

The Kettledrummer's Art

By Stanley Leonard

The art of performing with kettledrums (or timpani) has a long and varied history. This article presents perspectives about that art. These views come from living with music through three quarters of a century listening, observing, and performing. Some of the perspectives presented here have been discussed for decades. However, it is amazing how many times we discover young (and sometimes older) kettledrummers who still have not had the opportunity to consider them.

I love all percussion sounds. When I was 14 years old and a fairly competent snare drummer, I was introduced to an ancient set of two hand-tuned Belgian kettledrums, handed a pair of sticks, and instructed about holding them. I created a few sounds on the drums and was told to come to next week's orchestra rehearsal. In those few moments the kettledrums became a fatal attraction for me. My musical life has never been the same since.

My active performing career has been primarily in the second half of the 20th century. Much has happened in the evolution of music during the first 23 years of the 21st century. The character of kettledrum performance has seen some development and change. New and old styles of instruments are available as never before. Now there are many people around the world making an infinite variety of kettledrum sticks. With new concertos and solo recital pieces, kettledrums have come to the forefront as solo instruments.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, kettle drumming developed into an elaborate and ostentatious ceremonial art that used complicated drum patterns based on the multiple tonguing technique of trumpeters. Exclusive kettledrum guilds were created, and the drummers were treated with special respect and honor. Kettledrummers did their best to impress their masters with elaborate beats, flamboyant gestures, and choreographic movements. As I look back over the years, I have noticed a trend in kettledrum performance that has revived some of these practices in contemporary performance. My only concern is how it will affect the clarity and tonality of music making in the concert hall.

When I first joined the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 1956, I was listed in the program with the title *Tympani*, as in tympanum. One of my first projects was to correct the spelling of that title. After some time and discussion, the proper plural Italian *Timpani* appeared in the program. Today I continue to ask the question, why is the kettledrummer's title the only one listed in Italian in an English-speaking symphony orchestra's roster?

An 18th Century Timpanist



ATTRIBUTES

The timpani occupy a dominant position in the percussive sounds created in an orchestra and other ensembles. A stroke on a timpano alters the nature of any other musical sound created. The sound of the timpani focuses the rhythm and pitch of an orchestral passage. Timpani tone color reinforces the fundamental bass line sound of music. The drums can provide a continuous powerful or subdued pedal tone of almost infinite length and add colorful nuance to crescendos and diminuendos.

The most unique attribute of a timpano lies in its ability, as a drum, to produce a musical pitch. This requires the performer to have a well-defined, trained sense of pitch, achieved with ear training and sight singing. The performer must be able to sing the pitch, in order to make the drum sound that same pitch. Singing the pitch is often done in the beginning with a bit of self-conscious concern. A timpanist does not have to sound like an opera singer singing pitches. No one will ever sing to the drums during

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a concert, but the mind will be singing. The timpanist needs to be able to know exactly what the pitch sounds and feels like before it can be transferred to the drumhead. Intonation must correctly support the harmonic and melodic properties of a musical work.

The timpano drumhead can be compared to a vocal cord. This drumhead has many of the capabilities of the human voice, except that instead of word sounds, it has the ability to form images of expression and feeling in sound. When the timpani speak, one is almost forced to listen. The person who enables this voice to speak has a tremendous responsibility in understanding the musical and technical skills required to create the sound images the timpani can produce.

Modern timpani have tuning pedal mechanisms that allow for fast changes of pitch. The pedals are not just for pitch change; they are an integral part of the instrument and its music-making potential. The timpanist needs to optimize the cooperation and combination of foot, hands, ears, and mind to unlock the total capability of the pedal mechanism of the timpani. I try to demonstrate some of this potential in my solo compositions for timpani. This cooperation works equally well in ensemble performance. The pedals helped support my mantra of not using extra drums in a performance unless absolutely necessary.

Tuning gauges are very useful for quickly corroborating the correct pitch. The final judgment is with the player's ear, however. When I first began studying and performing on timpani, no drums I used had tuning gauges. When I purchased my first set of Dresden-style timpani in 1958, I removed the gauges because they rattled and I had never used gauges before. Eventually I put them back on the drums when I realized they were helpful in checking a pitch, even though I knew it was correct. I do not

have perfect pitch, but I trained my sense of pitch to always be able to sing an "A." That way I always had a center from which to practice interval singing and create a *mindful* awareness of pitch relationships. When I was teaching, I had the student cover the tuning gauges while playing tuning exercises.

TECHNIQUE

Technical skill is extremely important in the creation of music. It is one of the steppingstones toward realizing expressive interpretation in the sounds of music. Lack of skillful technical ability is like trying to follow a recipe without having the proper equipment for measuring ingredients. A pinch here and a little bit there does not work in the process of creating music.

Many years ago, I asked a member of the well-known percussion ensemble The Percussionists of Strasbourg (Les Percussions de Strasbourg) why it seemed that there was not much display of instrumental technique in their performance. The reply was

that they did not worry about technique; they were most concerned with bringing life to the sounds and rhythms of the music. This approach may work in a small, closely knit, musically talented group of percussionists, but it is not appropriate when you are in an ensemble of 30 to 100 other people, most of whom do not play percussion instruments.

