

Musical Encounters

By Stanley Leonard

My first musical encounter with the drum occurred when I was eleven years old. I was living in Independence, Missouri. My parents gave me a small, white, wooden-shell snare drum that was one step above a toy. I thought it was important to learn how to play correctly, so I took lessons with the local music store owner, a tuba player. After a few lessons, he invited me to play in a little concert band he conducted. I went to the rehearsal and found the music for a march on my music stand. I could *almost* read drum music, but when the band started playing, I was lost. I knew how a march was supposed to sound, so I faked the part.

Two years later I began studying with Vera McNary, principal percussionist of the Kansas City Philharmonic. My immediate goal was to play percussion in the Independence Little Symphony (later known as the Independence Symphony). As an audition for the orchestra, I played the beginning of the “Emperor Waltz” on my new, real snare drum. The conductor asked if I knew what timpani were; I said, “Yes.” He showed me the orchestra’s two hand-tuned drums, gave me a pair of Ludwig timpani sticks, and said, “High note on the right, low note on the left. Come to next week’s rehearsal.” That was the beginning of my lifelong association with the timpani. My first musical encounter as a timpanist was in the fall of 1945 with Schubert’s “Eighth Symphony,” the “Unfinished.”

During the years I played with the Independence Symphony I tried my hand at tucking timpani heads. I did not have a proper tool, but I read somewhere that you could bend the handle of a spoon and it would work as a tucking tool. I used this makeshift tool to tuck new heads for the two, hand-tuned, antique Belgian timpani I was playing in the orchestra. It was a rough tucking job, but during the years I played them, the heads never separated from the flesh hoops. Later I acquired a real tucking tool, which I eventually passed on to Don Liuzzi of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

When my high school purchased a set of two Slingerland pedal timpani, I was immediately fascinated with a new aspect of timpani performance. My *Ludwig Timpani Instructor* method book, published in 1930, had a section about developing pedal technique, written by Joseph Zettleman of the Chicago Symphony. (I learned later that Zettleman had once been a violinist.) I started practicing those exercises. One summer I was given a key to the school so I could have access to the band room and practice when the school was closed.

My timpani studies continued with Ben Udell of the Kansas City Philharmonic, Edward Metzinger of the Chicago Symphony, and William Street at the Eastman School of Music. My musical encounters included performances as a percussionist with the Kansas City and Rochester Philharmonic orchestras, then as timpanist with the Nineteenth Army Band at Ft. Dix, New Jersey. A postcard from William Street informed me about an opening for timpanist in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. I inquired about the job and was invited to audition. I became Principal Timpanist in 1956, a position I held for thirty-eight years.

My first drums in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra were hand-me-downs, owned by the orchestra, a set of three Ludwig old style Universal timpani (29, 28, and 25 inches) and a hand-tuned 23-inch drum. The orchestra also owned a 32-inch hand-tuned drum, which I discovered hidden in a warehouse. I did my best to update these instruments. New skin heads, purchased from George Way in Chicago, were impeccable and gave the drums a new voice.



Bob Sheets, an employee at Volkwein’s Music store, could tuck heads so skillfully you thought they were done by a machine. Bob tucked all my timpani heads. Even though I asked him, he never shared his tucking secrets. In 1958 I heard about new Dresden-type timpani made by Walter Light; Fred D. Hinger used these in the Philadelphia Orchestra. I contacted Hinger about the drums. He highly recommended them. The same year I received a loan from the symphony to purchase my own set of four Walter Light Dresden-style drums. Then, in 1972, I purchased a set of Hinger timpani. I played those drums in the PSO for the next twenty-two years; they became my musical voice. Today they are in in my studio.

CONDUCTORS

The conductor is always the captain of the ship. Even though sometimes his or her wishes were contrary to my own, I always tried to comply. Some orchestras attempt to impose their will against the conductor’s wishes; that never really works. If a guest conductor wanted something that seemed off course, I was fortunate; I only had to live with it a short period of time.

Some conductors addressed me as “timps,” others as “timpani.” Even though he addressed other principal players by their first names, Lorin Maazel always called me “Mr. Leonard.” I never could figure out why! Once, while in France, he called me “Monsieur Lé-o-nard”. I later dis-

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covered there is a famous Leonard perfume and cologne manufacturer in France. When he did discuss a musical passage with me it was usually offstage and rather casual. I dutifully told him, "I'll work on it."

