

Mahler's First Symphony: The Timpani Parts

By Andrew Simco

DURING THE COURSE OF THE PAST TEN SEASONS IN which I have been timpanist of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, I have had many occasions to perform the timpani part to the Mahler *First Symphony*. The more opportunities I had to perform the work, the more I got out of it, especially in terms of interpreting the part in a musically meaningful way.

I would like to share my thoughts with the readers of *Percussive Notes* in the hope that whatever light I can bring to the subject will be of assistance to those who have never played the work before or will be playing it for the first time, as well as those who have had the good fortune to perform the work. The symphony was originally written as a five-movement work in two separate parts, with the movement known as "Blumine" being cast as the original second movement of the first part. In a subsequent revision, Mahler withdrew "Blumine" from the symphony and recast the entire work as a four-movement symphony in one part, which is the version that has come down to us today. It is this version, in the edition by Dr. Erwin Ratz published by Universal Edition A.G. of Vienna, Austria, that will concern us here, as it represents Mahler's final thoughts on the subject. (I would like to thank the publishers of this edition, Universal Edition A.G. Wien, and in particular Ms. Gucki Hanisch, for permission to reproduce extracts from the timpani part.)

First, let us take a look at the background of the composition. It was composed in February and March of 1888, and in correspondence of that period, Mahler referred to the work as a "symphonic work" or as "a symphony." According to contemporary sources, the scoring for this first version was finished while Mahler was resident in Budapest. The first performance took place in that city, under the direction of the composer, where it was misunderstood by both critics and public alike. Four years later, the work was performed in Hamburg, for which performance Mahler revised the score substantially, and added the sub-title "Titan," which was a reference to a novel of the same name by the author Jean Paul. After another performance in Weimar in June 1894, Mahler called the work Symphony in D minor, and for a performance in Berlin that took place in 1896, deleted the "Blumine" movement, which only came to light again in 1967. As mentioned earlier, this four-movement version is the one most often played and the one (with further revisions made later in the composer's lifetime) with which we will concern ourselves.

Scored for a relatively large orchestra, including seven horns, two sets of timpani (finale only), percussion and one harp, the work has become one of the most popular and often-played of the Mahler symphonies. Its relatively short length of about 50-plus minutes, in addition to its wealth of tone and color, contribute to its popularity and to the frequency with which it appears on today's orchestral programs.

For the timpanist, this symphony offers many challenges, both musically and in terms of sound. The later Mahler symphonies increase in complexity, particularly numbers five, six and seven, but the first symphony has its own special challenge. Let us look at the timpani part movement by movement and see just how challenging it is, and at the same time, put forth some ideas as to its interpretation.

The part is played by one player for the first three movements. In the finale, a second timpanist is brought in with a rather substantial part of his own. A minimum of six drums is required, with player one using the three larger drums, and player two using the three smaller drums in order to reach the high G and F-sharp.

MOVEMENT I

The first movement, marked "Langsam schleppend," has one of the most atmospheric openings in the history of the symphony. Mahler's own sound world is immediately established with stylized bird-calls and military fanfares over a sustained A, scored for strings, and utilizing harmonics. The first entry of the timpani (together with the contrabasses), four bars after Rehearsal 3, marked Tempo I, Nicht Schleppend, contributes a feeling of foreboding to an already mystery-laden atmosphere. Note that Mahler has written the first half of the bar as 32nd notes, and only on the last half of the bar does he indicate a roll.



In executing this passage, I use a pair of general-purpose mallets, with slightly larger heads than normal, and play the first half of the bar slowly, as to emphasize the 32nd notes, speeding it up ever so slightly as I reach the second half of the bar so as to differentiate the roll from the previous 32nd notes. I also play the first half of the bar a bit closer to the center of the drumhead, in order to aid the articulation, drawing back to the normal playing spot in the second half of the bar.

The rest of the movement is fairly straightforward, with the composer giving ample tempo indications, leaving both conductor and player in no doubt as to his intentions. The open fifths five bars after Rehearsal 9 should be played with both brilliance of tone and energy, as much of the full orchestra is engaged in playing the theme of the exposition. General-purpose or perhaps medium-hard timpani mallets would be advisable here. Get those sticks off the head quickly, as this will not only add the required brilliance of tone, but also the required energy to the passage, as the fifths are repeated quite frequently. (One must take the timpani heads into account. If one is playing on drums equipped with plastic heads, medium-hard to hard mallets would be called for.)



