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Percussion Orchestrations (review)

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Percussion Orchestrations. Ed Cervenka. <http://www.percorch.com/> (Accessed September 2009). [Requires a Web browser and an Internet connection. Pricing: \$40-\$100 per year depending on subscriber level].

Determining the percussion requirements for a given work, program or season can be a considerable headache for orchestra managers and librarians. Most catalogs of orchestral music have developed clever systems for indicating in a compact form how many woodwind and brass players must be added to the string complement for any given work, even accounting for doublings and exotic instruments like oboe d'amore or bass trumpet. But often the only clue regarding percussion is a notation such as "timp, perc." But which percussion instruments are needed? And how many players will be required to cover them? Does the timpanist need two timpani or five? Once one has the score in hand, one can usually find the answer to the first question in the instrumentation list. But it often takes an examination of the complete score to answer the other two. Over the years many principal percussionists and orchestra librarians have kept personal files or databases of the percussion requirements of works they have encountered, and a few have even been published in book form. The Major Orchestra Librarians' Association Web site [<http://www.mola-inc.org/>] mentions three in particular: *Percussion Instrumentation Guide for Symphony Orchestras*, by Bo Holmstrand (Helsinki: Edition Escobar, 2004); *Handbook for the Orchestral Percussion Section*, by Henk de Vlieger (The Hague: Albersen, 2003); and *Percussion Workbook*, by Maggie Cotton (Birmingham, UK: Maggie Cotton, 1993).

Now comes what appears to be the first online offering of such a database: *Percussion Orchestrations*, created by Ed Cervenka, principal percussionist of England's Northern Sinfonia, and a frequent freelancer with other orchestras around the U.K. Cervenka's database eclipses the other published guides in size, covering over 4,600 works, compared to about 2,000 in the largest of the books, and is continuously updated. Indeed, over the weekend that the site was reviewed the work count grew by forty-four between Friday and Monday.

Use of the site is quite straightforward. After logging in, the user faces a page with

a small number of Google ads and three main links inviting one to go to the database, write an endorsement, or visit a Facebook group page. The database link provides three ways to access the database content: an alphabetic menu for browsing by composer, and two search boxes, one for composers and the other for titles. Terms entered in the search boxes are searched as keyword character strings, and the site instructions recommend entering only one word per search. Despite this limitation, the database is small enough that result sets are easily browsed to get to the exact work one wants to find. The only significant hindrance to efficient searching has to do with the handling of foreign-language titles. Such titles are not consistently presented, some being listed in their original languages ("L'Histoire de Babar le Petit Elephant") while others are listed only in English translation ("The Soldier's Tale"). This problem is exacerbated by the lack of cross-referencing in the database. The system is capable of offering alternative entries that are similar (4 or more characters in succession) to a search string that retrieves no matches. But this option is not offered if any exact matches are returned. While this does constitute an annoyance when initially using the database, the user adjusts quickly, and recourse to the composer search means that any given work is still easily retrieved.

The records themselves use HTML tables to convey concisely a great deal of information about the percussion instruments needed and a recommended distribution of players. The number of columns reveals at a glance how many players are needed, and the cell contents list the instruments played by each performer. For multi-movement works, the top row lists the total percussion requirements for the complete work, followed by a separate row for each movement. The cells for timpanists list the pitches required, grouping together notes needed at the same time. (Thus "G c d, A c e" means three drums are required, tuned and re-tuned as indicated.) Where rapid pedal-tuning is required, links are

provided to pop-ups containing notated excerpts. Similar links are provided in cells that list “bells” (American percussionists read “chimes”), showing in notation the pitches called for in the score. Notes below the tables provide clarification of issues such as sharing of large instruments between players or the need to have duplicates of certain instruments. The tabular presentation is very clear and concise, and allows for minimal use of abbreviations. The only drawback is that the database software seems to want to create table cells of a fixed width that, depending on the user’s screen resolution, can lead to side-to-side scrolling for works requiring many players.

Additional links on the data pages include: “Timpani notes,” which opens a pop-up showing the typical pitch ranges of timpani, along with an explanation of how timpani pitches are represented in the tables; “Percussion notes” which opens another pop-up showing the typical ranges of mallet percussion instruments; and “Figures” which opens a brief explanation

of how reference is made to particular points in a score; and, finally, “Instrument name translations.” This link leads to a table containing an extensive list of English names and descriptions of percussion instruments, along with terms for them in French, German, Spanish and Italian. This list is a very handy adjunct to the main content of the database. Another extra feature, accessible via a link from the database search page, is a list of “Works which have no timpani or percussion (which you might think do).”

Taken together, the size of the database and the clear and concise presentation of the information, along with ease of searching, make this an outstanding product that, at its very affordable price, will be a tremendous reference for those charged with making decisions regarding percussion and orchestra programming.

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