

Refining Your Timpani Roll

by Tom Freer

Following are some techniques and calisthenics for refining one's timpani roll. This is one of a timpanist's most frequently used techniques, yet it seems to get minimal attention in practice and development. To get started you should have the following:

1. Metronome (best quality you can afford)
2. Tape recorder, mini disc recorder, or video camera
3. Mirror
4. Towels to mute timpani
5. Method Books:
 - Eckehardt, Keune - *Pauken (Ein Schulwerk)*
 - Fred Hinger - *Technique for the Virtuoso Timpanist*
 - Saul Goodman - *Modern Method for Timpani*
 - Friese/Lepak - *Timpani Method*
 - Heinrich Knauer - all books
 - Richard Hochrainer - all books

Assuming the player has a good knowledge of roll technique, I will not elaborate on such things as forte piano rolls, measured rolls, and the like. However, I will touch on roll attack, speed, and release.

To get started, using two timpani, place a mirror on your music stand right in front of you for clear viewing, place a towel on each drum opposite your playing area, place your metronome on your music stand, and get your tape player ready to record. It may sound strange at first, but using the towels on the heads creates a timpani "practice pad" which not only saves your ears a bit but is immensely helpful in exposing any flaws you may not notice because of the very forgiving resonance of the ringing timpani head.

Now that you are set up and ready with your two timpani practice pads. Keep in mind that you are trying to improve the evenness of your hands and smoothness of your roll. The goal is that by paying attention to some simple mechanical details of your technique, your roll will become more fluid, relaxed, even, and a much more beautiful sustained sound.

Start slow to get started. Turn your metronome on to 72 and play eighth notes in an alternating pattern 4/4 to 6/8, eighth notes = eighth notes (example 1). The purpose of alternating between duple and triple feels is not to get stuck in only one or the other. This technique of constantly alternating between the two usually exposes and disposes of any of the beat heavy strokes. Play the pattern in example 1 and repeat with one hand only while focusing on the following things:

1. Loose wrists, relaxed forearms, even fulcrum. Use only the wrist and keep the forearm stationary. Be sure your grip is exactly the same in each hand especially in the amount of fulcrum pressure. It is extremely important to maintain a constant fulcrum. This means to have not only the same amount of pressure in the fulcrum (which should be as loose and relaxed as possible without losing the stick) but also to not manipulate the amount of fulcrum pressure during rolling. This will eliminate any color changes you may hear in your roll between your hands. Get each hand to function mechanically in exactly the same manner. Do this both by "feel" and by using all of your available senses, and include the use of your mirror to expose other viewing angles.
2. While working on example 1, pay attention that your sticks are going straight up and down. You can also experiment with doing these exercises with both hands in unison.. In order to really see and feel that both hands are operating exactly as a mirror image of each other. Remember, stay loose, relaxed, and breath! Once you feel "warmed up" a bit feel free to increase your speed up to 16th note patterns at quarter note = 120.
3. Now, starting with 16th note patterns at quarter note = 120, move onto alternating hands. Gradually push your metronome speed up to quarter note = 220, only if you feel loose and relaxed enough to get near the speed. This is by no means a must, simply a guide which you should feel free to use as a gauge. See example 2A. At this point when you really have your hands moving in a loose, relaxed and comfortable motion, you can start correcting any flaws you may start to hear, now that we are into realistic roll speeds. To speed up the process, start by listening for uneven blows, uneven rhythm, and the possible combinations thereof. See example 3. By uneven blows I mean one hand louder than the other, and by uneven rhythm I mean a sloppy "swing" or triplet feel between the hands.
4. Now remove the towels and work on your roll attack, lift and release. While keeping your sticks 6-8 inches apart, keep in mind that roll speed should be as slow as you can get away with, depend-ing on the quality of your timpani and how clear your heads are, and mostly the accoustical quality of the room you are playing in. In order to achieve a sustained, ringing beautiful sounding roll, you must roll slowly enough to take full advantage of the ringing head and not to inhibit it.

Too fast a roll a roll will only mean more length of time that the sticks are in contact with the head, thus stopping its ringing and causing the roll to sound percussive or rhythmic. This is the last thing you want. Of course roll speeds vary with the size of the drum and the pitch register ie: smaller drums higher notes means a faster roll (due to shorter ringing times) and the larger the drum and lower the pitch, the slower the roll. This you must gauge for yourself however as a rule, I will not roll slower than 16th notes at quarter = 158, and never faster than 16th notes at quarter = 220.