One bar before Rehearsal 14 is played as a roll, as Mahler clearly indicates. At this point, I emphasize the *mezzo-forte* and make an immediate diminuendo, as the whole passage is, like much of the timpani part so far, nothing but tone-painting. In the cadential passage leading up to the climax in D major at Rehearsal 26, I play as *piano* as possible at first, making a crescendo only to a *poco forte* three bars before Rehearsal 26. I thus save everything for the bar before 26, putting particular emphasis on the 8th note at the end of the bar, and the first 8th-note of Rehearsal 26. These I play with two mallets simultaneously (not as a flam!), both to emphasize the cadential nature of the music at this point and to support the horns in their *fortissimo* statement of the second subject. I also prefer the "thicker" sound of two mallets striking the drums here, as I feel that

it is in keeping with the character of the music at this point.



The remainder of the movement is played with the same brilliance as before and with even more energy, if that is possible, as the music is rushing forward in a great burst of energy. The concluding section (from Rehearsal 33 to the end of the movement) is particularly interesting, as the composer indicates an accelerando at Rehearsal 33, and at the entry of the timpani four bars later on the second half of the bar, he writes “Schnell” and later “Schnell (bis zum Schluss).” This passage should be played as Mahler indicated, with as much forward motion as possible. The notes should be loud and as short (secco) as possible, with impact, and the player should take care to muffle *immediately* after the figure is played, as any “ringing over” would destroy the significance of the passage. This stricture applies to the entire passage, right up to the conclusion of the first movement.



MOVEMENT II

The second movement is fairly straightforward and offers relatively little challenge. However, the section between Rehearsal 9 and Rehearsal 11 is of interest, particularly when it concerns the manner of sticking.



Normally, one can play the passage at Rehearsal 9 hand to hand (R L R L R L R), which would be just fine, as long as the required dynamic (*fortissimo*) is observed and the rhythmic figure played with the proper energy and articulation. However, I have found the sticking R L R L R R L to be quite effective in imparting that necessary burst of energy needed to “drive” the passage along. The figure is repeated, albeit at decreased dynamic levels, four bars before Rehearsal 11. I would use the same sticking, as it also helps in articulation. I play this passage on my 28-inch drum, as the relatively tight skin makes the articulation that much easier, and sounds better than if it were played on a smaller drum with a looser head.

MOVEMENT III

We now come to the famous third movement, which was intended by Mahler to portray a huntsman's funeral procession, with the animals themselves acting both as members of the funeral party and pallbearers for the huntsman's coffin. A more colorful, ironic piece of music than this would be hard to imagine, with its combination of

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the minor-mode “Frere Jacques” (known in Europe as “Bruder Martin”), Klezmer wedding music and in the midst of this parody another of the “Wunderhorn” songs, all beautifully scored. The movement opens with a slow timpani ostinato on the notes D and A, which serves as a basso ostinato for the minor mode “Bruder Martin” theme, introduced by solo contrabass, and then taken up by solo bassoon and solo tuba, with the rest of the orchestra gradually taking part.



On paper, this looks very easy, but in practice, it is a rather tricky passage—not so much technically, but in terms of musicality and intonation. The player must take care that the drums are as clear-toned as possible and that the heads respond well. One must also take care to follow Mahler’s directions scrupulously. The composer has marked the opening to be muffled (Gedämpft). The question here is how muffled should this passage be? The danger is that one could use too heavy a muffler, thus killing the resonance to the point that all that is obtained is a dull thud, which is not what I feel Mahler had in mind. If one is careful to use a pair of mufflers that are small enough and are constructed of a material that is just the right weight to take out some of the overtones, then that would be a good

solution. A pair of the small chamois mufflers like those advocated by Mr. Cloyd Duff would do nicely. I myself do not use mufflers, but use both the sticks and the head to accomplish what the composer had in mind.

As to sticks, I have a pair of Feldman mallets with very large, soft ball-type heads, which I find ideal for the purpose. I then play the passage a bit further in on the drumhead, toward the center, obtaining a slightly “dumpy,” almost muffled sound. I take care to test this out in practicing before I go into rehearsals and performance so I know where on the head to play in order to achieve the desired result. Our chief conductor, Mariss Jansons, was satisfied with this solution.

