

Timpani Technique

By Josh Gottry



Josh Gottry is a graduate of the percussion performance program at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. As an instructor, Mr. Gottry works with drumlines, percussion ensembles, and private percussion students from several local high schools and junior high schools. He also currently holds the position of Adjunct Percussion Instructor for Chandler-Gilbert Community College.

As a composer, Mr. Gottry is a recognized three-time ASCAP grant recipient with seventeen works. As a performer, Mr. Gottry has remained active as both a soloist and participant in various local ensembles. He currently serves as Principal Percussionist with the Mesa Symphony Orchestra and is the first-call alternate for the Broadway Palm Dinner Theater.

Mr. Gottry is a member of the Percussive Arts Society and the American Society of Composers, Authors, & Publishers. He has served three years as the Vice President for the Arizona State Chapter of the Percussive Arts Society.

SIZES AND RANGES

Knowing the sizes and ranges of a standard set of timpani is critical for any timpanist. This information assists in choosing specific drums to be used and determining approximate location of the indicated pitches within the range of the drum. A complete set of timpani is typically 4 or 5 drums with the optional drum being the smallest one (20"). Sizes and ranges are as follows (note that ranges are approximate and the best sound for each drum is in the mid-high portion of the range):

32" - D to A

29" - F to C (octave below middle C)

26" - Bb to F

23" - D to A

20" - F to C (middle C)

Timpani are typically set up with the largest drum on the players left (American style).

TUNING

The first and most important step in tuning timpani is knowing the pitch to which you are tuning the drum. Though this seems obvious, many beginning timpanists neglect the time necessary to establish the pitch in their head before striking the drum. Regardless of the source (tuning fork, pitch pipe, mallet instrument, etc.), the player must establish pitch before attempting to match it. After establishing pitch and choosing the appropriate drum for that pitch, move the pedal to a spot a bit below where that pitch should be. Tap the drum once lightly with your finger and move the pedal up until the pitch on the drum matches the one in your head. Always move the pedal from below the pitch. This makes tuning easier to hear and avoids the risk of the drum settling lower in pitch while playing.

PLAYING SPOT

All playing and tuning should take place in the same spot on the head. That spot is directly above the pedal approximately 1/3 of the way toward the center of the drum (2-4 inches from the edge depending on the size of the drum). The desired result should be a full and resonant sound that sustains for several seconds. Playing too close to the center reduces the sustain of the drum. Playing too close to the edge produces a thinner quality of sound.

ROLLS

Timpani rolls are performed as single stroke rolls (like mallet percussion). The speed of the roll will typically be faster on the smaller drums or when the pitch is in the upper range of the drum. For a more legato sound, mallets may be separated by as much as 6-8 inches, although they still must remain the same distance from the rim.

MUFFLING

Since timpani will sustain when played properly, it is necessary to muffle during indicated silences. Muffling should be performed using the middle, ring, and pinky fingers. The stick remains grasped by the index finger and thumb. To muffle, simply touch the head of the drum (don't press) in the playing spot until the sound stops or you need to play again. If the situation allows, take time to muffle every drum (even those not played recently) to compensate for sympathetic vibration. If there is not sufficient time to muffle all drums, muffle the one or two most recently played. Muffling can also take place during indicated sustained notes on one drum. In this case, muffle any others that may still be ringing to add clarity to the one indicated pitch.

STICKING

As with mallet percussion, sticking considerations are an integral part of preparing timpani music. Care should be taken to avoid repeated notes with the same hand in faster passages. On the other hand, performers can achieve greater consistency of sound playing a repeated note on one drum with the same hand in slower passages. When it is necessary to cross one hand over the other, this technique must be executed with the arms crossing at the wrist to allow for full strokes in both hands. In cases where the roll begins on one drum and releases on another, the release note should be played with the stick that is nearest to that drum. In other words, release with the right hand when moving right (higher), the left hand when moving left (lower).

GAUGES

While tuning gauges can be a tremendous asset in some contemporary literature, it is important to note that these gauges are only as accurate as the person who set them and how recently they were set. Since moving the timpani, playing the timpani, temperature, and humidity can all affect the accuracy of gauges, unless you recently set them yourself, the gauges are likely to be inaccurate.