

Blue Knights Front Ensemble Technique Packet

Purpose:

- To play comfortably, naturally, and efficiently.
- Uniformity

Our technique will be split into five large categories: Posture, Wrist, Fingers, Stroke and Sound Quality.

Posture:

- Feet shoulder width apart.
- Stand up straight with shoulders rolled back.
- Head should be positioned like you are looking straight ahead. Chin parallel to the ground. Then look down with your eyes not with your head.
- The upper arm should be even with your torso.

Wrong!



Right



Fingers:

- Mallet goes in between the thumb and the first joint from the end of the index finger.
- The middle finger should be wrapped around and for most people touch the palm of the hand.



- Joints should be curved naturally and not inverted.

- Wrap the back fingers around. These should also touch the palm. These fingers should also be relaxed.



- The index finger and middle finger should remain in the exact same position when the back fingers are wrapped around.
- There should be about two inches of mallet shaft sticking out of the back of the hand.
- The end of the mallet should be in the fatty part of the hand.

Wrong!



Wrong!



Right 😊



- All of the fingers should be as relaxed as possible. At any point in time it should be possible to easily pull the mallet out of the hand.

Wrist:

- Hand should be mostly flat on top.



- There shouldn't be a kink between the lower arm and the wrist.
- The wrist should remain extremely close to the playing surface. When we strike our playing surface the mallet shaft should be parallel to the ground.

Stroke:

- The stroke should be executed with the wrist alone.
- Both arms should be relaxed and will slightly move because of the wrist motion.
- Our stroke is called a **Piston Stroke**. It starts at the dynamic we need for a note and ends at the dynamic for the next note.
- Forte to forte preparation.

Beginning



Contact



End



- Forte to piano preparation.

Beginning



Contact



End



- While moving to the height of the next dynamic we will also be moving over our next note or instrument.

Sound Quality:

Imagine a huge football stadium or basketball arena filled with thousands of people, this is our playing venue. Respectively a marimba or vibraphone has very little chance of balancing to a horn line or full drum line, if you've ever played in symphonic band or wind ensemble you know this. So with this in mind our sound quality is extremely important. There are a number of things that control sound quality. First, let's talk about bar placement. As with all playing areas there is not a right or wrong place to play things but rather a desired sound that can be achieved by playing things in appropriate areas. If you look at a keyboard bar there are three nodes (places that the bar does not vibrate as much), 2 right where the string goes through the bar and a smaller one right in the middle. If we play in these areas we will get a very attack-oriented sound, meaning it will sound "ticky." If we play just $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 " off the center of the bar we will get a very resonant full sound so this will be our default playing position. If we are playing something that is faster we will be allowed to play on the very end of the black notes. In general though we should strive to play everything in the center of the bar.

The next thing that controls sound quality is what I call depth. It is important that we don't play the top side of the bar but rather play through the bar, meaning we are aiming for a point 6 inches below the bar rather than the bar itself. As Bruce Lee said when asked about his famous 1 inch punch (he could injure a person from punching them just one inch away), "I aim for a point 6 inches behind their back."

Synopsis:

This ends our general two mallet technique. As stated previously all these elements are meant to make us play with a good sound while being relaxed and efficient. It is extremely important that every person takes each of these elements to heart and gets over their own little foibles in order to move forward. Speaking of moving forward let's talk about some extended techniques.

Alterations to Sound Quality and Visual Appeal:

As stated previously, our default stroke consists of all wrist with a little bit of arm movement by virtue of the wrist moving. Let's describe this ratio between wrist and arm as 90% wrist 10% arm. Since percussion is such a visual instrument along with an audible one, it is good for us to respect the visual representation of music along with the

audible one. In order to do this we are going to smooth our stroke for legato passages and sharpen it up for staccato passages.

First for the staccato we are going to firm up our arm so that only the wrist is moving and then we are going to make the mallet move in a much sharper motion. Keep in mind to not alter your depth while doing this, you are just altering the speed of the stroke. For this our wrist to arm ratio will be 100% wrist 0% arm. Along with this I like to firm up my fulcrum to maintain precise control of the mallet. This technique is especially helpful for fast sixteenth note passages.

Next a legato stroke. This one is a little harder to master since it is substantially different than our default stroke. Whenever the music is moving in long tones or just has more of a relaxed feel we want our motion to represent this. The ideal way for this to happen is for the motion to be continuous and smooth. I think one of the easiest ways to do this is for us to use more arm along with the wrist. Let's put this wrist to arm ratio at about 60% wrist 40% arm. We can also use this feel to represent music that feels extremely weighty. If the music feels like it is prodding along or that it has a more lethargic feel, we can use this technique to give the feeling of adding weight to our stroke.

