

Becoming a Successful Timpanist

BY ANDREW P. SIMCO

Becoming an orchestral timpanist takes perseverance and dedication. It is a long, difficult process full of surprises and setbacks, but rewarding just the same. As with most career goals, desire and motivation are key elements required to achieve success. In addition, other important qualities are necessary: musical ability (or talent), patience, discipline, and a capacity for hard work. These qualities are essential in equal measure. For example, if a prospective timpanist has a fair amount of talent, but lacks either patience or the ability to work hard, the chances are high that this person will fail, either in the training period or in the audition process (if he or she even gets that far!). I would advise this person to look for another line of work.

The process of developing oneself into a successful orchestral timpanist has many ups and downs. If a player has the necessary talent, plus the ability to work hard and to endure the long period of waiting for the right position, then he or she should begin a serious study of the instrument.

The music business is extremely demanding and competitive. It is even more so in the specialized field of timpani playing, since timpani positions in major orchestras are rare. For every opening, there are at least 50 to 100 talented and determined applicants wanting to audition. Multiply this by the number of orchestras in the United States, and one gets a good idea of just how tough the competition is in terms of sheer numbers. This realization, plus the high quality of the competition, combine to make the career of orchestral timpanist a "calling" rather than just another job.

I mentioned the qualities a player needs to succeed in becoming a timpanist. I would like to be a little more specific when it comes to talent. When I use this word, I mean the following:

- A good sense of pitch recognition.
- A strong rhythmic sense (important in helping the player to rhythmically "drive" the orchestra when necessary).
- An instinctive sense of ensemble.

- An inherent sense of musicality.

The last point, in my opinion, includes a natural sense of how music "goes," and it is this understanding of style that helps the player perform with professionalism and develop a sense of good musical taste. Having discussed the aforementioned qualities, and assuming that one is equipped with a sufficient measure of each, let's outline some specific steps necessary for the development of an orchestral timpanist.

STEP ONE: PREPARATION

Proper preparation is essential in any chosen pursuit, and it is especially so in preparing for the career of orchestral timpanist. Ideally, the prospective player should have sufficient proficiency on snare drum and mallets before taking up serious study of timpani. The study of snare drum is an excellent way to build up and develop control of the hands and rhythm, while mallet-keyboard study is excellent for developing musicality and pitch recognition. I would also recommend some familiarity with the piano and the basic fundamentals of music and musicianship, with an emphasis on ear training.

Timpani Study

Serious students should seek instruction from a player who is well-versed in the instrument and orchestral repertoire. Ideally, this should be someone who is associated on a day-to-day basis with the instrument, such as a current player of good reputation. It could also be one who has retired from the field and has a broad base of experience with which to draw upon, inspire, and properly guide the student.

Based on my own experience, I feel that the serious student should count on a minimum of two years instruction with a timpani specialist in order to effectively learn the techniques and styles of timpani playing. This will also enable the student to acquire confidence in his or her ability, set the stage for the development of personal technique (which comes only with experience), and apply what he

or she has learned under the guidance of the instructor.

Repertoire Study: The Listening List

The student should gain knowledge and understanding of the basic orchestral repertoire. In addition to the many fine orchestral repertoire books for the aspiring timpanist, including the Fred Hinger and Morris Goldenberg series, libraries have scores and recordings of various works available for loan.

During my student days, I frequented the music collection of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, as well as the fine collection of scores and recordings at the Manhattan School of Music. Both were invaluable resources in learning orchestral repertoire. Knowledge of the repertoire is a must, and prospective players should listen to and study as much repertoire as possible. A good place to start is with the following listening list of composers from the major musical periods: Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Twentieth Century.

It is impossible to cover *all* the repertoire during the educational process, but by organizing one's study with the aid of a listening list, one can develop a feel for and an understanding of the various orchestral styles in an efficient manner and in a relatively short period of time. I have divided the list into the major historical periods or epochs.

Baroque

J.S. Bach: Mass in B minor; Magnificat; Orchestral Suite nr. 3 in D major
Handel: Music for the Royal Fireworks; Messiah

Classical

Haydn: Symphonies 93-104 (The London Symphonies); The Creation; Mass in Time of War
Mozart: Symphonies 35 through 39 and 41 ("Jupiter"); Operas: Don Giovanni; The Magic Flute. Operatic overtures: The Abduction from the Seraglio; The Marriage of Figaro; Così fan Tutte; Requiem Mass, k. 626

Romantic

Beethoven: Symphonies 1-9; Piano Concertos 1, 3, 4 and 5; Violin Concerto; Missa Solemnis; Overtures: Coriolanus; Egmont; Prometheus Overture; Fidelio and the three Leonore Overtures; The Consecration of The House

