

Performing the Timpani Parts to "Symphonie Fantastique"

BY ANDREW P. SIMCO

Editor's Note: To get the most out of this article, I suggest following the original timpani part while reading the following text. The complete timpani part to "Symphonie Fantastique" can be found in Orchestral Excerpts from the Symphonic Repertoire for Timpani by Scott Stevens (International Music Co., New York). The measure numbers referred to in the following article are not indicated in the Stevens book; therefore, I suggest that readers mark measure numbers at the beginning of each line, so as to derive the most benefit from the text.

—Michael Rosen

The timpani parts to the "Symphonie Fantastique" by Hector Berlioz are among the most intriguing in the orchestral literature. What makes these parts intriguing, and how can one best interpret them correctly in order to elicit a rewarding musical experience?

First, we must consider the work itself and when it was written. Some of the effects in the composition sound so fresh, so novel even on the brink of the twenty-first century, that it is difficult to believe that it was composed in 1830, just three years after the death of Beethoven. At the time, Berlioz was twenty-six years old, and already had several works to his credit, including a "Messe Solennelle," the opera "Franc-Juges," the overture "Waverly" and "L'Morte de Cleopatre." His creative and imaginative powers were at fever pitch, and this work bears eloquent testimony of this. The actual composition of the symphony took place between January and April of 1830. It is in five movements, which are arranged as follows:

Episodes In The Life Of An Artist;
A Fantastic Symphony In Five
Movements

By Hector Berlioz, Opus 14

Movement One: Reveries, passions

Movement Two: A Ball

Movement Three: Scene in the country

Movement Four: March to the scaffold

Movement Five: Dream of a witches'
sabbath

Originally, Berlioz placed the movement titled "A Ball" third, with the "Scene in the country" coming second, but changed the order of the movements to their present position at a later date. This made much more sense to the highly creative composer, and it is in this form that the work has stood the test of time.

Considering the work from the viewpoint of an orchestral timpanist, the last three movements of the symphony pose the biggest challenge for several reasons. First, Berlioz uses the instruments in chords, in order to simulate thunder at the end of the third movement. This necessitates the use of four players, each with a timpano to themselves. Player one has the high F; player two has the B-flat; player three has the C; player four has the A-flat.

The fourth movement requires two players for the most part, with a third player coming in to play the low-G roll at the very end of the march. The fifth movement uses two players throughout the entire movement.

MOVEMENT ONE

The first movement is played by one player, who is assigned two pitches, C and G. The part is fairly straightforward, with precise indications from the composer as to how the movement is to be played and with what type of timpani mallets. (This is typical of Berlioz throughout nearly all of his output.) In the latest edition of the symphony, published by Barenreiter Verlag and Breitkopf & Härtel, three different types of mallets are specified, and Berlioz lists them as follows: A. Wood-headed sticks covered with leather; B. Sponge-headed sticks; C. Wood-headed sticks.

Berlioz was among the first composers to specify a particular type of mallet. His concept of tone demanded such specificity, as the normal wood- or leather-covered mallet in use at the time was incapable of producing the type of sound he required at bar 329 in the long, almost solo roll on C, or at the *Religiosamente* at bar 511, near the very end of the movement. They most certainly would not do

for the thunderstorm sequence near the end of the third movement, which requires playing with the utmost sensitivity and touch.

Note that Berlioz requires sponge-headed mallets for these last passages. Felt was not yet in general use as a covering for timpani mallets, so Berlioz, who was a percussionist of sorts himself, experimented with sea-sponge and was most satisfied with the effect produced by that material. Today, timpanists use various grades of piano felt as covering for the mallets, and these work very well, particularly on modern instruments, most of which are equipped with plastic heads.

However, with the re-appearance of calfskin heads and period instruments, it might be useful to try a pair of sponge-headed mallets, and gauge the effect of what Berlioz was asking. I have done so, and have found the effect interesting.

In regard to leather-covered wooden mallets, their place has been taken by hard felt mallets, which do a very good job of producing the type of sound required by the composer. I use a pair of bamboo-shafted mallets that have a thin covering of piano felt for the passages at bar 64, bars 113 through 325, and bars 427 through 437. These work well with either calfskin or plastic heads.

MOVEMENT THREE

As mentioned previously, the third movement calls for the timpani to play chords near the end of the movement, requiring four players. The passage at bar 106, which is written for players One and Two, is usually played by Player One with wooden sticks as specified in the score. Do not try to use another type of mallet here. The music is extremely intense, and the sound of the timpani must be equally intense—almost shatteringly so! However, at bar 143 one can use a hard-felt mallet instead of a wood mallet, as the pitch of the F here must be fairly secco (dry), but clear in intonation as well.

