

FOCUS ON PERFORMANCE

The Agile Pedestrian: Melodic Freedom for the Timpani as Illustrated in Byron McCulloh's "Symphony Concertante for Timpanist and Orchestra"

Martin Kluger

A TIMPANIST MAY CHOOSE FROM A PALETTE of expressive choices within the expressive capabilities of his instrument, but these choices are also limited by one's musical concept and the compositional material. The range of expression includes timbral color, dynamic intensity, forcefulness of rhythm and control of pitch. But composers often fail to consider the extent of melodic flexibility of our instruments. Teachers advocate careful tuning of one pitch at a time, a useful and difficult skill if one is counting and surrounded by other sounds. However, by overlooking the option of producing a melody, young players and composers are channelled into a conceptual mode that is unnecessarily restrictive.

When one thinks of how orchestral timpani writing has evolved, e.g., from Handel to Beethoven to Mahler to Bartok, a tendency towards ever more flexible control of pitch becomes apparent. New performance techniques tend to follow improvements in technology. As early as 1912 a breakthrough occurred when Gerhard Cramer, timpanist at the Court Theater in Munich, claimed invention of the drum that "in an instant, (could) be tuned to any desired note" (Benvenga, 1979). Since then, other mechanical improvements have truly given the timpani a melodic voice. Although the timpani serve well their usual assignment, that of providing a harmonic/rhythmic foundation on the tonic and dominant of the key, some composers have explored additional melodic possibilities.

Byron McCulloh, composer of the *Symphony Concertante for Timpanist and Orchestra*, has succeeded in granting an exceptional degree of melodic freedom to the soloist. Furthermore, his effort created a substantial 24 minute opus that significantly augments the solo repertory for timpani. For the performer, it presents the challenge of honing one's pedalling technique to make it playable. McCulloh's treatment of the timpanist's ability to change pitch without pre-tuning is auspicious. In order to follow the contour of the melodic line, the feet must move the pedals with an agility comparable to a string player's left hand. In this context,

"tuning" is archaic usage as it implies something that preceeds, rather than occurs during, the act of execution. Just as with instruments of the other orchestral families, the timpanist finds the pitch as the contour of the melody reveals itself. Composers who take the time to study this work will gain an appreciation of the melodic capabilities of the timpani, and have this newly acquired information at their disposal." This is one piece that should find its way into a few orchestration texts.

The work is a symphony concertante, which is appropriate considering the musical history of the instrument. The four movements are entitled: *Introduction and Allegro*, *Elegy* (E.B.R. via Mozart), *Vivo Insectile* and *Proclamation and Finale*. A large 20th century-sized orchestra is matched against the soloist's arsenal of five pedal timpani, four roto-toms and eight tom-toms. The percussion section has not been slighted; it takes four

performers to cover xylophone, glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, chimes, two suspended cymbals, crash cymbals, four antique cymbals, three elephant bells, tambourine, sleigh bells, triangle, two piccolo wood blocks, four temple blocks, gong and bass drum. Most prominent are the colorful brush strokes

❖

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upon the broad second movement canvas, and the arduous élan during the insectlike *Vivo*, both delivered by the section performers.

For the solo timpanist, it is in the rigors of the first movement that his mettle is most tested. It has been performed alone without the other movements and has the most relevance to the topic at hand. A few excerpts will convey the movement's character.

Perched upon the requisite stool situated at the fore of the orchestra, the soloist establishes his presence by rolling upon octave C's interrupted by sforzando accents - it's a glorious effect (Figure 1). The context of this first encounter between tympanic tone and human ear is one of vertiginous swells of dense orchestral texture. Overall, it functions as a sort of motto, reappearing in varied form in the codas to the first and last movements (Figure 2).

Timpanists have their own explicit preference as to which drum sounds best on a given pitch, and this varies according to musical context. One consideration is that pitch clarity and articulation are improved when the drumhead is taut. Thus, tonal territory is often not defined, but rather inherent to the written material. A change of register will occasionally improve the musical product. For example, pitches below E on the deepest drum may benefit from an octave transposition upwards when orchestration permits. The tongue twister at the end of the fourth movement (figure 8): projects better when brought up an octave, and allows the solo line to be heard. It is an acoustical fact that higher frequencies will cut through more readily than slightly lower frequencies of equal amplitude. Even pitches a fourth apart, e.g., a high e on drum III against a B on drum II, require sensitivity to this phenomenon.

