Timpani FUNdamentals

by Mark Dorr

Grip Comparison for Basic Stroke/Tone Production

There are two basic grips of which the beginning to intermediate level timpanist should be aware, the German and the French grips. Both grips provide a timpanist with sound fundamental control of the mallets and pave the way toward high artistic expression. However, there are as many variations of timpani technique and interpretation as there are quality performers. Slight changes in hand position, stroke approach, playing area, and angle of the mallet shaft within the hand are only a few of the ways in which an experienced artist varies tone color and introduces articulation nuances within a musical passage. The musical result is the most important goal. The guidance of a private teacher knowledgeable in the finer points of timpani performance techniques is important and highly recommended.

Eight Steps for a Sound Fundamental Grip/Stroke

1. Allow the hands to rest comfortably at the sides of the body. Notice the natural curvature of the fingers. Maintain this same type of curvature when holding the timpani mallet.

2. Raise one hand up and grasp mallet shaft between pad of thumb and first two joints of index finger. This will create a fulcrum (pivot point). *Hint:* There should be a slight open space between the side of the thumb and first finger.

3. Fulcrum should be located approximately 1/3 of way from butt end of mallet shaft. Tip of index finger should be slightly curved in around mallet shaft.

4. Last three fingers of hand should lightly curl around mallet shaft.

5. Hold the mallet firmly, not tightly. Grip should not restrict freedom of motion of mallet during rebound.

6. Elbows should be slightly out away from the sides of the body.

7. The right and left hand grips should be mirror images of each other.

8. The basic timpani stroke is analogous to a golf or tennis swing. There is an uninterrupted approach (preparation), brief moment of contact, and a follow-through (lift or pull). Each is important in order to achieve the best tonal result.

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Checklist for German Grip/Stroke

- Mallet shaft lies parallel to a line from knuckle of index finger to just above the outside joint of the wrist.
- Forearms and wrists are comparatively straight, with mallet shafts angling in toward each other.
- Mallet shafts should form a wide "V" shape and be at almost a 90 degree angle.
- Motion of mallets controlled primarily from the wrists, with occasional help from *middle and ring fingers.*
- Little finger follows contour of other fingers, neither pointing away nor directly coming in contact with mallet shaft.
- Stroke lift/wrist motion similar to waving "good-bye" or bouncing a basketball or tennis ball. Palms are parallel to the floor.
- Be particularly careful to keep drawing the sound out of the head with a quick lift and free rebound. Any excessive wrist or finger snap creates an undesirable impact sound and forces the tone.

Checklist for French Grip/Stroke

- After grasping mallets as described in "Eight Steps," *then* rotate the wrists/arms so hands turn outward until thumbnails point toward the ceiling (knuckles are perpendicular to the floor). Thumbs are now on top of shafts, forefingers underneath.
- Mallet shafts and hands are parallel to or directed slightly outward from the forearms. The primary goal is to move the mallets in a relaxed fashion from the fingers, wrists, and arms.
- Motion of mallets controlled primarily from the middle fingers and wrists, with occasional help from the ring fingers.
- Fingers remain curled naturally underside the shaft. The last two fingers may not always touch the shaft, but they still need to remain alongside the other fingers to maintain a relaxed grip.
- Stroke lift/wrist motion similar to casting a fishing line or cracking a whip. Mallet shafts are more parallel to each other with this grip.

German Grip

French Grip

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Hints for Achieving a Basic Tone

- Let mallet weight and natural rebound from the drum head do a majority of the work to obtain a clear, concise legato sound.
- Mallet should travel in a vertical fashion toward and away from the drum head. Arms and wrists should maintain a natural arc-like motion. Motion of mallet from starting position toward head is initiated by the fingers or wrists, depending upon the dynamic level and the grip used.
- Play with relaxed wrists, a firm finger fulcrum, and flexibility from the arms, shoulders, and back. Avoid leaning too far over the drums when playing.
- In general, use more fingers and wrists at softer dynamic levels. Use more wrist and arm motion as dynamic levels increase. Arms are not the primary activating force for the mallets. Dynamic levels are achieved with mallet height, not with force.
- Mallet head should strike drum at the moment when mallet shaft is nearly parallel to drum head or even slightly downward.
- Contact the drum head with the mallet and immediately draw/pull away. Avoid driving mallet into head.
- Slower stroke velocities produce legato attacks; faster stroke velocities produce more marcato-type articulations.
- Mallet heads should be kept 5″-8″ apart from each other, depending upon the size of the drum and articulation desired.
- Be certain not to play on the stitching/seams of the mallet felt. Mark these prominently.
- Strive for consistency in tone, stick height, and articulation. Practice one hand alone, then both hands alternating.

