



The Grip

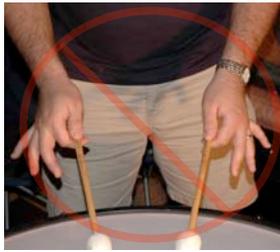
There are two basic grips for timpani playing. The one we use at Monocacy Middle School is called French Grip. The other one is called German Grip. German Grip is sometimes referred to as the German/American Grip.

The French Grip is one where the thumbnails are facing the ceiling when playing. As you look at your hand from above, your thumb will be pointing down the shaft towards the mallet head. The stick rests in the bend of your first knuckle (that's the one closest to your finger tip) of your index finger, and the thumb rests on the stick above the first knuckle. Make sure your thumb is flat so your entire thumbprint is on the mallet.



Tim Adams

Common Grip Mistakes



Flyaway fingers



Stick crossing the wrong knuckle



Thumb not on the stick

PLAYING WITH FRENCH GRIP

Use plenty of wrist motion and different finger pressure when playing with French Grip. Here is an exercise to help you learn the correct way to use your wrist with French Grip.

1. Pretend your hand is around a doorknob.
2. Rotate the doorknob forward and backward using your wrist (Adams). See the pictures below.



Tim Adams

3. Now, pretend the door is open and you are standing in front of the door so you can place your left and right hands on both doorknobs. Rotate each doorknob separately. This is the same motion you will use once you grip the mallet.
4. Try using the technique you just learned with a mallet. You will notice that the wrist motion is the same, but it should not be as exaggerated.

Fingers are also important when playing with French Grip. Use the last three fingers of your hand to control what kind of sound your mallet will make when it hits the drum.

Articulation Strokes

There are three main sounds to get from the timpani. They are called *staccato*, *legato*, and *common*. These different sounds are more accurately called **articulations**. Staccato articulation sounds short and separated from other notes. Legato articulation sounds long and sustained. Common stroke is what you use when there is no specific articulation written on the music. Common stroke sounds longer than staccato and shorter than legato. Here is how you play the three main timpani strokes:

PLAYING A STACCATO STROKE

1. Have your three last fingers touching the mallet shaft. These are the fingers after your thumb and index finger.
2. Strike the drum with the mallet. At the moment of impact, squeeze the stick with all your fingers so you restrict the rebound. Congratulations! You have just played a staccato stroke!
3. The squeeze should be about the same tension you use to grip a tennis racquet, or to give a firm handshake. The squeeze only lasts the split second when the mallet head strikes the drum. Your hand should be relaxed on the downstroke and relaxed just after the strike. (Later on we will talk about different mallets that will give you even more variety in your staccato playing.)

Articulation Exercise!

Play two staccato strokes followed by two common strokes followed by two legato strokes. Feel the difference between the three different Articulations. Alternate between the three strokes for thirty seconds to develop killer mallet technique!

PLAYING A LEGATO STROKE

1. Have your three last fingers touching the mallet shaft just like they are for the staccato stroke.
2. On the down stroke, before you strike the drum, lift your hand away from the drum. Begin the upstroke before you strike the drum. Pretend you are pulling the sound out of the drum. Or imagine that

the drum is filled with chocolate syrup, and you dip the mallet into it and some of it sticks to the mallet as you pull it out.

3. Strike the drum as you are pulling away in the upstroke.

PLAYING A COMMON STROKE

1. Have your three last fingers touching the mallet shaft just like they are for the staccato and legato stroke.
2. Strike the drum. Nothing special should happen with your fingers or wrist like it does with staccato and legato strokes.
3. There is no squeezing with this stroke. It should feel relaxed and comfortable.

How to Stand While Playing

Correct posture is crucial when playing timpani. Although your posture is critically important to playing well, it is also very easy to do correctly. All the cool stuff that you can do with your hands is effected by how you stand with your feet. You will stand for most of the timpani playing at Monocacy Middle School.