Many years before my association with Maazel, the PSO had a guest conductor from the film industry in Los Angeles; he conducted in a summer festival. During rehearsal he asked principal players for their names. After hearing the name he repeated the first name. When he got to me and asked for my name I said to him, "Mr. Leonard."

During my career I had the opportunity to perform with many well-known conductors. Here are experiences and a few quotes from some of them.

Leopold Stokowski: "A good percussionist must always be prepared to improvise."

Sir Thomas Beecham: To the concertmaster, "And who is that young man in the corner?" Reply, "That is the timpanist, maestro." Beecham, "Ah, yes, discreetly remote."

Carlo Maria Giulini liked my "tonality" but was striving for something in an Italian opera overture that I'm not sure I achieved. Maybe the long D roll in this piece should have been played on the 28-inch drum to give it a bit more humming sound. I never played D on the 28-inch drum in those days except for the Strauss "Burlesque."

Leonard Bernstein spoke to the trumpet section during a rehearsal of his "Jeremiah Symphony" and said, "If you guys muff that again I'll kill you!"

Herman Scherchen referred to a passage in the second movement of Beethoven's "Third Symphony" and said to me, "Gedampft, it is a funeral march." The performance of that symphony with Scherchen was one of the most intense, almost brutal, interpretations I ever played.

Eugene Ormandy told us (the PSO) in rehearsal that we were the only orchestra he would guest conduct.

Antal Dorati: "Timpanists everywhere play the ending of a roll too loud before moving to a different drum for the climax of the roll."

James Levine: Backstage, after some problems in Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," Levine said to me, "You and I know where the rhythm is so we will just keep going."

William Steinberg referred to me as "My timpani player." (After me being his timpanist for twenty years, he might have felt possessive.)

Andre Previn: Before his first rehearsal with us as Music Director, Previn and I met in the parking lot across from Heinz Hall. I introduced myself saying, "Hello, I'm your timpani player." Previn replied, "Oh, I didn't realize I had one of my own."

Lorin Maazel: "Sounds a bit wooly." I never heard that kind of description for something I played.

Paul Hindemith was commissioned to write a symphony for the PSO. In one movement there is a big solo for the timpani with a melody similar to the one in his "Symphonic Metamorphosis." After the first performance, which Hindemith conducted, he came rushing backstage asking for the timpanist. I thought, "What have I done?" He came over to me,

grabbed my hand, shook it and said, "That's the way the timpani should sound!"

TOURING

Tours provided opportunity to visit places throughout the world. Seeing friends in those places was even better. However, during my first season in the PSO, 1956, I was overwhelmed by the logistics of a five-week bus tour of the southern United States.

Watching my instruments being handled on tours often created anxious moments. I watched with some horror as a forklift moved my drums, out of their cases, up a story and a half to the stage door. I witnessed a drum, out of its case, being jammed into the cargo hold of an airplane. I saw my drums riding upside down on a truck in Poland. After a runout concert a drum slipped off the stage and the side of the frame was bashed in, breaking the spider and making the bowl out of round. On tour in Charleston, South Carolina, humidity collapsed the skin heads on the drums so much I had to play the end of Beethoven's "Eighth Symphony" on the 25- and 23-inch drums. While performing outdoors in an ancient amphitheater in Taormina, Sicily, moisture from Mediterranean Sea humidity collected on the plastic heads and waterlogged the felt on my sticks. I used a pile of paper towels to soak up the condensation during the performance. In the Musikverein in Vienna I watched a single stagehand struggling to carry my largest Hinger timpano up the risers. I stopped him and told him he needed someone to assist him. Fortunately my German language skills were better than they are today.

I recall a conversation with the timpanist of an internationally famous European orchestra who asked me, "Why do you Americans always want big drums?" All I could think of to say in reply was, "Maybe bigger is better?"

During a tour I rarely changed sticks to accommodate a particular hall's acoustics. The music is still the same no matter where it is played. The time to experiment with different sticks is during routine rehearsal or later with a trusted, knowledgeable colleague.