Roll attack should be like a backwards flam, bringing both sticks down at the same time (see ex. 4)) and letting the grace note or the flam be louder than the main note. Never attack a roll with a normal rudimental style flam for it only creates an unclear, muddled and sloppy sounding attack. Practice roll releases by subtracting strokes to get off on the desired hand, not adding strokes.

For one, it is easier to subtract one or two strokes to end your roll say on your right hand, with the added advantage that you are not deadening the sound with more strokes.

5. Utilize whatever roll etudes you prefer in the above mentioned books and try taking the quality of your roll even one step further. Take any simple etude at a slow tempo and work on "lift-ing" while you roll. Start to get a feel for this by playing a deliberately pressurized roll by simply throwing your strokes at the head even ignoring any rebound you may feel. Then play the etude a second time, paying strict attention to the feel of all available rebound at your disposal. On the third pass, take it a step further and try to "assist" the rebound by lifting your sticks even higher than they rebound naturally. This means playing a forte roll but lifting your sticks as high as if they were playing double forte. In other words you increase stick height but not volume to a degree so that your sticks are getting off the head faster therefore creating even more resonance and a more musical, ringing, sustained and projecting sound. One last thing is to try lifting the back of your sticks a bit to change the angle that the stick head strikes the timpani head. This will also create a slightly more mellow attack to each stroke and produce a more truly legato sounding roll.

6. The importance of efficient practice techniques and relaxation.. When applying any of these techniques, do yourself a favor and don't waste time with unnecessary criticism. Never say to yourself "that sounds really bad!" This is a useless generalization that really tells you nothing. Be honest and specific about focusing in on exactly what it is you hear that bothers you then pinpoint it and fix it. Simple as that. Above all, stay loose, relaxed, comfortable and breathe. Especially as you increase speed and volume you must resist the urge to increase tension. Always take a short break at the slightest sign of muscle fatigue, soreness, or "burn." Put your sticks down and allow your limbs to hang free and completely limp for five minutes or as necessary, in order to avoid overuse injuries.

HAVE FUN!

Ex. 1 $\text{♩} = 72$ 

Ex. 2 $\text{♩} = 120$ 

Ex. 2A $\text{♩} = 120$ 

Ex. 3 $\text{♩} = 120$ 

Ex. 3A $\text{♩} = 120$ 

Note: Accent your right hand the first time through, then your left hand on the repeat. Continue.

Ex. 4 

Ex. 4A 

Note: The flam grace note should be played on the beat and not before. Both hands should come down at the same time. The roll should not be attacked as a grace note before the beat as in 4A.

Tom Freer

A native of Millbrook, New York, Tom began his percussion and timpani training seriously at age 9 with Jim Atwood, a former student of Cloyd Duff. Up until then Tom had always planned on being a rock drummer because his brothers and sisters discovered he could actually play along to the Cousin Brucie show on the radio in time at age 5. Tom got his first drum set immediately after that and then disassembled it when he started studying with Jim Atwood, so he could use the toms as timpani. By age fifteen, he won an audition to become principal percussionist with the Asheville, North Carolina Symphony, and then principal timpanist at age 16. Tom attended the Cleveland Institute of Music where he was accepted as Cloyd Duff's last student before retiring.

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He continued his timpani and percussion studies there with Mr. Duff's successor, Cleveland Orchestra timpanist Paul Yancich, and principal percussionist Richard Weiner, until graduating in 1986. While in school, Tom formed a band called Exotic Birds along with "Stabbing Westward" drummer Andy Kubiszewski, Pittsburgh Symphony timpanist, Tim Adams and Trent Reznor of "Nine Inch Nails". This was an original alternative band that toured with Culture Club and opened for many major acts of the time such as The Thompson Twins, Psychedelic Furs, Paul Young, Big Country, Modern English and others. In 1986 Tom resigned from the rock scene and headed to Stockholm Sweden, to become principal percussionist and assistant timpanist of the Norrkoping Symphony Orchestra. After one year there Tom became principal timpanist for the Fort Wayne Philharmonic for two seasons and then principal timpanist of the Alabama Symphony in Birmingham for two seasons. Tom has now been assistant principal timpanist and section percussion for the Cleveland Orchestra for seven years. He has recorded and toured with some of the greatest conductors of our time all over the world. Tom can be heard with the Cleveland Orchestra on London/Decca and Deutsche Grammophon records.