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General Reference Texts for Timpani

Percussionist's Dictionary, Joseph Adato and George Judy (Belwin)
Early Percussion Instruments from the Middle Ages to the Baroque, James Blades & Jeremy Montagu (Oxford University Press)
Percussion Instruments and Their History, James Blades (Faber & Faber)
Handel's Kettledrums and Other Papers on Military Music, Henry George Farmer (Hinrichsen Edition, Ltd.)
Drums in the Americas, Joseph H. Howard (Oak Publishing)
The Kettledrums, Percival R. Kirby (Oxford University Press, Inc.)
Dictionary of Percussion Terms, Morris Lang and Larry Spivack (Lang Percussion Co.)
Handbook of Percussion Instruments, Karl Peinkofer and Fritz Tannigel (Schott/Belwin)
Percussion Education: Source Book of Concepts and Information (Percussive Arts Society)
The Drummer: Man, A Treatise on Percussion, Gordon B. Peters (Kemper-Peters)
Percussion Ensemble and Solo Literature, Thomas Siwe, ed. (Media Press, Inc.)
Contemporary Percussion, Reginald Smith Brindle (Oxford University Press)
The History of Musical Instruments, Curt Sachs (Norton)
The Art and Science of the Timpani, Henry W. Taylor (Dufour Editions, Inc.)
The Kettledrums in Western Europe, Caldwell Titcomb (Harvard U. Press)
Drums Through the Ages, Charles L. White (Sterling Press)

Instrument/Mallet Repair Texts

repair sections also included in selected methods and technique sources
Percussion Repair and Maintenance, Mark P. Bonfoey/A. Cirone, ed. (Belwin)
Mallet Repair, Arthur Press (Belwin)
Maintenance and Repair of Wind and Percussion Instruments, George H. Springer (Allyn and Bacon, Inc.)

Recommended Literature for Timpani

This suggested literature varies widely with respect to content and approach. Examples of possible content information includes but is not limited to orchestral excerpts, discographies, repair/maintenance tips, discussions of technique, and history.

Specialized Technical Studies (focus on particular developmental level)

Basic Timpani Technique, Thomas McMillan (Belwin)
Fundamental Studies for Timpani, Garwood Whaley (JR Publications)
Primary Handbook for Timpani, Garwood Whaley (Meredith Music Publications)
Musical Studies for the Intermediate Timpanist, Garwood Whaley (JR Publications)
Technique for the Virtuoso Timpanist, Fred D. Hinger (Jerona Music Corporation)

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Complete Methods (fundamental through advanced studies)
Timpani Method, Alfred Friese and Alexander Lepak (Belwin)
Modern Method for Tympani, Saul Goodman (Belwin)
The Ludwig Timpani Instructor, William F. Ludwig (Ludwig Music Publishing)
Fundamental Method for Timpani, Mitchell Peters (Alfred)

Supplemental Studies
Timpani Tuning, Mervin Britton (Belwin)
Orchestral Techniques of the Standard Percussion Instruments, Anthony Cirone (Belwin)
Thirty Etudes, Books I, II, III, Jacques Delecluse (Alphonse-Leduc)
Percussion Symposium, Vic Firth (Carl Fischer)
The Solo Timpanist, Vic Firth (Carl Fischer)
Etuden für Timpani, Volumes I, II, III, Richard Hochrainer (Verlag Doblinger)
Timpani Tuning Exercises, Bob Tilles (GIA Publications)

College Percussion Pedagogy/Techniques Class Methods
Guide to Teaching Percussion, 3rd edition, Harry Bartlett & Ronald Holloway (William C. Brown Co. Publishers)
The Complete Percussionist, Robert B. Breithaupt (C.L. Barnhouse)
Percussion Manual, F. Michael Combs (Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc.)
Teaching Percussion, Gary Cook (Schirmer Books)
Percussion for Musicians, Robert McCormick/Anthony J. Cirone, ed. (Belwin)
Percussion in the School Music Program, Al Payson and Jack McKenzie (Payson Percussion Products)