FEET

1. You need to have a comfortable “grounded” feeling when you are playing timpani and other percussion instruments.
2. Stand with your feet slightly farther than shoulder width apart. Many players believe this gives them the best playing posture, and helps give them that “grounded” feeling. If you are not grounded, experiment with feet placement.
3. Timpani stance is moveable. Don’t lock your feet or your body in one position. Stay relaxed.



1. *Proper stance*
2. *Improper stance for drum shift.*
3. *Proper stance for drum shift.*



ARMS AND HANDS

1. Your upper arm (from your shoulder to elbow) should hang comfortably next to your upper body.
2. Your forearm (from the elbow to the wrist) should be bent comfortably at the elbow to allow the mallet contact the drum.
3. The sound will be more full when the mallet shaft is parallel to the drum head. Don't go crazy with this! The angle of the stick should be between 10° and 25° in relation to the drum head. Depending on the music, sometimes you will want a full sound (mallet shafts close to parallel), and sometimes you will want a thinner sound (mallet shafts less parallel to the drum head).
4. Your arms and hands should feel relaxed in this stance.



Fullest sound - shaft close to parallel to the drum.



Thinner sound - shaft not parallel to the drum.

How and Why to “Sit” While Playing

The use of a stool at Monocacy Middle School will be rare, but this information will be helpful in high school.

The main reason to use a stool is if you have to tune more than one drum in a short amount of time. Something most people don't realize about the stool is that you don't sit in it at all. You use the stool to lean against.

Leaning against the stool allows you to use both feet to tune.

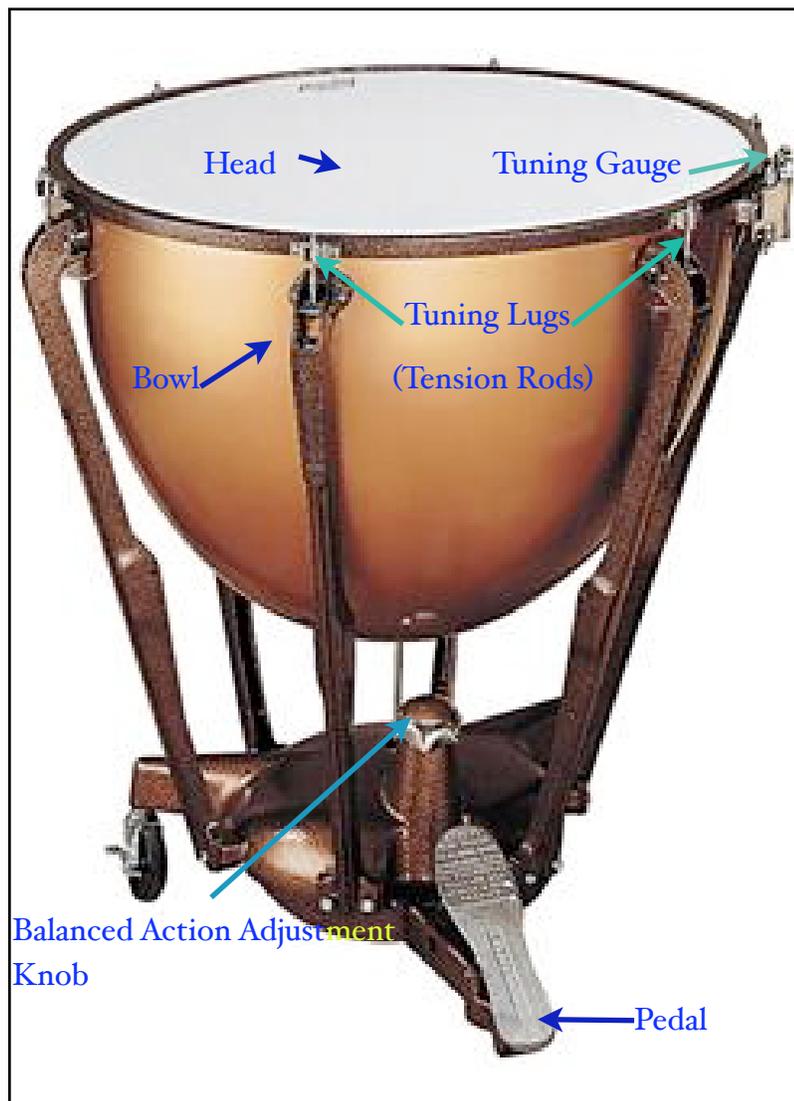
Another advantage is that your body is in better playing position if you are tall. Leaning against a stool also helps the player relax while playing.