The famous thunderstorm sequence begins with Players Three and Four at

bar 159, with Player Three on C and Player Four on A-flat. Sponge sticks are called for, but it is possible to use fairly soft ball mallets, ones that bring out the pitch yet are capable of some degree of articulation when required. (All four players are so equipped at this point.) Player Two enters at bar 177, with Player One following on the high F at bar 178. Dynamics must be observed scrupulously in order to make the most of this particular passage. Player Three makes a second entrance at bar 182. A word of caution: Watch your dynamics, and choose your mallets carefully! This scene *must* be effective, or the work loses its impact. (Literally!)

The placement of the drums must be carefully calculated, along with the assignment of the players. The whole piece can be played on four drums, if necessary, but common practice is to allot two sets of timpani between timpanists One and Three, who are the principal players throughout the remainder of the work. In the score and in the parts themselves, Berlioz divides them as follows: Timpani

I (Players One and Two), and Timpani II (Players Three and Four).

This is pretty much how we do it in the Oslo Philharmonic, except that I play the part assigned to Player One, which includes all of the first movement, both parts at bar 106 in the third movement, the high F in the rest of the movement, and the first timpani part throughout the fourth and fifth movements. Player Two is responsible *only* for the B-flat in the thunderstorm sequence of the third movement. Our principal percussionist has usually taken this part, going back to play percussion in the fourth and fifth movements.


Player Three's role is taken by my associate timpanist, who is responsible for the C's in this movement. He then plays the second timpani part throughout the remainder of the symphony. Player Four is responsible for the low A-flat in this movement, and other than the low-G roll at the end of the fourth movement, is pretty much confined to those passages.

In regards to the instruments themselves, the arrangements are fairly

straightforward. Players One and Two share the first set of timpani, and Players Three and Four share the second set. Player One has the option of playing the high F either on the smallest drum of his set (the 23-inch), or the 25- or 26-inch, while Player Two plays the B-flat on the 28- or 29-inch drum. On the second set, Player Three plays the C either on the 25- or 26-inch drum, or on the 28- or 29-inch.

Nowadays, most players use the larger drums for the C to obtain a rounder, fuller and warmer tone. Berlioz was very fond of using the upper register of the instrument, so playing the C on a larger drum with its added tension is actually complying with the wishes of the composer! (Ditto having the high F on the 25- or 26-inch drum as opposed to the 23-inch.) Player Four plays the A-flat either on the 29-inch drum, if the third player is not using it, or (as is usually the case) the 31-inch drum.

In preparing this work for performance, it is advisable that all four players rehearse the sequence as a group,



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each player getting a feel for the passage and the instrument. This can be done during a short group rehearsal, in which the players also decide on what type of mallets they feel most comfortable using. Whatever make or type of mallets one uses, it would be well to make sure that they are capable of producing a round tone as well as some degree of articulation.

In addition to a group rehearsal (which should take place before the regular orchestral rehearsals begin), it is usual for conductors to rehearse this passage separate from the regular rehearsal in order to properly balance the passage. Be alert, responsive to suggestions and flexible in your attitude. This will go a long way towards making for a good, musically rewarding performance.

MOVEMENT FOUR

We now come to the famous "March to the Scaffold," or as the French would have it, "Marche au Supplice." This movement is mainly performed by two players, with the assistance of a third player towards the very end. The opening bars of the movement are among the most famous passages in the orchestral repertoire, and require the most careful consideration in order to interpret them correctly.

Berlioz is very specific in his instructions as to how the passage is to be played: "The first quaver of each half-bar is to be played with two drum sticks; the other five quavers with the right hand drum stick." Translate the term "quaver" into American terminology and you have "eighth note." By playing the first eighth

note of each half bar with two sticks, Berlioz is by no means suggesting that this be played as a flam. No way! He wants them played *together*, as he is looking for the sound of muffled drums in the distance, with a slight accent on that first eighth-note.

The following five eighth notes are to be played by the right-hand mallet alone. If taken at the tempo marked at the beginning of the movement, which is half note = 72, this is not a problem. However, many conductors play this movement at a slightly faster tempo, which poses a problem for the timpani player, as it becomes increasingly more difficult to execute the passage cleanly if the tempo is increased to any great degree. In my own case, my right hand will not function much beyond the tempo indicated by the composer—at least not with the sticking as indicated. So I have two choices: One, I can use a *third* mallet in the left hand, playing the first eighth note with the two mallets of the left hand, and playing the others with the right. This remains true to the spirit of Berlioz' intentions, while adjusting to the faster tempo. My second option is to play the first eighth-note with both mallets as indicated, and then alter the sticking of the following eighth notes as follows: first eighth-note (both sticks as indicated), then LRLRL.

