

# George Gaber's Melodic Timpani Techniques

By Rebecca Kite

**W**HEN I ATTENDED GRADUATE SCHOOL AT INDIANA University, I studied with George Gaber and went through his program of timpani study. One of the most important goals he set for his students was to become completely comfortable and fluent with clearing a head, and pedaling and tuning a timpani. The path he had us travel to reach this goal began with clearing a calfskin head on a hand-tuned drum. It took us through interval-tuning exercises with these same drums, then scale and arpeggio exercises with his pedal techniques, to full melodic playing on two pedal drums.

The experience and skill I got from this study has served me well throughout my professional career. I once played a timpani audition for an orchestra in Kentucky. When the conductor wanted to hear a tuning demonstration, I pulled out "My Old Kentucky Home" from the Saul Goodman *Modern Method for Tympani* book, which I had played in lessons, and performed it on two pedal drums. The conductor was astonished at this display of melodic work. I won the audition, and the conductor constantly praised my tuning. I guarantee I never would have done that without the techniques I learned from George Gaber.

I believe everyone who plays timpani can benefit from this type of study and practice. I worked with George Gaber in writing this article to present his exercises and ideas. I will describe the work we did with hand-screw timpani so that anyone who has these drums may play these exercises. I will go into greater detail with the pedaling techniques because everyone who has access to two pedal drums can use them. I hope you find these exercises as valuable as I have.

## HAND-TUNED TIMPANI—CLEARING THE HEAD

A hand-tuned timpani consists of the copper bowl, a head with counterhoop, and T-handles for adjusting the head. This drum sits in a quadropod. All tuning is done by turning the hand screws. There is no pedal, chain or cable. Learning how to get a clear sound from this type of drum and then tuning the head to different pitches while maintaining a clear sound is quite a challenge. We used a pair of Ludwig hand-tuned drums (25" and 28") for these exercises. Each drum had six T-handles.



Reproduction of D. Schretlen Classical Era timpani manufactured by GP Percussion. 21" and 22" in diameter, respectively.

The first lesson was clearing the head. This procedure works on any drumhead (snare, bass drum, tom-tom, etc.) and I highly recommend it. Here is the process:

1. Take all the tension off the head (unscrew all the tuning lugs) and make sure the head is centered on the rim.

2. Tighten each tuning lug until each one just starts pushing the counterhoop down. Watch the counterhoop carefully to see when it starts moving down, then loosen the lug and do it again. By doing this you will find the point at which the lug just starts pushing the counterhoop down.

3. Look at the head carefully to see if there are any wrinkles or extremely loose areas. If there are, tighten the lug closest to the wrinkle to eliminate it.

4. Lightly tap the head next to a tuning lug and tighten the lug quickly while the drumhead is still vibrating. Listen carefully for changes in the sound as you do this. When you first tap the head, it will make a "flappy" sound because you have not yet applied tension. As you turn the tuning lug and add tension to that part of the head, the sound will change. There will be a point in your turning of the handle where there will suddenly be enough tension applied to the head to create a very faint musical tone to replace the "flappy" sound. Professor Gaber calls this change a "thrust of sound." Adjust each tuning handle to this point.

When you carry out this procedure, you are in essence fine tuning the head at the first amount of tension that produces a musical sound. It takes practice to become proficient at using this method of clearing heads and it is easier to do with calf than plastic. I highly recommend practicing this technique, which I have found extremely useful in tuning all kinds of drums.

5. Listen for a pure sound at this low tension level. When you get it, tighten the tuning handles equally to bring the head up to the playing range. Measure each half or quarter turn of the handle to make sure that each one maintains a clear sound.

## INTERVAL EXERCISES ON HAND-TUNED TIMPANI

After clearing the heads, set the low drum on a starting pitch (A is a good choice). Tap the head so you can hear the A, then sing the pitches you will go to. While the head is still sounding, turn two handles at a time (one with each hand). Turn the handles just enough so that when you have turned all of them equally you are now at the new pitch. This will take some practice. If the new pitch is a whole step away, don't turn the handles very much. If it is a fourth away, turn the handles a lot. It is important that you touch each handle only once.