Technical facility creates the *how* of performing. It is the enabler for the "what" of music. What can I do to give these musical notes life in their moment? Once there is a well-developed ability to create with the *how*, you are set to move on to expressing the *what*. Everyone is different in achieving the *how* and *what*. Some people start understanding how to use a little "what" early on, and others take more time to function in both spaces at the same time. When the timpanist finally starts performing in an ensemble, there will be great emphasis on the "what," so the "how" has to be almost instinctive and applicable in an instant.

DRUMS AND STICKS

In today's world we have access to many varieties of timpani. During my early, and some later years, a timpanist was fortunate to have one set of good drums. Now there are many performers, both professional, non-professional, collegiate, and even high school who have the opportunity to use and play on multiple sets of timpani. It is very important to have the best instruments possible. However, the perfect drums and sticks are no better than the person who creates the sound. I sometimes had the experience of playing on second-rate timpani, and listeners who heard them would tell me they were surprised at the excellent sound I made the drums produce. Go figure! I thought the drums still had a faulty sound, although I never mentioned this to my hosts.

The grouping of timpani from two to any higher number should be considered a *console* of drums. They are individual parts of a larger whole. Balancing the sound in this console requires diligent attention to the character of each drum and the way in which it contributes to the console's combined tonality of sound and the expressiveness needed to articulate the music being performed.

Another positive development in our day is the availability of good timpani sticks. I have lost track of how many people around the world are now making timpani sticks. Most are excellent quality and produce first rate tonality. I try to find sticks that feel physically comfortable to use and produce the kind of sound I am trying to create. I tried making a few myself (everyone should try this at least once) and discovered that it was better to work with a real *stick maker*. However, one should always remember that the sticks do not make the music; the performer does.

I have seen a growing desire to acquire timpani sticks. One timpanist I know had a room with an entire wall filled with timpani sticks in racks. Cloyd Duff once was quoted as having seven different pairs of timpani sticks that he used. My collection was bit larger, but most of the time my choices for performance included a selection of five or six for a particular piece of music. Sometimes I only used one or two pairs for an entire composition. My stick case did contain several more varieties than I used. When I first began playing timpani, I was fortunate to have one pair of my own. Do more sticks create a better player?

BEATING SPOTS AND STROKES

Every drumhead has a spot that helps produce a good sound: the beating spot. I hesitate to use the word "beat" because a timpanist is not supposed to *beat* the drumhead. The performer is supposed to make it have a beautiful sound when struck. Some experimentation will inform about the best spot on the drumhead to achieve a resonant, clear sound. Playing too close to the rim will sound *ding*; too far toward the center will sound *thud*. I did have one teacher, a timpanist in a world-famous orchestra, suggest moving slightly to the center of the head to achieve a clear, rhythmic articulation. I never enjoyed employing that technique.

The stroke creates the sound by drawing the sound out of the drumhead and not pushing it into the drumhead. Whacking the head with the stick produces the sound of a drumhead being whacked. The stroke and stick are not alone in creating the sound. Character in the sound is created by the imagination of the performer. Before striking the drumhead, the performer must imagine the sound that is to be created. Imagining is part of the process of creating the sound. It helps in defining the "what" about the music you are trying to create.

Proper tonality is also created by using a variety of movements in the fingers, wrists, hands, and arms. Tightening and loosening muscular activity can help create different tonal char-

acter during the stroke. The most important thing to remember is that the stroke articulates the music. Clear, singing, *created* sound needs to occur from very soft to very loud. This means even a *pianissimo* must be *performed* with the stroke, just as a *fortissimo* is *performed* with the stroke. I have seen players *dropping* the stick on the drumhead to play a soft sound and *throwing* the stick at the drumhead to create a loud sound. These motions produce a tonality that depends on the stick and the drumhead to produce the sound. That is expecting a great deal from inanimate objects.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Every musician needs to train his or her musical instincts. To some it comes more naturally than others. Timpanists must be able to trust their interpretation of the music's phrasing and musical expression. Rhythms must be clear and articulated precisely. Intonation must be correct and focused. Muffling techniques must be appropriate for the music. The *performer* creates the sound with sticks and drums, giving life to the music.

The timpanist must bring the universal language of music into being with technical finesse, musical tonality and expression. The sound of the timpani (kettledrums) must be integrated into an ensemble's music making. There is great joy in fulfilling an important role within the team of fellow musicians.

Stanley Leonard performed internationally, recorded extensively, and premiered several new works for solo timpani and orchestra as Principal Timpanist of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra for 38 years. He was a member of the faculties of Carnegie Mellon and Duquesne Universities. His compositions for percussion ensemble, snare drum, and solo timpani are published and performed world wide. He is the author of *Pedal Technique for the Timpani*. He was elected to the PASHall of Fame in 2010. For more information, visit www.StanleyLeonard.com.

