

The Use of Dynamics on Snare Drum

By William J. James

Rhythm and dynamics are the most important tools we have to be expressive on snare drum. In my lab at PASIC, and in this article, I will discuss the importance of using dynamics in multiple environments.

We are very lucky to play an instrument that has a dynamic range greater than any other. However, we are also cursed by this fact, as is often demonstrated by our non-percussionist friends when they run in the opposite direction when asked to listen to us play snare drum. Our loud dynamic is incredibly effective when we need to be powerful, but how often do we really need to use such an extremely loud dynamic? On the flip side, all of us have received the comment, “Your dynamic range needs to be bigger.” But what does that really mean?

My goal with the snare drum lab at PASIC is to discuss the dynamic range of the snare drum in the following performance settings: ensemble, solo, and audition. These environments are very different from one another, and those differences need to be taken into account when preparing for each setting.

ENSEMBLE PLAYING

When playing with a group, one would think that a large amount of the decision-making related to dynamics is out of our control. If a conductor asks you to play something a certain way, you do it. Conductors are in charge, and you have to give them what they want. In a chamber setting, there are times when you must compromise with others to create a shared concept. But outside of those scenarios, we have a great deal of dynamic freedom in our playing.

Dynamics are a tool of orchestration and expression. The printed dynamics give us the framework. Our own interpretation and personality direct us towards a more expressive performance. We can ride on top of everyone else, leading the charge, or we can fit into the texture and blend in with those around us. Sometimes it can be fun to play barely audible to see if the audience notices you are even there. The roll in “Capriccio Espagnol” is a famous example of this. It is a great opportunity to play incredibly soft during the violin solo. If the dynamic is soft enough when the violin is playing, the snare drum really isn’t audible. But as soon as the violin pauses or takes a breath

in the phrase, the snare drum is heard as if it is way off in the distance. This powerful idea can be used throughout the repertoire.

The fourth movement of Prokofiev’s “Fifth Symphony” provides great examples of when you can use your own personality in the dynamics to create a more exciting performance. The section starting at rehearsal 111 is a driving rhythmic section with a powerful melody from the brass and timpani. There is a driving eighth-note pulse throughout with sixteenth



notes, added almost as grace notes. The accents are mostly on beats 1 and 3, but occasionally additional accents are added to help drive the orchestra. I choose this section to blend into the orchestra with only the accents sitting on top of the overall dynamic. Sure it is loud, but being loud is relative. Chris Deviney used to tell me to “pick your spots” when choosing to be aggressive. Here, I save it until we arrive at 112, where the printed dynamic goes from *f* to *ff* and the rhythm is straight eighth notes. This is where I really want to take over and lead the group. The entire ensemble is essentially a rhythmic entity. There are no melodic lines playing with the snare drum. All of the melodic material happens in the snare drum rests. The

intense rhythmic focus is why I see this as a perfect opportunity for the snare drum to lead the charge. On the page, the written increase in dynamic may seem slight, especially since there are no accents. However, I choose to make this a big change and show off the snare drum’s ability to be a rhythmic leader.

SOLO PLAYING

In my opinion, it is very hard to pull off a snare drum solo. We are disadvantaged since we have no melodic means; all we have are rhythm and dynamics. There are multiple styles of snare drum solos rhythmically, but they all have a dynamic element that is crucial to “pulling it off.”

When I was preparing for my college auditions, I was trying to play my prepared repertoire for as many people as I could. Gerhardt Zimmerman was the conductor of the North Carolina Symphony at the time and was a family friend. I worked up the courage to ask him to listen to me play, and to my shock, he said yes. I had prepared Delecluse 9 because I had heard that was a standard audition solo. Not surprisingly, I was struggling with such a hard solo at only at 17 years old. When I played it, I expected Zimmerman to work with me on all of the complex rhythms and subtle nuances that I clearly wasn’t executing. To my surprise, all we worked on was dynamics. We went over all the swells and sudden drops in dynamics as if they were more important than the rhythm. At the loud roll he said, “This is the climax of the whole solo! Really let me have it!” This was a remarkable moment for me, and it has helped me throughout my career. Not only did it teach me the importance of dynamics in expression, it taught me that a snare drum really could be a solo voice.

