

**The Following Lesson is Excerpted from:**

A FRESH APPROACH TO

# Mallet Percussion

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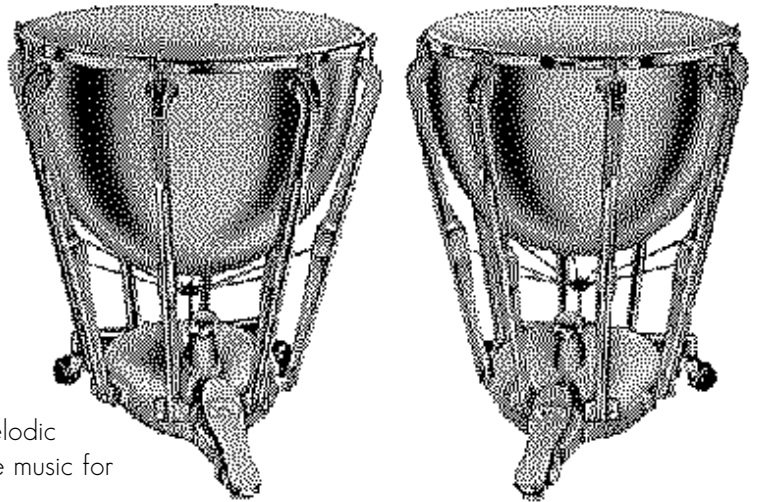
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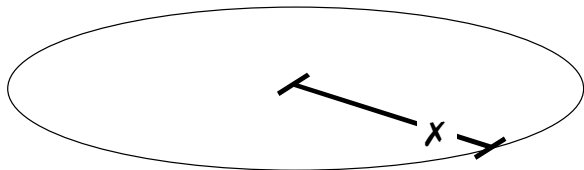
# An Introduction to the Timpani

The word "**timpani**" is taken from the latin word "timpanum," meaning "vibrating membrane." The timpani's heads, which used to be made primarily of calf skin, when struck, are made to vibrate. The timpani are often called kettle drums because the bowls, which are made from copper, resemble kettles. Timpano is singular, timpani is plural (so PLEASE don't refer to them as the "timpanies!").

Timpani range in size from 32 inches to 23 inches (the standard sizes are 32", 29", 26", and 23" - 3 inches for each separate size). Each drum has a melodic range of about a 5th (see intervals on Lesson 17). The music for timpani is written in the BASS CLEF.



## The Proper Beating Spot



The proper beating spot on the timpani is approximately one-third the distance between the rim and the center of the head (about 4 inches from the rim). Since the timpano is a bowl, you NEVER strike it in the center as you do other types of percussion instruments. Because the bowl acts as a resonating chamber, the sound vibrations have nowhere to travel when you hit the drum in the center (actually, if you'd like to test it out, go ahead: hit the drum in the center. You should find that the head doesn't vibrate at all. If the head doesn't vibrate, we wouldn't call them "timpani" would we?).

## Getting a Great Hand Position

Grasp the timpani mallet just as you do a keyboard mallet. Instead of playing with "flat" hands, turn your wrists to where the thumb nail is facing the ceiling (this is known as the "French Style" of playing). Relax the back fingers - they should lightly make contact with the shaft of the mallet. For a darker, heavier tone, add more finger contact by squeezing the stick slightly.

## The Stroke Style

You should strike the timpani in the same place on the head on every stroke. By playing in a few different spots on the drum, you can tell that a variety of tones can be produced (from a very thin sound near the rim to a dead sound when struck too close to the center).

### The "Prep Stroke"

- Start with the stick about 3 inches from the head (with the "French" hand position)
- Raise the forearm slightly while leaving the mallet head in the same position (causing the wrist to turn).
- As you continue to raise the forearm, allow the wrist to "react" to the motion.

### The "Stroke"

- Allow the weight of the forearm to carry the stick back to the timpani head. Again, the wrist (which is totally relaxed) should react to the movement of the arm - much like the way a baby's head would react when he or she is picked up suddenly by a mother.

### The "Follow Through"

- At the exact moment of impact of the mallet with the drum head, snap the wrist slightly - the way you would "pop" someone with a wet towel (but only SLIGHTLY).
- Allow the hand to come up to shoulder level, then gently bring the stick back to playing position.
- This is the most important part of the stroke because it "draws" the sound out of the instrument - just like a batter needs a full follow through to be able to hit a baseball out of the park.

