

Keyboard Technique

A solid foundation in technique will provide you with the ability to express yourself musically. It is important not to lose sight of this. Perhaps you've seen one or both of these scenarios. A student practices scales all the time and knows all of the exercises, but struggles with show music and solos. Or perhaps you've seen a performer who knows all of the latest solo literature, but can't figure out why they keep hitting wrong notes or why their dynamics are monotone. These scenarios are quite common. Students must learn to apply technique to music and learn to make music while practicing technique.

Stance/body position/posture

Good technique starts with having a good foundation. Good posture will allow your body to most efficiently do its job. Playing keyboard instruments can be a very physical activity, so it's a good idea to give yourself a few guidelines to follow.

Right!



In general, your **feet** should be about shoulder width apart, keeping your **knees** relaxed and your **back** **straight**. Also, **don't cross your legs**. This may sound obvious, but sometimes players have to "travel" to different ranges of the instrument (especially on marimba). If this is necessary, move your stance as little as possible.

Wrong!



Right!



It's important to note how far back from the instrument you are **standing**. It is common for beginners to get very close to the keys, sometimes so close that their pockets are brushing up against the bars. Not only will this dampen the bars, but it puts your arms and elbows at somewhat of a "cocked" position. This will make it difficult to play a proper stroke and stay relaxed.

Wrong!



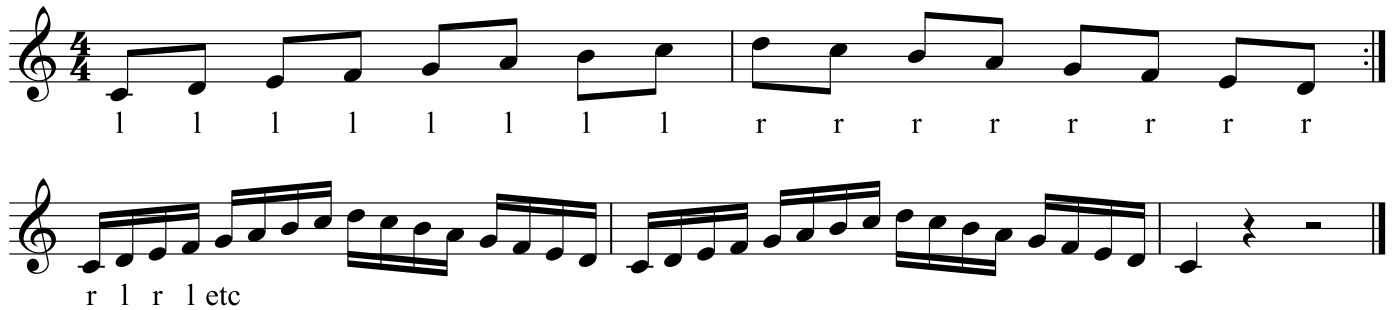
Vibe players will need to keep one foot forward for pedaling. Remember that you don't have to use your entire leg to pedal! Try using just your toes or the front of your foot to pedal. This will help you keep your balance and keep you from "over-pedaling."

Wrist motion

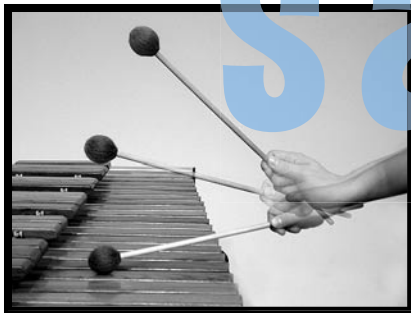
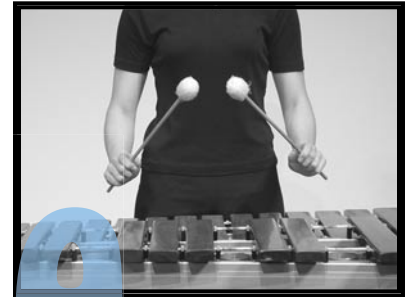
As you strike the first notes on your keyboard of choice, remember that **you must continue to follow all of the previous advice for stance, body position, and grip.**

Please reread the previous sentence...

