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Timpanist Jason Haaheim on Interpretation

by Greg Waxberg

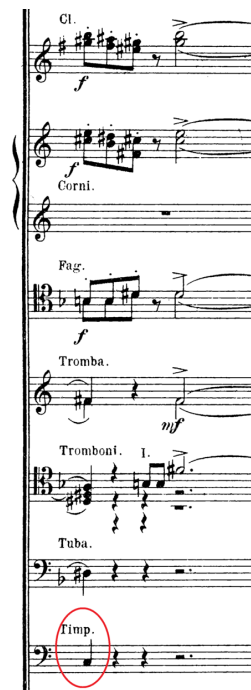
Interpretation is tricky. Just as singers develop interpretations of their characters, and conductors of the score as a whole, instrumentalists within the orchestra must decide how to play their individual parts. But, given that conductors ask instrumentalists to play their parts a certain way, how does an instrumentalist's interpretation of the score fit with a conductor's interpretation? How much of a say does the instrumentalist have in how the music ends up being played?

Posing this question to MET Orchestra Principal Timpanist Jason Haaheim, in relation to last season's revival of *Der Fliegende Holländer*, but also in general terms, elicits a surprising answer that goes beyond what might be apparent from the written page. When it comes to timpani parts, it turns out that Jason has his work cut out for him in two ways – not only interpreting the score, but also *figuring out* and re-writing the timpani part from the score! Like operas that were not finished, or that do not exist in "one" version, timpani parts are often a mess.

Pitch? What pitch?

"In Italian opera orchestras, the timpani themselves were generally incapable of producing good, clear, focused pitches," Jason explains. "The timpani sounded like thuddy, pitchless, 'bass drum' things. Italian orchestration standards evolved based on the instruments available. Wagner inherited these traditions, which often treated timpani without regard for harmonic impact, and he only evolved his timpani writing to account for the focused pitches from better timpani instruments later in his career. Since *Dutchman* was an early opera, it is incomplete in the timpani part writing – essentially unplayable as written." This means that wrong pitches must be "fixed" to the best of Jason's ability because the written pitch would create substantial unintended dissonance.

"When an audience member is listening, they can probably hear when a timpani note is 'wrong.' It might sound weird, but they don't know why. I need to come to the first rehearsal prepared with something that doesn't sound weird," he says of this conundrum. Assuming that many pitches are wrong, Jason compares his timpani part, measure by measure, with a recording and with the full orchestral score to hunt for problem spots – areas where his timpani part does not match the harmony of the other instruments (perhaps trombones or double basses in specific cases). When he encounters a discrepancy, he changes the pitch accordingly.



One of a number of incorrect pitches in the timpani part to *Der Fliegende Holländer*. In this case, Jason changed the circled note to a D#.

If only it ended there! There are other challenges as well, having to do with note lengths and articulations. "In timpani parts – especially opera timpani parts – the written note lengths are almost entirely meaningless. There are lots of times when a quarter note will be written and you're expected to hit the drum, but then it should ring for a measure or two measures. At other times, you have a half note, but you're expected to muffle it right away and take the sound out because everybody else in the orchestra has stopped playing," Jason says. "There are different ways that composers will write a timpani roll, and all kinds of inconsistent ways of notating the way the roll should begin and end. Those practices for indicating that in the score were not developed until the early 20th century. Lots of things aren't clear in terms of strokes and articulations – everybody will do it somewhat differently." Knowing all of this makes it easy to understand why Jason creates an "opera studying" calendar to fit part preparation into his schedule.

A first for Jason



Photo by Justin Haaheim

Der Fliegende Holländer appeared on Jason's studying calendar last season, one of 10 operas he played for the first time in 2016–17, and he offers a behind-the-scenes account of how he learned the timpani part. (In advance of the first orchestral rehearsal on March 30, his preparation required about 40 hours over 10 days in February and March.) His tools: a PDF (portable document format) of the full orchestral score, the timpani part, and a digital video file of the opera. With these tools, his first task was to digitally bookmark the score, according to the tracks on the DVD, to navigate more easily.

"Then I read a full synopsis of the opera because it's essential for me to know the story. There are moments when somebody is declaring their love, or somebody is getting ready to stab someone, and those things should definitely sound different. That context really matters for the interpretation. I then watch the video to get a sense of the scale, the scope, the dramatic high points – the moments that need to stand out," he says. Looking back over the timpani part, Jason determines the timing between entrances and marks detailed cues so that he does not have to constantly rely on counting measures. "I want to know the music well enough that I don't have to be counting measures." At this point – yes, it's that time – Jason marks his part with pitch changes, articulations, phrasings, and when to re-tune the four timpani and adjust the pedals. Prior to joining his colleagues for rehearsal, his final steps are to brainstorm about which mallets to use in different spots, and to play through the opera (with the DVD) for several dry runs.

Shaping the interpretation

There are essentially two possibilities during rehearsals – either the conductor will ask an instrumentalist to make an adjustment, or they will say nothing. As far as the "asking" is concerned, Jason reports that conductors rarely discuss their interpretation of a section prior to playing through it. Instead, "most conductors' interpretations will come out in 'real time' during rehearsal as they subtly indicate how they want us to play, talking in broad strokes and using hand gestures." If the conductor doesn't say anything, Jason employs the interpretation he brought to rehearsal, although he hastens to add that that "default" interpretation will change if a conductor asks for something different that Jason believes makes more sense than what he originally conceived.

A few examples of Jason's musical decisions in *Der Fliegende Holländer*: for most of the opera, he uses heavier sticks for a darker, more menacing sound; in contrasting sections, with Senta and the Norwegian

Maidens, lighter sticks connote a more carefree atmosphere; in the Norwegian Sailors' Chorus "I really try to cut loose with the high-seas gusto!" As an example of a moment when Maestro Yannick Nézet-Séguin requested a change, Act II, Scene 3 "begins with a long timpani solo, in a quasi march rhythm. In rehearsal, I began playing it with a medium-articulate stick, and Maestro Nézet-Séguin commented something along the lines of, 'Jason, feel free to use a softer, darker stick there.' Awesome! You *rarely* hear that from a conductor; they almost always want harder sticks."

Back to the Italians for a moment...

When reflecting on collaborating with other conductors, Jason immediately refers to the wide range of possibilities in Italian operas, particularly standard repertoire such as *Aida*, *La Bohème*, and *La Traviata*. "There are moments that become inflection points of interpretation for conductors, when they are more likely to have different takes. In my part, I will have three or four variations along with the conductor's name associated with each. As an example, most Verdi timpani parts are not clear about whether they want a single note or a roll at the end of a number. I'm happy to do either, and conductors indicate that they want it one way or another." Recently, for a dramatic moment in *Aida* when Jason would normally have entered with a loud timpani roll, the conductor gestured for him to enter quietly and then raised his hands to indicate a crescendo; a corresponding note for that conductor's preference went into Jason's part.

So, in Jason's view, where does this leave the subjective question of interpretation, especially when two sides must come together to create a single sound? "It's my responsibility to bring an interpretation that I think works, knowing that it is one of many possible interpretations," he offers. "It's the conductor's job to take the collective interpretations we bring and, with rehearsal time, make them cohere in a way that is aesthetically consistent. I'm willing to do just about anything a conductor asks because that's my job!"

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