## Practice the Stroke

Before we begin, I would like to point out how important your “frame of mind” is when playing the timpani. Most highly trained, professional percussionists agree that the job of playing the timpani is the most important in the symphonic percussion section. Every major symphony orchestra in the world has a “timpanist” that is a specialist and is separate from the rest of the percussion section. To become a successful timpanist, you must approach the drums with an “attitude of sophistication.”

Don't worry about tuning the drums yet - have your instructor tune these pitches for you. Each “prep stroke” in this exercise should begin one count before the note, and the “follow through” should last approximately one-half of the note's duration (2 counts on whole notes, 1 count on half notes). Memorize this line so that you can watch your hands and the mallet placement on the timpani head.

**1** m.m. = 120

Exercise 1 consists of two staves of music in bass clef, 4/4 time. The first staff has two measures of whole notes with stickings: R, R, L, L, R, R, L, L. The second staff has two measures of quarter notes with stickings: R, L, R, L, R, L, R, L, R, L, R, L.

As you make the left stroke on the high drum (the drum on the right) in this next exercise, you must rotate your upper body at the waist so that your hands are centered on the drum. The same goes for the right stroke on the low drum. Remember your prep stroke and follow through in the first four measures. As you play the quarter notes in measure 5, you will not be able to make a follow through on every note: save the follow through for the half note at the end of the phrase. Try to make the prep stroke feel natural and relaxed.

Exercise 2 consists of two staves of music in bass clef, 4/4 time. The first staff has two measures of quarter notes with stickings: R L, R L, R L, R L, R L R L, R L R. The second staff has two measures of quarter notes with stickings: R L R, L R L, R L R, L R L, R L R L, R L.

Use the suggested sticking and alternate every stroke. Remember to follow through on each half note!

Exercise 3 consists of two staves of music in bass clef, 4/4 time. The first staff has two measures of quarter notes with stickings: R, L, R, L, R, L, R, L. The second staff has two measures of quarter notes with stickings: L, L, R, L, L, R.

## Passing Strokes

It is often necessary for the sticks to pass from one drum to another without the luxury of having a half note or rest to give you time for a smooth transition. To produce the best possible sound on each drum, it is necessary to eliminate as many "cross stickings" as possible. Consider this example:

If you start the 8th notes on the RIGHT hand, it is necessary for the right stick to cross the left on the passing note.

Of course, the simple solution would be to start the 8th notes on the LEFT hand to avoid the cross over stroke.



To develop the proper sticking for passing strokes, you must first decide if the group of notes directly before the passing stroke is "EVEN" or "ODD." **Odd** groups of notes should start with the outside mallet (the mallet that's the greatest distance from the drum that you are passing to). **Even** groups of notes should start with the inside mallet.

Proper sticking habits must be "second nature" to a timpanist! Work on these exercises for a few weeks with a metronome set on 120.

### Passing from the high kettle to the low kettle:

**4**      1 note group: ODD                      2 note group: EVEN                      3 note group: ODD

3 note group: ODD                      4 note group: EVEN                      7 note group: ODD

### Passing from the low kettle to the high kettle:

**5**      1 note group: ODD                      2 note group: EVEN                      3 note group: ODD

3 note group: ODD                      4 note group: EVEN                      7 note group: ODD

## Tuning the Timpani

Although many people consider the timpani to be a “drum,” it is actually a MELODIC instrument because you can play pitches (whereas the snare drum, bass drum or cymbals have no definite pitch). Use the following steps to learn the proper technique to tune the timpani:

### Step One: Knowing the Drums

The first and most obvious step to tuning the timpani is to know what size timpani will reach the desired pitch. Spend some time memorizing these pitch ranges:



### Step Two: Hearing and Singing the Pitch

The biggest problem that most percussionists have with tuning the timpani is being able to HEAR and SING the pitch! Start with a pitch pipe and see if you can sing or hum various pitches (EVERY good percussionist should own, or have access to, a pitch pipe or tuning fork). You don't have to have a great singing voice to sing a pitch, but you will have to put some effort into it. If you can't sing a pitch, then tuning the timpani is going to be very difficult at best!

### My Easy, Never Fail (but not too sophisticated) Approach to Tuning

I have found that the easiest method of getting my students to hear the pitch on a timpano is to approach it like a bad country western singer! Sing the lowest of these two pitches, then “scoop” up to the second pitch.