Play this exercise while keeping the following pointers in mind:

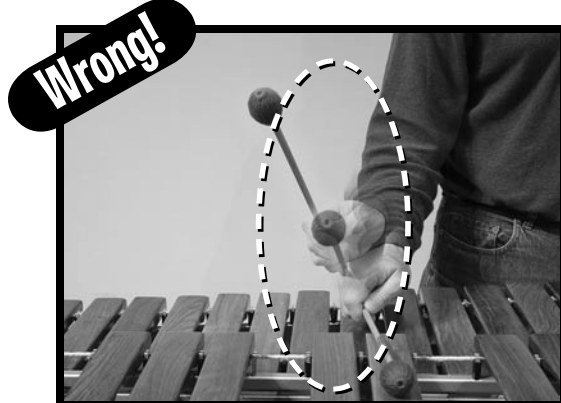


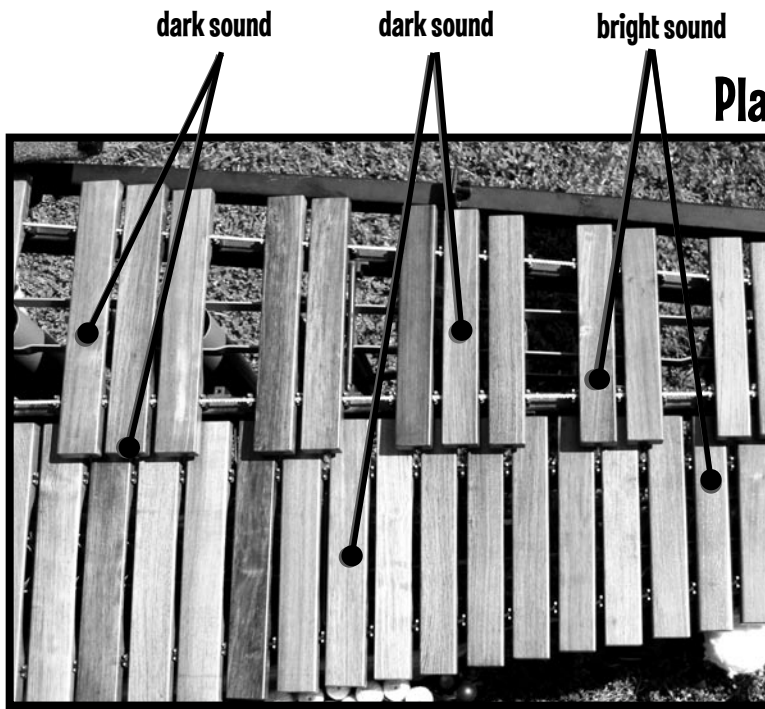
1. Start with your mallets in the **“up” position**. They should be at the height that you want to play each stroke of the exercise.



2. Play with a **continuous and relaxed wrist motion**. This is the **legato stroke**. The fulcrum should stay firm while the back three fingers relax and move with the stick. Again the stroke is mostly wrist at this point, not fingers. The back three fingers can contribute more as the tempo increases.

3. Make sure that your **mallet paths** are straight up and down. You don't want any sliced strokes or ellipses; these are very inefficient and inaccurate strokes.





Playing Zones

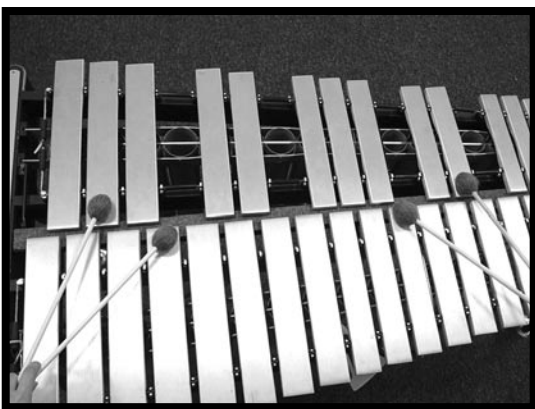
(Marimba, Vibraphone, Xylophone, Glockenspiel)

For all of the keyboard instruments, the tone bars have a number of playing zones. The **dark** playing zones are great for general purpose playing. They have a focused fundamental and a pure sound. The **bright** playing zones have a thin, brittle sound. Though most people shy away from playing in the bright playing zones, these areas of the bar can add a great special effect, just make sure it's obvious that this is your intent!

