

A Complete Timpani Curriculum

Understanding the ideas and skills you need to master this instrument

By Duncan Patton

During the course of my teaching career — 35 years at the Manhattan School of Music — I have had the chance to observe major trends in percussion performance. During the first 15 to 20 years, we saw astonishing progress in keyboard playing. In the past 15 to 20 years, I feel there has been a major improvement in the level of snare drumming, particularly among the top high school players. Sadly, I am still waiting to hear this kind of progress in timpani performance. I have been asking myself what the problem is, and I developed my PASIC 2024 clinic as a way to try to answer that question and hopefully to help move things forward in this area.

No doubt there are practical obstacles to timpani study, especially at the high school level. Few students have easy access to good instruments for practice. The level of teaching is uneven; many very fine percussion teachers are not as knowledgeable or comfortable on timpani as they are on other instruments. Even if a student has a chance to study with a professional timpanist, each one seems to have a different way of playing, and that can make things difficult down the road. I also notice that most teachers seem to

be using books that are 60–80 years old. Keyboard and snare drum repertoire have enjoyed an explosive increase in the variety and quality of material; newer timpani resources have not been adopted as widely.

More importantly, I think timpani, by its nature, presents some unique chal-

lenges that many students have difficulty navigating. The timpani, of course, are drums that produce a definite pitch. Some students get intimidated by having to deal with intonation, but this is a solvable problem, which I will touch on in the clinic. Timpani are also the most resonant drums, with a lengthy sustain to the tone. When we play the timpani, in a sense, we are doing two things: We are drumming, and we are producing tones. The quality of the “drumming” needs to be impeccable, with the same attention to perfect time, evenness and fluidity of hands, and dynamic control that we try to bring to our snare drumming or drumset playing. At the same time, we want to maximize the unique and noble tone of the timpani with every stroke we play. We need to cultivate this tone, because it is the fundamental character of the instrument. But this tone can create a problem as well; every note we play has a resonant duration that can interfere with the clarity of our performance. Playing a four-drum timpani solo can be a little bit like playing four suspended cymbals with soft mallets. We need to manage the sounds we are producing to make them as attractive as possible, but also to allow for the clarity we need.



DUNCAN PATTON

Playing a four-drum timpani solo can be a little bit like playing four suspended cymbals with soft mallets.

SOUND AND TECHNIQUE

Building an effective timpani technique needs to begin with a focus on sound. The student needs to learn to recognize the subtle differences between qualities and types of sounds. Next is developing the basic strokes. First, we want to simply to produce a “good” sound, and then we want to be able to vary that sound in musically useful ways. In my clinic I will go through the components of a good basic stroke; then we will address how to vary the stroke to create more or less “attack” in the sound, and then how to achieve a brighter or darker tone color. The timpani amplify subtle differences in how the drum is struck more than any other drum (at least those played with sticks and mallets). Timpani study can be a window into

the world of touch and sound, which can carry over to work on other instruments.

The development of good basic strokes on timpani is only the beginning. We need to then build a comprehensive technique around these strokes. Too often timpani study skips over the kind of hand development we typically spend years on when studying snare drum. It is useful to spend time on George Stone- or Ted Reed-type exercises using good fundamental timpani strokes. Timpanists like to use alternate sticking in general, because it helps maintain consistency and quality of sound, but there are many times when doubles are useful. Developing even doubles is essential practice as well. It is crucial to do all of your technique work at all dynamic levels. You need to learn,

and then practice, how the hands need to move to consistently produce the ideal sounds from *pp* to *ff*.

THE ROLL

Timpani rolls need to be studied from two points of view. We often say that the purpose of the timpani roll is to produce a sustained tone. It is essential to utilize the most legato touch possible for the individual strokes of the roll. The speed of the roll is coordinated with the vibrations of the head – slower for low pitches, faster for high pitches – in order to maximize the resonance of the particular drum. But it is rare that we actually achieve that ideal of the seamless sustained tone. Typically, the individual strokes of the roll are heard along with the tone. So, we need great

THE HARTT SCHOOL

MUSIC • DANCE • THEATRE

TURN YOUR PASSION INTO PROFESSION.



Experience the rhythm of creativity and find the keys of success at The Hartt School. Along the way, you can experience some of the following highlights:

- **86** majors, minors, and areas of concentration
- **85** guest artists a year
- **100+** endowed scholarships
- **2 hour** drive from NYC and Boston

UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD

hartford.edu/hartt

hands that can produce a satisfying, perfectly even single-stroke roll. And again, practice through the complete dynamic range is obligatory. Crescendo and decrescendo exercises are particularly useful for roll practice.

