



KEYBOARD PLAYING TECHNIQUE

The Stance

Always approach the instrument aggressively and with agility. You will be expected not only to perform physically, but the notes themselves will necessitate a great deal of physical motion from one end of the keyboard to the other. Give yourself about six inches to a foot of space between yourself and the keyboard. If you need to move closer you may do so, but try not to “crowd” the instrument. A comfortable, about shoulder-width, stance and relaxed knees will facilitate side to side movement for runs up and down the keyboard. For movement between one instrument and the next, quick efficient motion is necessary. You must be on your toes, so to speak, otherwise your performance will be lacking as will your ability to make the proper logistical movements. Percussion is far more than just about the fingers, hands and arms. It all starts with your posture.

The physical performance

All professional musicians move when they play. It is appropriate for you to move when you are playing. However, it is not appropriate to move in any pre-contrived or unnatural motion. You should feel free to move around and “groove” to your part, but at no time should any of this motion be choreographed. You will sometimes see front ensembles bending over, really close to the keyboard, for soft parts and the standing up for loud parts and it just doesn’t look good. I also don’t want you to just stand still. This looks almost as bad. Feel the music and use your body to express it.

Consider the performance venue. First of all, you will be in large arenas, sometimes not very close to your audience. You have to make eye contact and communicate the musical message of the show through your face and body movement. Consider that no other musician on the field/floor can use their face the same way you can. You have no shako to hide behind and are not out on the field/floor hiding in the drill. You are upfront and you WILL be seen no matter what you choose to do.

Consider also, that the physics of sound play a large role in what you do, and at all times, you must communicate with each other in order to maintain unity of the ensemble. The front ensemble instruments will be set up to accommodate this as best as possible, but you must do the rest. Look up, look around at your fellow ensemble mates, use your body language and face to communicate tempo, phrasing and musical message to each other and the audience. Besides, it just makes performing (and all the hours of rehearsing) that much more fun!

The grip and stroke

There are many schools of thought on how to hold mallets. What I will offer is multi-faceted and hopefully will unify your approach while still allowing for some individual flexibility. After all, not all hands are built the same.

The mallet should be held with the front of the grip about $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ of the way up the shaft. The mallet should angle through the palm of your hand so that when you turn your hand over, it should be nothing more than an extension of your arm. Your palms should be almost, but not, flat to the ground. You should be able to turn your mallets around and be able to play on your forearms if you're using the proper technique. The "front of the grip" is defined as the pad of your thumb and the first knuckle of your index finger (the fulcrum) and the second joint of your middle finger.

You will use your thumb and index finger to transfer the wrist motion into pushing the mallet toward the keyboard. The middle finger will act as a sort of axle for this to happen. This will allow for a relaxed yet articulate stroke. Relaxation is the key to great sound as well avoiding injury.

The back fingers must be utilized appropriately and should always be in contact with the mallet. They are used for additional control and must never be gripped too hard. If so, this will inhibit playing longer, faster, louder passages and also cause you to choke off your intended articulation. Gravity will do much of the work and the fingers will control the motion.

Your playing motion must come from the wrist. Sound is generated through velocity. The motion must not start from the elbow or shoulder. It must come from the wrist and fingers. The arm must be relaxed at all times and allowed to move.

You must always start with your mallets in up (playing) position and always end in up position. You also want to always keep the "V" in front of you.

In summary

A truly efficient grip utilizes the whole hand but is relaxed. It pivots around the middle finger using the fulcrum while the back fingers help to control the mallet. All muscles should be relaxed at all times, from the shoulder through the fingertips with everything moving in harmony. The wrists will initiate all motion.

Sound quality

The quality of sound is affected by many things. With the grip and stroke as defined above, you should be able to get a warm, open, relaxed sound with the option to gain articulation with firmness and focus toward the front of the grip.

Gravity and velocity are the keys to getting fullness of sound. Once the mallet is in motion, gravity will take it the rest of the way. The mallet must be allowed to rebound as the stroke follows through into the bar and back up to prepare for the next note. This is all one motion and can be compared to dribbling a basketball. This is also how you gain the legato stroke. To gain a fuller/louder sound, one would focus more energy on the front of the grip to speed up the velocity of the mallet as it approaches the bar. Rebound becomes even more important here, so as to not dampen the full resonance of the bar by allowing the mallet to make contact with the bar for more than an instant.

The proper playing “zones” are more important than you think. Traditionally, people are taught to play in the center of the bars. This is not always the best playing zone. For faster passages and four mallet, chordal passages, I would suggest using the outside of the “accidental” bars rather than the center. This will allow you to get up and down the instrument with minimal arm movement and distance for your mallets to travel. At all times you want to avoid striking the bars on the nodes (where the string passes through the bars).

