

FOCUS ON PERFORMANCE

Practice Techniques for Efficiency in Learning Mallet Keyboard Instruments

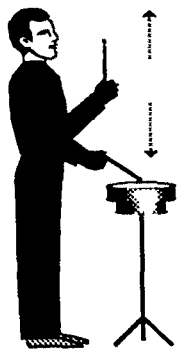
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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO provide the reader with practical information on how to practice mallet keyboard instruments and to differentiate these practice concepts from concepts involving other percussion instruments.

There are six basic skills to be mastered in order to play mallet instruments (vibraphone, bells, xylophone and marimba), and they are as follows:

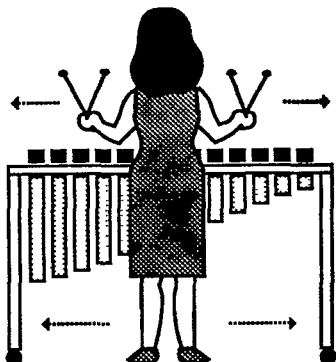
1. proper grip and stroke action
2. speed and accuracy in technique (legato and non-legato)
3. sight-reading ability
4. muscle memory skills
5. smooth rolls (tied and untied)
6. ability to assign good sticking patterns to written music.

When a student plays the snare drum, he learns a vertical stroke and stands in a stationary position in front of the drum. A different physical approach is necessary when playing mallet instruments because the keyboard is spread out horizontally. This may not occur to the student and he may tend to play the instrument as he would a snare drum, using high vertical strokes, thus losing some technical accuracy. Standing in a stationary position to play a mallet instrument would also cause problems, as the student would be off balance when shifting registers.



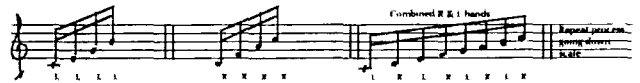
The student should stand in the middle of the playing area so that his weight can be shifted to address the section of the instrument being played. In the case of larger instruments such as the marimba, the student should learn

to walk back and forth by comfortably crossing the feet or sliding them from side to side, keeping in mind that he should always face the instrument directly, not at an angle



As for musical exercises, the concept of a vertical multiple bounce stroke on a snare drum can be translated to a horizontal "drop stroke" on a marimba. First, have the student drop his mallet on one note as a springboard for a series of random notes across the keyboard (either up or down) in a sweeping motion. The hand should be kept low and relaxed, and there should be only one large motion containing smaller, connected motions, just like the single wrist stroke which produces a number of buzzes on the snare drum. After the stroke feels relaxed and smooth on random notes, specific pitches (i.e. open fifths or an arpeggio) may be practiced. The left and right hand patterns for a major scale may be practiced separately and then combined to produce a relaxed, legato sound (see figure 1). This fast legato technique is essential when playing a piece like *Flight of the Bumblebee* or a Bach violin transcription.

Figure 1 "Drop stroke" one motion = many notes
Ex.: preparation for major scale—
result = smooth & fast



REPEAT PROCESS GOING DOWN SCALE

Another must for mallet instrument study is a thorough understanding of music theory and the ability to execute scales and arpeggios fluidly. Music theory (scales, arpeggios and harmony) should be taught using the circle of keys. Have the student first practice scales individually. Then have him play through the circle of keys without stopping. Begin with C, then play through the flat keys and the sharp keys and vice versa. The ability to look ahead in harmonic sequence is an essential part of the mallet player's overall musicianship. Also, it is important to visualize arpeggios and scales as shapes and groups of notes **NO LESS THAN ONE OCTAVE AT A TIME** in order to master the vocabulary keyboard percussion.

Practice Time

Musicians spend a vast amount of time practicing, but don't always use this time efficiently. In order to maximize efficiency and develop concentration, prac-

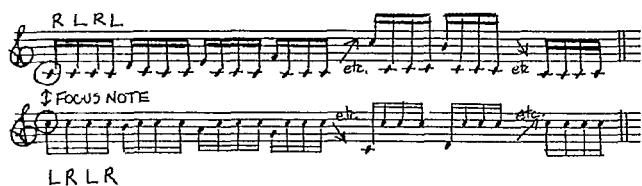
tice time for mallet instruments should be divided into the following areas: technique, kinesthetic exercises, repertoire, and sight-reading.

These four areas should be part of every practice session.

While working on technique (i.e. scales, arpeggios, double stops and rolls), the student should concentrate on correct hand position, stroke, even tempo (METRONOME!) and accuracy. It is important to remember that percussion students who start by learning snare drum will have a natural resistance to learning mallet instruments; the challenge of reading pitches and playing accurately can seem overwhelming. For this reason, the first few lessons should allow the student to get comfortable with the instrument by playing exercises and familiar tunes learned by rote, not by reading music. This is an excellent way for young mallet players to maintain enthusiasm for a sometimes technically frustrating instrument.