I began using plastic heads in 1964 on a two-and-a-half month tour of Europe and the Middle East sponsored by the U.S. State Department. I told myself if I could use plastic heads in the great concert halls of Europe, why not at Syria Mosque in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania? On all later tours with the PSO in the United States, Europe, and Asia, I used plastic heads. After a concert in Belgium a man came up to me and wanted to see the timpani heads. He did not believe I had plastic heads on the drums. In Vienna, at the Musikverein, Richard Hochrainer had to take a look to make sure. After I received my Hinger drums I did try using calf again for a short period in Heinz Hall. But (for the first and only time in my life) I broke a drumhead while playing. It happened during the solo roll at the end of Tchaikovsky's "Fifth Symphony" in rehearsal. I was upset with the minimally competent guest conductor, and after the music stopped I called out loudly to him and said, "We can't tell what you are



Stanley Leonard in 1952



Stanley Leonard in 1959 with the Light timpani

doing back here.” I could hardly believe I did that. But members of the brass section pounded their feet.

RECORDING

During recording sessions I always tried to use the same sticks as in concert. Occasionally I did have to modify my choice. Usually it did not upset my aesthetic concerning the music. *However*, I was upset when I had to muffle the drums and use wood sticks to play the famous timpani passage in the third movement of Beethoven’s “First Symphony.” I don’t know which version was actually chosen for the recording, a normal performance procedure or the adulterated one.

While recording a contemporary violin concerto with Andre Previn and Isaac Stern, the engineer kept asking for the timpani to play so he could make adjustments. He did it so many times I finally played the entire tune of “America” on my 25-inch Hinger drum (it can be done in the key of A major, although I prefer to do it in B-flat) while I heard him yelling from the onstage loudspeaker, “That’s enough!” Previn and Stern were speechless (but not angry) and the orchestra was delighted.

MUSIC

When I began serious musical studies there were no collections of percussion or timpani parts for the large body of orchestral repertoire. These came along later. In November 1949 I created my own repertoire notebook by visiting the Jackson County library in Kansas City, Missouri, and copying major percussion repertoire from the full scores in the library. I was fortunate to play some of that same music with the Kansas City Philharmonic. It is important to be able to interpret music in an individual part without listening to a recording of the piece. Studying the part in the full score is a part of this process. My little repertoire collection also included my first efforts at writing music for percussion, *Exercises for the Battery*.

It may seem unimportant to some but the way parts are marked can be beneficial or inhibiting. During my performing career when I received a new part, one that I had never used, I always erased every mark that had been placed in the music so I started with a clean copy. While making my own marks I inadvertently started studying the part for performance. I did not write messages to myself about performance details. I used little icons, my own shorthand. It is difficult to read messages and play the notes at the same time; something will always suffer. Sometimes I marked sticking or placed a mark above the rhythm to indicate the pulse. I always used a regular, soft lead pencil for marking. The worst parts were those that had been marked with colored pencil or, heaven forbid, INK.

