

# PRACTICAL TIPS FOR THE STUDENT TIMPANIST

## SET-UP

- 1) Set up tims in a semi-circle with the pedals pointing toward you. The two outside drums (32" and 23") should be set so that it is practically effortless to hit the correct "beating spots" consistently. (*Hint: Most people set them too close.*)
- 2) Always have a variety of mallets (3 to 5 pair, ranging from very soft to very hard).
- 3) Always have a pitch source - a pitch pipe or tuner (NOT A MALLET INSTRUMENT, PIANO, OR YOUR BUDDY OVER BY THE BELLS!!!!)
- 4) Always have a trap stand or extra music stand (with a towel) for your mallets, pitch source, pencil, and accessory instruments, etc.
- 5) Timpanists usually stand. However, depending on your height or the type of tuning required (frequent, quick, or tuning while playing), sitting on a stool may be acceptable. If you do sit, do it for the right reasons (I've known a lot of short, lazy timpanists in my time....)

## GRIP

The most common timpani grip is the French (or "thumbs-up") grip. It is similar to matched grip on snare drum, but with the thumbs on top and the palms essentially facing each other. Much of the control comes from the fulcrum. The back three fingers should be relaxed, but remain on the back of the stick for additional control.



## STROKE TECHNIQUE

The basic stroke is an "up" stroke or "return" stroke similar to mallet percussion. It is a "piston-like" motion using the wrist. Additional finger involvement, however, can provide additional power at louder volumes and more control in softer dynamics and faster or more intricate passages. **Always let the weight of the mallet do as much work as possible.**

**Legato** - The idea is to lessen the articulation of the initial attack as much as possible. The BODY (or resonance) of the note is most important. The motion should be as smooth and flowing as possible. Think of "pulling" the sound out of the instrument. A slight, relaxed, and flowing arm movement can help with this.

## STROKE TECHNIQUE Cont'd

**Staccato** - The idea is to exaggerate the articulation of the initial attack as much as possible. The initial ATTACK of the note is most important. The stroke should be a very short, quick motion. Think of "punching" the drumhead with the mallet (but still "pulling" out of the head almost instantaneously). Dampen the drums as needed for clarity.

**Marcato** - This is "2001: A Space Odyssey"! This is "King Kong"! This is Shostakovich's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony, 4<sup>th</sup> Movement (check it out, it's pretty cool!) The idea is to get as FULL of a sound as possible out of the drums - both on the attack AND the body! A slightly slower - think "heavy" - staccato motion with a medium to med.-hard mallet will help to achieve this.

## BEATING SPOTS

The correct "beating spot" is approximately 3" to 4" in from the edge of the drumhead, depending on the size of the drum. I like to center my playing position right above the pedal, just to be precise. The beating spot is where you will get the best articulation, the most "fundamental" pitch out of the drum, and the best "feel" in the mallet response.



## MALLET SELECTION

*True or False: "This is a loud passage, so I need to use the hardest mallet I have!"*

- 1) Mallet selection should be based on the desired ARTICULATION, not VOLUME!!! (Yes, you CAN play loud with a soft stick! You CAN play soft with a hard stick! Go home and try it! It's fun!)
- 2) Use a **soft stick** when the music calls for a *smooth, legato, connected, less-articulate* style of playing. Use a **harder stick** when the music calls for an *articulate, staccato, or detached* style. A piece involving faster, more articulate rhythms (16ths, 6-tuplets, etc.) may require a harder mallet. A **Medium** (or "General") to **Soft** mallet will work for a piece involving more "open" rhythms (half notes, whole notes, etc.) and rolls - where the articulation is not as important.
- 3) Always have a variety of mallets in your set up. If you are unsure of what the music requires, start with a medium hard mallet (usually a T3 or "General") and go from there (5 times out of 10, this will probably be exactly what you need).

## STICKING

Like in all percussion playing, sticking plays an important role on the timpani. There are a variety of sticking options - alternating, right-hand lead, left-hand lead, double-strokes, cross-sticking, etc. Sticking choices should be made based on **flow, clarity, and consistency of articulation, volume, and quality of sound**. If the sticking you're using doesn't present optimal results in one or more of those categories, try something else.

## ROLLING ON THE TIMPANI

- 1) Timpani rolls are **SINGLE STROKE ROLLS!!!!** Not double-stroke rolls! Not buzz rolls! "*Right-Left- Right-Left- Right-Left- Right-Left-etc....*"; okay!?!?! Got it?!?!?
- 2) Roll speeds are dictated by the tension of the head. Larger, looser heads require a slower speed than smaller, tighter heads. **Usually**, the roll speed is going to be **slower** than you think. Practice playing long rolls on each drum at a variety of pitches - and a variety of dynamic levels - to get a "feel" for the correct roll speeds. If you roll too fast or unevenly, you'll feel the head "reject" the mallet. That's when it "pops" back up at you unexpectedly.