Proper mallets must always be used. Always use yarn, chord or rubber on marimbas and vibes. Cord, rubber and plastic can be used on xylophones. Hard rubber, plastic and brass may be used on bells and crotales. With proper mallet usage, you should never over-play any of the instruments as in can cause damage to the instruments, the mallets and your hands.

All other front ensemble instruments must be approached with the same relaxed, concert percussion technique. Most instruments will not need excessive force to produce the proper volume if played with the proper technique and implements. Some instruments can be easily broken if over-played or played incorrectly.

Four-mallet technique

In an effort to not try to re-invent the wheel, I will sum it up to say that you will be using the Leigh Howard Stevens (Stevens) grip on most of your four-mallet parts. You can get an excellent tutorial on this at vicfirth.com, **keyword: Giff Howarth**. Plan to learn all four-mallet exercises and musical passages using the Stevens grip unless otherwise instructed.

Some specific techniques and terminology you will be hearing are listed below:

Single independent

This is the use of a single mallet in one hand while the opposite mallet rotates in place as a sort of axle for the motion of the entire hand, allowing the other mallet to play. The non-playing mallet should be dropped to a position, close to the instrument, so that the playing mallet can rotate off of it. All two mallet exercises should be learned with four mallets using the single independent technique.

Double vertical

This is a double stop played with a single hand, meaning both mallets play simultaneously on different bars. This stroke is very similar to the two mallet technique and is controlled by the wrist.

Double lateral

This is the motion of both mallets of a single hand striking one slightly before the other. The wrist moves in a slightly circular fashion and one mallet comes down before the other. It is utilized, primarily, in ripple rolls.

Other techniques to be familiar with:

Interval expansion

Using the thumb, index and middle fingers

Traditional and ripple rolls

Fluidity, speed, control and evenness



Again, a great tutorial for this can be found at vicfirth.com, keyword: **Giff Howarth**.

Volume control

Volume is controlled two ways: by velocity and by height of the mallets. The faster the velocity of the mallet toward the bar, the louder and fuller the notes will be. However, since you generally want your sound to always be full, considering the venues, you will also rely on height to control your volume as well.

Volumes to height (in inches):

- Pianissimo = 2-3 inches with less velocity
- Piano = 3 inches with a touch of velocity
- Mezzo piano = 6 inches with more velocity
- Mezzo forte = 9 inches with good velocity
- Forte = 12 inches with better velocity
- Fortissimo = 15 inches (mallets almost vertical) with the most velocity

Add an inch to all volumes for accents.

Please understand that these are guidelines. No one can be accurate with this level of measurement and some passages of the music will call for variations on the above chart. As long as everyone is unified in their approach, you will be on the right track. Remember, this is a visual activity as well. If your mallets are lower, then you will be perceived to be playing softer even if you are striking the bars with great velocity.

Softer mallets are used to control timbre and color. They are not necessarily used to play softer. You control that with your approach to technique.

Other general performance techniques

All professional performers make eye contact, communicate with each other and breathe while performing. All entrances are controlled with a unified breath in as part of the "prep". This breath typically comes on beat 4 of any tap-off or count-off. In slow passages, this may be redefined as the "and of 4".

The starting/ending position for the mallets should always be in a "V" and be about 8 inches of the instrument. For soft passages, a 3 inch level is acceptable. All players will subdivide with their mallets while breathing in, as mentioned above, prior to their entrance of any phrase.

Implementation of fundamentals

All of the above techniques will be studied ad nauseum during the course of your exercise work. Those exercises will be handed out under separate cover. If you can learn how to play properly then it doesn't matter what you're playing, it will all be great. Always approach the literature with the same work ethic you approach the exercises.

Timpani

The timpanist will be self-sufficient as far as caring for the drums and their heads. Tuning is a constant activity throughout everyday of the year. The timpanist will be expected to know how to change a head, tune a head, make small tuning adjustment and care for the drums and cart.

When the weather changes, for outdoor use, the pedals will give you clear signals. When the pedal slips up on its own, the head needs to be tightened. When it slips down on its own, the head needs to be loosened. Basically, take the head in the direction it is trying to go until the pedal doesn't slip any more.

General ranges:

20" G3 – D4
23" E3 – Bb3
26" C3 – G3
29" G2 – D3
32" C2 – Bb3

Always play a note on the lowest drum possible. Change only to accommodate difficult pedaling passages. A tight head on a big drum sounds better than a loose head on a small drum.

Please take care in protecting the heads of the timpani mallets. Wrap a nylon around the head, secured by a rubber band to preserve the felt.

Please have an electronic tuner with you at all times.

Multi-percussion

Anyone interested in being a multi-percussionist is welcome to be evaluated. Sometimes you will be warming up with the keyboards and other times you will be working on stick control, rudimental and rhythmic exercises. Everyone is required to have the method book Stick Control by George Stone.