MOBILITY

After establishing quality strokes and fluid hands, we need to address mobility around the instruments. Playing two, four, or more timpani creates the issue of integrating horizontal movement with our vertical strokes. Exercises and etudes to develop this mobility are important. We don't want our quality sound to go out the window when we start playing rapid passages around the drums. Experts can disagree about the pros and cons of cross-sticking, shifting, and doubling, but we need to build the skills to handle rapid technical passages one way or another.

PEDALING AND INTONATION

Becoming adept and comfortable with pedaling is an essential skill for a timpanist in the 21st century. If the hardest thing you have ever played is the excerpt from Bartok's "Concerto for Orchestra," you are not really prepared for all the contemporary repertoire you will face. Practice on pedaling exercises is needed to develop the feet and the ears, but also to coordinate the hands working well with the feet. Too often I see players whose good hands and sound concept evaporate when they are faced with a challenging pedaling passage. A methodical course of tuning/pedaling exercises is needed to build this skill.

MUFFLING

Hand muffling is, of course, a necessary part of timpani technique. There is also an Art to it; muffling need not always be 100%. Often taking out only part of the sound can give you the clarity you need while keeping the beauty of sound in your performance. Studies to focus on muffling are valuable. Many times, I see students compromising the quality of their stroke as the hand comes in for the

muffle. You need to always complete the stroke before the muffle.

PASIC CLINIC

The technical and musical examples for my clinic will be drawn from my book, *The Artist Timpanist*. The book contains carefully constructed exercises to address all of the technical issues I have discussed, etudes to practice all of these skills, and a lengthy set of musical etudes that cover everything. I will include an orchestral excerpt or two to show how these ideas and skills get applied in context.

It is my hope that the clinic can be useful for teachers as well as for students. The idea is to give a big-picture view of what needs to be addressed in timpani study. My observation is that too many students are getting only small pieces of what they really need in their timpani training. I have had a lifelong fascination with the unique and multi-faceted sound of this instrument. Timpani playing is the way for percussionists to delve into and experience the great 18th- and 19th-century orchestral literature. There is nothing quite like being in the middle of a Beethoven or Brahms symphony, or a Wagner or Strauss opera. Finding a way to unlock the full musical magic in these great scores creates an incredible artistic experience. I hope this clinic can help get people excited about pursuing a sophisticated and comprehensive approach to this great instrument.

Duncan Patton was principal timpanist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra for 33 years. Additionally, he has appeared as a guest timpanist with the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, and the Orchestra of St. Lukes. He has performed or recorded chamber music with the Met Chamber Ensemble, the Percussionists of the Met Opera, the Metropolitan Opera Brass, Canadian Brass, Empire Brass, Graham Ashton Brass Ensemble, Kiril Gerstein and Ingrid Fliter, and the Manhattan Percussion Ensemble. His articles on timpani performance have been published in *Percussive Notes*.

He is also a composer of works for percussion and mixed ensembles, published by Bachovich Music Publications. Patton is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music, and was a student of John Beck, Roland Kohloff, and Richard Albagli. He has been a member of the Manhattan School of Music faculty since 1989. [PN](#)

DRUMSET

ROB MITZNER Virtual Drumset Clinic/ Performance; Workshop Dial in Your Drum Sound to Make the Music Feel Great

Getting a great drum sound is not only about *what* you play, but *how* you play it. Many subtle details go into this, and nailing them can be the difference between an adequate performance and a remarkable one. This clinic will focus on concepts like the beat placement of a groove in live and recording situations (on top vs. behind). It will also focus on managing stage adrenaline (result: rushing), overplaying (result: dragging) and how to create balance between your limbs to make patterns feel good. Getting the right blend within the kit can take your sound to the next level.

Rob Mitzner has recorded for *Billboard* Top-10 charting albums, films, and Broadway shows, and recently appeared on NBC's *Late Night with Seth Meyers* as the guest drummer with the 8G Band. He is the author of *Drumming in a Band: Stuff You Can Use* (Hudson Music) and his credits include over 60 albums across many styles, including jazz, rock, pop, hip-hop, country and R&B. He has served as a guest lecturer at NYU's Clive Davis Institute and Albright College and does masterclasses throughout the country on how to play in a band with other people and make the music feel great. Rob also runs C-Room Studio in Brooklyn where he records tracks and writes articles about music.