Now, with the pedal at the bottom range of the timpani, hit the drum. Immediately after you strike the drum ONCE, GRADUALLY push the pedal up. If you can work the pedal smoothly and slowly, you should be able to hear when the timpano reaches the desired pitch. Try to tune the 29" and 26" timpani to the second note by using this approach.

Decide which drums you should use to tune these following notes, then give it your best shot.



DIRECTORS: avoid telling the students “A little higher” or “A little lower!” If the student misses the pitch, start over from scratch! Young percussionists will often guess at the pitch and be satisfied when you doing the “fine tuning” for them!



## Playing Rolls on the Timpani

The purpose of the roll on timpani is to sustain an even sounding tone. A wind player does this by blowing air through the instrument, a string player does it by drawing the bow across the string. Since the sound of the timpani note decays as soon as it is hit with the mallet, we must sustain a tone by rapidly striking the drum. To accomplish this, relax the wrists as much as possible and play with quick, EVEN strokes single strokes (never play bounce rolls on the timpani).

**11**

Exercise 11 consists of two staves of music in bass clef, 4/4 time. The first staff begins with a whole note G2, followed by a quarter rest, a half note G2, and another quarter rest. This is followed by a double bar line with repeat dots. The second staff continues with a quarter note G2, a quarter note F2, a quarter note E2, and a quarter note D2, all slurred together. This is followed by a quarter note C2, a quarter note B1, a quarter note A1, and a quarter note G1, also slurred together. The exercise ends with a quarter note G1 and a quarter rest.

You may notice that it is easier to produce a nice sounding roll on the lower drum. That is because a loose timpani head has a slower VIBRATION speed than a tight head. In order to keep the head vibrating, you can play with a slower roll speed. Try tuning the smallest timpani to the highest pitch and see how fast you must roll to keep the vibrations going!

## The Passing Roll

When playing a passing roll (or slur), it is necessary to pass from one drum to the other without a break in the roll. Just like in the passing stroke exercises, you must always shift to the next drum with the INSIDE mallet first, avoiding a cross stroke. Try this 16th note exercise first, then speed it up until the 16th notes become rolls.

**12**

Exercise 12 consists of two staves of music in bass clef, 4/4 time. The first staff shows a sequence of 16th notes. The first four notes are marked 'R' (Right), followed by a quarter rest marked 'R', then the next four notes are marked 'L' (Left), followed by a quarter rest marked 'L'. The second staff continues with four notes marked 'R', a quarter rest marked 'R', four notes marked 'L', a quarter rest marked 'L', four notes marked 'R', a quarter rest marked 'R', and finally four notes marked 'R'.

Of course, you may not be able to always play an even number of strokes on passing rolls. In this next exercise, try to move from one drum to the next as SMOOTHLY as possible, without any breaks in the sound.

**13**

*Adagio*

Exercise 13 consists of two staves of music in bass clef, 4/4 time, marked *Adagio*. The first staff begins with a quarter note G2, followed by a quarter note F2, a quarter note E2, and a quarter note D2, all slurred together. This is followed by a quarter note C2, a quarter note B1, a quarter note A1, and a quarter note G1, also slurred together. The second staff continues with a quarter note G1, a quarter note F1, a quarter note E1, and a quarter note D1, all slurred together. This is followed by a quarter note C1, a quarter note B0, a quarter note A0, and a quarter note G0, also slurred together. The exercise ends with a quarter note G0 and a quarter rest.

# Timpani Etudes

Read the key signature when finding out which two notes to tune in this etude. Remember to stop all sound possible on each rest by muffling as quietly as possible. Follow the sticking when it's provided for you.

## 1 Allegro

*mf* R L R R L R L  
 9 *p* R L L R L L R L R L R  
 17 *mf*  
 25 *f*  
 L R

This short etude includes some **staccato** notes (measure 15 and 16). When a dot is placed above or below a note, play the drum, then muffle as quickly as possible.

## 2 March Tempo

*f* L R L R L R L R L R L R  
 9 *p* L R L R L R L R L R L R  
 17 *mf*  
*f* *p*

Accurate and silent muffling is extremely important in this slow etude. While all sound should stop on each rest, make sure that each note gets its full value.

### 3 Adagio

This etude includes a couple of quick tuning changes (meas. 12 and 20). Practice the tuning change several times to get used to the “foot action.” While it might be easier to play this etude with 3 drums, GREAT TIMPANISTS will be able to play it on two!

### 4 Moderato

