

# Refining Your Snare Drum Playing for Orchestra Auditions

By W. Lee Vinson

**S**nares drumming is important at orchestral percussion auditions for many reasons. First, the technique required is generally considered to be more difficult to master than any of the other orchestral percussion instruments. Second, the depth of orchestral literature that calls for snare drum is extensive in scope and is musically and technically demanding of the performer. Third, the snare drummer will be responsible for dictating the time within an orchestra more often than the other percussionists. And finally, snare drumming gives the audition committee the opportunity to hear an audition candidate execute rhythmic and technical expertise in its purest form.

In this article I hope to bring to light some of the elements that audition committees tend to listen for in an audition candidate's snare drumming.

**Execution:** This is a matter of playing exactly what you see on the page. Every note needs to be played cleanly and correctly under pressure. Record your practice sessions and play for others to catch the things you might be missing.

**Rhythm:** Interpreting rhythms correctly is crucial. Be sure that rhythmic figures are never exaggerated to the point where they can be perceived as being inaccurate or incorrect. Critical listening as well as practicing with a metronome on subdivisions will help to shore up any rhythmic inaccuracies.

**Time:** Playing with good time means maintaining a consistent and appropriate tempo throughout a passage. There are lots of obstacles to good timekeeping in the music such as rests, dynamic changes, complex rhythms, and technical issues. The challenge is always to maintain perfect time despite all of these things. The metronome is your best friend when trying to ensure good time. Practice with a metronome on every other beat, or only once every measure, or once every two measures to see how accurate

you really are. Record an excerpt and then play it back against a metronome to find out what your tendencies are.

**Tempo:** Know the piece, know the part, and know the standard interpretation in performance and for an audition. (These are not always the same!) Study recordings and play for other experienced orchestral percussionists to get a good idea of what the acceptable tempos are for each excerpt. Then, assuming your tempos are acceptable to begin with, try taking about two clicks off of your normal audition tempos. This will combat the nervous tendency to play everything too fast in an audition, thereby giving the impression that you are more mature as a performer and more experienced at taking auditions.

**Interpretation:** There is rarely, if ever, a sin-

for someone who fits in with their ensemble's collective sense of phrasing and musicianship. Knowing what they are used to hearing and tapering your sound towards that ideal is something to consider. Don't take this too far, though, or you will be out of your comfort zone and giving the committee a false impression of who you are as a player.

**Your roll:** Control is the most important thing about a good snare drum roll. Roll quality can be subjective, but consistency cannot. Exactly how open or closed the roll is can be open for interpretation, but an uneven roll sounds wrong all of the time. Practice your rolls by practicing your rolls!

**Dynamics:** A good rule of thumb is to, again, play exactly what is printed on the page. Be sure to make enough contrast between dynamic

levels. Showing off your dynamic range at the right moments can make you stand out from the rest. Pay careful attention to the excerpts asked in each audition round and decide when to go for the extremes and when to hold back.

**Your drum:** I would like to believe that audition candidates do not get eliminated based on the sound

of their drums, but it is something that committees consider. Don't over think this. Go with what makes you sound good and what makes you comfortable. Instruments will always respond differently in every hall, but a good quality, well-tuned drum should be acceptable in any audition situation. Everyone is always looking for the perfect snare drum, but go with what you have.

**Your style:** This is difficult to put a finger on and is tied closely to interpretation. What it all comes down to is whether or not you sound like the player that they will want to work with for the next 30 years. What counts in the end is their overall impression of you as a musician. That's what auditions are for. They are looking for the right person for the job. Maybe it's you,

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gle correct interpretation of anything. Playing for friends and teachers is important for this reason, too. Know the middle-of-the-road interpretation and stick to it. Audition candidates are expected to play "inside of the box"—especially in the early rounds of an audition. Exaggerated interpretations and eccentric tempos or dynamics can make you stand out for all of the wrong reasons if your execution is not pristine.

Let your natural musicianship shine through, but keep it simple until the later rounds. Save your grand musical gestures for the final round and focus on solid execution until you get there.

A good audition committee realizes that the best player is not necessarily the one who interprets everything exactly as they would like to hear it. A committee is, however, looking

and maybe it's not. The only way to find out is to take your best shot. So practice hard, play well, and let the rest take care of itself. Good luck!

**W. Lee Vinson** was named section percussionist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in March of 2007. He holds a bachelor's degree from the Eastman School of Music and has done graduate study at Boston University. While at Eastman he performed with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and from 2000 to 2004 served as a member of the United States Navy Band in Washington, D.C. As a student, he attended summer music festivals at Interlochen, Tanglewood, and the Brevard Music Center. His teachers have included John H. Beck and Tim Genis. PN

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