Proper use of the timpani stool

The Parts of the Timpani

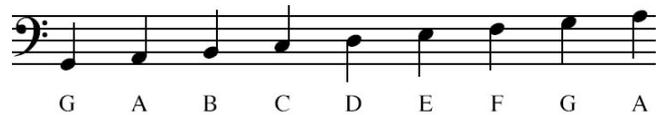
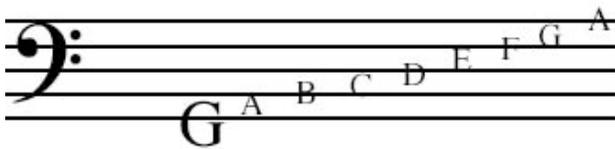
An accomplished timpanist knows the different parts of the drum. Below is a diagram identifying the most important parts.



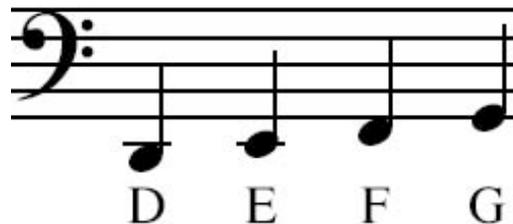
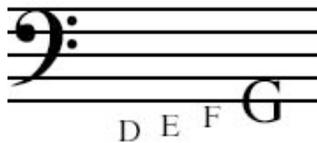
Reading the Bass Clef

Percussionists are the most versatile musicians in the band. You read music in three clefs - percussion clef for snare drum, treble clef for keyboard mallets, and bass clef for timpani. You are in an exclusive club!

Reading bass clef is easy. Just remember that the bottom line of the staff is the G line. Any note that falls on that line is called G. Go up the music staff alternating line to space to line... progressing through the musical alphabet. Remember, the musical alphabet starts with A and ends with G. If you have gotten to the letter G and you still have more notes, repeat the sequence starting with letter A.



If you have to figure out the names of the notes below the staff, go backwards with the musical alphabet starting on the bottom line of the staff



Muffling

Timpani are resonant and will often ring longer than the written notes require. Use a technique called muffling to control the ring of the drum.

Here's how:

1. Hold the stick with the thumb and index finger ONLY. (Wessels)
2. Extend the other three fingers out. (Wessels)
3. Gently touch the beating spot of the head with the three extended fingers.
4. You don't want to hear your fingers touch the drum. With practice you will be able to do this technique silently.



Try the following exercises to practice this muffling technique. The symbol (*) above the rests means to muffle. You will not see this symbol in your band music, but it will help you learn the proper way to muffle in this exercise. **Be sure to let each note ring for the written duration before you muffle the drum head.**

Muffling Exercise

Marc Wessels

$\text{♩} = 80$

8

Tuning the Drums

Tuning is the most critical part of playing timpani. When the timpani sounds, it is usually the foundation note for every player in the band. Wind players need your notes to be correct so they are in tune. Some timpani have tuning gauges which will give you a visual representation of where the drum should be tuned. These gauges will approximate being in tune, but you must use your ear to tune the drum accurately. **If you are only close to being in tune, you are out of tune.**

Use this procedure to tune:

1. Put the timpani pedal in the heel down position.
2. Play the note you need to tune on an electronic tuner that will play chromatic pitches.
3. Turn off the tuner and hum the note to yourself.
4. Lean over so your ear is close to the timpani head. Make sure no clothing or hair is touching the drum head.
5. Softly strike the head with your mallet, then SLOWLY push the timpani pedal so the pitch of the drum goes up. When it matches the pitch of your hum, stop pushing the pedal. Remember, push the pedal SLOWLY.
6. Use the same procedure to tune each drum.



