

Timpani FUNdamentals

Maryland / Delaware Percussive Arts Society
Day of Percussion
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PREPARATION

Sitting vs. Standing

Depends on these factors:

- Player's height vs. drum height
 - For ideal stroke, mallet should be parallel to the drum at the bottom of the stroke
- Tuning changes
- Need for mobility

Drum Positioning

- 1) Setup (from left to right)
 - American: Low to High (standard)
 - German: High to Low (less common)
- 2) Position the center two drums first
 - Place stool in line with drums
 - Position so that hands rest naturally over correct beating spots while in ideal playing position
 - Music stand centered on drums and conductor, high to allow drums to ring freely
 - Turn pedals so that they are easy to reach from your playing position
 - i. You should be able to easily rotate into position
- 3) Position the outer two drums
 - Arc out slightly to account for difference in distance (front of body: center vs. side of body: outer)
- 4) Mallet stand
 - Position away from drums, to the outer edge of the high or low drum, depending on:
 - i. Dominant hand
 - ii. Space available
 - If you must place the mallet stand over the drums due to space constraints:
 - i. Place as high and as far back as possible so it does not interfere with the sound of the drums

Tools

- Tuning fork or pitch pipe (use sparingly and develop your ear)
- Tuner
- Timpani key (use only if you are certain of what you are doing)
- Mutes
- Pencils (at least 2)
- Paper clips (to keep music together or to help you find your place in a book)
- Clothespins (for that unexpected draft)
- Ear plugs (for you and your neighbors)

Also consider:

- Small tool kit (screwdriver, wrench, pliers, small flashlight)
- Dictionary of Percussion Terms and a Musical Dictionary

PITCH

Instrument Ranges



- For best results, tune drums so that the notes lie in the middle of the drum's range.
- When this is impossible, prioritize!
- Also, keep in mind the speed of your passages.
 - If a note could be tuned on either of two different drums for a fast passage, choose the drum that allows for easier movement to and from the other drums

Tuning

- 1) Lower the drum's pitch to its lowest note (heel down).
- 2) Find the desired pitch using a pitch source.
- 3) Sing the note softly or hear it in your head.
- 4) Play the drum softly with a mallet or your finger and slowly but immediately slide the pedal up to pitch.
 - Only strike the drum a few times to not confuse your ear.
 - Do not go too high. If you overshoot the note, bring the pedal back down and begin again.
 - Always tune the note from below to ensure even head tension.
- 5) Practice ear training to improve your sense of pitch.
 - Find songs to help you remember intervals (Perfect 4th = "Here Comes the Bride").
 - Use solfège (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do) and learn how to sing a Major scale. Once you have mastered this, learn the most common intervals using solfège (Perfect 5th, Perfect 4th, Octave, Major 3rd).
 - Practice tuning different intervals and check your progress with a tuner.

Gauges

Gauges are a useful tool, but only when used properly.

- Be sure that YOU set them right before you play. Changes in temperature and moving the drums can affect these settings. They may even become inaccurate during the course of a performance, so your ear will always be the best tool for tuning.
- Use them only to get into the ballpark. Small variations in the head tension can affect pitch, so always fine tune with your ear. By keeping your feet on the pedals as you play, you can change your tuning as you go.

TECHNIQUE

Beating Spots

- The ideal beating spot is approximately 3-4" from the edge of the drum, between two lugs (the bolts attached to the drum).
- The beating spot varies by the size of the drum.
 - Low drum – beating spot is farther from the edge.
 - High drum – beating spot is closer to the edge.
- You may vary the beating spot **slightly** to achieve a different sound.
 - For more articulation, move towards the center.
 - For thinner or smoother sound, move towards the edge.
 - Be careful to not compromise the tone quality by going too far.

Grip

There are different advantages to using each grip.

They may be used in different musical settings to achieve the desired sound.

- German: thumbs to the side
- American: between German and French
- French: thumbs up

Fulcrum

The fulcrum is the balancing point at which you hold the mallet.

- Approximately one-third of the way up the stick
- Allows the stick to bounce freely and naturally
- Grip at the fulcrum should be primarily with the index finger and thumb, and some from the middle finger.
- Back fingers should wrap loosely around the stick to help with control but should not restrict motion.