This sticking has the advantage of helping to maintain the faster tempo, but the disadvantage is that, unless one practices this sticking assiduously, there is a tendency to make a flam on the first eighth note, which dilutes the effect of the passage somewhat. I prefer to use the first option, as it is closer in spirit to

what the composer had in mind.

In our own performances of the symphony, our conductor takes the opening at, or at least very close to, the tempo as indicated by Berlioz, so we are (thankfully) able to play it exactly as marked. However, the tendency is to pick up the tempo after the opening bars, so I am still faced with the choice of the above options. After bar 50, the texture of the orchestration is thick enough that I can use either option without compromising the effect Berlioz had in mind. This applies to Player One's part, which carries this same rhythmic figure repeatedly from bar 32 until bar 47. Player Two has the exact same sticking in the opening bars of the movement, but nowhere near to the same extent and frequency as Player One.

I mentioned earlier that Berlioz was looking for the effect of muffled drums at the beginning, and that the effect should be as if they were in the distance. The dynamic here is *piano*, which implies distance. On modern timpani, most of which are equipped with plastic heads, the effect of the opening bars can be somewhat boomy, unless they are muffled. In the Barenreiter edition, Berlioz does not indicate that mufflers are to be used, but the way he scores for the instruments here implies, at least in my opinion, that this was the effect he was looking for. We use very light mufflers for the opening bars, and remove them later as the music changes character. With calf heads, this works very well, as the calfskin gives an earthy, almost military-drum character to the opening.

Whatever type heads you use, muffle the drums at the opening of the fourth movement. Make sure that the mufflers are light enough to let some pitch through, but heavy enough to take out the brighter overtones. The rest of the movement is fairly straightforward, and if played as the composer indicates, there should be no real problems.

At bar 169, Berlioz brings in a third player for the long roll at the end of the movement. This is indicated in the part of the second timpanist. The notes are G and D, with the second timpanist playing the D and the third player on the low G. The first player is rolling on B-natural here, and this makes for a nice chordal passage. The practice up until recently was to have the second player do a double-roll on the G and D; although this

works all right, with wooden sticks, one can hear the difference. We obey the score and have a third player come in for the chord. It is much more effective, and what Berlioz wanted!

MOVEMENT FIVE

The fifth movement, "Dream of a witches' sabbath," is played by two players throughout the entire movement. The opening is extremely interesting, as Berlioz calls for the players to play their opening notes simultaneously, giving the effect of chords, albeit with only two of the notes present. Player One has an E on the first two bars and a B in the corresponding passage at bars 12 and 13. Player Two has a C-sharp on the opening bars and a G-sharp at bars 12 and 13. Immediately after bar 13, Player Two is instructed to change to C and G. Do so quickly, as there is a very important C at bar 17!

At the Allegro (6/8) passage at bar 21, Player Two takes the reins for a bit by playing double-stops on C and G for four and a half bars, then is joined by Player One on the second half of bar 25 (Player

One has the B) until the Allegro Assai at bar 29. This passage should be played with sticks covered with hard felt, as articulation is important here. The drums are accompanying a solo C clarinet, and the effect is supposed to be macabre. Be aware of this, and play accordingly.

Throughout most of the movement, the parts are straightforward, and it would be well for Player One to remember that Player Two usually has the tonic and dominant of the piece, as well as the leading rhythmic pulse. (See bars 399 through 403.) Player One's part should be carefully balanced with that of Player Two, in order for both parts to project effectively. This is always a problem when faced with a part requiring more than one player. The music is exciting, so the temptation is to play loud, fast and furiously. Here is another case of where less is more. Play with vitality, but use musical judgement at all times and don't over-play!

Finally, let me mention the passage at bar 496, which can be played either by doubling or by cross-sticking. It has become tradition to play this particular

passage using cross-sticking, which works very naturally here and is visually exciting as well. However, there can also be a case made for doubling, especially if the conductor changes the dynamic. Berlioz marked the passage *forte*, and using cross-sticking is no problem at all at that dynamic. However, our conductor has changed the dynamic to *piano*, with a gradual crescendo to bar 506. This tends to make the conscientious player a bit wary of over-playing, so it might be best to leave the histrionics aside and use doubling, especially if the conductor insists on the *piano* dynamic with a crescendo.

Whichever you choose, you will find that performing "Symphonie Fantastique" will provide an experience that adds a new dimension to your playing, especially in the area of tonal production. May you savour the experience!

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