

Opinions and Attitudes Regarding Percussion During the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

By Renee Keller

It is no secret that percussionists and drummers have often been subject to low opinion and been the butt of many jokes in the music world. Because the academic study of percussion is relatively new, very few books dedicated entirely to the functions and history of percussion were in existence before the 1960s. While method books are numerous and date back to the 17th and 18th centuries, information in published articles and books regarding percussion is a relatively new occurrence. Aside from a handful of encyclopedia entries, there were few widely available publications detailing the histories and potential of percussion instruments or continuing serious discussions about the state of percussion until the second half of the 20th century.

One consequence of this lack of available information about percussion was the attitudes towards percussion before its surge in popularity in the mid to late 20th century. These attitudes regarding percussion (i.e., standard and popular opinions of the day) were demonstrated in numerous orchestration guides and treatises. In a significant number of earlier orchestration texts, the percussion section was disparagingly referred to as the “kitchen of the orchestra.” And many works warned against the dangers of the percussion section and dismissed the potential of the percussion instruments. These attitudes likely developed as a result of several factors, including a lack of familiarity with several outstanding uses of percussion in orchestra, unfamiliarity with the instruments and their possibilities, and the poor reputation of the percussion section.

While instruction on the function, possibility, and limits of other instruments has been written about extensively, the potential of the percussion section had hardly been explored by the start of the 20th century. Orchestration texts from the 19th and early 20th century were extremely cautious about percussion. The most common advice in orchestration texts was to use percussion sparingly. Among the authors recommending caution was Rimsky-Korsakov, ironically himself an innovator of percussion writing. In his *Principals of Orchestration*, Rimsky-Korsakov recommended economy with regard to percussion. His reasons were sound, stating that: “A group of instruments that has been silent for some time gains fresh interest upon its reappearance.”¹ However, Rimsky-Korsakov went on to say that, “[The percussion instruments] have no intrinsic musical meaning, and are just mentioned by the way.”² This dismissive attitude towards the percussion instruments was not unique.

Another well-known orchestration text by Cecil Forsyth also assumed the unmusicality of unpitched instruments. Forsyth categorized the percussion instruments into two groups: “unmusical” and “musical.” While these labels distinguished instruments of indefinite pitch (“unmusical”) and definite pitch (“musical”), the terminology further perpetuated the idea that percussion instruments are not capable of or essential to musical ideas.³ Forsyth went on to issue a strongly worded

warning advising against the use of bass drum and cymbals. His words were enough to scare many composers away from attempting this combination. He said, “The combination...of the soft two-plate-stroke with the *p* notes of the bass drum is, despite Berlioz’s liking for it, rather poor and stupid.”⁴ Forsyth also referred to percussion as “mere noise,”⁵ again reinforcing the idea that percussion does not measure up to the other instruments of the orchestra.

Other orchestration books tended to be excessively restrictive in the imagined uses for percussion instruments and, in general, expressed wariness towards percussion. A 1931 book by Gordon Jacob gave such advice, advising that, “The use of the tambourine should be confined to dance music or to music of a dance-like character.”⁶ Jacob went on to say that, “Such things as the tenor drum, tubular bells, cow bells, jingles, castanets (useful for Spanish rhapsodies!), gong (sinister, solemn, Chinese), tabor (Old English), &c., &c., need not be spoken of in detail. Their function is to supply realism or local colour, and for these purposes their use is perfectly legitimate.”⁷ Despite the apparently legitimate uses of percussion, Jacob still advised composers to be “extremely sparing in their use.”⁸

Percussion instruments often made their way into orchestral ensembles merely to add realism and local color. However, once these functions became commonplace, percussion instruments evolved into unassociated timbral options, which remained unexplored by composers. Because of the lack of literature stating otherwise, many writers assumed that these instruments could serve no better purpose.

Another example of the pre-assumed role of percussion instruments comes from a 1959 book by Joseph Wagner called *Orchestration: A Practical Handbook*. This work was a rather late example of an orchestration book that took percussion into consideration only by assessing how it might enhance other orchestral instruments. Wagner said, “Percussion instruments are of value only when they can add dimensions of timbre and nuance unobtainable from the other sections.... They are strictly supplementary instruments with limited tonal definition which, in turn, affects their scoring values.”⁹ This type of attitude was pervasive in orchestral writing and teaching before 1960.