Looking back, I know that Gerhardt knew I was too young and didn’t have the proper technique yet to play Delecluse 9 rhythmically perfect, but he knew I was smart enough to play expressively. Rhythm is essential when playing snare drum, but this experience taught me that dynamics are probably even more important. Ultimately, if a rhythm doesn’t come out just right, the audience probably won’t

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notice—even in an audition setting when they have the music in front of them! But if a snare drum solo is dynamically stale, you can bet they will notice!

So how do we decide what are appropriate dynamic levels when preparing a snare drum solo? Pacing is probably the most important point of emphasis. Jim Ross used to grind that into my brain at Northwestern University. “Save it for the end” or “Save it for the *ff*.” In any solo there are loud moments. How do we know which are supposed to be the most extraordinary? Can others come down in relative dynamic so that the really important moments shine through? The same questions can be asked for soft dynamics. How soft can I make the quietest moment of the piece so that everyone leans forward in their seats? Can I bring a *p* section up in dynamic slightly so that the *pp* section right after it is more noticeable? Similar questions can be asked in crescendos and diminuendos. Can I diminuendo fast so it is surprising? Can I crescendo slowly and wait until the last second to create a powerful moment? These are the sorts of questions that will help with pacing and help the solo tell a story, rather than making it a series of events.

AUDITIONS

Playing snare drum at an audition is similar to both of the topics discussed already; however, additional factors must also be considered. The repertoire performed at an audition is either an excerpt from an orchestral work or a solo. For the most part, preparing a solo for an audition is exactly the same as preparing for a recital or any other solo performance. The variables are the acoustics of the room and the proximity of the panel to the drum. These may have more of an impact in an audition than in a recital setting. Usually, extremely soft dynamics are not affected by the size of the room, but extremely loud dynamics definitely can be. You want to be seen as a sensitive player who has a nice, full, loud dynamic rather than a harsh, painful one. If the panel is only 15 or 20 feet away from the drum, you may want to tone down the loud dynamics. You may offend some poor violist on the panel.

For excerpts prepared for an audition, it is appropriate to use the same thought process for playing with an ensemble. However, we must remember two important differences: you are playing *alone*, and you may know the score to the work better than some of the people on the panel. The fact that you are playing alone makes a big difference in the loud dynamic.

The *ff* dynamic I play with the orchestra in the Prokofiev example would be far too loud if playing by myself. The audition is a weird environment where you are trying to *represent* what you would be doing in the orchestra while not always playing *exactly* as you would with the group. You only need to sit on one mock audition panel to know what I am talking about. When players come in and play “Scheherazade” or “Pines of Rome” way too loud, you tend to see them as insensitive. The panel often doesn’t think that you actually need to play that exact dynamic with a group. The psychology of perception between the panel and applicant is interesting. The main reason I think we perceive the dynamic as too loud is because we have nothing (or no one) to which to compare. The panel is trying to imagine the orchestra while listening to a solo player. Dynamics have to be adjusted in order for this to happen. This will be a major point of emphasis on the excerpts the participants play at PASIC.

Finally, don’t forget that you have probably spent way more time studying the music than the panel. I make this point because a lot of the character that you may want to add, like the Prokofiev example described earlier, may be too much. Luckily, the Prokofiev is a standard work, so everyone sitting on the panel will know it, and it is probably safe to take a liberty from the printed dynamic. However, the non-percussionists on the panel are unlikely to be familiar with “Exotic Birds” or William Schuman’s “Third Symphony.” This makes taking dynamic liberties more of a risk. When in doubt, play the ink! Chris Deviney used to ask me, “Is this a safe or unsafe gamble?” Whenever I am playing something different than what is on the page, even if I have a good reason for it, I always ask myself that question.

In the Snare Drum Lab at PASIC, I will demonstrate examples of how dynamics can appropriately be used in ensemble, solo, and audition environments. I will use recordings to mimic a live ensemble environment and have the participants demonstrate opportunities to serve different roles dynamically. The participants will also prepare solos and a few excerpts to demonstrate how appropriate dynamic choices can be made when playing alone.

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