Schubert: Symphonies 8 and 9; Rosamunde Overture

Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique; Dramatic Symphony Romeo et Juliette; Requiem, op. 5; Overtures: Benvenuto Cellini; Roman Carnival; Corsair; Les Franc-Juges; Rob Roy

Schumann: Symphonies 1-4; Manfred Overture, Scherzo and Finale

Mendelssohn: Symphony nr. 3 "Scottish"; Symphony nr. 4 "Italian"; Overture and Incidental Music to A Midsummer Night's Dream; Violin Concerto

Brahms: Symphonies 1-4; Ein Deutsches Requiem; Piano Concerto nr. 1; Overtures: Tragic and Academic Festival; Violin Concerto

Liszt: A Faust Symphony; Les Preludes; Piano Concerto 1

Dvorak: Symphonies 5-9; Cello Concerto in B minor, op. 104; Carnival Overture: Scherzo Capriccioso; Slavonic Dances, op. 46 and 72

Smetana: Overture and Three Dances from The Bartered Bride; Ma Vlast (This series of six tone poems includes "Vlatava" (The Moldau), which is the most often played. However, the entire series is worth knowing, as it is performed frequently as a complete set.)

Glinka: Overture to Russlan and Ludmila

Tchaikovsky: Symphonies 1-6; Manfred Symphony; Piano Concerto 1; Overture-fantasy Romeo and Juliet; Francesca da Rimini; Overture 1812

Rimsky-Korsakoff: Symphonic Suite Scheherazade; Overture Russian Easter; Capriccio Espagnol

Wagner: Operatic Overtures and Preludes: Rienzi: The Flying Dutchman; Tannhauser; Lohengrin (Acts 1 and 3); Tristan und Isolde (including Liebestod); Die Meistersinger; Parsifal; Orchestral Music from The Ring: Entrance into Valhalla from Das Rheingold; Ride of The Valkyries and Magic Fire Music from Die Walkure; Dawn, Siegfried's Rhine Journey; Siegfried's Death and Funeral Music, and Immolation Scene from Götterdämmerung

Bruckner: Symphonies 3-9

Strauss: Burleske; Don Juan; Death and

Transfiguration; Til Eulenspiegel; Also Sprach Zarathustra; Ein Heldenleben; Symphonia Domestica; Eine Alpensinfonie; Suite from Der Rosenkavalier; Dance of The Seven Veils from Salome

Mahler: Symphonies 1-9; Das Klagende Lied

Elgar: Enigma Variations; Overture Cockaigne; Symphonies 1 and 2 (These last three works are not performed very often in the USA, but are coming back into vogue and offer wonderful insights into the music of this composer.)

Sibelius: Symphonies 1, 2, 5 and 7; Violin Concerto; Finlandia; Tapiola

Nielsen: Symphony 4 "Inextinguishable"; Symphony 5; Overture to Maskerade

Debussy: La Mer; Trois Nocturnes; Images

Ravel: Daphnis et Chloe (complete ballet and suites); Piano Concerto; Alborada del Gracioso; La Valse; Rhapsodie Espagnole

Twentieth Century

Bartok: Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta; Concerto for Orchestra; Violin Concerto nr. 2; Piano Concertos 1 and 2; Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (also the orchestral version)

Holst: The Planets

Vaughan Williams: Symphonies 2, 4 and 6; Hodie; Dona Nobis Pacem

Britten: Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra; Three Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes; Sinfonia da Requiem; Violin Concerto; A War Requiem

Stravinsky: The Firebird (complete ballet and suite); Petrouchka; Le Sacre du Printemps; Symphony of Psalms

Prokofiev: "Classical" Symphony; Symphonies 5, 6 and 7; Scythian Suite; Romeo and Juliet (complete ballet and suites)

Shostakovich: Symphonies 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 15; Festive Overture; Violin Concerto 1; Cello Concerto 1

Martin: Concerto for Seven Winds, Timpani, Percussion and Strings

Bernstein: Overture to Candide; Chichester Psalms; Symphony 2 "The Age of Anxiety"; Symphonic Suite from On The Waterfront; Symphonic Dances from West Side Story

Schuman: New England Tryptych; Symphony 3

Roy Harris: Symphony 3

Copland: Symphony 3; Appalachian Spring; A Lincoln Portrait; Billy The Kid; El Salon Mexico; Dance Symphony

Barber: Meditation and Dance of Death and Vengeance from Medea; Three Esays for Orchestra; Symphony 1; Overture to The School for Scandal; Violin Concerto

Orff: Carmina Burana

Hindemith: Symphonic Metmorphosis; Mathis der Maler; Nobilissima Visione

This list is far from complete. It does, however, provide a good overview of the music a timpanist is expected to know. The student does not have to listen to every work on the list, but can choose two or three compositions from each composer to become familiar with that composer's style, use of orchestration, and musical texture, all of which are extremely important in correctly interpreting the timpani parts to these and other musical compositions.