I have played the work using drums equipped with both calf and plastic, and have come to the conclusion that calfskin works better, being more “earthy” in timbre and less resonant than plastic. Note that at bar 29 Mahler directs that the mufflers be removed, as by now much of the orchestra has entered, and with the entry of the E-flat clarinet, more resonance is required.



The mufflers remain off until four bars before Rehearsal 13, where the low G is muffled; they should also be replaced on the two middle drums during the 19 bars rest between Rehearsal 10 and Rehearsal 12.

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At Rehearsal 13, the drums have been tuned up a half-step to E-flat and B-flat, and here the composer is very careful to stress that the dynamic is “*sempre ppp*,” always *pianississimo*.



There is one small detail concerning the passage between Rehearsal 16 and 17 that the player should be aware of, so watch the conductor attentively. Mahler calls for a sudden increase in tempo on the second bar after Rehearsal 16. This is rather brief, lasting at most five bars, with a *poco ritard* just one bar before the return to Tempo I at Rehearsal 17. The drums are tuned to C and F, and the dampeners are removed. The sound here is quite different from what Mahler has called for up until now, especially with the quicker tempo. I recommend using a pair of hard-felt mallets, both to bring more articulation to the passage (it lasts all of one measure) and to brighten up the sound.



The player must be careful to return to heavier, rounder, soft

mallets, and to do so quickly, as the music at Rehearsal 17 returns to the same sound world as at the beginning of the movement. At this point, Mahler does not call for muffers. However, I recommend playing that passage in somewhat the same fashion as at the opening, especially bearing in mind that it is the same sound picture. The only difference is that the tone should be a little more “open.”

I play this passage in the normal beating spot (as opposed to a bit further in toward the center in the opening bars) but with the same mallets as I used at the opening. In this manner, I obtain the best of both worlds, namely roundness of tone, albeit with more ring to it than at the opening. Pay scrupulous attention to the dynamics, and be very careful to change mallets and make your tuning change for



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We now turn our attention to the finale, marked "Sturmisch bewegt." The movement begins with a clash of cymbals on the first half of the opening bar, with the timpani coming in like a ton of bricks on the second half of the bar. Mahler suggested that this opening passage be played as if it were "the cry of a deeply wounded heart," so give it all you have, but then pull back, as there are now two players involved, and both must be careful not to overplay in the movement. I recommend general-purpose mallets here, as there is much rolling, especially in the first part of the movement. However, the mallets should be capable of articulation as well, especially when the two

Timpani I

Timpani II

players "trade off" later in the movement. It is important that the two players be very careful, as it is easy to become over enthusiastic and overplay the passage between Rehearsals 4 and 6.

Make clean entries and forceful ones, but come down just enough

so as to allow the orchestral detail to come through. The parts are very straightforward. Be careful to observe the dynamics carefully, and to give as much brilliance of tone as possible, especially when you come to *forte-piano* passages and single notes. The orchestration is fairly heavy, and it is important that the orchestral detail always be heard.

For the first player, the passage between Rehearsal 18 until just before Rehearsal 22 is an exercise in rolling, especially in the softer dynamics. The passage is all accompaniment, but the player must be careful to choose the right mallets and drums in order to achieve the desired effect. I use a pair of Duff-American number 7 mallets with

large round heads, and they have proven most satisfactory. The weight of the mallets are, to my mind, just right, and they are voiced with this type of passage in mind.

Be careful with the crescendo three bars before Rehearsal 19, as it is tempting to make a real "schmaltzy" *fortissimo* at this point. There is nothing wrong with schmaltz, especially in this movement,



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and it is important to weigh in heavily at this point, but be careful to go *with* the orchestra, not *over* it. The conductor is usually helpful here in determining the correct balance. What works for me is speeding up the roll just a bit as I make the crescendo, and as I change over to the D-flat, go back to my original dynamic and speed of roll in relation to the drum I am playing. Mahler does not give the

Timpani I



Timpani II



player much time to change mallets for Rehearsal 22, but I wouldn't worry too much. The part is doubled with player two, who has the upper octave, and that octave comes out easier than the lower one.