The highpoint of the second movement is a salute to Mozart. The climax quotes the *Tuba mirum* of that composer's *Requiem*. Entering on a cross-rhythm, the timpani create a tension that clashes the inevitability of death against the good natured optimism of that melody. The richness of the orchestration here rivals that of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (Figure 9).

Communication between composer and performer is not usually possible. When available, the advantage should be taken. Although not indicated in the score, thin wood dowels on natural skinned congas and bongos effectively evoke insect activity and match the concurrent twanging of strings in the *Vivo Insectile* third movement. The ethnic instruments also work well where hand playing is required (see Figure 10). The score indicates eight concert tom-toms, however the composer suggests that whatever sounds most in character is the proper solution. A humorously effective compositional device used by Mr. McCulloh elsewhere in the same

movement is unison accompaniment of the soloist by the piccolo, a passage later repeated in canon with the contrabassoon (Figure 11).

The fourth movement, *Proclamation and Finale*, starts segue from the third with a pre-recorded tape of the timpanist that is accompanied by the live player (Figure 12). The cadenza of this movement presents the soloist with an opportunity to write his own music (the only indications are slow, accel., fast, furious, rall. and slow; about 40 seconds). Overall, it is a movement of contrasts portraying both the power and sensitivity of

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

83 A TEMPO (♩=112)
Play up 8va →

which the kettledrums are capable.

The slant of this article is not meant to imply that automatic adjustment of the pitch is any substitute for fine tuning of intonation. One may conclude that timpanic tradition will evolve so that adjustment of head tension is more spontaneous. Elementary instruction on timpani should begin with scales, melodic exercises, double stops and the like, so that upcoming players and their peers

consider this style commonplace. Such an approach would be in the interest of both their musicianship and the expressive powers of the instrument.

It took a timpanist (Benjamin Britten) to write the *Nocturne for Tenor and Small Orchestra*. That piece contains passages in which the timpanist becomes an agile pedestrian. The *Concertante* was also written by a composer familiar with timpani by virtue of his friendship with Stanley Leonard, timpanist of the Pittsburgh

Symphony to whom the work is dedicated. The “take-home” message here is that melodies on all twelve chromatic pitches are accessible to timpanists. More composers and educators should avail themselves of this fact. ■

Marty Kluger performed the Symphony Concertante for Timpanist and Orchestra with the Springfield Symphony Orchestra, Springfield, Mass. on December 9,

Figure 9

The musical score for Figure 9 is a page from a symphony score, starting at measure 30. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 60, and the dynamics are marked as crescendo (cresc.). The score includes parts for the following instruments:

- Perc. (Percussion)
- Fl. I & II (Flutes)
- Ob. I & II (Oboes)
- E.H. (English Horn)
- Cl. I & II (Clarinets)
- B.C. (Bassoon)
- Bsn. (Bassoon)
- Coro. (Cor Anglais)
- Hrn. I & II (Horns)
- Trpt. I, II, III (Trumpets)
- Trb. I, II, III (Trombones)
- Tuba
- Solo Timp. (Solo Timpani)
- Cymbals
- Gong
- Vibes (Vibes)
- Maracas
- Celeste
- Harp
- Vln. I & II (Violins)
- Vla. (Viola)
- Vlc. (Violoncello)
- CB (Double Bass)

The score features complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings throughout. A specific instruction for the Solo Timpani part reads: "Corno I & II a unison with Solo II (written for 1st)!".

1989. Mr. Kluger performs as principal timpanist and does research in the field of molecular neurobiology.

Those interested in perusing the work discussed may contact Mr. Arthur Cohn, Director of Serious Music at Carl Fischer, Inc., 62 Cooper Square, New York, NY 10003.

Reference

Bevenga, Nancy. *Timpani and the Timpanist's Art*. 1979. Gothenburg University, Department of Musicology. ISBN 91-42222-276-X

Editor's Note

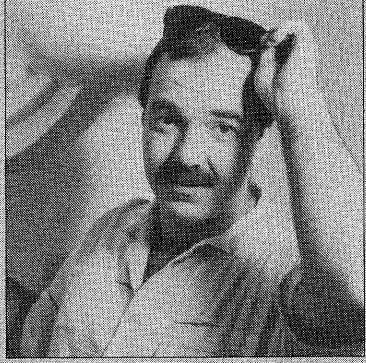
Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1984) defines the word *Pedestrian* (subsense 2A) as: "going or performed on foot." - *Michael Bayard* Copyright ©1973 by Carl Fisher, Inc., New York International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission.

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