The Church Timpanist: Challenges & Solutions

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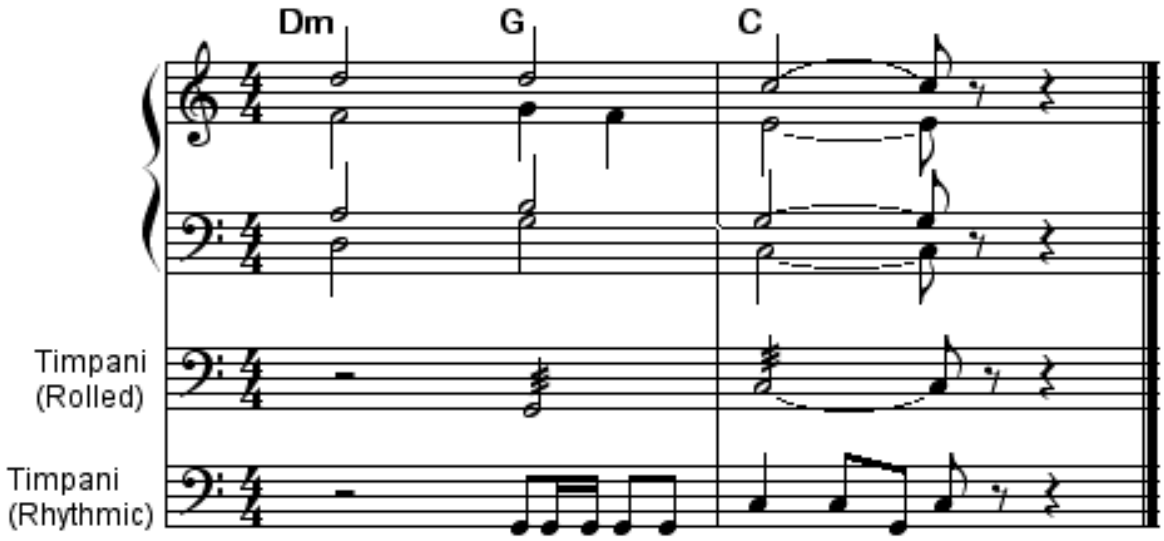
"It's #162 in the hymn book. Go ahead and add some timpani."

When timpani parts first appeared in orchestral scores, the tuning of the drums was slow and clumsy with performers using their hands to turn the tension rods that adjusted the heads. The normal practice was to write for two drums: one timpano tuned to the tonic degree of the key and the other drum to the dominant. It was a “set it and forget it” system that eliminated pitch changes (while remaining in a key) as the timpani often emphasized the V to I authentic cadence and punctuated the dominant harmony of the half cadence. As timpani technology progressed, pedal-tuned drums allowed for quicker pitch changes. Composers took advantage of the more agile system and wrote parts requiring faster pitch changes and MORE kettles in a setup.

Keep that little dose of history in mind as I offer some tips to help you navigate through a couple of the challenges often encountered when playing timpani in a church setting.

#1 No Written Part

• If you are asked to “play along” on timpani and the conductor hands you a hymnbook, some of the best places to add the kettles are at a few well-chosen cadence points. (As noted earlier, that simple formula has been employed for quite a while.) Focus on the chords and bass line at the end of phrases. The harmony will frequently be either a full cadence with the pitches of the bass line moving from the fifth scale degree to the first degree or a half cadence ending on the dominant. Consider tossing in some timpani in some of those spots.



• Not limited to hymns, the “cadential punctuation formula” can also work in situations when there is an orchestration, but no specific timpani part (or the music director simply gives you a chord chart).

• In addition to cadence points, adding kettles on a modulation is a typical orchestration device.

• Just using your ears and musical instincts can guide you in finding other spots that can benefit from some "pauken punch."

• Don't overdo it. Too much timpani can become predictable and tedious. Listen to the other instruments and choose to play in spots that will enhance rather than clutter. A simple roll is a good choice when there is a great deal of activity coming from the rhythm section.

#2 Not Enough Drums

Churches seldom own (or rent) more that two timpani, yet composers and arrangers continue writing for three to four drums. In dozens of rehearsals, I have scribbled a few marks on the timpani part and managed to achieve a satisfactory performance with just the 26” and 29” kettles.

Here are some pauken pointers for making do with just two:

• Switch octaves to fit the pitches onto the two drums that are available. Example: If the notated pitches are Eb2 - Bb2 (usually played on the 32” and 29”), simply flip to Bb2 - Eb3 and the pitch set fits on the 29” and 26” timpani.

• Tune the bottom note of the 29” timpano to E rather that F. This gives you the low “resonate” E to use rather that only the high (less resonant) E on the 26” drum. Many timpani parts go down to the low E.

• Substitute another chord tone. Example: What if the timpani part calls for a D played beneath the D major chord of the song, but the pitch change is awkward with the two drum setup? Try playing the fifth (A) or the third (F#) if either is more attainable.

• Sneak an “inaccessible” note onto the nodal area. The center of a timpano head produces very little resonance or pitch. In a rapid passage, some notes can be played in the center to provide the percussive sound without a strong definite pitch.

• Alter the rhythm and/or pitches. Example: A passage consisting of four sixteenth notes (such as F-G-A-Bb) could be reduced to eighth notes (F-A) or pitches doubled to achieve the sixteenth rhythm (F-F-A-A).

• Delete a passage. Leaving the timpani out in a thorny section might be the best decision. If the outline of the timpani part is being covered elsewhere (electric bass, tuba, bass drum, bassoon, string bass), just allow that instrumentation to carry the moment.

Finally, two pieces of advice for every timpanist:

• Sitting on a stool makes operating the pedals MUCH easier.

• Tuning Gauges! Get ‘em. Set ‘em. Use ‘em.

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