Strokes

- Piston Stroke: like the pistons in a car's engine
 - Head of the mallet begins and ends in the same place. Works for all dynamics.
- Down stroke: Begins high and ends low
- Up stroke: Begins low and ends high
- Legato stroke
 - Full, resonant sound. Smooth, relaxed motion with little or no finger tension
- Staccato stroke
 - Articulate sound. Firmer grip with the fingers, faster rebound

Rolls

- Always use single stroke rolls.
- Vary speed based on the notes and the dynamics
 - Lower notes = slower rolls
 - Higher notes = faster rolls
 - Softer notes = slower rolls
 - Louder notes = faster rolls
- Depending on the quality of the drums, louder rolls may be played with mallets spread wider.
 - Each mallet should be between two lugs in an ideal beating spot.
 - This excites more surface area of the head and helps to keep the drums from "feeding back" on itself.

Stickings

- Alternate whenever possible to keep the music sounding smooth
 - Except when attempting to achieve a "vertical" effect (i.e. in a march).

Example:



Choose either a "right hand lead" (R L R L) or "left hand lead" (L R L R) sticking.

- Choose stickings wisely to prepare a shift from one drum to another.

When you have:

an EVEN number of notes before the shift, begin with the SAME hand as the direction you will move



an ODD number of notes before the shift, begin with the OPPOSITE hand as the direction you will move



Cross-Sticking

Sometimes, there are continuous notes that switch from drum to drum and a smooth leading sticking will only work in one direction.

- One option is to use a paradiddle sticking, but sometimes the doubles may sound uneven.
- Cross-sticking allows for an alternating sticking pattern. The “x” shows where the cross happens.

Paradiddle: L R L L R L R R L R L L R L R R L

Cross (RH Lead): R L R L R L R L x R L R L R L R L x R

Cross (LH Lead): L R L R x L R L R L R L R x L R L R L

- In the Right Hand Lead example, the right hand leads up to the high drum for the second measure
 - In order to get back to the low drum, the right hand crosses OVER the left.
- In the Left Hand Lead example, the left hand crosses OVER the right to lead up to the high drum.
 - On the way down, the left hand freely leads to the low drum.
- Reminders:
 - When crossing, the hand that plays first crosses OVER the other hand.
 - The non-crossing hand follows quickly and sneaks out from underneath for the next note.
 - Keep wrists low and close together so that both mallets play at a similar angle to the head.
 - Good posture makes these quick moves easier.

Dampening

Dampening is a very important aspect of timpani playing, and is often overlooked.

- If the timpani are not dampened, the sound may ring and cover other important notes or ring through the ensemble’s rests.
- On the contrary, dampening on every rest results in a choppy, broken sound and does not allow the drum to speak fully.
- It is important to understand what is going on in the music when deciding how much and when to dampen. Listen to the rest of the ensemble:
 - Who else is playing a similar part? Are the notes long or short? Are you playing a solo?
 - What is the purpose for your notes? Do you have the important part or are you in the background?

Dampening Technique

- Hold the mallet with your thumb and index finger.
- Use your back three fingers to gently touch the head near the beating spot to stop the sound.
 - For a smooth muffle, bring each finger down individually, beginning with your pinkie near the edge.
 - Do not slap or press your hand down on the head. This causes an abrupt stop and can even create an extra sound which is undesirable.
 - Do not swipe your hand across the head. This creates an audible swiping sound that can interfere with the music.
- Simultaneous Dampening: dampen one note while playing another.
 - Allows the second note to be heard, while still giving the first note its full value.
 - This technique can be tricky to master, but it is a great way to let your notes sing without cutting the previous notes too short. Wait to dampen each note until the exact moment you play the next note.
 - For a smoother legato effect, allow the sound overlap a tiny bit into the next note before dampening.

Mutes

Sometimes the term “coperto,” “sordino” or “covered” is indicated in a timpani part. This means that the drums should be played with mutes.

- There are different styles of mutes:
 - Suede patches, which are available in your local craft store. Look for elbow patches or other similarly sized pieces. These are inexpensive and are easy to keep on hand.
 - Felt discs made by timpani manufacturers. These can be purchased from a percussion retailer.
- Positioning of the mute will vary depending on the size and weight of the mute, as well as the drum itself.
 - Try positioning the mutes in different places around the drum to achieve the desired sound.
 - Most commonly, mutes are placed on the head in the playing area next to your beating spot (between two lugs, one beating spot over).
 - Try moving the mutes closer to the edge or closer to the center of the drum to change the sound.
 - Placing a mute directly opposite your beating spot on the drum will give you a more muted sound.
- Mutes may also be used to alter the articulation of the drum while playing regular notes.
 - Use this technique sparingly, and make sure the mutes do not interfere with the tone of the drum.
 - Position the mute on the edge of the head to make the sound decay faster than it would without it.
- It is always useful to have mutes on hand just in case:
 - If your drums are extremely well in tune, you may hear what is called “sympathetic resonance.” You will hear one drum ringing on its own when you play a different one loudly then dampen quickly. Place a mute on the drum you are not using to keep this from getting in the way.