STEP TWO: PRELIMINARY ORCHESTRAL EXPERIENCE

This is an essential step, as there is no better way to develop into a professional than through experience. Students should be looking for every opportunity to put what they are learning into practice in performance situations. Community orchestras, conservatory or college orchestras, and ensembles provide students with excellent opportunities for performance experience.

When I was in school one of my performing opportunities was with the Greenwich House Music School Orchestra. The group had two, old, hand-tuned timpani, which was a challenge indeed! They were set up on old-style iron stands that were so low I had to sit on a camp-chair in order to play them. I realized later how fortunate I was to have had that experience with hand-tuned timpani. It taught me how to "feel" the pitch with my hands as well as with my feet.

STEP THREE: PRE-AUDITION EXPERIENCE

Once the student has completed his or her training and has garnered some professional experience, it is time to think about auditioning for a permanent position. Be aware that it is very difficult to land a permanent orchestral position on the very first audition. A prospective timpanist can expect to go through at least six to eight auditions before winning a well-paid, secure position. First, the competition is stiff. Most, if not all, of the other applicants are equally talented and



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motivated. Each has gone through the preparatory procedures to one degree or another and is hoping to land that job. Second, there is a scarcity of orchestras that provide stable, full-time employment.

My advice to the player who has not yet won an audition is to be patient and keep practicing for the next audition. In the meantime, play in a small, regional orchestra. Even though you won't have full-time employment, you will gain orchestral experience at a professional level. Famed timpanist and pedagogue Cloyd Duff used to call this "the progressive approach." While all prospective players hope for a position with one of the 30 or so Class A orchestras (those with a budget and season large enough to offer full-time employment and benefits), most work their way up through the "minor leagues" of the Class B and C orchestras. Class C orchestras have a budget of around one to two million dollars a year, and offer a limited season of 10 to 15 concerts, whereas Class A orchestras have an annual budget of up to 20 million dollars or more and have a 52-week season. Class B orchestras lie somewhere in the middle.

Class C orchestras give aspiring musicians a chance to develop further in a professional performance situation. Most

of them operate quite professionally and have high musical standards. I speak from experience, having had the good fortune to play in three fine organizations of the Class C category: the Albany Symphony Orchestra, the Evansville Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Owensboro Symphony Orchestra.

Of course, most aspiring players are looking for a job in one of the Class A or B orchestras that have longer seasons, larger budgets, and a better chance of offering full-time employment. Here, we run into several obstacles. The first is that there is usually only one vacancy for a principal timpanist in an orchestra, and there are all those lean and hungry candidates!

The second obstacle occurs, ironically enough, after the vacancy is filled. Once a player wins an audition and is appointed timpanist, he or she usually stays put for a long time, especially in the major orchestras where the pay scales, working conditions, and benefits are of the highest standard. In many cases, they remain there for the rest of their working lives. Cloyd Duff spent 39 years with the Cleveland Orchestra. Fred Hinger and Gerald Carlyss both served as timpanist of the Philadelphia Orchestra for up to 20 years, with Hinger going on to a career with the Metropolitan Opera for 16 more

years. Vic Firth just retired from the Boston Symphony after over 40 years. Sal Rabbio recently retired from the Detroit Symphony after more than 35 years of service, as did Stanley Leonard, who retired from the Pittsburgh Symphony.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned obstacles, my advice to the prospective player is to set high goals, but be realistic and get as much performing experience as possible from the Class C orchestras while concurrently auditioning for Class A or B orchestras.

THE AUDITION: APPLICATION, INVITATION AND REPERTOIRE LIST

When an orchestra advertises a vacancy (usually through the local union newsletter and the monthly newspaper *The International Musician*, published by the American Federation of Musicians), it is not unusual for that orchestra to receive up to 200 applications for one position! In these situations, the orchestra's audition committee screens each application carefully, especially if the organization has a policy of "highly qualified applicants only." This policy has become the norm, as the number of highly qualified applicants increases.

Let us suppose that our prospective player is one of the many applicants for a position in a Class A orchestra. What the

orchestra is looking for at this point is a player with experience. Young players with little or no experience are among the first to be rejected. For someone bursting with talent and ambition, this can be discouraging. This is where patience is important! If you are talented, don't let the rejection depress you for long. It happens to most of us, and those of us who felt that we had "the right stuff" did not give up. We kept ourselves on the audition circuit, and (in my case, at least) wound up with rewarding careers. The only exception to this initial rejection are those extremely talented players who come highly recommended by their instructors or by highly regarded timpanists who know their capabilities.