For some writers, it was easier to shy away from or ignore the subject of percussion rather than to deal with it. Another well-known orchestration text from 1899 by Ebenezer Prout refrained from discussing percussion, aside from the advice that “Much variety of colour is often obtained by the judicious use of percussion instruments. We emphasize the word ‘judicious’ because the beginner may be tempted to employ these instruments in season and out of season, and there is nothing which more readily vulgarizes a score than such a procedure.”¹⁰

The writers of these early orchestration texts were not entirely to blame

for their wariness about percussion. Many percussion instruments were still in various states of development and improvement, and the poor quality of instruments may have been to blame for unmusical sounds emanating from the section. Despite these technical limitations, however, various composers in the earlier part of the 20th century tried to imagine the possibilities of percussion if the instruments could be expanded and if improvements could be made.¹¹

The reputation of percussionists also came into question many times throughout music history. Orchestration books were full of stories and anecdotes, such as the following by a conductor:

During a recent recording session in Berlin I was having a difficult time getting an accurate reading of an arrangement by the xylophone, vibes, and percussion. It seems they spent the first two run-throughs lining up all of their gear, and it was a mess to say the least. Finally I said, "Let's try it this time, and percussion please watch your entrances." (I was being rather polite.) We were all ready to record so I thought we'd risk a take. Well, we did it and it was a disaster. It occurred to me that perhaps the copyist left out some bars but that was not the case. I found myself getting a little uptight and just then the orchestra contractor came over to the podium and said in a hushed voice, "You must not be too hard on them. After all, they are only drummers!"¹²

Such stories were often issued as warnings about what to expect from percussionists and upheld the traditional view that percussion was something best to be avoided.

Comments by Stewart Frank Howes in his work *Full Orchestra* also disparaged the quality of playing by percussionists. He said, "Speaking generally all percussion instruments are capable of more discriminating playing than they normally get in English symphony orchestras. Since their function is mainly decorative there is no reason why they should not invariably perform it with exquisite elegance."¹³

Percussion programs at conservatories and music schools developed much later than programs for other instruments. The historic lack of properly trained percussionists may have fueled the early critical attitudes towards percussion playing. Yet, circumstances beyond percussionists' control and for which percussionists were often blamed contributed to the poor reputation of the section. A 1906 work by Charles-Marie Widor concerning orchestral technique and instrumentation acknowledged that, at least in some cases, mistakes by percussionists were not always their fault, but rather the fault of negligent composers. Widor said that, "It frequently happens that, at a first rehearsal, the performer is embarrassed by the composer having neglected to indicate the changes of key beforehand; it will be the drummer's business to study and arrange the proper changes for the next rehearsal. In such a case I think the composer is somewhat to blame."¹⁴ Regardless of who was to blame, percussionists have worked for years to try to overcome the stereotypes of our section.

The timpani, in general, received a somewhat kinder treatment than percussion in orchestration texts due to the long history of timpani in the orchestra and due to the ability to tune timpani to various pitches. Even changes in timpani use encountered resistance. In his comprehensive history of the timpani, Edmund Bowles contended that: "Even musicologists and instrument historians have tended to give timpani short shrift, compared to the serious studies devoted to other standard but often less venerable orchestral types."¹⁵

As with other percussion instruments, the changes in tradition or function of timpani were often regarded with hostility. F. Castel-Blaze in an 1885 publication wrote, "To add two timpani [to the two already in the orchestra] is to wish to create a jam and nothing more; this childish addition has no other result than that of congesting the orchestra."¹⁶

As with percussion playing, the quality of timpani playing also came under scrutiny. An 1809 comment from the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* stated, "As far as the orchestras are concerned (Milan, Venice and, in any case, Naples excepted, however) we wish to repeat some of those remarks...no one knows how to play timpani."¹⁷ Poor drum

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quality, which was an issue in 1809 before the advent of machine timpani, probably contributed to the poor sound of the instrument. Berlioz was known to have lamented the failure on the part of composers to indicate their stick preferences for timpani. Regardless of the causes, timpanists, like percussionists, often suffered a poor reputation.