## DAMPENING

- 1) What did your beginning band director say? "Rests are **PERIODS OF SILENCE**", right? Whenever possible, you should dampen the timpani on a rest so that they don't ring through it. Your brass and woodwind buddies have to stop their instruments from resonating when they come to a rest. So do you.
- 2) Sometimes, it is necessary to dampen one drum while playing another for the sake of clarity. If, for example, it's difficult to hear the last note you played because the next to last note is still ringing - or the harmony caused by the vibrations is undesirable - you need to dampen the offending drum(s). This problem is most obvious at the ends of musical phrases.
- 3) If you need to dampen a drum, do it as **INCONSPICUOUSLY** as possible! Work on dampening without making extemporaneous noise when your fingers touch the head. If you press too hard, you can alter the pitch. Not hard enough, and your fingers will "buzz" against the head.
- 4) If you're going to dampen a drum, do it **COMPLETELY!** If you only partially dampen the head, you will dampen the fundamental pitch while allowing overtones and harmonics to continue ringing. This can be even worse than not dampening at all!
- 5) Use good musical judgement in regards to dampening. The bad news is that, due to the tempo, sticking, logistics, etc. there will be some instances where you won't be able to dampen the drums when you probably should. The good news is that, in many of these cases, it won't be a problem anyway. Keep the clarity of the music and intent of the composer/ arranger in mind, and you can't go wrong.

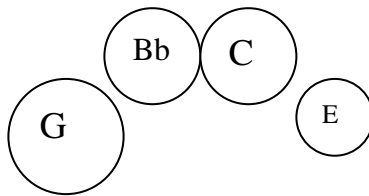
## TUNING

- 1) Know the approximate ranges of the drums. Be aware that notes in the extreme range of each drum will not be very well in tune or sound very good. The lowest notes will be sharp and sound "flabby". The highest will be flat and sound "pingy". Always place pitches based on the optimal ranges of the drums. **Avoid the extreme ranges unless there is no other option.**

### Approximate Ranges of the Timpani

| Size | Lowest Pitch | Highest Pitch |
|------|--------------|---------------|
| 32"  | C            | A             |
| 29"  | E            | C             |
| 26"  | A            | F             |
| 23"  | D            | Bb            |
| 20"  | F            | C             |

- 2) Determine what pitches are going to be placed on each drum. Draw a chart at the top of your music for quick reference (see ex.)



- 3) If there are any tuning changes in your piece, write them in at the EARLIEST possible time you can get to it in the music (For ex: "change C to D"). Usually, tuning while counting rests is something that needs to be **PRACTICED!** Good wind players can make adjustments "on the fly", so you should be able to as well.
- 4) **How to Tune a Timpani** (or "How to Avoid Annoying Your Band Director/ Percussion Instructor")
  - Place the pedal at its lowest setting.
  - Play the desired pitch on your sound source; sing or hum the desired pitch to get it in your head.
  - Tap the timpani head **ONCE - WITH YOUR FINGERS!!!!** As the head is resonating, slowly increase the tension until you hear it reach the desired pitch. Tap the head again to check it. If it's close, make the necessary adjustment. If it's totally wrong, start over.
  - No one wants to hear the "**Boing Boing Boing**" Song (this is that "annoying" part I was talking about).
  - The head will "seat" better if you go slightly above the desired pitch, then "settle" back down into it.

5) Tips for Improving Your Ear:

- Play the solo or timpani part on a piano or mallet instrument to get the "tune" in your ear. If you know what it's *supposed* to sound like, you'll recognize it right away if it doesn't sound right.
- Practice playing pentachords (5 note scales), arpeggios, and simple tunes ("Happy Birthday", "Mary Had a Little Lamb", "Jingle Bells", "Iron Man", etc.) on one drum.
- Learn to hear, sing, and tune the most common intervals used in timpani music. Using the pitch pipe for every drum may seem easier at first, but once you learn how to do this, it's actually *easier AND faster*.

The most common intervals in timpani playing are:

| <u>Interval</u>                        | <u>Example (low to high)</u> | <u>Ascending Tune</u>  | <u>Descending Tune</u>                               |
|--|------------------------------|--|--|
| Perfect 4 <sup>th</sup>                | Bb to Eb                     | Here Comes the Bride   | Eine Kleine Nachtmusik<br>O Come All Ye Faithful     |
| Perfect 5 <sup>th</sup>                | Bb to F                      | Twinkle Twinkle<br>Star Wars Theme   | Feelings   |
| Perfect 8 <sup>th</sup><br>(or Octave) | F to F                       | Take Me Out to the<br>Ball Game<br><i>(or just match pitch and transpose the octave)</i> | Scherzo from Beethoven's<br>9 <sup>th</sup> Symphony |
| Major 3 <sup>rd</sup>                  | C to E                       | Michael Row the Boat<br>Ashore<br>Arpeggio: "Do, Re, Mi"                                 | Swing Low, Sweet<br>Chariot<br>Londonderry Air       |
| Minor 3 <sup>rd</sup>                  | C to Eb                      | Greensleeves/<br>What Child Is This<br>Brahm's Lullaby<br>Iron Man<br>Smoke On the Water | National Anthem<br><br>Proud Mary                    |

**Other Ideas on Tuning:**

- Once you are comfortable with the most common intervals, learn the rest of the major and minor intervals.
- Tune the drums TO EACH OTHER using pitch and interval recognition.
- If you are playing in an ensemble, listen to the instruments that play in the timpani's range (tubas, double basses, cellos, bass marimba, etc.) and tune to them. Use the pitch pipe to get it "in the ballpark", but then tune to the ensemble (their pitch will change based on a variety of factors).
- **GAUGES** can be handy - particularly for young timpanists still learning, or when the music calls for very fast tuning. The downside is that they must be **re-set daily**. Use them as a tool to **ASSIST** you, not as a crutch.