

Writing for percussion

The section that reads two staves, plays thirty instruments and needs time to walk between them. Half of writing well for percussion is knowing what makes a pitch and what only makes a noise.

PITCHED, AND HOW THEY ARE WRITTEN

INSTRUMENT	RANGE	NOTATION	WHAT IT IS FOR
Timpani	D2–A3, 3–4 drums	Bass clef, real pitch	Tonic and dominant, rolls under a crescendo, the weight beneath a cadence. Name the tuning at the top of the part.
Glockenspiel	G5–C8	Treble, sounds 2 octaves up	Bright sparkle doubling a flute or violin line. Cuts through anything.
Xylophone	F4–C8	Treble, sounds an octave up	Dry and hard. Fast rhythmic figures; the sound has no sustain at all.
Marimba	C2–C7	Two staves, real pitch	Warm and woody. Rolled chords and melodic lines; four mallets are normal.
Vibraphone	F3–F6	Treble, real pitch	Metal bars with a pedal and a motor. Sustains and can be damped — the only lyrical one.
Tubular bells	C4–F5	Treble, real pitch	Church bells. Loud, slow to speak, and impossible to use quietly.

Unpitched: one-line stave



One instrument, one line, no clef — a percussion clef (a thick double bar) instead. Cross noteheads for metal and cymbals, plain heads for drums.

Several players, one stave



A five-line stave shared out: high instruments up, low ones down, stems away from each other. Label each line the first time it appears.

SAY HOW, NOT JUST WHAT

Sticks	Hard, medium or soft; wood, felt or yarn. It changes the sound more than dynamics do.
Where struck	Centre, edge, rim, or on the dome of a cymbal.
Roll or single	Three slashes for a roll, <i>tr</i> for a measured one.
Let ring / damp	<i>l.v.</i> to let vibrate, or a written rest and "damp" to stop it.

PRACTICALITIES

- 1 Count the players, not the instruments. Three parts at once needs three people.
- 2 Allow bars to change instrument — four is comfortable, one is not.
- 3 Timpani need time to retune: a few seconds per drum, and write the new note above the stave.
- 4 List every instrument needed at the head of the part, so the section can set up the stage.

LESS IS LOUDER

One cymbal crash in a movement is an event; four is wallpaper. Percussion earns its effect through rarity more than any other section.

DECAY IS THE DIFFERENCE

A woodblock stops instantly, a tam-tam rings for twenty seconds. Write the rest you actually want — silence is part of the notation.

COLOUR, NOT JUST PULSE

A suspended cymbal roll under a string chord, a triangle on one beat: percussion shades the orchestra as well as keeping time.