

**ABOUT THE *CONCERTO CON TIMPANI* (“BATTAGLIA”)
by David Avshalomov**

BACKGROUND

In my early school years I sang and studied piano, theory and percussion. My first performance in an orchestra was playing third glockenspiel in Orff's *Carmina Burana*, a percussion feast. What fun! Soon I discovered the glory of the kettledrums and set out to master them. I was hooked. When I began to compose my own music (as a self-taught teen), I started with choral settings, but I also conceived the ambition to write a convincing concerto for timpani.

At Harvard, in my spare hours I played timpani in numerous ensembles, sang in the chapel choir, and read madrigals with friends. I entered the school orchestra's concerto competition and soloed with them in the Milhaud percussion concerto. I wrote my honors thesis on the melodic use of kettledrums and, to underscore its point, composed a piece featuring them, to play in my senior recital: the brief *Diversion* (1966) for timpani and violin. Master percussion teacher George Gaber soon put it in front of students at Indiana U., and it has had many performances in the US as a recital piece. I also wrote several works for pitched percussion quartet, including an *Allegro* which took a first prize at the Aspen Festival in 1972.

There ensued many years of conducting and composing of works in my own personal style, for various instruments and voices in a variety of forms. Fast forward: In 1990, after running my own Baroque chamber orchestra for a decade, I realized I could now improvise fluently in that style. I decided to create a quasi-Vivaldi-style concerto for timpani and strings (as a warm-up etude before writing my "modern" one). The three-movement *Concerto con Timpani* (1992, under the pen name of Salomon) was the result. It was great fun to write, and is even more fun to play. I have learned that several young drummers have recently taken a run at the career of solo timpanist (which I once dreamed of), recording some newly-unearthed 18-century galant/concertante works. This first concerto is for them and their peers; one of them Jon Haas, premiered it in England.

DESCRIPTION

This concerto is written in early 18th-century *concertato* style (ca. 1720), derived largely from the procedures in the concerti of Vivaldi (especially those for odd instruments), with some echoes of Handel, Telemann, G.B. Sammartini and others here and there. It is intended to fill a severe gap in the known solo repertoire for timpani, and should prove suitable and enjoyable for both recital and concert use. (Duration: ca. 13 minutes.)

A “Battaglia” originally was a type of organ toccata common in the 17th century, purporting to represent in stylized, antique manner the formal fanfares, intradas, battle signals, sorties, etc., of medieval warfare. The timpani, of course, entered Europe as military instruments played on horseback in battle, but this piece has no underlying “program.” Here the sub-title simply refers to the quasi-military sonority of certain passages, such as the Intrada and the octave tattoos in Movement I, the showy drumming near the end of Movements I and III, and the affect of “mourning” in the slow middle movement.

The first movement, *Intrada*, is a French Overture (slow/fast/slow). It starts and ends with a regal fanfare. The quick middle section is full of rhythmic passages alternating between the showy, busy soloist and the *ripieno*, with some flashy drumming near the end.

The second movement is slow, elegant, with an affect of mourning.

The rattling fast movement is a *ritornello/rondo* form with longer solo passages, a flashy wrap-up, and a light echo ending.

The piece was premiered by American virtuoso solo timpanist Jonathon Haas with the Hallgate (England) Chamber Orchestra in 2001.

HOW LIKELY?

Imagine Vivaldi commissioned to write a big cantata for a noble patron's daughter's wedding ceremony at the cathedral. A big occasion, large orchestra, extra trumpets and drums (three antiphonal groups, in the best St. Mark's tradition, all in D), big choir, soloists, the whole thing. Grand success.

He is invited to dine with his patron afterwards, and even the band is treated to wine and victuals—in the kitchen. Later, drunk as a lord, he returns to the sanctuary to gather up his manuscript parts. The pairs of kettledrums have been brought downstairs hours ago for transport but were left uncovered. One pair sits near the flickering ranks of huge votive candles, another near a side door left ajar (temperature differential). One drummer, in his haste to wet his whistle, has left his sticks carelessly on the music stand.

Vivaldi pauses to swig from his wine cup, picks up a timpani part . . . and a stick falls, bounces across two drums, then rolls to the floor. The pitches of these two drums have risen from the warmth. Vivaldi shakes his flaming curls, glances to another set of drums, and an odd but appealing idea forms in his tipsy genius mind . . .

He gingerly drags the pairs of drums on their light triangular wooden stands into a parabolic arrangement. Clumsily but accurately he tunes them with the pairs of handscrews to six *different* notes of the scale (quickly realizing that he must reposition all three large drums on the left for the lower notes). Then he takes another swig, sets down his cup, picks up the sticks, and slowly bangs out the opening tune from his Concerto for two trumpets. A huge smile spreads across his face; his eyes sparkle. He plays it again—with more gusto. Inspired, he calls excitedly for a servant to fetch quills, ink, music paper, a writing table. “Subito!” “Si, Maestro!”

An hour later, he has scribbled out this concerto. The rest could have been history.

PRECEDENTS

In this period, Bach wrote a short melodic solo to open the Christmas Cantata *Tönet, ihr Pauken* (“sound, ye kettledrums”), and Handel an extended rhythmic solo illustrating text about the kettledrums in his *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*. Molter and Graupner, contemporaries of Bach, both wrote sinfonias with parts for 5, 6, even 7 drums, mostly doubling bass lines. Philidor, military musician to Louis XIV, wrote a fanfare-like duet for two pairs of timpani, tuned G-c and

e-g. Even Mozart later wrote 4-drum parts in some incidental serenades with flutes and trumpets. And there is his popular *Serenata Notturna* for 2 timpani with double string quartet and bass, which makes an **excellent companion piece** for this concerto in concert.

In the late eighteenth century, a number of lesser composers wrote pieces featuring as many as 8 timpani played by a single soloist. Examples include a symphony by the German J.C.C. Fischer, and a Partita and a Concerto Grosso by the Bohemian Georg Druschetzky.

PERFORMING THE *CONCERTO CON TIMPANI*

The score and parts to this work are available in two versions. One imitates a responsible musicological version of Urtext—only the composer’s notes and markings, in modern notation, with a very few editorial annotations, chiefly of ornaments, clearly differentiated from the original text. The other is thoroughly edited and re-notated to suggest a centrist approach to interpretation based on now-generally-accepted practices distilled from the period-practice (HIP) Baroque revival waves of the late 20th century.

The ideal choice is to play it from the Urtext version on old copper hand-tuned (chain-tuned) drums, with your local full-size period-instrument band, at low pitch (~A 415), etc. These specialists, if accomplished and informed, can teach us all a lot. And you do not need a conductor; you and the concertmaster (and, sometimes, the harpsichordist) co-lead. But this option is not open to many.

At the other extreme is a big modern string orchestra, using the edited version, in which case modern drums and sticks (and rolls) may be not just allowed but preferred. However, any modern string group accompanying this piece *must* fundamentally modify their sound picture towards the Baroque ideal. (This can be done easily, even with modern steel strings and Tourte bows. General suggestions for the strings are provided in the “Instant Baroque Ensemble Style” notes in the score. There are also notes for the harpsichordist and timpanist.) One advantage to using a string group of around 20 players rather than 40 is that the soloist is forced to play more delicately for good balance, which immediately clarifies all the phrasing