About the Triangle

by Neil Grover &
Garwood Whaley

ABOUT THE TRIANGLE

English	Triangle
German	der Triangel
Italian	il triangolo
French	le triangle
Spanish	el triangulo

History

The triangle is rarely viewed as a musical instrument that requires serious practice and study. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The tonal texture of a triangle is that of a special nature which cannot be imitated. The instrument was used as early as the Turks with their Janissary music and eventually found its way into the classical orchestra repertoire of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “The triangle entered the European orchestra in the 18th century by way of the Janissary music of the Turkish soldiers.”[1] Drawings of early instruments show rings loosely hung which provided additional sound when struck. According to James Blades, “ The humble triangle can lay claim to being one of the first purely metal percussion instruments to enter the modern orchestra (Hamburg Opera 1710). Until the end of the eighteenth century. . .it was used mainly to give added color. It became a permanent member of the orchestra during the early part of the following century, and in 1853 was raised to the rank of a symphonic solo instrument by Liszt in his Piano Concerto in E flat, causing, it is said, considerable consternation.”[2] Early examples of triangles include ornamental work at the open end, often in a scroll pattern.

Historically, the triangle has been manufactured from a solid iron and later steel rod and bent into a triangular shape roughly equilateral. In modern times, the scroll pattern has been abandoned and triangles are made from either steel or brass. Just after the turn of the century in the United States, triangles were fashioned in New England using the spindle from knitting machines (during this period, New England was the regional center for knitting mills). These spindles were fabricated from hardened steel which was turned on a metal lathe. The result was a triangle with sides of unequal diameter.

Most triangles range in size from four to ten inches in diameter. The preferred size for orchestra and concert band is between six and nine inches, the larger size being more suitable for literature from the Romantic period. Since there is no “correct” triangle size, it is the responsibility of the percussionist to select an instrument of suitable sonority for each particular work. Although the triangle is of indefinite pitch, it tends to blend with the overall harmonic sound of the band and orchestra.

Accessories

The manner in which the triangle is suspended is critical to the quality of sound produced. Since the triangle is a highly resonant instrument and must be free to vibrate, a good triangle clip with a very thin

Fundamentals Track

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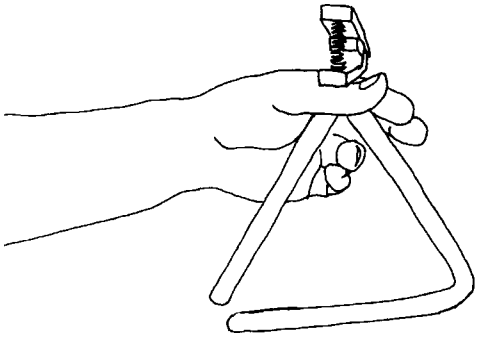
suspension line is essential. A suspension line that is too thick or heavy will prevent the triangle from vibrating and produce an undesirable sound. One of the best materials to use is monofilament fishing line which is readily available and inexpensive. When tying the line to the clip, do not leave much slack or the triangle will have a tendency to turn when played. Make a second "safety" loop larger than the primary loop in case the first loop breaks.

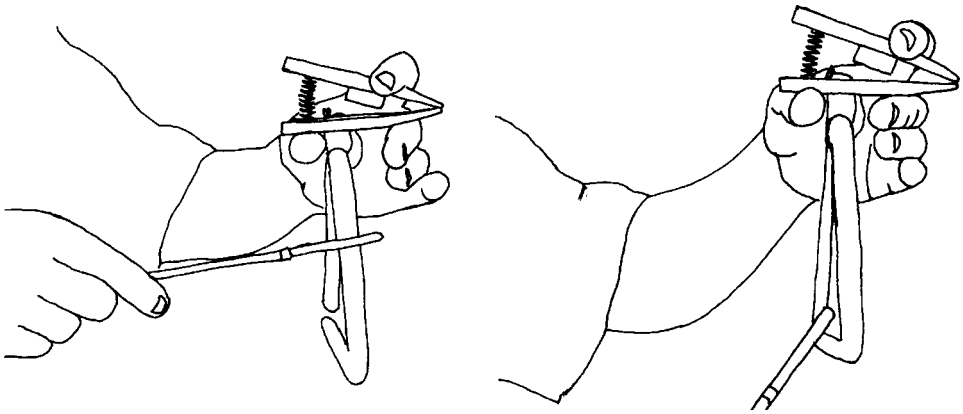
The size and weight of the beater is also of great importance. Generally, heavier beaters of various metals produce the most sonorous sounds. There are a variety of beaters on the market today that are suitable for all types of music and ensembles.



Performance

Hold the triangle in the weaker of the two hands. The clip should be held between the ring finger and the thumb with the pointer on top. This method leaves the other fingers free for muffling. If at all possible, play the triangle with one hand while suspending it with the other. By holding the instrument up the sound is more easily projected and there are no extraneous stand sounds.

Strike the triangle "pushing out" away from the body while holding the instrument at eye level. When struck properly, the triangle will produce a fundamental sound with numerous overtones. The production of overtones is important and enables the instrument to blend with an ensemble. The triangle is a "coloration" instrument and must always blend with the ensemble. The instrument may be struck on the bottom or on the side. Wherever the instrument is struck, it must be with a pushing motion since a slapping motion will produce a hard, metallic ping rather than a beautiful, resonant tone.



Standard performance techniques include striking the instrument with steel beaters and, for special effects, wooden sticks. Fast rhythms are played either by suspending the triangle and using one beater in each hand or by moving a single beater back and forth from side to side on the inside of the instrument.

1 Peinkofer, Karl and Tannigel, Fritz. Handbook of Percussion Instruments. Mainz, Germany:Schott, 1969.

2 Blades, James. Percussion Instruments and Their History. London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1970.