

# Timpani 101

By David England

## Timpani

- Timpani are pedal tuned drums usually made of metal or fiberglass/plastic.
- They are bowl shaped. This is the reason some people call them “kettle drums”.
- “Timpani” is the word for more than one drum. “Timpano” is the word for one drum.
- **Set up:** Timpani are usually set up with the smallest drum to your right and largest to your left.
- Timpani music is almost always written in bass clef (Lines – G,B,D,F,A / Spaces – A,C,E,G)

## Mallets

- Timpani mallets are generally made of wood and have felt or wool wrapped ends.
- Do not use sticks or other implements unless notated on the music. Be careful in those cases!

## Grip

- There are a few different types of timpani grips. French grip is the most popular grip for timpani. But unless you have the time and instruction to learn it properly it’s best to use basic matched grip for now.

## Stroke

- The stroke we use for playing timpani is very similar to the one we use for mallets.
- A “Full Stroke” is commonly used which can also be called a “Piston Stroke”.
- The Full Stroke “starts up – ends up”. Your mallets will be up more than they are down.
- This stroke allows us to use the *rebound* from the head. The timpani have lots of rebound!
- You can “dampen” or mute a timpani stroke by placing your hand on the head to stop the sound.

## Playing Area

- You should strike the timpani approximately 1/3 of the way from the rim to the center.
- The timpani should not be played in the center unless it is for a special effect.

## Rolls

- When playing timpani, always use a single stroke roll (fast alternating strokes). Never use a buzz roll! ☹
- Place hands further apart for better roll sounds
- For Fp rolls, strike the drum then start rolling a beat later
- Larger drums roll slower, small drums roll faster
- Increase roll speed as you get louder

## Tuning

- Don’t forget that the timpani are “tunable” drums that can match exact pitches. That is their purpose! This is why tuning is so important.
- To tune:
- use a pitch source like a pitch pipe, a mallet instrument or pitch generating device (tuner)
- play the desired pitch on the source
- hum or sing the pitch (This is very important at first!)
- strike the drum with your *fingers*
- sing or hum the pitch near the head
- push the pedal *from the bottom up* until you hear the pitch “sing” back to you
- check the pitch again
- play the note with your mallets
- tuning the timpani to intervals is a very helpful way to make sure your pitches are accurate
- a list of common intervals and ways to check them are:
  - Perfect 5<sup>th</sup> - “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” (first four notes)
  - Perfect 4<sup>th</sup> - “Here comes the Bride” (first four notes)
  - Major 2<sup>nd</sup> - “Happy Birthday” (first three notes)
  - Major 3<sup>rd</sup> - “O When the Saints or Kumbaya” (first two notes)
  - Minor 3<sup>rd</sup> - “7 Nation Army” (first two notes)