Warmer sounds can be achieved by observing the relationship of the playing zone to the center of the bar. Different zones will work more comfortably for certain patterns or voicings.

and speed, try to play in the middle of the bar for the natural notes and on the edge for flats and sharps. (see photo). When you play on the edge of the bar, try to play on the angle of the bar, as if you're slicing the mallet head in half. Playing on the center and edge will allow for maximum speed and fluidity. For other situations, such as the *Modular Four-Mallet Exercises* (see page 132), which don't require a lot of movement and speed, play in the middle of the bars for the majority of the time. Ultimately, this is the choice of the instructor. Try to take each musical situation as it comes and then decide what will allow you to play with the most fluidity and the

The big question is: for general purpose playing, do I play on the **edge or in the center**? The answer: it depends. For passages that require a lot of movement



Playing on the back edge of the vibe bars can be very useful when holding four mallets and playing chords which have uncomfortable voicings.

most consistent sound. (Note: if you have extended range marimbas, avoid playing in the center of the bars on the bottom octave. Not only is this the thinnest part of the bar, it is also the **octave node**. Play off-center, over the rail of the resonator tubes).

The **vibraphone and glockenspiel** present some other issues. It is possible to play on the back edge of the natural notes on the vibraphone (over the felt). Be careful with this technique when you have linear (run) passages as it is very difficult to achieve a consistent sound. As for the glockenspiel, try to play in the middle of the bars all of the time. Not only is this the best sound, but it also keeps the bars from hopping off the rails.

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4-mallet grips and techniques

There are two main camps for four-mallet technique: Burton and Stevens. The **Burton technique** was created by jazz vibist, Gary Burton. The **Stevens technique** was created by marimba virtuoso Leigh Howard Stevens. Both techniques have their advantages and disadvantages. The Burton technique can be somewhat easier to grasp at first, due to the fact that the wrist motion is similar to the two-mallet wrist motion. The drawbacks are that it can be a little slower with interval changes and getting large intervals on the low end of the marimba can be more limited. The Stevens technique is a very fast and flexible technique, allowing for quick interval changes and large interval spreads. The drawback with Stevens is that it may take a little longer to feel comfortable with the finger movements and wrist strokes.

It's up to the instructor to decide what technique best suits his or her students. If a student is comfortable and proficient with one technique, there is no need to switch to or learn the other. Some instructors feel the need to have their students play Burton technique on the vibraphone and Stevens on the marimba. Again, this is the instructor's choice, but realize that the two techniques are relatively unrelated and use completely different sets of muscles.

Common question....

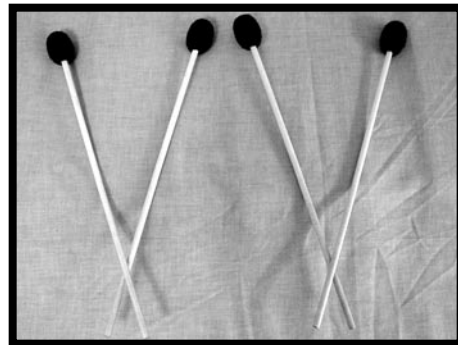
Should all the pit members play with the same 4-mallet grip?

Our answer...

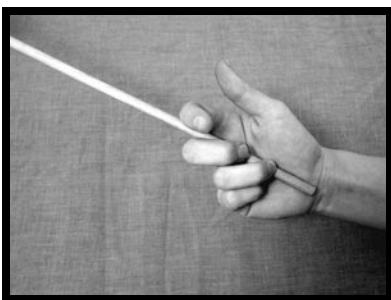
Four-mallet keyboard technique should not be approached in the same manner as marching snare drum technique. We've found that as long as a student is comfortable with a certain grip, as long as it blends musically with the other players, it's perfectly OK to have different students playing with different 4-mallet grips. The main goal is to achieve a unified sound, rather than creating technical "clones" from player to player.

BURTON GRIP AND TECHNIQUE

This is a "cross-stick" grip. The mallet shafts actually cross over the top of each other.



Notice in this picture the outside mallet is over the inside mallet (from the player's perspective).