Let's assume that our applicant has a pretty good resume, with a fair amount of experience in Class B and C orchestras. There is a pretty good chance this person will be invited to audition. Once this weeding-out process is complete, the list is pared down from about 100 applicants to less than 40. Letters of invitation are mailed out to the applicants who fit the qualifications of the orchestra. These letters contain information such as the date, time, and location of the audition. Most orchestras also include information as to the type and brand of timpani available, and information concerning hotel accommodations in the area. The letter also includes a repertoire list that the applicant is expected to know to perfection. Selected passages from most, if not all, of these works will be required of the player at the audition.

The following is sample repertoire list that the applicant will be expected to perform at an audition:

Orchestral Repertoire List—Principal Timpani

Mozart: Symphony 39, Movement I: Introduction; Symphony 41, Finale
 Beethoven: Symphony 1, Scherzo; Symphony 5, Movement 3: transition to Finale; Symphony 7, Movements 3 and 4; Symphony 9, Movements 1 and 2
 Brahms: Symphony 1, Movements 1 and 4; Symphony 4, Scherzo
 Bartok: Concerto for Orchestra, Movement 4; Piano Concerto 2, Movement 2
 Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique*, Movements 4 and 5
 Elgar: *Enigma Variations*, Variation VII "Troyte"
 Hindemith: *Symphonic Metamorphosis*, Movement 2: "Turandot"

Nielsen: Symphony 4, Movement 2
 Schuman: New England Triptych; Symphony 6
 Shostakovich: Symphony 1, Movement 4: Solo cadenza; Symphony 10, Finale
 Stravinsky: Rite of Spring, "Danse Sacrale"
 Tchaikovsky: Symphony 4, Movement 1 (letter T)
 Wagner: Funeral Music from "Götterdämmerung"
 Barber: Medea's Dance of Death and Vengeance

Pre-Audition Preparation

In preparing for an audition, organize your practice time in a manner calculated to get efficient results. Much is dependent on the amount of time available between receipt of the letter of invitation and the audition. There are usually several weeks between the invitation and audition; however, a smart applicant will begin preparations as soon as the vacancy is announced. If possible, the applicant should practice five days a week. (Take the weekend off! One needs to get away from work briefly in order to remain fresh and objective.) Structure practice sessions in a way that will increase accuracy and build confidence in the ability to perform well.

The Practice Session

For my own audition preparation, I chose a two to three-and-a-half hour block of time and divided it up as follows:

A. Ten- to 15-minute warm-up period: This consists of drum-to-drum exercises, rolls, and anything that was helpful in getting physically "loose" and mentally "in touch" with the instrument.

B. Forty-minute practice session: Work on the most difficult excerpts at the beginning when you are physically and mentally alert.

C. Ten-minute break: This will help in getting ready for the next block of practice time. Relax and enjoy some refreshment.

D. Thirty-five to 40-minute practice session: Continue with the orchestral excerpts, working on the more well-known and less complex ones.

E. Another ten-minute break.

F. A final practice session of up to 40 minutes: Concentrate on anything that might have been overlooked earlier, or work on basic technique. You might do some sight-reading, although it's better to

do that earlier in the practice session when you are more alert. Putting sight-reading off to the very end of the practice session is counter-productive, in my opinion. You are usually not at the peak of concentration and may be physically tired.

At this point, I would call it a day. Once you are mentally and physically tired, further practice is pointless.

Adapt this sample schedule to your particular style. We all have different abilities and levels of endurance. Some are able to practice much longer, and others are able to accomplish a great deal in a shorter period of time. Whatever works for you, do it, but above all, be consistent! Rather than "practice makes perfect," think "perfect practice makes perfect!"

THE AUDITION

Auditions are generally conducted in two parts: preliminaries and finals. In many cases, the competition is so stiff that holding semi-finals is becoming the norm. The final audition, then, involves having the top three semi-finalists play with the orchestra, either at a rehearsal or for an assigned period of time, such as a week.

Preliminary auditions are usually conducted with the players hidden from the committee by a screen, so that the committee can establish an aural "picture" of each player. The main purpose of this round is to narrow the list of candidates to four or five outstanding players. These qualify for the semi-final or final audition, depending on the policy of the orchestra.