Perhaps the most important idiomatic element in playing percussion keyboard instruments is kinesthetic sense (or muscle-memory) because of the lack of tactile sense used as in piano playing. Although seldom addressed in method books, this skill is THE KEY to playing percussion keyboards well. Muscle-memory can be developed by practicing "focus" exercises, in which the player looks only at one central note or area and uses peripheral vision and muscle movement sense to play the correct notes (see figure 2). This skill should be practiced at least as much as scales and arpeggios, perhaps even more, as the student progresses. [For a more complete set of focus exercises, see "Idio-kinetic Exercises for the Marimba" by Gordon Stout (PN, July 1986)].

Figure 2—Focus exercise for muscle memory
Look only at "focus" note = practice slowly so muscles may "remember" distance



* Practice this type of exercise using other scale patterns such as chromatic and whole tone.

Kinesthetic sense as well can be developed by looking only at the music while playing. Using peripheral vision as a guide is the key to developing good sight-reading ability, which is essential. Keep in mind that muscles will only develop correctly if focus exercises are practiced very slowly and conscientiously, and we must continually remind our students of this. [George Hamilton Green's *Instruction Course for Xylophone* (Meridith) is

perhaps the best source of published practice guidelines, as it emphasizes slow, accurate practice. This book is highly recommended for development of two-mallet technique.]

Many students spend hours practicing a piece and yet still seem unprepared during lessons. The problem lies in the method of practicing. The student needs to master an effective learning sequence, as outlined here, for thorough and accurate learning of music.

At the first reading, work out STICKING and write in where necessary, with the intention of practicing as such from then on (see Appendix 1, Guidelines) COUNT! Don't guess at rhythms thus learning them incorrectly ISOLATE difficult passages and practice them until they are correct. Then practice the passage in the context of the piece until the entire section can be played without stopping. ALWAYS READ GROUPS OF NOTES, not individual pitches, noting the musical line and its shape. Make a mental note of stepwise motion and melodic leaps, eyeballing the pattern. It may help to draw phrase marks over note groups and occasionally have someone move a piece of paper over the line of music as it is played, forcing the eye to READ AHEAD. Analyze some of the harmony (arpeggios, chords, etc.) before playing to increase awareness of the larger structure.

When the learning sequence has been completed and the piece is thoroughly and accurately learned, it is advisable to MEMORIZE it for performance. This allows attention to be focused on technical accuracy and musicality rather than note-reading. An invaluable aid to memorizing music is to study it away from the instrument. Be able to visualize the music being played on the keyboard so that in a performance situation, the intellect can be relied upon when the body is hampered by nervousness.

A part of every practice session should be devoted to sight-reading. Keep a selection of music on hand solely for this purpose. Remember that good sight-reading skills develop from consistently reading without stopping. For a more complete guide, read "How to Sight-read Correctly" by Gordon Stout (PN, Winter 1989).

Practicing efficiently is difficult for beginner and professional alike, but it is a valuable skill, well-worth learning. And the greatest gift a teacher can give a student is patient encouragement.

Appendix

Guidelines for deciding on sticking patterns for two mallets:

1. In general, sticking alternates between hands
2. Use double sticking where necessary and musically appropriate:
 - a. Begining by looking at phrases, not single beats, and decide which hand to begin with, using alternate sticking. The most appropriate sticking avoids awkward cross-overs.

- b. If sticking needs to be doubled to avoid a cross-over on a leap, use double sticking on a weak beat, not on a downbeat. This keeps musical punctuation strong (see examples). Use double sticking on smaller intervals, if possible.
- c. Usually, repeated phrases have the same sticking for continuity and ease in memorization (see example). An exception would be

when a new pattern follows a sequence, and the new pattern needs to start on the other hand to avoid crossovers in leaps in that new pattern. (see example)

- d. You may occasionally use double sticking on a downbeat if the rhythm is slow enough to retain force. (See examples)
- e. If possible, use double sticking on the same manual. ■

The image shows a handwritten musical score on ten staves. The notation is dense with notes, slurs, and articulation marks. Key features include:

- Staff 1:** Features a sequence of notes with slurs and sticking instructions: *L R L R L R L L L R L R L R L R R*. A circled '1' is placed above the sequence.
- Staff 2:** Continues the sequence with sticking: *L R L R L R L L R L R L R R L L L R L R L*. A circled '2' is placed above the sequence.
- Staff 3:** Shows a transition with sticking: *R R R L R R*.
- Staff 4:** Features a series of *R* sticking marks with slurs.
- Staff 5:** Continues with *R* sticking marks.
- Staff 6:** Includes a circled '1' and a circled '2' with a 'leap' annotation. Sticking includes *R L R R*.
- Staff 7:** Shows *R L R L R* sticking with slurs.
- Staff 8:** Features *R L R R L R* sticking and a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking.
- Staff 9:** Shows *L L* sticking and a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking.
- Staff 10:** Concludes with *R R L R R L* sticking.