Timpani Orchestral Excerpt Sources
20th Century Orchestra Studies for Timpani, compiled by Alan Abel (G. Schirmer)
The Logic of It All, Anthony Cirone and Joe Sinai (Belwin)
Timpani Passages, Volumes I, II, III, R. Ariel Cross (Belwin)
The Timpani Player's Orchestral Repertoire, Volume I-Beethoven; II-Brahms; III-Tchaikowski; IV-Sibelius; V-R. Strauss; VI-Stravinsky, Fred D. Hinger (Jerona Music Corp.)
Timpani Method, Alfred Friese and Alexander Lepak (Belwin)
The Gardner Modern Method for the Tympani, Part III, Carl E. Gardner (Carl Fischer)
Classic Overtures for Timpani; Classic Symphonies for Timpani; Romantic Symphonies for Timpani; Standard Concertos for Timpani; compiled by Morris Goldenberg (Chappell)
Modern Method for Tympani, Saul Goodman (Belwin)
The Ludwig Timpani Instructor, William F. Ludwig (Ludwig Music Publishing)
Orchestral Excerpts for Timpani, Volume I, Scott Stevens

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GLOSSARY OF FOREIGN TIMPANI TERMS

English	Italian	French	German
at the edge (of the head)	*sul bordo* or *all' estremità* (*della membrana*)	*au bord* (*de la membrane*)	*am rand* (*des felges*)
change pitch	*muta*	*changez*	*nach-stimmen*
dampen	*secco*	*étouffé*	*dämpfen*
felt stick	*baccheta di feltro*	*baguette en feutre*	*filzschlägel*
finger	*dita*	*doigt*	*finger*
(with the) fingers	(*col il*) *dita*	(*avec les*) *doigts*	(*mit den*) *fingern*
hand	*mano*	*main*	*hand*
hard	*duro*	*dur*	*schwerer* or *hart*
hit/strike	*colpo*	*frappee*	*dem*
kettledrum	*timpano*	*timbale*	*pauke*
kettledrums	*timpani*	*timbales*	*pauken*
leather	*pelle*	*cuir*	*leder*
let vibrate (l.v.)	*lasciare vibrare*	*laissez vibrer*	*klingen lassen*
mallet	*mazza*	*mailloche*	*klopper*
medium	*medio* or *mezzo*	*moyenne*	*mittel*
medium-hard	*media dure* or *medio duro*	*assez dur* or *moyenne dur*	*ziemlich hartem* or *mittelharte*
medium-soft	*media molle*	*assez molle* or *moyenne doux*	*ziemlich weichen* or *mittel weich*
mute/muffle off	*senza sordino* or *modo ordinario*	*sans sourdine* or *naturel*	*dampfung* or *gewöhnlich*
muted, muffled, covered	*con sordino*, *coperto*, *coperti,* or *velato*	*sons voilés*, *sourdine*, *voilé*, or *couvert*	*abdämpfen, bedeckt, dumpf*, or *gedämpft*
on the skin/head	*sulla membrana*	*sur la peau*	*auf dem fell*
percussion	*percussione*	*batterie*	*schlagzeug*
roll	*rullo*	*roulée*	*wirbel*
soft	*morbido*, *molle*, or *soffici*	*doux* or *douce*	*weich* or *weicher*
sponge	*spunga*	*épongè*	*schwamm*
sponge-headed sticks	*baccheta di spunga*	*baguettes d'éponges*	*schwammschlägel*
stick	*baccheta* or *mazza*	*baguette* or *mailloche*	*schlägel* or *klöpper*
strike (beat)	*colpo*	*frappez* (*blouser*)	*schlagen*
timpani	*timpani*	*timbales*	*pauken*
timpani mallet, stick	*baccheta di timpani*	*mailloche de timbales, baguettes de timbales*	*paukenschlägel*
unmuffled	*senza sordino* or *scoperto*	*sans sourdine*	*dämpfung ab*
with	*con* or *col*	*avec*	*mit*
without	*senza*	*sans*	*ohne*
wood stick	*baccheta di legno*	*mailloche de bois*	*holzschlägel*
wool	*lana*	*laine*	*woll* or *wolle*