ADDITIONAL TIPS or “PRACTICING” AWAY FROM THE DRUMS

Most students do not own timpani, and have limited access to timpani at school, church, or a teacher’s studio. Here are some things you can do away from the drums to improve your timpani playing:

Tools and Techniques

Even if you are not able to spend a lot of time playing timpani, you can still improve your playing. There are affordable ways for students to prepare before they are able to get in front of timpani.

- Research
 - Look up the piece you are playing and find the answers to these questions:
 - When was the piece written?
 - Who was the composer?
 - What kind of piece is it? A song? A dance? A story? What is it about?
 - What do these things tell you about how the piece should be performed?
- Recordings
 - There is an extensive assortment of collections of music available online, and in libraries and music stores. A large majority of music has been performed or recorded and can be found in these locations. Ask your director if there is a study recording available for you to use.
 - Get a hold of at least one recording of the piece, but ideally three. You will find that they will all be different from one another.
 - Listen to the recording with the music in front of you and follow along with your part.
 - Mark your music with cues, measure numbers, and tuning changes (see below).
 - Find the tricky spots and figure out the best stickings for each passage.
- Scores: Ask your conductor to see the score if you are unsure of what is going on in a particular passage.
- Visualization: Visualize (imagine yourself) playing through the part.
- Timpani Practice Pad
 - There are practice pads available that simulate the feel of timpani. They are made differently from traditional snare drum practice pads and have a realistic feel.

MARKING MUSIC

Having your music properly marked before you get in front of the drums can have a dramatic impact on your playing, especially if you are a student just getting started with timpani. Even if you are experienced, it can make it easier to focus on your sound production, balance, accuracy and musicality.

ALWAYS USE A PENCIL WHEN MARKING MUSIC

You may make markings for yourself that the next person may choose to do differently, or you may change your mind later. Rented music **must** be marked in pencil or your organization will have to pay for its replacement.

Tuning Changes

Using the ideal pitch ranges for each drum, map out where you will place each note. Look ahead for tricky passages.

- Draw a diagram of the drums over each major section. This may seem silly in the practice room, but in rehearsal the conductor may ask to go to a section with a completely different tuning arrangement and you have a few seconds to re-tune before they give the downbeat. Having the diagram can save precious time.
- Mark every tuning change that you need to make as it comes up in the music. If you have time to make the change early, mark it there.
- Sometimes you will have two drums tuned to the same letter name (F or G, for example). Use the letter “L” before the lower note of the two to make it easier to remember which drum needs re-tuning.
- When writing the changes, use arrows to indicate the direction in which you are tuning. In real-time it is important to remove all variables so that you can focus on the important things.

Mallet Switches

Remind yourself which mallets to use for the next passage by writing in these switches right after the previous part.

Cues

A cue is a signal or reminder of what is happening in the music. It is especially helpful to write in cues during long rests and tricky passages to help give you the confidence that you are in the right place, or help you if you get lost.

- Write the number of the measure within your rest that corresponds with the other player’s entrance. For example, if the flute comes in during the fifth measure, write (5) under the rest.
- If the passage is confusing, it helps to write out the other player’s part. Often, just the rhythm will do.

Measure Numbers

If your music does not have measure numbers written in, or they are written in sparsely, make sure to mark more into your part. It helps to have them marked at each entrance after a rest as well as every 4 measures (or at least 8 for a very long piece).

Repeats

If you have trouble seeing repeats, mark brackets around the repeat signs. At a quick glance they will be easier to see.

Repeated Measures

When a measure is played many times in a row, it is easy to get lost. Mark the first of the series, the 4th, 8th, etc.

The example on the following page shows a fictitious timpani part and how it could be marked. The color is used to show which markings were added after the fact, but you should always use pencil when marking your music.

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BEFORE:

Timpani FUNDamentals - Music Marking

Joanna D. Huling

Timpani

Maestoso

f *dim.* *p*

A Allegro 8

17 **B** 10 *p* *mf* *f*

33 1. 2. *mf* *f*

39 4 con sordino *mp* molto rit.

51 **D** Adagio senza sordino *pp*

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AFTER:

Timpani FUNDamentals - Music Marking

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Timpani

General mallets

Maestoso

f *dim.* *p*

A Allegro 8 (B♭B) (1) fl (5) cl

17 **B** 10 *p* *mf* *f*

33 1. 2. *mf* *f*

39 4 mute on G 43 con sordino RH get soft mallet *mp* molto rit. 47 8

51 **D** Adagio senza sordino LH get soft mallet *pp*

59 *pp*

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