Fortunately, the general improvement of timpani and percussion instruments helped to make orchestrators less wary of the instruments. The general attitude towards timpani improved more quickly than the attitude towards percussion. Compliments aimed at timpani were often at the expense of percussion. Howes' 1942 book stated of the instruments, "Of this motley company the only instrument of serious and permanent musical value, an integral part of the texture and not a mere decoration upon it, is the set of kettle drums with their notes of definite pitch and their capacity for fine nuances of tone and expression."¹⁸

Generally, the longer history of timpani in the orchestra and their ability to achieve pitches seemed to be the basis for the assumed superiority of the timpani over percussion. Joseph Wagner wrote that, "Inasmuch as the timpani have been an integral part of the orchestra practically since its inception, the student orchestrator should consider them as musical instruments and not as supplementary 'noise makers.' Although percussive to a degree, they do not belong to the same category as the other percussion instruments, which are decidedly more limited and prescribed in their usage."¹⁹

Not all orchestration writings about timpani and percussion prior to 1960 were negative. One of the earliest proponents of the possibilities of timpani and percussion was Hector Berlioz, who also wrote one of the earliest and most respected treatises on orchestration. Berlioz, in an excerpt from his 1844 *Treatise on Instrumentation*, described his ideal large orchestra of 825 musicians. He imagined what might happen:

By combining the 30 pianofortes with the 6 sets of small bells, the 12 pairs of ancient cymbals, the 6 triangles (which might be tuned in different keys like the cymbals), and the 4 crescents into a metallic percussion orchestra—gay and brilliant expression in *mezzoforte*; By combining the 8 pairs of kettledrums with the 6 drums, and the 3 bass drums into a small, almost exclusively rhythmic percussion orchestra—menacing expression in all shadings; By combining the 2 gongs, the 2 bells, and the 8 large cymbals with certain chords of the trombones—sad and sinister expression in *mezzoforte*.²⁰

Berlioz was obviously not shy about using percussive sounds. Unfortunately it took more than a century for the attitudes of most other writers to change. Several groundbreaking parts by innovative composers like Stravinsky and Bartok were necessary to influence the general opinion towards percussion. Recognizing the changes taking place in orchestral writing, Stravinsky stated in a conversation with Robert Craft, "Though the standard orchestra is not yet an anachronism, perhaps, it can no longer be used except by anachronistic composers."²¹ Stravinsky's forward-thinking attitude and recognition that the orchestra had to evolve influenced later writers of orchestration texts to imagine what the future of percussion might hold, emphasizing its possibilities rather than its limits.

Later publications, such as a 1965 work by Christopher Headington, acknowledged their predecessors' fears, saying, "Books on orchestration usually warn students of the danger of too much use of percussion—a quiet roll on a cymbal is probably much more effective than prolonged clashings and crashing. But the use of percussion, as of all orchestral instruments, is governed by one rule only—the composer's instinct for what is right at a particular moment."²²

The advice contained in these later books did not encourage students to use every instrument in every piece, but did encourage students to experiment. In his 1951 book, *The Art of Orchestration*, Bernard Rogers offered the sage advice that, "The student must study these instruments 'from life,' and by consulting players."²³ Rogers also acknowledged prior warnings, stating that, "In one sense the old view is correct: frequent use of percussion (especially *forte*) soon becomes banal and vulgar. But for the sensitive tone painter these instruments will prove an ally and a friend."²⁴

These attitudes in part remain true today. Blades wrote, referring to well written if sparse percussion parts, "This economy in the use of percussion so often proves the master: the use of the crotale, a pair in E flat in Massenet's *Hérodiade* (1881), the single stroke on the tam-tam in Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony (*Pathétique*), the solitary clash of cymbals (*mf*) in Dvořák's *New World*, and the gentle solo on the timpani to open his *Slavonic Rhapsody No. 1*, or, the rare but extremely effective use of the cymbals by Bruckner."²⁵

As the general attitude began to change mid-century, a greater enthusiasm in orchestration books for percussion became apparent. George Frederick McKay, in his 1963 book, *Creative Orchestration*, recognized the possible directions orchestral writing might take, saying, "Throughout the future the fundamental need for new tonal interest will stimulate a search for new resources in timbre differentiation...new techniques still in early stages of exploration are: fuller and more subtle use of percussion instruments."²⁶

A 1969 contribution to the subject entitled, *Scoring for Percussion*, by H. Owen Reed and Joel T. Leach, assessed the state of percussion writing as follows:

As the stringed and wind instruments are borrowing from the percussion sounds, so too are the percussion instruments borrowing from the melodic sounds. This melodic thinking has of course always been associated with the mallet percussion instruments, but recently there has been an increased awareness of the melodic (or simulated melodic) possibilities inherent in the percussion instruments of *indefinite pitch*.²⁷

The opinions of McKay, Reed, and Leach were a far cry from the sentiments commonly expressed less than sixty years earlier. The possibilities for percussion were rapidly expanding by the 1960s.

