

Two is Better Than One

Repertoire that uses two timpanists

By Matthew Strauss

One of my responsibilities as the Associate Principal Timpanist of the Houston Symphony is to play all of the second timpani parts. I have had the privilege to perform many orchestral works that require at least two timpanists throughout my tenure with the orchestra. At PASIC50, the Principal Timpanist of the Houston Symphony, Leonardo Soto, and I will present my class on repertoire that uses two timpanists.

A timpanist is usually the only member of that section. However, some composers have written pieces that require

more than one timpanist. While performing these pieces, the second timpanist matches the principal timpanist's color, character, and rhythmic placement. This requires a high level of flexibility, open-mindedness, and adaptability. Leonardo Soto and I will demonstrate excerpts from the following works:

- Berlioz, *Symphonie Fantastique* (Mvts IV and V)
- Holst, *The Planets* (Jupiter and Uranus)
- Mahler, *Symphony No. 2* (Mvts I and V)

- Mahler, *Symphony No. 10*, Deryck Cooke Version (Mvt IV)
- Nielsen, *Symphony No. 4 (The Inextinguishable)*
- Orff, *Carmina Burana*, Mvt 7

Here are some considerations when performing as Second Timpanist:

MALLET CHOICES

Successful timpanists eventually find their voice through thoughtful exploration and diligent experimentation. One of the main ingredients of one's sound as a timpanist is mallet choice. While the mallets used by a timpanist are often chosen due to that player's individual technique and unique sound concept, second timpanists should be willing to use a similar mallet as their colleagues, regardless of their own background.

STROKE TYPE

The timpani community has various schools of thought on producing a sound when striking a drum. Multiple factors contribute to a timpanist's stroke type, including schooling, acoustics, instrument brand, drumhead material, composer, and orchestra size. Effective second timpanists can alter their stroke type to match their colleagues' sound and character.

STICKINGS

Similar to a violinist's bowings, a timpanist's stickings will directly impact the



Matthew Strauss

feel and phrasing of the music. Orchestral violinists must play their parts with the same bowing as the concertmaster to achieve a homogenous sound throughout the section. Equivalently, the second timpanist should use the same sticking choices as the principal timpanist in specific passages when playing in rhythmic unison. This concept will be demonstrated during our class when we play the ending of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. In this particular excerpt, we use cross-sticking to maintain a linear flow to the music.

VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Another responsibility of the second timpanist is to maintain a high level of rhythmic placement with the principal timpanist. When possible, the second timpanist's drums should be set up half a foot further back on the stage to gain added visual contact with the principal. It is (usually) best to watch the conductor while catching the other timpanist's motions through one's peripheral vision. Other times, the second timpanist should look directly at the principal to increase the chances of rhythmic uniformity.

The ending of Gustav Mahler's 3rd Symphony provides one of the best examples of direct unison playing between the timpanists. The principal should watch the conductor while the second timpanist watches the principal. Mr. Soto plays with a German setup in the Houston Symphony, while I use the American setup. The mixture of the two setups creates an advantageous circumstance where our low drums are near one another. Concert attendees might catch us exchanging a passing smile after landing on a unison pitch on both of our low drums!

CONCLUSION

An excellent timpanist contributes a strong pulse, an enhanced pitch center, and an extensive palette of colors while increasing the dramatic effect of the music. Sometimes extremes are required. For these moments, a committed timpanist is well equipped to provide a wide range of sounds, ranging from a barely audible

pedal tone to a shocking interjection of a thunderous blast. Notable composers have doubled down on these qualities originating from the timpani section, because sometimes two is better than one!

Matthew Strauss is an Associate Professor of Percussion at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. His methodical yet passionate teaching style has guided many of his current and former students towards successful careers as orchestral percussionists and timpanists. Additionally, he is a cofounder and Resident Teaching Artist at the International Timpani Intensive held at Rice University. As the Associate Principal Timpanist/Section Percussionist with the Houston Symphony and the Principal Timpanist with the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra, he has a clear understanding of the joys and challenges of creating world-class music on a consistent basis. Strauss received his bachelor's degree in Percussion Performance from the Juilliard School and his master's degree in Performance from the Temple University. **PN**

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Kimberly Council

Pre-Tenure Realities

This will be a "real-world" conversation about the realities of working in higher education in 2025, including discussion of research, teaching, service, mentorship, helping today's students find success, juggling family and work responsibilities, and working with administration.

Dr. Kimberly Council

Landing a Job in Higher Education: An Administrator's Perspective

In this session, participants will learn about the variety of universities, faculty positions, and opportunities in higher education. Conversation will include preparing for the job search, cover letter and CV preparation, and interview realities.

PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE

Brett Dietz and Hamiruge -

The LSU Percussion Group

New Percussion Literature Showcase

Every year at PASIC, the New Percussion Literature Showcase offers the latest repertoire available to high school and collegiate musicians. This concert will highlight a variety of literature written for a wide range of compositional and instrumental styles over the past five years. The performance will present a wide variety of styles, instrumentations, and ability levels, as well as underrepresented composers in our field. We will also incorporate videos of new percussion ensemble music while navigating equipment moves between the program's live performances, which will allow our audience to experience more music in the allotted time.

Brett William Dietz is the Carolyn Mattax Professor of Percussion at Louisiana State University. He is the music director of Hamiruge - The LSU Percussion Group, an ensemble at the forefront of commissioning, performing, and premiering works for percussion. This group commissions original works each academic year and shares videos across social media to encourage performances by other ensembles across the country. Hamiruge is made of students from the LSU Percussion Studio, including graduates and undergraduates, some of whom performed in the PASIC 2024 Chamber Music Competition.