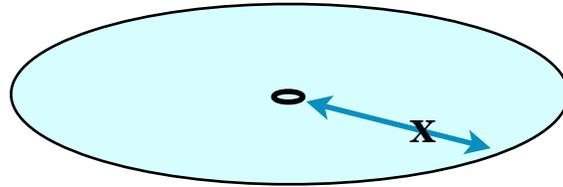
Tim Adams



Tim Adams

Slowly push the timpani pedal to bring the pitch up to what you are humming

Where to Play on the Drum



The rule of thumb for where to strike the timpani head is $\frac{1}{3}$ the distance between the rim and the center of the drum which is about 4 inches from the rim. Remember, each drum is a different size, so you need to play the large drum (32") a little more than 4 inches from the rim, and the small drum (23") will need to be played a little less than 4 inches from the rim.

Don't worry about measuring 4 inches, just "eyeball" it to play approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ the distance from the rim to the center.

After you visually decide where to play, use your ears and adjust the playing spot for the best sound.

Never strike the timpani in the exact center of the drum. The resonating chamber is a bowl so the sound waves go down and reflect directly back on the same path. This cancels out most of the sound. Try it! (during warm-ups of course) You will hear a dead, flat sound. When you hit it off center, the sound waves have a chance to deflect off the bowl in many different directions making the sound more full, resonant, and rich. Through hundreds of years of experimenting with the striking spot, timpanists have discovered that playing $\frac{1}{3}$ the distance from the rim to the center sounds the best.



Tim Adams

Play about 4 inches from the rim.

Which Mallet Should I Use?

Unfortunately, most composers don't tell you what kind of mallet to use on the timpani part. It is up to you and the director to make an appropriate musical choice.

Mallets are constructed with a shaft, core and covering. They range from a soft almost inaudible attack to mallets that have a sharp and strong attack. The core material and wrapping thickness determine the articulation and tone the mallet will produce. Cores can be made from felt, rubber, cork, wood or synthetic materials. Covers can be one layer of felt, two layers of felt, leather, or no covering at all. A professional timpanist will have five or six different pairs of timpani mallets to ensure the correct sound for any given musical situation.



1. Wooden mallets for the most articulate playing.
- 1a. Wooden mallets for playing music in the Baroque style.
2. Ultra staccato mallets for playing pronounced articulations.
3. Staccato mallets for articulate passages where you need a full tone.
4. General mallets for all purpose playing.
5. Soft roller mallets used for getting a rich sound with little articulation.

MALLET CHOICE GUIDE

At Monocacy Middle School we use three different timpani mallets. We have general mallets which give a rich full tone and have a moderate amount of articulation. Our roller mallets give a full sound but lack articulation. Staccato mallets give clarity and articulation, but do not produce as full a sound as the others.

Your choice should be based on the articulation needed. **The type of mallet you choose has nothing to do with volume.** You can play any of the mallets fortissimo or pianissimo.

Changing mallets for different musical situations within a song is common.

Here are some guidelines to help you make musical mallet choices:

MUSICAL SITUATION	MALLET CHOICE
Lots of rolls and/or sustained notes in the part	Rollers
Lots of quarter, eighth, or sixteenth notes in a row.	Staccato
Isolated notes that should not ring after they are played.	Staccato
Isolated quarter notes and half notes that are played with the tubas	General
Passages that have a mix of note durations such as sustained notes, short notes, and rolls.	General

Which Notes go on Which Drums?

