

Timpani for the Asking

by Bryan Gerlach

Do you know what timpani are? They are large, tuned, orchestral drums, also called kettledrums. These tuned drums are part of a standard orchestra. Composers often include their festive sound in arrangements of hymns. On the second hymn this morning, timpani or kettledrums accompany our singing. They make a wonderful noise and sound great with organ and/or brass. They can add an especially festive dimension to singing hymns. They are also extremely expensive and take up a good bit of room. Not the most practical purchase for the average church! So why not borrow them for special occasions?

Our timpani experience started with a notice in the church newsletter last August. In my annual late-summer notice for choir recruitment, I included a request for timpani players. Bill called while sick at home reading the newsletter. He had majored in classical guitar in college, but I didn't know he also had played timpani. He was excited to imagine their contribution to our worship. "So," he wondered, "when did you get timpani?" I had to admit I hadn't—yet. No problem. Bill knew two local band directors. After he made a couple of phone calls, we were set to borrow timpani for some dates in the fall choir season.

When we dedicated *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, we used the drums with an arrangement of "When in Our Music God Is Glorified." You can hear that arrangement on the recording that accompanied the release of *Christian Worship*. For Reformation, we used the drums again in a festive choral setting of the "Te Deum" and, of course, with "A Mighty Fortress." But perhaps the most moving use of our borrowed timpani came with some of the traditional hymns at Christmas.

How do you say thank you for the loan of timpani? With approval from our board of elders, I said so with a check for one hundred dollars. Music programs in California's public schools have had budgets gutted. So the high school band director was surprised and thrilled at the one-hundred-dollar thank you. He had graciously loaned the timpani with no "rent" expected.

Sometimes the simplest ideas are the most effective. A timpani part for "Once in Royal David's City" used only two drums struck thirty-two times. Any competent high school percussionist could handle the part. So this isn't an idea just for large congregations with lots of skilled musicians. One of our players this last Christmas hadn't played for twelve years, but he hadn't lost his touch.

Where do you find music for timpani? Some concertato settings include timpani, or write your own. Timpani parts for use with hymns typically use two and three drums. That means you should limit yourself to two or three notes. Study how the timpani part works in some published concertatos, then have at it. Ask your resident percussionist to write the part or to evaluate your writing.

Does this timpani idea intrigue you? You might be able to include timpani on some hymns in the coming Church year. As a courtesy to those who would be surprised by an unexpected addition to their worship, consider a notice in the worship folder.

If Christmas isn't too close as you read this and if you have a school or choir, arrange for some children or a few sopranos to learn the descant for "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" or "Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful." Add a simple timpani part. I guarantee that some worshipers will consider it the musical high point of their Christmas worship.

Pastor Gerlach serves as Director for the WELS Commission on Worship. This article is from the Spring 1994 issue of "Parish Leadership," later called "Lutheran Leader" which ceased publication in 2006.