

# GUIDELINES FOR PERCUSSION WRITING

## I. INSTRUMENTATION

The following instruments are available:

Timpani (four, ranges D – B, F – d, A – f, d – b $\flat$ )

Large Concert Bass Drum (36")

Small Bass Drum (28" – pedal can be attached)

Side Drum (snare on or off)

Piccolo side drum (snare on or off)

Tenor Drum (no snares)

Clash Cymbals (three pairs: 18" or 20" French, 20" Viennese)

Suspended Cymbals (three: 14", 18", 20")

Cymbal attached to bass drum

Hi-Hat Cymbal with pedal

Antique (finger) cymbals (two pairs, unpitched)

Tam-tam (30")

Gong (20")

Triangles (six, various sizes and timbres)

Orchestral Tambourines (two: 10", 12")

Rock Tambourine (no head)

Xylophone

Glockenspiel

Vibraphone

Tubular bells (1 1/2 octave chromatic set, C – g)

Wood blocks (three 'pitches')

Temple blocks (five 'pitches')

Jam blocks (two 'pitches')

Big Bom

Wind chimes (bamboo)

Whip / Clapper

Slapstick

Ratchet / Rattle

Bongos (two)

Tom-toms (two)

Congas (two)

Rototoms (three)

Surdo

Tambourim

Darbouka

Bodhran

Cowbells (three)

Agogo bells (two 'pitches')

Alpenglocken (eight of various sizes)

Mark tree (bell tree)

Sleigh bells (two sets)

Handbell (untuned)

Anvil

Maracas (two pairs)

Egg shakers

Guiros (two)

Reco Reco

Cabasa

Chekere

Vibraslap

Flexatone

Rainsticks (two, one large, one small)

Claves (two pairs)

Castanets (Machine and handle)

Metal Castanets

Sandpaper blocks

Thunderdrum

Thunder sheet

Miscellaneous whistles (referee, train, lighthouse)

Apito (samba whistle)

Slide whistle (swanee whistle)

Bulbhorns (two: large - car, small - bicycle)

Kazoo

Bird calls (nightingale, pigeon, cuckoo, quail, duck)

If you require any additional instruments, they would have to be hired – please check with an Orchestra representative first. The most common items that fall into this category are:

Piccolo Timpani (20" or smaller)

Timbales

Crotales (low or high octave)

Bass bells (below middle C)

Hang/Gubal

Steel Drum

Marimba

Tubophone

(Rock/Jazz) Drumkit

Cajon

Log Drum

Mahler Hammer

Aluphone

Boobams

Keyed Glockenspiel

Please note that you should not take this list as an invitation to use it all – moderation is a good thing!

## II. HINTS AND TIPS FOR PERCUSSION WRITING

*Remember – percussionists are human beings: they can't be in two places at once, and have only two arms!*

It is fair to say that percussion writing can often leave a lot of detail to the performers: the more precise you are about your requirements, the better.

Unfortunately, it is quite common for scores to make unreasonable requests of percussionists, so here are a few points you might wish to bear in mind (in no particular order)

The most common problem for percussionists is being asked to be in two places at once – or being asked to get from one place to another in no time at all. Some instruments are large (eg timpani, xylophone, vibraphone), others are small (whistles, egg shakers, antique cymbals). You shouldn't expect a player to be able to switch from one instrument to another in less time than it physically takes to get there.

Switching to a hand-held instrument involves picking the thing up (naturally): some such instruments have to be handled with care to avoid audible faux-pas (eg maracas, tambourines, sleigh bells). If you have to move from, say, a side drum to a glockenspiel, you also have to drop (silently!) one pair of sticks and pick up another. All of this takes time.

Some instruments require the use of both arms (eg timpani, guiro, claves) whilst others can be played with one hand (eg triangle (on a stand), mark tree). Whilst it is not unacceptable to require a percussionist to 'double' (play more than one thing at the same time), don't ask a player to play impossible combinations of instruments (eg clash cymbals and maracas).

### *Advice on part production*

You should always suppose that percussionists will be asked to perform your pieces on a minimum amount of rehearsal. This means that the clarity of your percussion parts is of paramount importance. There is no 'best way' to notate percussion in general – you have to choose the appropriate method for the situation. If you have a particular number of players in mind, you might produce separate parts for each player, showing where the player should switch instruments. If, however, you think that the number of players may be left to the discretion of the concert organiser, such parts could make life very difficult (if, for example, you have produced separate parts for four players and only three have been engaged). A better method would be to produce a 'percussion score' which has all the instruments in one part. Provide sufficient copies for the number of players you think should be used, but if there are fewer, they can then annotate the parts themselves to divide the labour.

Unless you are writing a piece where you expect a player to be uniquely allocated to each instrument, you should not produce separate percussion parts for each instrument – this makes organising players much more difficult if they have to find their place in a new part as they move from instrument to instrument.

You might also bear in mind that in a complex score with many instruments, it may not be physically possible for all the instruments to be laid out within each player's arms' reach. Rather than have to remember to carry the part around when one moves from place to place, it is helpful to have additional copies of the parts that can be left around, particularly next to large instruments like the xylophone or vibraphone.

### *Timpani parts*

The instruments listed above have specific ranges, and retuning takes time. It is sometimes awkward to retune whilst playing, and doubly so if the time signature is varying. Many timpanists would not thank me for saying so, but the pitch of the note a timpanist plays is often unimportant: that is not to say that it is irrelevant, but as long as the note is an *appropriate* pitch, it doesn't have to be a *specific* pitch.

Please don't assume that just because the timpani part only ever requires three different notes at once, you can play the work on only three drums. For example, if you start the piece with drums tuned to F, G and c, and then retune to c, f and g, you would need four drums to cover the range of pitches. Also remember that you can't write for, say, three drums tuned to low D, E and G simultaneously, because only two of the four available drums can get that low – in other words, take great care over what you are asking the timpanist to do.

### *Players' Abilities*

Even if you expect a particular number of players to be available for a performance, bear in mind that not all players are equal: there are certain specialties, and you shouldn't assume anyone can play anything. In particular, not everyone may be happy playing tuned instruments (xylophone, glockenspiel, vibraphone), especially if you expect them to be able to use four mallets at once. If you are writing in such a fashion, you must indicate that such abilities will be expected of a particular number of players – don't leave it to chance.