If the conductor wishes for a change of mallets at that spot (one would change to general-purpose mallets here), I would fade out a bit earlier and discreetly make the shift. If not, I would play with the mallets I used previously, giving as much energy and brilliance of tone as possible, making the change of mallets during the ten measures of rest that follow the four *fortissimo* strokes. As I noted above, the second player is doubling the passage one octave higher, so there is no real problem here. What is interesting is the way Mahler uses



the timpani at Rehearsal 23. The timpani are assigned a low F for three bars, and on the fourth bar of Rehearsal 23, the note suddenly descends by a half-step to F flat.

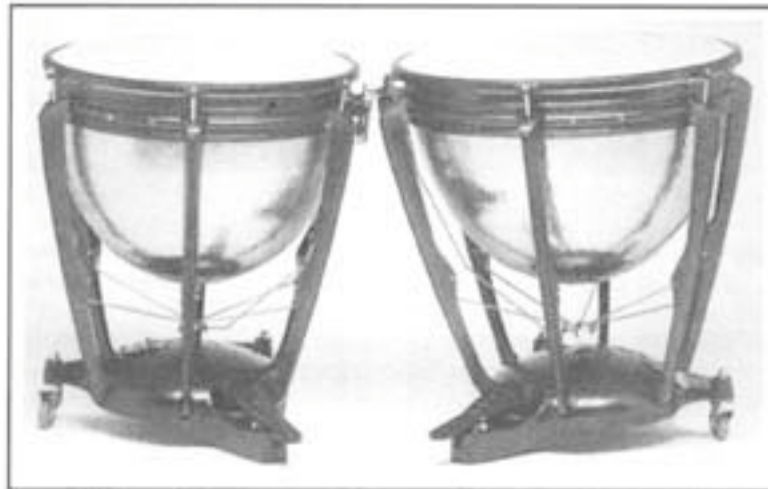
This passage presents the player with a problem. Shall he or she pedal it, thereby risking even the slightest of unintentional downward glissandi, or let the second player play the F flat? Note the directions above the passage, in which Mahler instructs the second player to effect the tuning, while the first player continues to roll. This dates from a period in which lever-operated machine timpani were the rule, pedal drums not having come into full usage at the time. The effect would be somewhat the same, unless a rapid downward turn on the tuning lever were to be effected.

I pedal it, using a rapid downward pedal movement to the desired note. I make sure that the motion is rapid enough to disguise any glissando effect. One other solution would be to have an extra drum



tuned to F-flat, or to have the second player take over the F-flat. The choice is up to you. The second player has a nice soloistic passage,

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albeit a quiet one, seven bars after Rehearsal 26.

I would use mallets with as much brilliance of tone as possible, in order for the notes to come out clearly and distinctly, despite the *piano* dynamic. I mentioned earlier that the second player uses the upper three drums, in order to obtain the upper G and F-sharp. This would mean that he or she would be performing this passage on the 26- and 29-inch drums, which (if the drums are in good shape tonally, the correct mallets are used and the player is aware of the composer's intentions at this point) would be ideal. Remember, this little passage should have the feeling of distance about it, hence the *piano* dynamic. Today, most players, and I include myself among this number, prefer a bigger, rounder, and warmer tone from our drums, so we use our larger drums for notes such as C and G whenever we can. Here is an exception: The smaller drums would be a bit shallower in sound, but that is just what is wanted here, as the larger drums would tend to make this small soloistic passage a bit too heavy. Again, the choice is up to you.

I could go on for pages and pick apart the entire movement, but I will confine myself to some general comments concerning the rest of the movement. The parts for both players are straightforward, and require a good deal of sensitivity. By this, I mean sensitivity to each other as well as to the music. It is very easy to get carried away and try to outdo each other. The music would almost seem to encourage this; however, if both players are sensitive enough to realize that at times "less is more," then a good result, as well as a moving performance, will most likely be obtained.

A case in point would be the section from Rehearsal 43 to 45. Here both players are required to trade off and to match each other's

sound, if possible. I would recommend that both players use the 28-

Timpani I

Timpani II

or 29-inch drum for the C, as the music here requires a full round tone. Be careful with your crescendi and diminuendi, and pay scrupulous attention to the dynamics.