When Professor Gaber first showed this to us, it seemed impossible. However, with practice, all of us became quite proficient.

We used the Goodman *Modern Method for Tympani*, page nineteen, for interval practice. The procedure was first to clear the heads on both drums, then set the starting pitches—in this case, A and D. Professor Gaber would sound his A tuning bar to give the pitch. Then came the fun! While maintaining a slow, steady tempo, you had to play each line on page nineteen and make all the tuning changes in time. When you finished the line, Professor Gaber would sound his tuning bar again to see if you had maintained a pitch center. If you hadn't, it meant more practice for next week. As you might imagine, after doing this for four or five weeks, using pedal drums seemed really easy.

### PEDAL DRUM EXERCISES

First, get one pedal drum. Chose a drum that has the widest possible range. I have found some 26" drums that have an octave difference between the lowest and highest pedal positions. While it's not the playing range of the drum, it can work quite well for ear training and pedaling exercises.

These examples use the F major scale and F major arpeggio played on a 26" drum. After you are comfortable with these exercises play as many melodic patterns as you can find. There are several good exercises in the Goodman book on pages 69 to 71. If you cannot get an octave on your drum, modify the exercise to fit the range you can get (use a perfect fifth, for example).

### CONSTANT GLISSANDO

Exercise 1



1. Strike the drum and slowly move the pedal at a constant rate from the lowest to the highest pitch.

2. Listen to the pitch change throughout the glissando. Do this several times before going to step 3.

3. As you move the pedal from low to high, strike the drum as each pitch in a major scale is reached. Move the pedal at a steady rate.

Things to listen for:

- How much pedal movement is required to change the pitch to each scale note?
- Are some notes closer together than others?
- Are the notes on different places on the pedal when you are going up versus when you are going down?

Exercise 2



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4. After practicing steps 1 through 3, move the pedal and play the scale pitches in time (quarter notes on each pitch).

Exercise 3



Exercise 4



5. Repeat steps 1 through 4 using the pitches in an F major arpeggio instead of a scale.

**DELAYED GLISSANDO**

Exercise 5



+ Do not strike the note with the plus sign. Move the pedal on beat four so it reaches the new pitch by the last 16th of the beat. Strike the drum once each measure, on the downbeat.

Play the arpeggio as shown in the above example. Listen to the sound of the drum as you change pitch. Move the pedal with a quick, sure motion at the very last 16th note in the measure to make the pitch change. Your foot should be getting used to the distance it must move after practicing the constant glissando.

**INSTANT GLISSANDO**

Exercise 6



Play the note and move the pedal to the next pitch immediately. Play the drum only on the downbeat. Do not dampen.

**SILENT GLISSANDO**

Exercise 7



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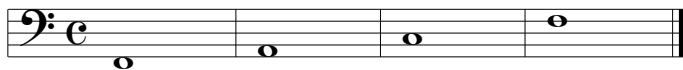
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Play the note, dampen and move to the next pitch immediately. (Use the faint residual sound of the head to guide you, as well as the position of the pedal.)

**NO GLISSANDO**

Exercise 8



Move the pedal simultaneously with striking the head. This requires a very quick, sure motion of the pedal.

Use these techniques to practice any melodic pattern. Enjoy! PN



**Rebecca Kite**, president of GP Percussion, specializes in solo marimba performance. She teaches at the University of Minnesota and the University of St. Thomas and is on the board of directors of PAS. Kite holds a Master's in Percussion Performance from Indiana University School of Music, where she studied with George Gaber. She also studied timpani with Cloyd Duff and has been timpanist with

the National Symphony of Nicaragua, Evansville Philharmonic, Owensboro Symphony and Columbus (Indiana) Pro Musica. Kite is also an instrument designer and has four patents on the timpani designs used by GP Percussion. Her work as a solo marimbist may be heard on her debut CD, *Across Time*.

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