To get the mallets in your hands properly, start with the outside mallet. The mallet should be placed between your index and middle fingers. The mallet should be anchored to your palm with the tip of the ring finger.

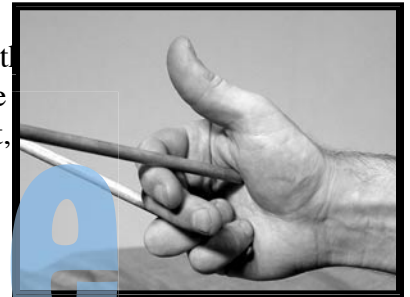
STEVENS GRIP AND TECHNIQUE

This is an “independent” grip. This means that the **mallets do not cross** and they move independently of each other.



Start by getting the outside mallet in position. Place the mallet shaft between the ring finger and middle finger, then wrap the ring finger and pinky around the mallet. Notice that only a small “nub” of mallet is sticking out past the pinky finger. If too much mallet is sticking out, you will not be able to reach the larger intervals. In other words, don’t waste the mallet!

Now you can set the inside mallet. Place the end of the mallet under the “meaty” base of your thumb. Then let the mallet rest on the first knuckle of your index finger. The index finger should be curved and relaxed. At this point, the inside mallet should be able to hang in your hand without assistance from your thumb or middle finger.

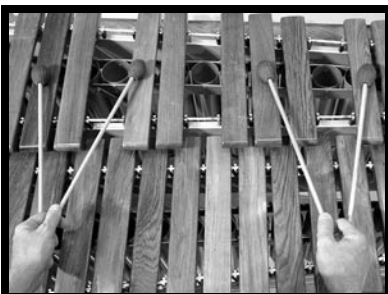


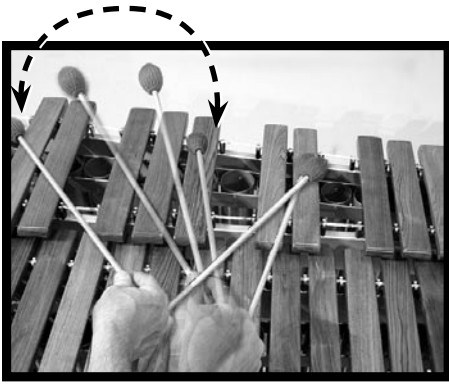
Now place the middle finger at the base of the mallet...

...and gently rest the thumb on top. The contact point of your thumb, once again, will resemble the two-mallet fulcrum.



Make sure, at this point, that the thumb is facing the ceiling and the index finger is curved and pointing “in.” Now, relax. You will notice with this grip, that you don’t have to “grip” the mallets. The **mallets simply hang in place** in a very relaxed hand. In fact, this concept is crucial. Each finger serves a very important function in changing the interval size. If they are tense, they can’t do their jobs! As with the Burton grip, when you hold your mallets, as described above, your interval size will probably be a fourth or a fifth.





While all of this is happening, the middle finger will extend out slightly to create the “shelf” for the mallet. If you do this correctly, the mallet head will draw a nice arc in the air. Be patient with this process. It’s all about coordination and it takes some time to develop this skill. This is something that you can practice *away* from the keyboard.

After you’ve practiced the rotating method and developed a nice curved arc, you can move on to the “throwing” method.

This concept is very simple. You will use the energy of the rebound or upstroke to “throw” the mallet into position. Start by playing a few quarter notes at a small interval. When you’re ready, throw the mallet, using the same curved arc, out into position. Your index finger, thumb, and middle finger will still make contact with the mallet to help guide it into place. Once again, this is a coordination exercise that can be practiced *away* from the instrument.

“speed bump”



One common problem when trying to get out into the large interval is the mallet getting caught on the skin at the base of your fingers. This is known as the “speed bump.” The solution to this is quite simple: try pulling your inside mallet out about 1/16 of an inch. Now you have “less mallet” in your hand and it should glide right over the “speed bump.”



Do not extend ring and pinky finger while increasing intervals.

