

Removing those Annoying Noises from your Timpani

By David Quinn and Brett Carvolth

In this article you will find some hints on how to remove those annoying creaks and groans from your timpani.

Noises in timpani while retuning are usually caused by one of two things, either the movement of the head over the rim, or mechanical noises from the tuning mechanism. Often a combination of these leads to many extraneous noises from the timpani and much embarrassment for the timpanist.

The first step is to move the pedal to the position of least head tension (lowest note) and make sure that it is fixed in this position. Use a suitable piece of wood for a chock under the toe of the pedal (Ludwig, Yamaha and Adams), under the pedal (Premier and Slingerland) or under the spider on "Dresden" action drums. This step is to ensure that the mechanism doesn't move once you have removed the head.

The next step is to mark the counterhoop and shell to ensure accurate replacement and then remove the head. Check it for stretching, dents and cuts etc. If it is damaged or worn, discard and replace it. It is a waste of time reusing a worn-out head because it will not be possible to return the drum to its correct playing range. Clean all the deposits of grease, oil, dirt and wax etc. from the rim of the drum (and the underside of the head if you are reusing it). If the rim is damaged or bent it may need to be repaired or replaced by an experienced repairer.

Once the rim is clean, apply a very small amount of wax around the surface that the head moves across. Be careful not to use too much, as this will cause rattling and buzzing on low notes, or too little because this will cause the head to creak. Sit the new head on the drum ensuring an even overhang all round (especially on extended collar models). Replace the cleaned hoop in its original orientation and finger tighten all the cleaned and lubricated tension rods. Once all the tension rods are as equal as possible, tighten them evenly, working on opposite sides of the head. When the head approaches a playable note, remove your pedal chock and move the pedal to the highest note and check it - adjust the head up or down until the drum reaches its correct playing range.

Next tune carefully around the head, making sure that the pitch is the same at each tension rod. The range of the drum and the "trueness" of the head will have to be checked over succeeding days and even weeks as a new head will stretch out of the collar, sometimes dropping the range by as much as a third from its initial upper note.

With the new head in place and 'noiseless!' carefully check the rest of the mechanism, cleaning and lubricating as necessary to remove any squeaks and groans and tightening to remove any rattles. With your now noiseless pedal action you can enjoy the absence of those embarrassing noises while retuning in quiet passages.

Handy hint:

When they are not in use or when they are being moved, keep your timpani heads under high tension (on the highest note). This minimises any movement of the mechanism and misalignment of the heads.