

How to Wreck Your Instruments (and the Music)

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Composers have a bad habit of trying to wreck our instruments by telling us to use the wrong sort of gear. Elgar, for examples, asks for a forte stroke with an iron bar on a cymbal – well, not on my cymbal, mate. I'll hit his cymbal as hard as he likes with whatever he likes, but not on mine. That's not quite true of course – we do all keep the odd crap cymbal to cope with this sort of thing, just as violinists keep a crap bow for *Il Signor Bruschino* and other works when they have to tap the strings with the stick and ruin the varnish on their bows. And we do know how to use a wooden stick on a cymbal without cracking it when we have to do so, but again we quite often don't do it on one of our better cymbals. But then, of course, the sound will suffer because we're using duff kit and not the good instruments.

And we don't use side drum sticks on our timpani, either. We know that the small bead of a side drum stick will scar a timp head and so we ignore what the composer said and then we'll use a proper timpani wood stick with a ball or disc head.

Equally we use bass drum rollers when composers ask for timpani sticks on a bass drum and again we use cymbal rollers rather than timp sticks on a cymbal because we know, even if the composer doesn't, which shape of stick produces the best tone.

But trouble does come when the composer is there standing over us, and we have to talk them out of it. Most of them are reasonable and realise that we're doing our best to help them without damaging our kit. We all know the legends of using half crowns on the timpani in the *Enigma Variations*. Half crowns have pretty well vanished today, but I've still got some old pennies from pre-decimal

days and they work equally well – just don't use the side drum sticks and if you've not got suitable coins, use the butt ends of the timp sticks – they might be safer, depending of course on the design of the sticks.

There are some composers (and some conductors) who have been percussionists and who do actually know that they want a special effect, and then we do our best to comply, but they are very rare birds.

Pianos suffer from wreckage, too. Some (and other keyboards such as harpsichords and clavichords) suffer from the heavier-handed players, with broken strings, keyboards knocked sideways, and actions damaged. Others suffer from players who don't like the sound and who try to fluff up the dampers with pins or try to mess up the hammer felts. The worst of all damage comes from composers who climb all over them and stick things into the hammers or the dampers, or weave chains and such things into the strings to produce 'prepared pianos'. If it's your own piano, fair enough, you can do what you like to it, but to 'prepare a piano' in a concert hall and then walk away after the performance, leaving the owners and the tuner to undo all that you've done to it would amount to criminal damage – even if they try to undo the work themselves, it still leaves the piano seriously harmed.

And then there are the composers who ask either the player or often also us, the percussion players, to bash the poor thing with drum sticks and other objects, as if the ordinary sound of the piano isn't often bad enough.

Here some makers are to blame. String tension has risen so high that the overtones of the strings have become inharmonic, approaching those of bars, with the result that the upper notes in particular sound like xylophone bars. New York Steinways are particularly agonizing to the ear in this respect – the tone of the upper notes is strident rather than musical, and, with a chord held into a pause, one can hear the overtones clashing against each other into a dissonance as the sounds fade away. Steinways are the fashionable piano, but how players can bear the sound I have no idea. Of course, unlike early musicians who have to tune their own harpsichords and fortepianos, most pianists have cloth ears for tuning and, nowadays, more and more for tone quality as well.

Then of course there are the composers who think we're an octopus. There's a short passage in *The Rite of Spring* where there are five timpani notes going at once for the two timpanists; usually the bass drummer reaches over and lends a hand. I remember once at a Prom being asked to play claves and maracas, not simultaneously but in quick succession. Maracas while holding claves are easy, but claves while holding maracas are damn near impossible without letting the maracas sound.

And what about sleigh-bells? Holst, who usually knew what he was doing, asks us to play a 7/8 rhythm in *The Perfect Fool* on the sleigh bells, da-da-dadada allegro. The only way that I found to do it was to hold the bells in one hand and then tap the rhythm on that hand with the other hand, while avoiding any sound of the hands clapping together. Result was OK on the night but bruises on the back of the hand next morning.

Timpanists nowadays are finding composers writing diatonically for them. Yes, we do have pedal timpani and therefore we can change pitch all the time, but unless there is time to damp the sound of one note with the hand, a change of pitch between two consecutive notes can produce an unwanted glissando. And we only have two feet and the pedals for four drums are further apart than the pedal board of an organ. And unless we have time to check a pitch, it can be a matter of guesswork whether the pedal has taken us to the right pitch for the next note. Yes, we have gauges but we only have two eyes, and one eye on the music and one on the conductor (we do look at them from time to time), which leaves us short of an eye for the gauge, and even then gauges are never as precise as the makers like to think they are. So some modern writings work and others don't. One that does work is Britten's *Nocturne*, where you never have to change a pitch by guesswork in a silence.

It's not just percussionists that suffer. I've seen music with low B in a viola part, but I hoped that that was just carelessness by the composer rather than ignorance. Composers do get confused over things and they do have a bad habit of just writing notes and hoping that players will find a way to play them. Colleagues are always complaining that they can't work out how to produce the notes that some people write. I remember once in a string piece the second fiddles were

on top-line F \flat and firsts an octave higher. It sounded horrible in rehearsal, but we discovered that the seconds had played an open E string while the firsts had fingered F \flat . My leader solved it by telling the firsts to play an open E harmonic and to hell with the F \flat s. The composer didn't notice the change. Nor did another composer notice when, as we came off the platform after a piece for two trumpets and percussion, one trumpeter said to the other "That was a C part wasn't it?" and his mate said "No, I was playing it on the B \flat ".

Worse are the managers of opera and ballet companies. They'll have timps and three or four percussion in the pit at home and then send out a touring company with just a timpanist or timps and one percussion and expect all the same music to be played. They do the same with the horns, too, sending out two instead of four, and of course they cut the number of string players, and then the audience wonders why the music sounds thin. Festival Ballet used to tour timps and one and whenever I had to put in a bit of percussion as well as timps, when my colleague was otherwise fully employed, I got doubling money, so more or less fair enough, but with the Royal Ballet I was on my own. When we got back to the Garden I asked for doubling for all I'd tried to do – 'What's that?' they said, so I refused to go out with them again. 'Doubling' is negotiated by the Musicians' Union to ensure that managements don't economise by expecting a player to play two people's music too much, but instead the management is supposed to pay a 50% extra fee when one has to do it. The Covent Garden management refused to.

'Overdubbing' is much the same; this does happen in recordings, especially in film studios, when a sound is felt to be inadequate and players are asked to repeat something, overlaying what they had just played. Of course they should have booked extra players, but these things do happen on the fly, and when they do so, one can't whistle up players from miles away on the instant, so sometimes we do overdub and we then get paid extra.

Sometimes the instruments are to blame. A lot of Italian trombonists used the valve trombone, especially in opera pits, where space is always a problem, and using the valve trombone avoided allowing space to stick the slide out. Other players in other countries, using slide trombones, found that some Italian composers had

written their music for valve trombones with the result that there just wasn't time to go from first to sixth position with the slide, in music that assumed one just put a valve down. And both Wagner and Bruckner never made their minds up whether the B \flat Wagner tubas were higher or lower than the F tubas.

But it's not often that the instruments are to blame – far more often it's that they, and the music, that have to suffer.

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