

THE TIMPANI AND THE COURT
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The first documented appearance of timpani on the European continent was in 1457, when King Ladislav V of Hungary entered France.¹ In his baggage train were “drums like great cauldrons carried on horseback such as had never before been seen.”² The immediate impressions for anyone viewing the procession were probably vivid: a foreigner using flourishes on each stroke to create loud sounds from a large drum. For those who saw this alien procession, the sight may have led them to question the Hungarian’s intent.

In this case the intent was benign. King Ladislav V only wished the hand of Charles VII’s daughter in marriage. This procession is an appropriate first appearance for the instrument in Western Europe, as it identified the timpani as instruments of the noble classes and reserved only for those of privilege. These classes found a variety of uses for timpani, virtually all of them high-lighting their owner’s importance.

A procession like this was one of the primary uses for kettledrums. An early procession is shown in the *Spiezer Chronik*, a Swiss source from 1485 (see Figure 1). The procession is large, with many individuals visible at the rear. The timpanist is on horseback, playing two mounted drums, and leads the procession. The timpanist’s sticks are raised, presumably in mid-stroke, demonstrating the embellished manner with which timpanists were expected to perform—a way that would convey the importance of the owner. Zedler states that a kettle-drummer used movements of the body that in other settings would seem absurd.³ These include bodily ornamentations, flourishes that were meant to exaggerate the technique and increase the virtuosic nature of playing the kettledrums.

A primary iconographic source is *The Triumph of Maximilian the Great*, a series of famous woodcuts commissioned by Maximilian the Great from 1526 that include the timpani shown in royal procession. Again the



Figure 1. *Spiezer Chronik*

timpanists lead the procession, demonstrating their importance in announcing the emperor. This time four timpanists lead twenty trumpeters, with each player in full uniform topped by a cap adorned with large feathers.⁴

Various processions involving Charles V have been recorded. October 22nd, 1520 was the day of his coronation as Holy Emperor and Archduke of Austria. The procession for this event included 5,000 horses and 3,000 men-at-arms in five divisions, followed by twelve trumpeters and one kettle-drummer. The timpanist was directly in front of the emperor himself, who, it is noted, “was clad in full armor over which he wore a coat of gold brocade.”⁵



Figure 2. *The Triumph of Maximilian*

A print of the arrival procession of Charles V into Bologna on November 5th, 1529 for his coronation the following spring shows musicians in full processional regalia and the timpanist, again mounted, looking directly at the viewer. Two drums are visible and the player holds a stick over each drum, possibly at rest. The timpanist is a focal point in this print, set slightly apart from the other visible musicians.⁶

In a separate source showing Charles V’s coronation in Bologna in 1530 as ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, the timpanist’s hand is raised as high as his head with the mallet extending behind. All of this suggests an exaggerated stroke: The arm is extended almost as far as it can go, and is a stroke designed as much for show as for sound.⁷

Another type of procession is one for a tournament. A source from Austria in 1581 shows the tournament procession of Duke Othainrich von Braunschweig and Lünneburg.⁸ In this scene the timpanist is first in line, with both mallets again raised and apparently in mid-stroke. A practical reason for the timpanist to be first is for the rest of the procession to clearly hear the beat. It may also have something to do with symmetry, as there was no one to pair the timpanist with. Whatever the reason, the timpanist is first, which only increases the importance of the player and the instrument.

Virdung notes that timpanists were also used with trumpets for fanfares in addition to leading soldiers on the battlefield.⁹ Throughout any procession, it is evident that the visual element, as much as the sound, was important in communicating the presence and importance of royalty or nobility.

MEALS

The court of Maximilian the Great gives us another example of uses for timpani at this time. It is known that two drums, each so big that they could hold ten cauldrons of water, and ten trumpeters played for the

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Emperor’s noon and evening meals.¹⁰ Montagu cites Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where Hamlet says “as he [the king] drains his draughts of Rhenish down./The kettledrum and trumpet thus bray out/The triumph of his pledge.” A passage in Hentzner’s *Itinerarium* describes a meal from 1598 during which “XII Trumpeters, & two Drummers, who with trumpets, horns, & drums with a great noise for an hour and a half sounded aloud.” Montagu is clear that tympanum at this point may still mean drum and is not clearly indicative of timpani.¹¹

FUNERALS

Through the history of the timpani runs the tradition of their presence at royal funerals. In these settings the formerly heroic character is transformed into one of mourning. The drums are sometimes draped, perhaps to cover up the shine of the kettles themselves. In a plate from the Spencer collection at the New York Public Library, a hunched man carries two covered drums, with intricate designs on the shell barely visible. The timpanist follows at attention a slight distance, sticks held parallel to the body. Judging from the distance between player and drums, the drums were not to be played.¹²

An illustration of the funeral procession of Elector August I of Saxony shows a man hunched beneath the weight of two kettledrums that he carries on his back, while behind him comes the player, walking with his back straight and two timpani mallets held in front of him. Possibly the individual carrying the drums saw this as an honor and a way to pay tribute to one who had passed. An illustration of the funeral procession of Charles V in 1558 shows two timpanists, each with two drums, standing next to a group of wind players (see Figure 3).¹ The detail of a plate by Joannes van Duetecum that shows kettledrummers



Figure 3. Detail of plate by Johannes van Duetecum

with drums hanging in front and behind. Cloth imprinted with a seal, presumably that of Charles V, is draped upon each drum. It is not surprising that musicians would be included in these types of processions, announcing a person’s importance in death as they did in life.

IN ENGLAND

Timpani were pursued by royalty in many countries, not all of whom were successful in procuring the instrument.

Henry VIII saw kettledrums in the train of his fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, upon her arrival in Blackheath, which presumably gave him the idea to procure the drums.¹³ He wrote to Vienna two years later seeking “ten taborynes on horsbak, after the Hungaryons facion” making a clear

distinction between kettledrums and side drums.¹ Apparently, Henry never acquired his hoped-for timpani: There is also no record of payment of kettledrummers in the English Court Records and no record of their having been sworn in for service. Neither is there any record of kettledrums in the inventories of musical instruments taken after the King’s death.

From the first arrival of timpani in Western Europe, their association with the highest levels of society was established. At various events the timpani, in conjunction with wind players, highlighted the importance of their owner by providing an impressive visual and aural display, suitable to the majesty and awe inspired by the noble state of their owners.

NOTES:

- ¹ Larry Spivack, “Kettledrums: A European Change in Attitude 1500-1700 Part 1,” *Percussive Notes* XXXVI/6 (December 1998), 54.
- ² Jeremy Montagu, *Timpani and Percussion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 43.
- ³ Larry Spivack, “Kettledrums: A European Change in Attitude 1500-1700 Part 2,” *Percussive Notes*, XXXVII/1 (February 1999), 57.
- ⁴ James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and Their History* (New York: Frederik A. Praeger, 1970), plate 112.
- ⁵ Edmund Bowles, *The Timpani: A History in Pictures and Documents* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 359.
- ⁶ Bowles, 99.
- ⁷ Bowles, 98.
- ⁸ Bowles, 107.
- ⁹ Montagu, 43.
- ¹⁰ Montagu, 43.
- ¹¹ Montagu, 47.
- ¹² Bowles, 110.
- ¹³ Bowles, 100.

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Galliards”. Both groups are for those in high school and older. The Singers explore madrigals, providing opportunities for singing solos and playing on period instruments. “Pavans and Galliards” performs the music of two dances that originated in the 15th and 16th centuries, following the progression of the music as it evolves from an accompaniment for dancers into its own highly-complex musical form in the early 17th century.