The semi-final round is conducted without a screen, and with the player in full view of the committee. This round gives the committee an aural and a visual image of the candidate. The audition committee is usually made up of the Principal Percussionist and other members of the percussion section, as well as selected players from the string, woodwind, and brass sections. The Concertmaster is usually present as well. The Music Director is not present in the preliminaries, but generally joins the committee for the semi-final or final round.

The Preliminary Round

During this round, candidates are given about 15 to 20 minutes to demonstrate their basic competence. They will be asked to play a prepared solo piece, if

one is required. They are then asked to play some orchestral excerpts and often do some sight-reading. In addition, they might be asked to demonstrate basic techniques, such as the roll, and tuning. There will be a monitor behind the screen with the candidate who will give tempi and make sure the audition proceeds smoothly and efficiently.

Stay as calm and collected as possible. Proceed with the execution of the various requirements as efficiently and effectively as you can. Whatever happens, *do not rush!* Take whatever time you need to assess the demands placed upon you and discharge them to the best of your ability. An important part of the audition procedure is handling the pressure of playing alone in front of strangers who are interested in seeing and hearing how well you respond to the demands placed upon you. Practicing self-control and self-discipline before the audition will reduce the chances of a breakdown in concentration. Fifteen or 20 minutes go by very fast, especially in a high-pressure situation, so prepare yourself mentally beforehand.

A few suggestions are in order at this point. First, get sufficient rest before the audition. The audition will be stressful enough without having to deal with lack of sleep the night before. Second, go into the audition with realistic expectations. Sure, you want that job, but so do the other applicants. Do your best, and don't worry about what happens if you don't win the audition. Instead, go into the audition with the sense that you are well-prepared and ready to deal with whatever they give you. Third, don't talk about the audition with the other candidates before you go in. For me, the point of greatest suspense was not the audition itself, but the waiting period just before I went in. Talking to the other candidates—especially the ones who described the experience after they auditioned—wound me up so much that on several occasions I was too emotionally tight to be 100-percent effective—with the result that I never made it past the preliminaries. I was more effective if I took a walk around the block shortly before I went in to play. That helped reduce the tension to a bearable level. Whatever helps you relax, make use of it!

Final (and Semi-Final) Rounds

At the semi-final (or final) round, each candidate has satisfied the committee as

to his or her basic competence and, what is even more important, created a positive impression. The committee will be listening to each candidate with heightened interest and perception. The screen is taken away and the candidates are judged visually and aurally. The requirements will be more complex, and the committee will be interested in hearing the more difficult orchestral excerpts. Candidates will be asked to make tempo and dynamic modifications, much as in a regular orchestra rehearsal. The conductor might conduct you through a few excerpts to test your flexibility and responsiveness to musical suggestions, especially in a pressure situation. There may be additional sight-reading of greater complexity in order to push the candidates to the limit of their ability.

The Orchestral Round

Many orchestras invite the top two or three candidates to a rehearsal at which they play through selected repertoire and are put through their paces. Or, as is frequently the case, candidates are assigned a concert series with the orchestra. Here they function as the orchestra's timpanist during that period, carrying out all the duties of that position. In my opinion, this is the best way for an orchestra to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of a player, as his or her work is heard in context. Preliminaries are important for revealing technical strengths and weaknesses, but nothing is better for judging a player's sense of sound, style, ensemble, and musicality than actually playing in the orchestra.

Post-Audition

After the candidates have had the "trial" period, the audition committee evaluates and compares them in closed session and the winner is chosen. Post-audition periods can vary according to the outcome. If you won the audition, congratulations! All your hard work has finally paid off. It was your day and you are embarking on a period of your life that will prove to be most rewarding. It will be your job to adapt the skills that you have learned and honed over a period of time to the style of the orchestra that you will be joining.

It is beyond the scope of this article to say much more about this point. But a few words of advice should suffice to set the tone for the next phase of your career.

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Be flexible! Be open to new ideas and, above all, strive for consistency in your playing. Continue to strive for excellence as you grow in experience. If you do this, you and the orchestra will grow together, and this will set you up for some of the most rewarding musical experiences of your life.

If you progressed to the finals but did not win the position, that's fine, too. You have what it takes, but this audition was not yours to win. Keep trying, and do not give up. Your day will come, especially if you keep working at it and you are determined. If you did not make it to the finals, stay calm and assess what went wrong. Better luck next time. All of us have had our share of bad auditions.

For those starting out on your careers, or those who are already part way to your goal, I wish you well, and "good practicing"!

Andrew P. Simco is the Principal Timpanist of the Des Moines Metro Opera, the Chicago Chamber Orchestra, and the Elmhurst Symphony Orchestra. From 1983 until 1999, he was Principal Timpanist of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, and was timpanist of the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra from 1987 until 1998.

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