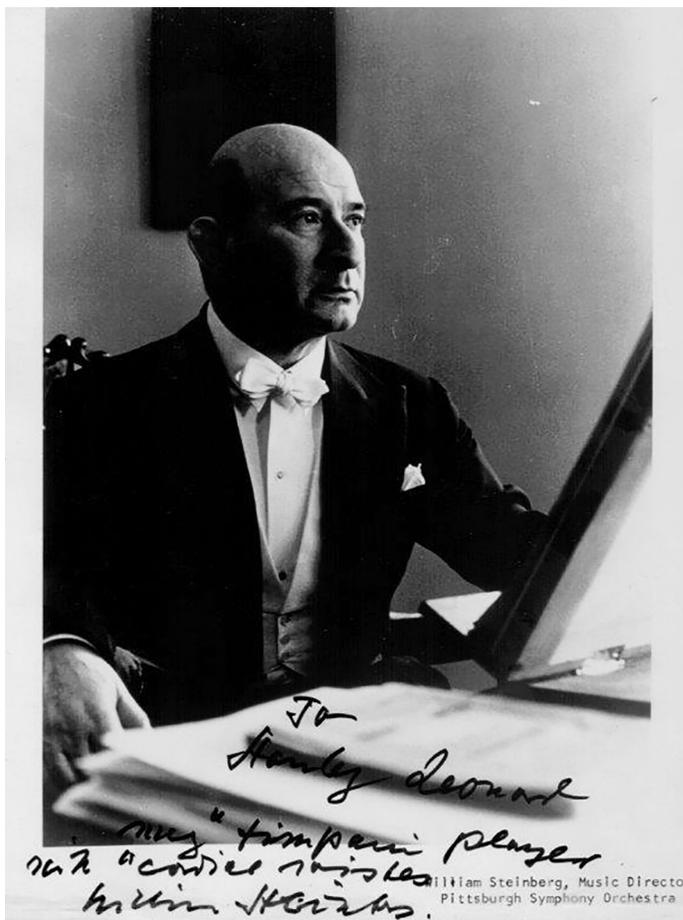
PERFORMING

When I began my professional career as a percussionist, many symphony orchestra players were not conservatory trained. These were men and women who were exceptionally competent instrumental performers. One of my first colleagues in the Kansas City Philharmonic began playing trumpet in the orchestra when he was fourteen years old; he never finished high school. Eventually he became principal in the Cleveland Orchestra. I began playing professionally with the Kansas City Philharmonic when I was seventeen and still in high school, but I thought the best path to the career I wanted was to continue with an education that included conservatory training.

During my junior year in high school I began studying timpani with Ben Udell, the timpanist of the Kansas City Philharmonic; I also played timpani in the University of Kansas City Symphony. The rehearsals were on Saturday evening from six to eight. As a high school student I rubbed shoulders with university students and members of the KC Philharmonic who played in the orchestra. This is the mantra that I always encouraged my students to follow: play, play, play, no matter what the group. This is the internship into the real world of performing.

One thing I did not learn early enough was that I would not turn into a pumpkin if I changed some of my technical performance strategies. For example, “Keep those thumbs up on the top of the stick.” Eventually I discovered that there are several different ways to hold the sticks that may, in fact, assist in interpreting the music in a more musical manner. For me, varying the grip opened up a whole new realm of possibility for performance. I began to see how multiple styles of producing the sound on the drums could be valid.

My biggest concern has always been to avoid *whacking* the drum, which can happen if you start using too much arm, flapping the sticks too loosely, and playing *into* the drumhead rather than *off* of it. I have



1976 autographed photo of William Steinberg.

always attempted to be very consistent in *producing* the sound whether it is *pp* or *ff*. The performer, not the stick, creates the sound.

Performing with a sense of naturalness and musical balance has been another mantra. The music tells you what to do: Follow that path, engage in the sound, and always remember you are part of a larger instrument (the orchestra or band). *In your face* timpani playing is not being part of that larger instrument. I blame conductors for some of this problem; many conductors demand increased dynamics from brass and wind players. The timpanist may also feel compelled to comply.

Often, the timpani can control the way an orchestra feels the pulse or rhythm. The temptation is to *drive* the orchestra the way a drumset player drives a performing group in jazz or other popular musical genres. The timpanist must be careful to make wise judgments about using this control. Sometimes I wanted to move the performance along (especially if it seemed the orchestra was getting bogged down). I tried to carry or support the musical moments, not drive them. Again, I always focused on my role in the music and as an integral part of the orchestra.

As I reflect on my musical encounters I become more aware that music is a universal language. This language brings joy and appreciation with a worldwide scope. I feel fortunate that music makes it possible for me to continue participating in and being part of this global community.

Stanley Leonard achieved prominence in the music world during a distinguished thirty-eight-year career as Principal Timpanist of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. He performed internationally with the symphony in concerts, television productions, and recordings. As a solo artist, he premiered several major new works for solo timpani and orchestra with the PSO. He has received accolades for his performance from critics, conductors, and musical colleagues as well. His extensive compositions for percussion and other musical mediums are published in the United States and Europe and performed around the world. Leonard is author of *Pedal Technique for the Timpani*. He can be heard performing and directing his compositions for percussion on the CDs *Canticle*, *Collage*, and *Reunion*. His music for organ, timpani and trumpet is presented on the CD *Acclamation*. The CD *Jubilate* features his music for handbells. He has presented master classes at leading conservatories and universities in the United States and abroad and is a member of the PAS Hall of Fame. For more information, visit www.StanleyLeonard.com.

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