

THE JOY OF PLAYING

Discovering Musicianship with Timpanist and Teacher Don Liuzzi

BY LAURA C. KELLEY

Was it fate knocking on the door? The famous four-note motif of Beethoven's Fifth may not have been destiny calling Don Liuzzi, a seventh-grader with warped mallets playing timpani for the first time with a community orchestra, but it certainly captured his attention. And it hasn't let go, not even after 30-plus years and 40-plus performances of the fifth symphony.

"Beethoven wrote in a revolutionary manner for the instrument. It is actually still some of the hardest music on timpani to play," said Mr. Liuzzi, who has been principal timpani of the Philadelphia Orchestra since 1989 and joined the Curtis faculty in 1994. He describes Beethoven's parts as motivic and active, keeping the timpanist rhythmically involved and busy, whether leading the sound or providing an inner voice. More so than earlier composers, Beethoven used the timpani as a motivic and rhythmic engine for the orchestra. He was also the first composer to write in octaves for the timpani and to require retuning.

That this active, driving music is a favorite of Mr. Liuzzi is not surprising. For him music-making is about connecting to other parts and people ("this mingling of everyone's little spider webs of ear chops"), being emotionally involved (sometimes a challenge, but a hallmark of a true professional, he says), breaking new ground (he plays with the New Music Network and on the Kimmel Center's *Fresh Ink* series, and he requires his students to learn drum set and Latin percussion and encourages jazz improvisation on vibraphone) and being part of the movement of a piece ("like a train that's going down the track").

"Playing any chamber music or in any ensemble, you're learning how to sense how time moves in a piece," he said. "Before you jump on that train, you have to run along with it. You have to mentally be with it, feel its pace and jump on. And that's not easy. That's a lot of what I think my teaching is here, how to be able to jump on. And, you know, it's a process. It takes some years. And I'm still learning."

HOMework FOR TIMPANISTS

One way Mr. Liuzzi teaches is through a five-part analysis of late Mozart symphonies and works by Beethoven and Brahms. In their first two years, his students examine timpani parts and full scores to gather specific information related to performance.

They begin with orchestration. "Whom are you supporting, or are you a solo?" Mr. Liuzzi asks. He expects his students to provide orchestration details for every note they play: "whether they should be prominent or a secondary voice, or a color within the sound, or whom they should be blending with, or when they should be leading with the sound."

Next is articulation, which translates to stroke speed. "Composers back then really didn't have a sense of the different articulations that timpani could make," he said. "You can do different kinds of stroke speeds to create different sounds that *imitate* the articulations of brass, wind and string players."

Third is note value, usually not indicated by Mozart or Beethoven. "How long should I let my sound go? Timpani ring. They should be allowed to ring, especially if you're playing with instruments that are sounding with a longer note value," he said. They also should be muffled when everyone else's notes end. In the acoustically dry Academy of Music, Mr. Liuzzi used a tapered muffling to create resonance. In the livelier Verizon Hall, he has switched sticks and muffles more often.

The analysis continues with harmony, important for balance and tension. "What note am I in the chord? Am I the root, the third, the fifth or the seventh? Each position in the chord tells you how to play. Often when you're the root of the chord, you're playing strongly but you're settled. You're at home. When you're a fifth, that's an instability — the tension of where are we going? If you're the third, you play inside the chord, a little under the dynamic that's written. If you're the seventh, you *lean into it*," he said with a slight snarl, "because that's great. You're playing against the root."

The last element for studying a part is subjective: "Is there a *word* that can help



Don Liuzzi - PHOTOS: JEAN BRUBAKER

describe what this sound should be?" Perhaps it's "cool," "warm" or "noble." Mr. Liuzzi said, "Timpani can be all different kinds of sounds, like every instrument can be malleable.

You're trying to make your sound sing with different human qualities." He considers the sound quality to be an essential part of being an alert, thoughtful member of an ensemble, not someone in the back of the group merely hitting an instrument.

VERSATILE EARS

If Mr. Liuzzi's method for studying and playing timpani emphasizes what *other* musicians are doing in an orchestra, it may be because he has played various instruments himself. As a kid, he wanted to be a rock 'n' roll drummer and proceeded from banging on pots, pans and cardboard boxes to studying drums at age seven. He studied new instruments from fifth grade into high school, taking up violin, piano, marimba, horn, double bass and voice. He played in rock bands, pit orchestras, jazz bands, wind ensembles and youth orchestras, and he sang in choir. Almost nightly his family would gather around the piano and sing show tunes or hymns, or play along on their instruments. At that watershed Beethoven Fifth performance with the community orchestra near their home outside Boston, his older sister played clarinet and his older brother, trombone.

Playing so many instruments and styles of music increased Mr. Liuzzi's versatility and

sharpened his ears. Versatility is important for percussionists, who have to be skillful on mallets, drums, and what Mr. Liuzzi calls “the small toys” (triangle, tambourine, cymbals and the like). He encourages teens to study more than one instrument, telling them, “It’s such a good thing for your ear to be actively having to adjust to other people.”

He also believes it is important for percussionists to have vocal experience, since they are supporting phrases. “You don’t play them like you would be playing a melody,” he said, “but you support the contour of a melody that you’re accompanying.”

