John Bergamo's Four Pieces for Timpani: A Performance Guide

By Robert J. Damm

Four Pieces for Timpani, written by John Bergamo in 1961, was first published in 1963 by Music For Percussion. It is dedicated to Max Neuhaus, who premiered the work on his bachelor's recital. Bergamo and Neuhaus were colleagues at the Manhattan School of Music for five years, where Bergamo studied with Fred Albright and Paul Price. Bergamo had been exposed to Elliot Carter's timpani pieces: similarities include the use of a variety of mallets to bring out the character of each piece, the exploration of various striking places on the drumhead to produce different sound qualities, and the appearance of the "X" to indicate hand dampening. Readers interested in comparing Bergamo's Four Pieces... with Carter's Eight Pieces... are referred to Patrick Wilson's interview with Elliot Carter in Percussive Notes, October 1984, Vol. 23, No. 1.

Four Pieces For Timpani is a frequently performed work in the solo repertoire. Its contrasting movements, from free to furious, allow the performer an opportunity to display both musical expression and virtuoso agility. It is well within the reach of talented high school students and makes an excellent undergraduate performance piece.

In preparing this work for a recital, many aspects of the piece seemed unclear, so I telephoned Mr. Bergamo and talked to him about some of the performance problems I encountered. Others who are considering this work for performance may benefit from the following solutions and suggestions.

TUNING

The composer stated that the tuning of the drums is only a suggestion; the specific pitches are subject to the performer's judgment, though the intervals must be maintained. The pitches indicated in the music and the resulting intervals are as follows:

I. Recitative
   F, A, B, D (M3, M2, m3)
II. Perpetual Motion
   F, A, B, D (M3, M2, m3)
III. Elegia
   F, G, Cb, B (M2, m2, m3)
IV. Finale
   F, G, Ab, Cb (M2, m2, m3)

The accidentals in the third movement, although omitted in the fourth-movement manuscript, are to be maintained. It is important to keep in mind the standard sizes and approximate ranges of the timpani:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Sizes</th>
<th>Approximate Ranges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32&quot; D-A</td>
<td>23&quot; D-A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29&quot; F-C</td>
<td>26&quot; Cb-F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26&quot; B</td>
<td>23&quot; D-A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For contrast and effect, the second movement might be tuned to the upper range.
using these pitches: Ab, C, D and F. In order to maintain the specified intervals and stay within the ranges of the drums, the lowest selection of pitches that would work for the third and fourth movements are: Ab, Bb, B and D.

MOVEMENT I: RECITATIVE
According to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, a recitative is “a type of writing, normally for a single voice, which follows closely the natural rhythm and accentuation of speech, without necessarily being governed by a regular tempo or organized in a specific form” (Sadie, 1980, v.15, p. 643). This type of writing is sometimes used in instrumental music for dramatic effect because it can offer a sense of spontaneity. In this movement there are no barlines to inhibit the performer’s sense of freedom. The composer pointed out that this movement should be “musical, but not necessarily rhythmic.”

Fairly hard mallets should be selected for clear articulation of the 16th- and 32nd-note passages. It is important to note the difference between trill and tremolo: tr (trill) indicates a rapid alternation of a given pitch with the diatonic second above it. The composer advises the performer to start and end the trill on the upper drum. Tre (tremolo) indicates to roll on one drum. All muffling is indicated with an “X” as is used in vibraphone dampening.

The length of each fermata is relative to the dynamic of the passage, the number of drums ringing and, especially, the acoustics of the performance hall (see Examples 1-3).

MOVEMENT II: PERPETUAL MOTION
This movement is typical of the moto perpetuo in that it is a rapid piece that proceeds from beginning to end with notes of the same

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**Example 1**/ In the first line, the 8th rest with the fermata might be interpreted as a half rest.

**Example 2**/ In the fourth line, the quarter note with the fermata might be interpreted as a dotted half note.

**Example 3**/ In the fifth line, the 8th rest with the fermata might be interpreted as a whole rest.
value, in this case 8th notes, facilitated by the absence of barlines. Familiar examples of the perpetual motion are the finale from Weber’s First Piano Sonata, Mendelssohn’s op.119 and Paganini’s Allegro de concert op.11 for violin and orchestra (Sadie, 1980, v. 12, p. 648).

Mallets for “Perpetual Motion” should be thin dowel rods or rattan sticks in order to produce the particular timbre the composer had in mind. Taping the end of the sticks with moleskin will alleviate harsh contact noise. Tuning the drums to the top of their range and striking the heads near the edge tends to draw out the harmonics called for in this movement. It is important that the note groupings are clearly defined by placing a slight accent on the first note of each grouping, as in Example 4.

The symbol *indicates to strike the center of the head. The accents in the sixth line, according to the composer, are with the non-moving line to make it balance with the moving line, which naturally draws the attention of the listener (see Example 5).

The quarter rest in the seventh line should be read as a fermata in order to give time to muffle all the drums before continuing with the last section of the movement (see Example 6). Be sure to let the drums ring in the fermata at the end of this movement, shown in Example 7. Muffle only where the composer has marked an “X.”

**MOVEMENT III: ELEGIA**
The composer intended this movement as a contrast to the others. Very soft mallets should be selected to help achieve the desired sempre tenuto character. This movement requires four mallets be-

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**Example 4**/ It is suggested that note groupings are defined by a slight accent.

**Example 5**

**Example 6**

**Example 7**

**Example 8**

**Example 9**

**Example 10**

**Example 11**

**Example 12**

**Example 13**
cause the performer is asked to play chords (see Example 8). It may be helpful to use mallet-dampening technique to muffle in the third measure of the third line, since all fingers are needed to hold the mallets, as shown in Example 9. The arpeggio in the seventh line may be played quite openly in the context of the mood of this piece (Example 10). The roll in the last line may be played as a ripple roll or a hand-to-hand tremolo (see Example 11).

**MOVEMENT IV: FINALE**
The “Finale” is to be played as rapidly as possible, “with barbaric ferocity.” The first phrase is indicated L.V. (laissez vibrer or let vibrate), which directs the performer to use no muffling in this movement (see Example 12). Since the tempo is so rapid, this lack of muffling allows more concentration on rhythm and tone production. The “Finale” is especially challenging because of the many double stops, as seen in line five (Example 13).

The composer specified that this movement relates to the drive and energy associated with Max Roach’s bebop drumming. He recommends felt staccato mallets because he warns that wood may sound too “pounding.” Wooden mallets, however, may be appropriate in order to make this movement sound more like a drumset solo.

Four Pieces For Timpani is well received by audiences and rewarding to perform. It is hoped that this guide clarifies the composer’s intentions and provides helpful information to anyone considering this piece for performance.

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