Embracing the new optimism towards the percussion section, mid-century percussionists seemed eager to change their professional reputation. In the introduction to his 1970 book, *Contemporary Percussion*, Reginald Smith Brindle wrote, "Percussion players, who not long ago were regarded as the dunderheads of the orchestra, have had to step forward almost overnight and perform feats of virtuosity. The previous paucity of orchestral percussion instruments has rapidly given way to profusion of novel instruments, some of them still in a state of evolution."²⁸

Using similar terminology to Brindle, James Holland wrote in his 1978 work, *Percussion*, "Percussion players were at one time regarded as a lot of dunderheads by most other musicians, and from meeting colleagues in many countries it would appear that this attitude was quite widely held. But as percussion has changed, so have the attitudes, and the majority of other musicians today regard percussionists as equals rather than inferiors."²⁹

Following a similar train of thought, Gordon Peters, in his work *The Drummer: Man*, made a plea for the continued development of percussion ensemble programs in universities, "To promote a change in



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the erroneous traditional attitude that percussion is not as important as the other sections of the orchestra.”³⁰

By 1960, percussion was prime for development. The concept of solo multiple-percussion had recently been developed. Percussion ensemble music was about to find renewed interest through commissions of university programs and through the development of professional percussion ensembles. Following the tonal experiments of the first half of the 20th century, composers were looking for new areas of exploration. They would find such opportunities in the previously unexplored frontier of percussion timbres, highly developed mallet instruments, and a nascent interest in the use of percussion instruments from cultures the world over.

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Mathews, ed., *Orchestration: An Anthology of Writings* (London: Routledge, 2006), 113.
2. Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, *Principles of Orchestration: With Musical Examples Drawn from His Own Works* (New York: Kalmus, 1912), 33.
3. Cecile Forsyth, *Orchestration* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1914), 23.
4. Ibid, 36. Forsyth seems to be mistaken, however; it is well documented that Berlioz did not like the combination of bass drum and cymbals and thought that the sound of each could be better achieved by a single player on each.
5. Ibid, 42.
6. Gordon Jacob, *Orchestral Technique* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 72.
7. Ibid, 72.
8. Ibid, 72.
9. Joseph Frederick Wagner, *Orchestration: A Practical Handbook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 251.
10. Ebenezer Prout, *The Orchestra* (London: Augener & Co., 1899), 150.
11. Articles by Ferruccio Busoni and Percy Grainger published in the Paul Mathews *Orchestration: An Anthology of Writings* point to such a conclusion.
12. John Cacavas, *Music Arranging and Orchestration* (NY: Belwin-Mills, 1975), 90.
13. Steward Frank Howes, *Full Orchestra* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1942), 64–65.
14. Charles-Marie Widor, *The Technique of the Modern Orchestra; a Manual of Practical Instrumentation* (London: Joseph Williams, Limited, 1906), 101.
15. Edmund A. Bowles, *The Timpani: A History in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2002), 7.
16. Ibid, *The Timpani: A History in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2002), 482.
17. Ibid, 472.
18. Frank Stewart Howes, *Full Orchestra* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1942), 58.
19. Joseph Frederick Wagner, *Orchestration; a Practical Handbook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 259.
20. Paul Mathews, ed., *Orchestration: An Anthology of Writings* (London: Routledge, 2006), 74.
21. Ibid, 148.
22. Christopher Headington, *The Orchestra and its Instruments* (London: Bodley Head, 1965), 51.
23. Bernard Rogers, *The Art of Orchestration; Principles of Tone Color in Modern Scoring* (New York: Appleton Century-Crofts, 1951), 72.
24. Ibid, 77.
25. James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and Their History* (Connecticut: The Bold Strummer, Ltd., 1992), 323.
26. George Frederick McKay, *Creative Orchestration* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1963), 177.
27. H. Owen Reed and Joel T. Leach, *Scoring for Percussion and the Instruments of the Percussion Section* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 129.
28. Reginald Smith Brindle, *Contemporary Percussion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 1.
29. James Holland, *Percussion* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1978), 196.
30. Gordon B. Peters, *The Drummer: Man* (Illinois: Kemper-Peters Publications; revised edition, 1975), 215.

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