I cannot reiterate enough the necessity for both players to be musically aware of what is going on in this movement, and this is particularly true in relation to the coda. From rehearsal number 52 on to the end, the orchestration is on the heavy side, with dynamics of *forte* and above being the general rule. Both players should play

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the passage at rehearsal number 52 with great weight, giving greater emphasis to the quarter note, but at the same time not stinting on the grace note, either. I play this fairly open, almost as a flam, and with a rather thick sound. This is another instance in which Mahler requires this type of sound.

The second, third and fourth bars (these relate now to the first player) are played *pianissimo* with a molto crescendo from the third to the fifth bar, where the dynamic is *forte*. Here, the player must be careful to articulate the rhythmic figure on bars five and six carefully, while at the same time watching the conductor, who will indicate just how much of a *poco ritenuto* there will be on bar six. This is musically vital, as these bars act as sort of a brake, collecting the entire orchestra, just before the brass section begins with their big "Pesante" one bar before Rehearsal 53. The first timpanist is again in an accompanying role at Rehearsal 53, and remains such until Rehearsal 54. Three bars before Rehearsal 54, he or she plays a roll marked *piano*, with a gradual crescendo until Rehearsal 54, where he or she again takes the leading role. Going back to three bars before Rehearsal 54, the second player takes the bit between the teeth, so to speak, by playing a single quarter-note *fortissimo* and a series of repeated 8th notes two bars before Rehearsal 54. Mahler has indicated that these notes be played with great brilliance of tone, and care should be taken that they be heard, as these bars set the stage for the first player taking the lead at number 54. Like a similar passage heard earlier (namely the fourth bar after Rehearsal 34), this should be played with great energy and brilliance, with a feeling of triumph. This sets the stage for the great blaze of glory from Rehearsal 56 on, which Mahler has marked "Triumphal."

From Rehearsal 57 to the end, care should be taken on the part of both players to match their respective sounds. The great "trade-off," which begins one bar before Rehearsal 59 and continues until the last five bars, when both players contribute their "all" to the great torrent of sound, should be done carefully. The ends of each roll should be slightly accented, so that where one player's roll ends and the other begins can be heard cleanly and effectively. This is important, as it is all too easy to get carried away and overplay this section. If this is overplayed, then it would sound unclear and act as an anti-climax, rather than an exciting conclusion to a fine symphony. Play with enthusiasm, by all means, but always keep the overall sound picture in your mind. Save your all for the last five bars! Then you can let go!

One last item, and this concerns the very last notes of the piece. The timpani parts end on a D, on the first quarter of the bar, whereas the rest of the orchestra plays another D an octave lower on the second quarter. The timpani are silent here. Many conductors, beginning with Leonard Bernstein, have added the low-octave D to match what the orchestra does at that point. As a matter of fact, that seems to be the general rule nowadays, so if the conductor asks for it, why not deliver it? It makes musical sense, and with all of the

instruments available today, there is no question of a problem in obtaining the low D. In most cases, both players play the low D, so both players should in this case have four drums each, in order to best play the note. I now quote the previously mentioned passages:

Timpani I

52 Wieder vorwärts drängend
53 Vorwärts
54
55
56 Triumphal
57
58
59
60 Von hier an nicht mehr breit
61 Drängend bis zum Schluß

Timpani II

52 Wieder vorwärts
53
54
55
56 Triumphal
57
58
59
60 Von hier an nicht me
61 Drängend bis zum Schluß

In conclusion, let me restate what I said at the outset of this article: The more exposure I have had to this piece, the more I have learned from it, which is true of any piece of great music and is one of the things that makes that particular piece of music great. It is my hope that this article will give those who read it a better idea of what it is to play this symphony (especially those who come to it for the first time), and food for thought for those who have had the good fortune to play the symphony before. Either way, I can guarantee that you will find it an intensely enriching, rewarding experience.

Editor's Note: The musical examples for this analysis were extracted from the Universal edition; the Kalmus edition is different in some ways and deserves perusal by interested readers. For a translation of the terms used in the timpani and percussion parts of this symphony see Percussive Notes, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1980.—Michael Rosen PN

Andrew Simco is an American-born timpanist who plays with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra in Norway.

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