

Picking Timpanists

By Gene Fambrough

The first day of concert band rehearsals has arrived, and you have done everything possible to be prepared. The percussionists pick up their music and gather around the snare drum, accessories, and keyboards, but noticeably avoid the timpani. No one wants to volunteer for that instrument with the pedals, for fear of actually having to tune the drums accurately. An equally terrifying situation occurs when a star drummer bolts for the timpani without even looking at the music, tuning the drums, or getting the proper mallets.

The process of picking a timpanist should ideally start on the first day of school. Here are some tips for finding the right person for the job.

Begin evaluating students with a simple pitch-matching exercise. Try a few different notes in the students' relative range to see how close they can come to matching. Students should stand next to a piano or marimba while the director plays a few notes to see whether they can sing them back to him. Make sure that they open their mouth and do not just hum the pitch. If students can match pitches, ask them to find a perfect fourth above it. Those who cannot match pitches with any consistency should be eliminated from consideration.

Continue by pinpointing the highest and lowest notes that the student can reproduce without straining, in the proper octave. Make sure to discuss the grand staff and where treble and bass clef are located, as well as the location of the timpani range within the grand staff. Compare the vocal range of the student to the range of the timpani to be used. It is imperative that the student know if they will have to transpose by an octave. If a student's voice goes no lower than an octave below middle C, he should understand that any pitch below that will need to be tuned an octave lower than it is sung.

Timpani ranges (approximate) by size of drum:



The next step is interval singing. Start with the easier intervals, such as perfect fifths and fourths and major triads, and work from there. Use familiar songs to your advantage (*Twinkle, Twinkle; Wedding Song; Star Spangled Banner*). This part of the audition should be an ongoing process.

It will likely take at least several weeks to find timpanists and get them to the point of feeling confident in their ability to tune the drums. In many small schools or those without specialized percussion instruction, one option is to take five minutes each day to properly train your potential timpanists while the wind players assemble their instruments. Young players may be embarrassed to sing in front of the entire band, so only do pitch-matching exercises if you can pull students into your office and shut the door. It can be difficult to find one-on-one time with potential timpanists, but just three to five minutes a day to work on first pitch matching, and later tuning the drums, should be enough. If the piece scheduled for rehearsal that day is in F, have them stop in, tune an F major triad, and be on their way.

When new music is passed out, timpanists should play the timpani part on a piano the first time, so they can hear the pitch differences. Emphasize that timpani is a band instrument, and treat the timpani as one of the wind instruments rather than one of the percussion. Use timpani in warm-ups and talk about the relationship between the timpani and low brass instruments.

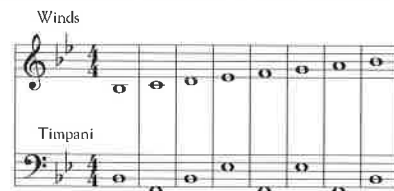
Advanced timpanists can play scales, but even younger players can tune three drums to a major triad. If the band plays



photo by Kirby Fong

a B \flat scale, the drums should be tuned to B \flat , D, and F. Timpanists can play along with these notes in the scale. Playing with the wind players gets timpanists used to being with the winds instead of the percussion.

I write out timpani parts to go with the specific scale exercises for my band. If the first measure of an exercise outlines B \flat major, I'll have the timpani play quarter notes B \flat , F, B \flat , F. The next measure might be D minor, for which the timpanist can play D, A, D, A. The goal is to look at the exercise and write a specific timpani part for it, ideally one with tuning changes if students can handle them. An inexperienced player could tune the drums to B \flat , E \flat , and F and play those drums when those harmonies came around in the exercise.



Take time to find the best students to play timpani. Avoid using the star quad player just because he can move around on a set of four drums, or the star snare drummer just because he has the best hands. Even a student who can read notes and handle mallet parts may not be the best choice. The students with the best ears will make the best timpanists. □

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