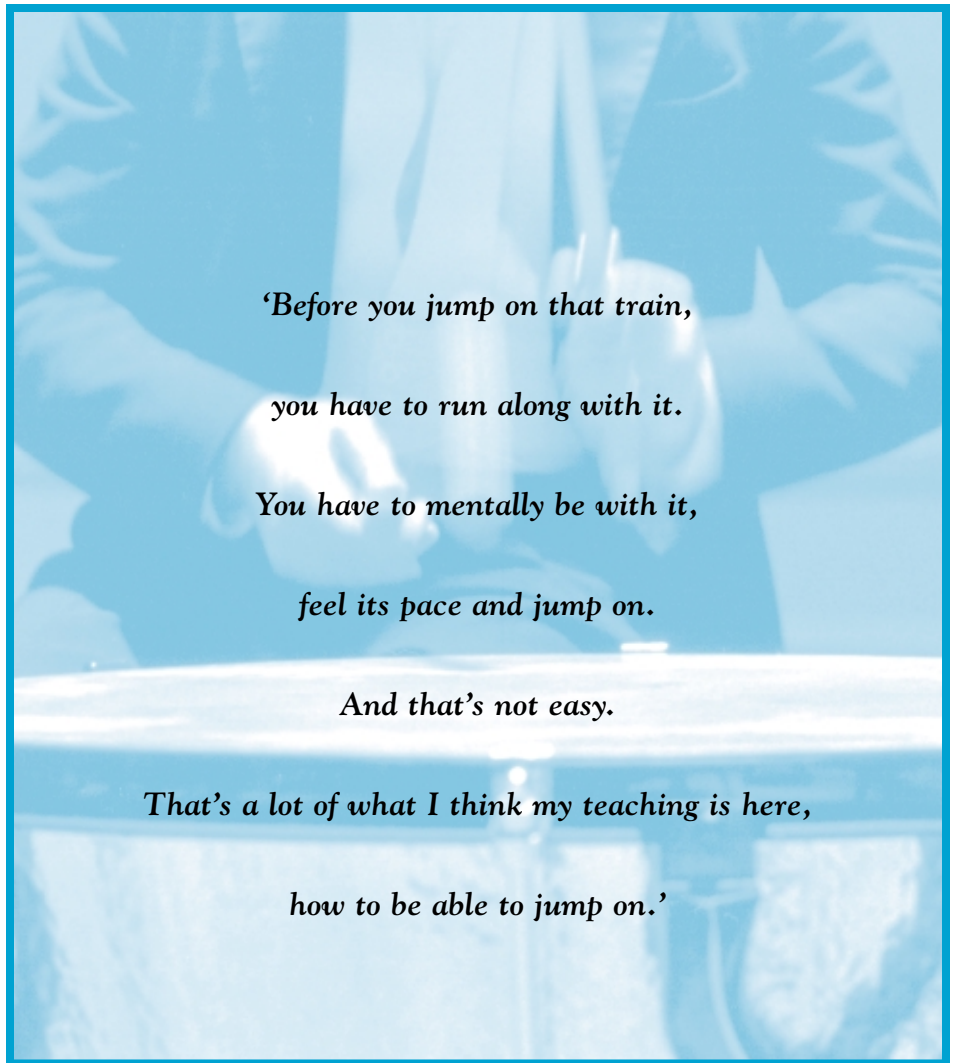
Mr. Liuzzi’s awareness of how his musical part fits with others’ began in a summer wind ensemble he played with during high school. Conductor Frank Battisti, from the New England Conservatory, told the kids, “Your ears have to be *huge!*” Shaping ears as large as an elephant’s on either side of his head, Mr. Liuzzi recalled that advice with delight: “I really got into that.”

During the same program, he realized that every member of the ensemble had a responsibility and that every sound he made had meaning. “When you learn that responsibility to every moment, your whole life goes onto another level,” he said.

EXPLORATIONS

As a member of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Mr. Liuzzi has been helping to develop curriculum for middle school students and to create a documentary on the lives of orchestra musicians. While visiting an eighth-grade New York City classroom where the students were exploring Beethoven’s Fifth using a literary-based approach, he remembered what an age of discovery 13 is (the same age as his twin daughters). He sees it as an untapped time to erase the notion that some people are serious about classical music and others are only interested in pop music; music is for everyone.

Some of the mystique of music-making could be dispelled with the orchestra’s documentary, *Music from the Inside Out*, which should air nationwide next fall on



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PBS. It explores how musicians are playing, technically and musically, and asks *why* they are playing, too. Motive, Mr. Liuzzi said, should be examined more often. “Motive is everything. If your motive is really developed and pure and focused, anything is possible.”

So what’s his “why”? The answer lies in purely joyful moments of music — “what makes you sing a tune or a special mood that gives you a tingle up your back.” They are created in an absence of qualities such as hatred, jealousy, revenge, anger, dissatisfaction and boredom, and instead require a fairly uncluttered, pure mind, he said. “When you’re not entertaining those emotions or states, then you have the ability to be a window for what the music is doing.”

Making those moments constant, he said, is human progress. “That’s when you’re living musically. And that’s for everybody. That’s not just for musicians. That’s my motive: to keep finding those musical moments that are pure and that give real joy.” Much like Beethoven did for that seventh-grader. ☺