If you learn the bottom note on each drum, knowing which notes to tune on which drums becomes easy. The most common set-up for timpani is four drums. The biggest and lowest sounding is 32 inches, the next biggest drum is 29 inches, after that is the 26 inch drum, and the smallest and highest pitch drum is 23 inches in diameter.

32" drum: D-A

29" drum: F-C (School)

26" drum: Bb-F (Monocacy Middle)

23" drum: D-A

Its easy to remember drum sizes!

Memorize that the biggest drum is 32 inches. All you have to do is subtract 3 inches for the size of the next drum. Check it out:

- 32 inch drum
- 3
- 29 inch drum
- 3
- 26 inch drum
- 3
- 23 inch drum

Its easy to remember the note range on each drum!

Learn this phrase: **D**oughnuts **F**or **B**etter **D**rummers. The first letter of each word is the bottom note of each drum from largest to smallest. Just remember that the B is really **Bb**.

Count up 5 notes from the bottom note to get the top note of each drum. Example: Bottom note is D, D=1, E=2, F=3, G=4, A=5. The range of both drums that have D as their lowest note is from A to D.

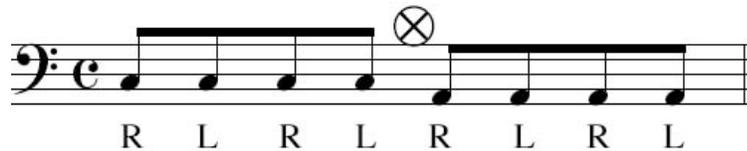
Whenever possible, put the note in the middle of the drum's range. For example, if the two notes you need to tune are A and C, you could put the A on the 32" drum and the C on the



29" drum, but the notes would be at the extremes of each drum's range. You will produce better tone quality if you put the A on the 29" drum and the C on the 26" drum.

Sticking

The general rule for sticking is to alternate strokes from right hand to left. You must choose how you will stick different passages. Base your choice on what sticking will make the music sound best. In the following example you would have to cross your hands in order to play the excerpt. The circle with the X in it (⊗) means to cross sticks when playing.



Another way to stick this example is to start the passage with your left hand. This will avoid the cross stick.



Sometimes it is best to use two of the same strokes in a row. Number 1. in the example below shows you one good choice of sticking. Notice that the excerpt begins with two rights in a row. Later there are two left hand strokes in a row followed by two right hand strokes. Example 2. is also a good sticking choice. You would choose one over the other based on what you think sounds best.



Another circumstance where you may choose to not alternate strokes is when dampening. If you had a pattern of notes similar to the example below, you might like to play the notes with your right hand and dampen with your left.



Timpani Maintenance

Timpani require daily and periodic maintenance. The heads can get easily damaged by leaving them uncovered, and by playing them with anything other than timpani mallets. The bowls are made out of copper which is a soft metal that dents easily. The mallets are extremely fragile. They will last a long time provided they are only played on the timpani, the mallet heads are not touched by your hands, they are treated as musical instruments and not tossed around like toys, and stored in a cabinet or stick bag when they are not being used.

Occasionally the timpani head needs to be changed. This is an advanced procedure that is best left to your instructor.

MAINTENANCE GUIDE

EVERYDAY TIMPANI MAINTENANCE	TWICE PER YEAR
Cover each drum.	Use machine oil on all the tension rod threads.
Wrap the mallets in plastic and put the mallets in the cabinet or a stick bag.	Use machine oil on the friction points on the pedal.
Put the pedals in the heel down position at the end of rehearsal. This reduces tension on the heads.	Adjust the balanced action on the pedal.
Wipe the heads with a towel to clean off any fingerprints.	Use machine oil on the wheels.



1.



2.



3.



Wiping the head clean with a towel.

Wrapping the mallets in plastic.