



Timpani

FUNdamentals

Ron Fink

Brief History: Illinois boys (Emden, Danville) who went to the University of Illinois during the Paul Price–Jack McKenzie era. (LUDWIG AD) I believe the timpani on the field was a gift of Ludwig Drum Co. and played by William F. Ludwig II.

We both came to Texas in the 1960s, among the first full-time percussionists in the state. George played timpani with Austin Symphony and I played in the Ft. Worth. Symphony.

Equipment

Good Drums: pedals that are easy to work, without squeaks; no dents; no out-of-round bowls.

Good Heads: replace with latest generation of technology.

Good Sticks: my preference is bamboo for most occasions. Most important is having soft, medium, and hard beaters in your stick bag. (GROVER)

Tone Production

After having the right equipment, without question, the most important asset to the timpanist is the “sound” produced. This is where having quality sticks is so important. The balance and feel of the stick should be easy to manipulate.

Fink Approach to the stroke

Explanation of the French grip (thumbs-up). Start low to the drum, snap the wrist, let the natural rebound lift-out the stick. Strike the drum in the proper playing area. Explanation of dynamics and tightness or looseness of the grip.

The Roll/Finger Control

Another major aspect of your sound is the roll. There are 3 phases of dynamics that determine hand positions:

Soft: a wrist “twitch,” using thumbs over (German) for ultra-soft control

Medium: finger control, using thumbs turned up (French)

Loud: wrists, tighter grip, involving more forearm, thumbs up

Finger control: controlling the bounce off the head with proper finger placement on the stick. The index finger is the “cradle,” the middle finger is the “manipulator,” the thumb (on top) is the lever, keeping the stick in place.



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Practice routines that isolate each hand are easy to include in your study of developing this technique. The snare stick and a practice pad is all you need.

Fast rhythms and/or grace notes involve finger control as well. The 2-stroke, 3-stroke, 4-stroke ruffs.

Ear Training

Good theory training is essential. An understanding of intervals is mandatory. For centuries, the intervals of the fourth and the fifth were the standard tonic (I) and dominant (V) relationships in music. It is important to hear this V-I cadence. (V-I examples)

When you have music with 3 and 4 pitches, it is helpful to make some type of chordal association. (3 drum examples; 4 drum examples)

The melodic approach in timpani tuning. (Hymns, Instruction book examples)

The Most Abused Technique in Timpani

Over muffling: Interpreting all rests as muffling is inappropriate. Let the tone get out of the drum.



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I. Sizes and Ranges



Knowledge of ranges is needed to best decide which drum should be used to perform specific musical passages. Since plastic heads normally sound better with more tension, it is usually best to use the larger drum (ex., low G can be played on both the 32" and 29" drum, but will have a better focus on the 32"). Experiment by tuning the same pitch on two different drums, and let your ear determine which has the best tone. Listen for focus, whether there is a dip in tone when playing loud accents, and roll on each.

II. Tuning and Balancing Heads

To more closely achieve equal tension at each tuning post try the following: With the pedal in mid-range, place a ruler or flat piece of wood on the head, suspended over the counter hoop. Put a screw through the ruler that will rest on the counter hoop. Be sure it rests the same at each post. When you have equal adjustment around the drum, slowly bring the head into its proper playing range. To further test your tuning, you may find it helpful to use an electronic tuner (Korg, Protune, or Drum Watch work well on timpani). After this, let your ear be the final check and make fine adjustments as needed.

Singing and matching pitches are a must if the student is to feel confident with tuning. By applying the experience gained through keyboard percussion study, singing scales, intervals, and arpeggios will be quickly applied to timpani. Start off by using a set of bells or other keyboard behind the timpani, and match pitches until confidence is gained. Next work on various intervals and scales, and encourage creativity by creating your own exercises.

III. Selecting Mallets

Mallet choice is a personal decision and the type of mallet, weight, and degree of hardness should be based on the style of the music, the acoustics of the hall, and the type of stroke the player uses.

IV. Tone Production/Drum Placement

The purest and richest tone is produced when the head is struck around 3 to 4 inches from the lip of the bowl. Movement toward the center will introduce a little "boom" mixed with the tone. Playing less than 3 to 4 inches from the edge will produce a tone that lacks fundamental and will have more overtones or high partials.

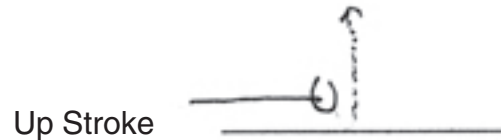
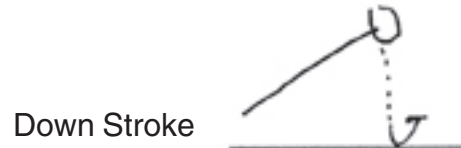
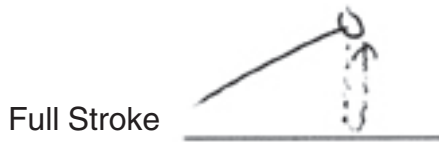


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The strokes used for other percussion instruments are also used for timpani performance. These include the following motions:



Because of the large and slowly responding heads, the full stroke is used for most playing. The amount of finger contact or grip will also have a major influence on the tone. For legato passages a loose, relaxed grip will be appropriate. For passages that need articulation or clarity, a firmer grip is recommended.

The angle at which the mallet strikes the head has a great influence on the tone. Playing with the mallet handles flat or parallel to the head will produce an excellent sound but with a degree of contact sound. By slightly raising the hands (3-6 inches) the mallet head will land on the drum more on its edge or shoulder. This will produce a brighter tone and will reduce the contact sound described above. If this seems uncomfortable, it may be helpful to put the drums on blocks so that they angle toward the player.

Drum placement is very important in terms of playing with good tone. Young students often pull their drums in a tight circle or arc around them, believing they can move from drum to drum more quickly. However, if the drums are too close, players tend to strike the outside drums in a part of the head that produces a poor tone, and they have to turn their body too much to reach the drums. Experiment by placing each mallet over the two middle drums and then snap the wrists outward over the outer drums. Note where they are and place the drums in that position to play with a more natural motion.

V. Rolls and Releases

Producing a beautiful sustained roll is one of the more challenging demands of timpani performance. Starting with slow, relaxed strokes, practice rolling at different pitch levels on each timpani. Be sure to include rolling at loud levels in your practice, and be sure that your roll speed keeps the head at its proper pitch level. Often, young students tend to roll too fast causing the pitch to go sharp.



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VI. Shifting Motions

Moving fluently between drums can only be achieved with practice. The natural movement of right-hand to left-hand alternation should be employed for most passages. When this alternation is not practical, other sticking options must be applied. The following pattern is common in many passages of our literature. Experiment with the sticking suggestions below.

a. R L R L R L R L R L R L (rapid shift of both hands)
 b. R L R R L R L L R L R R (paradiddle)
 c. R L R L X R L R L R L R L (cross-sticking)
 d. R L R L L R L R R L R L (double between drums)

Additional patterns in which alternate sticking patterns may be employed:

a. R L R R L R R L R (double between drums)
 b. R L L R L L R L R (paradiddles)
 c. R L R X L R L R L R (cross-sticking)

VII. Dampening and Observing Rests

The decision on whether or not to dampen the heads during rests is dependent on what is occurring musically. When rests or increased clarity are to be observed, there are three types of dampening that are common: a. strike the note and dampen with the opposite hand; b. strike the note and dampen with the same hand; c. dampen one drum while playing on another drum.