Keep in mind if we keep the force into the bar constant as we do these different strokes they do not actually change the sound the bar is producing. Next let's change up our sound quality a little bit.

Let's say we are playing a passage that is supposed to be extremely staccato and we've already sharpened up our stroke and firmed up our fulcrum. Do we have any options after that? How about altering our bar placement. As stated before the nodal points on the bar have a much more attack oriented sound. Typically we do not play over the strings unless it is for some type of special effect, but we can play in the exact middle of the bar since it has a good attack and a little bit of sustain afterwards.

How about if we have a passage that has a lot of sharp sounding things and then a short legato section afterwards and we have no time to change mallets? What can we do then? Well with most marimba mallets this answer is extremely easy, all we need to do is raise our wrists so that we are playing on top of the mallet. There is more wrap on that part of the mallet so it is easier to create a rounder sound. Also, this can be helpful is we have a roll passage that begins at niente (nothing) because we can start on the top of the mallet and slowly move to our default playing position.

Front Ensemble

A few tips...

The majority of your time should be practicing with a metronome. Don't teach yourself to play the wrong way.

Know the exercises thoroughly. Nothing is more frustrating for a student than not being prepared for a rehearsal. Learn all of the exercises in all keys and variations and be able to play them in a variety of tempi.

Spend some time playing on other instruments. Less than half of the keyboard players will be on a marimba, yet most players tend to spend most of their time practicing on them. Take some time and play on a vibraphone or xylophone. Be able to play comfortably on all keyboard instruments.

You don't need to be on an instrument all the time. Many of our exercises can be learned playing on the floor. This allows you to focus on your technique without the stress of missing notes. This can be very handy if you have limited access to an instrument.

A word about timpani...

The timpanist is the only soloist in the ensemble. While being a challenge, this also provides a student with a unique perspective and experience. We encourage anyone to consider this position because of its significant role in the percussion program at Carolina Gold.

Keyboard Technique Guidelines

Posture

The way we stand behind our instruments not only allows us to be successful musicians, but also creates an atmosphere of professionalism to the audience. Remember: **before you play your first note, you are judged on how you look behind your instrument.**

Stand with your feet shoulder width apart. Torso should be upright with the shoulders and arms relaxed. How far away from the instrument you stand will be determined by which exercise you are playing. Generally speaking, you should be standing where both manuals are easily reachable. Many players make the mistake of standing too far back, and then have to lunge or overextend to reach the accidental manual. There is no one perfect place; in fact you should be compromising by shifting your weight forward or back depending on which manual you are playing at the time. Note: **While standing with your feet shoulder width apart, place one foot slightly in front of the other. This will give you better balance while shifting between manuals.**

Keyboard Height and Arm Placement

To determine your instruments proper height, let your arms hang down at your side. With your shoulders relaxed, bring your arms up and rest your hands on the keyboard just like you were setting them on a table. Your forearms should be angled slightly down. If the angle is too steep, you need to raise your instrument. If your arms are flat or angled up, you need to lower your instrument.



Mallet Placement



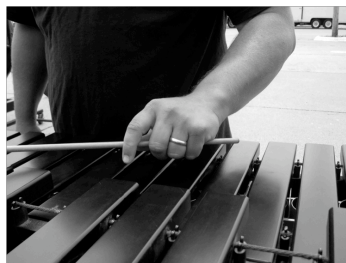
Whenever possible, we strive to play every note in the center of the bar directly over the resonators. While there are many schools of thought on this subject, for our purposes this allows us more consistency in sound quality and projection. This will often mean you will have to play with mallets next to each other.

Rebound

Never do anything to inhibit the free rebounding of the mallet. The grips we use will facilitate this, but remember to allow the mallet to rebound after each stroke. Under no circumstance should you finish an exercise with the mallets down near the bars.

Two-Mallet Technique

Grip



Our two-mallet technique can be described as a “rear fulcrum” grip. The mallet is held primarily with the back two fingers which allows for more arm to be used in the stroke producing a fuller sound and to allow for more rebound.

With about 2 inches of the mallet extending from the back of the hand, wrap the back two fingers around the mallet. Then lightly wrap the remaining fingers around the mallet, with the index finger slightly extended. The rear two fingers hold the mallet and the remaining fingers “guide” the mallet. Avoid pinching the index finger and thumb. This provides a sharp, brittle sound and restricts the rebound. The palms should not be flat, but rather turned slightly inward at a natural and comfortable angle. **The wrist and arm should form a natural angle that puts no stress on the wrist joint.**

Stroke

~~From a resting position about ½” inch above the bar, the motion is initiated by the mallet head, followed by the wrist and arm in a fluid, seamless motion. The mallet head should move directly up, not at an angle. Nor should it move in or away from the body. Upon reaching the top of the stroke, the mallet is brought down by the weight in the back of the hand (where the rear two fingers are holding the mallet). As the mallet comes down, the wrist turns to accelerate the mallet into the bar. The mallet should be completely level as it strikes the exact center of the bar. After contact is made, the looseness in the front of the grip allows the mallet to naturally rebound, thus initiating the next stroke.~~

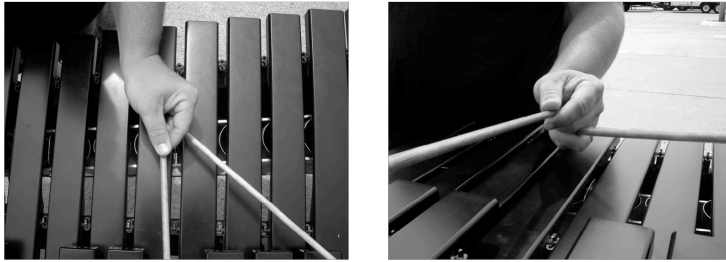
At a moderate tempo, the stroke is 90% wrist motion, 10% arm motion. As the tempo increases, the stroke will become more wrist-oriented and the mallets will stay lower to the bars. As the tempo decreases, the stroke will become more arm-oriented, and the mallets will come higher off of the bars.

Rebound

~~When playing with two mallets, **never let the mallets stop moving.** The mallets will never stop or slow down near the bars, nor will they stop at the top of the stroke.~~

Four-Mallet Technique

Grip



Here, we use the standard Stevens grip when playing with four mallets. With the hand turned sideways in a “handshaking” position, the outside mallet is gripped with the bottom two fingers with no more than a half-inch extending beyond the back of the hand. The inside mallet is balanced between the center of the palm and the curled-in index finger. The middle finger secures the mallet in the palm, while the thumb rests on top of the index finger. For more information on the Musser-Stevens grip, see Leigh Howard Stevens’ “Method of Movement” or Gifford Howarth’s “Simply Four.”

A few common problems regarding 4-mallet grip...

Keep your hands turned on their sides. The angle of the hand is very different from the 2-Mallet technique, but it is very common to confuse the two.

No pinching, please. Only squeeze the fingers enough to keep the mallets from flying out of your hands and across the room. Believe it or not, squeezing your fingers employs muscles in your shoulders. That transference of tension can quickly hamper your ability to play quickly and with a relaxed approach.

Keep the thumb and index finger across from each other. Don't over-curl the index finger or pull back with the thumb. This "locks" the mallets in place and prevents quick interval changes and good tone production. (It also leads to tension in the hands. See "No pinching, please" above.)

Stroke

For the purposes of building strength and flexibility, all four-mallet exercises in this packet should be learned first using only the wrist. Arm motion should only be incorporated once sufficient wrist strength has been achieved.

Prior to the stroke, all four mallets are lifted simultaneously by turning the wrist upward while leaving the arms in their original position. It is to this position that the mallets should return after each and every stroke. Also, only move the mallet or mallets that are being used. The others should remain up. Don't allow stationary mallets to "sag" or "wiggle" along with the others.

Specific stroke types will be discussed along with the corresponding exercises.

6-4-2-1

START ON ANY KEY

♩ = 100

2 MALLETS

4 MALLETS

PIANO

PERCUSSION

2 MALLETS

4 MALLETS

PIANO

PERCUSSION

2

2 MALLETS

4 MALLETS

PIANO

PERCUSSION

R L R L R L R L

2 MALLETS

4 MALLETS

PIANO

PERCUSSION

R L R L R L R L R

SCALES

ERIC KRUSE

MALLETS

RLRL RLRL RLRLRLRLRLRLRLRL ...

PIANO

DRUMS

LLL RRR RLRLRLRLRLRLRLRL RRR RL L L L LRLRLRLRLRLRLRLRL LLL RRR RLRLRLRLRRR

LLL LRLRLRLRLRLRLRLRL LRL LR LRR RLRLRLRLRLRLRLRL R LRRRLRLRLRLRLRLRL LRLRLRLRLRLRLRLRL

RIPPLES

MIKE NEVIN

4 Mallet

1 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 | 1 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 1 2 3 1 2 3 | 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 1 2 3 2 3 4 2 3 4

2 Mallet

L L L L R L R L R R (CONT.)

PIANO

PERCUSSION

R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L (CONT.)

1 2 3 4 2 3 4 1 2 3 2 3 4 1 2 3 | 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 2 3 4 1 2 3 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 2 3 4