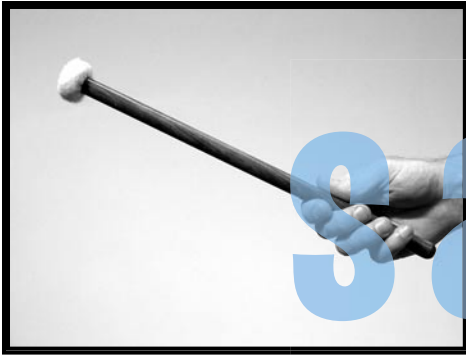
Another very common problem when increasing the interval is extending the ring finger and pinky finger. Notice how the back of the ring and pinky fingers are in a straight line with the back of the hand. This is tension and should be avoided. If this is happening to you, chances are when your middle finger comes out to form the “shelf” it’s taking those other fingers with it. It will take some time to develop finger independence. To check yourself, try practicing interval changes in a mirror.

As you can see, there are quite a few things to think about with this technique. This is what can make the learning process of the Stevens technique a little slower. The benefits, however, are an increased speed and flexibility, which no other technique can deliver. If this technique intrigues you, run, don’t walk, to your local music store and purchase Leigh Howard Stevens’ book, ***Method of Movement***. This book contains everything you would ever need to know about the technique and it’s written by the man himself!

BASIC TIMPANI GRIP

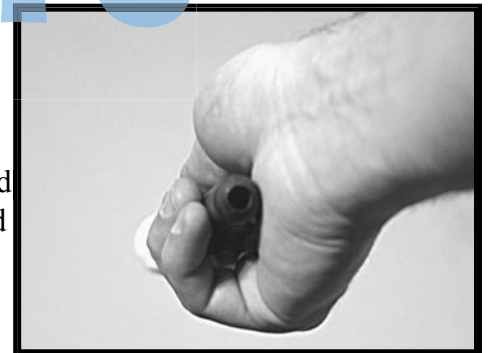
The timpani grip has many of the same characteristics as the basic two-mallet grip. It also revolves around the concept of a relaxed and natural hand position. If you let your hand hang by your side you'll notice the natural curve of all your fingers. Keep this look in mind as you go through the following setup:

Place the mallet between the **first knuckle of your index finger and the pad of your thumb**. This is a very important contact point as it is the **fulcrum, or pivot point**, of the mallet. Start with your fulcrum **one-third of the way up the mallet shaft**. Unlike keyboard playing, seldom will you choke up on the mallet.



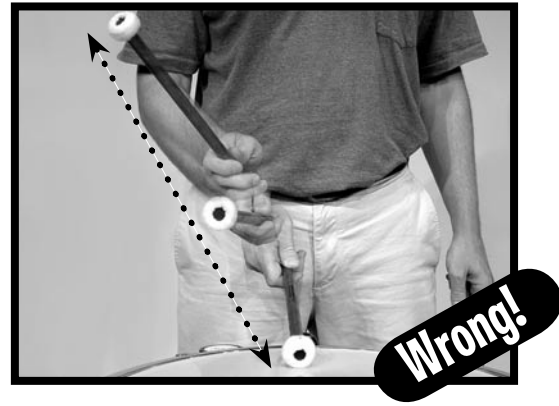
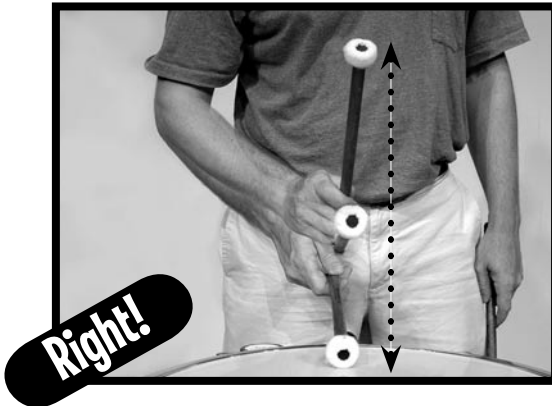
The **other fingers** should wrap around the mallet in a curved and relaxed manner.

Leave a little space between the mallet shaft and the palm of your hand. This will help to relax your stroke and allow you to use the natural rebound.



When your hands are set and ready to play, your **palms will face each other** with your thumbs facing up. This should be a relaxed position. **The mallet shafts will be close to parallel and the mallet heads will be from 6 to 8 inches apart.**

3. The timpani have as much or more natural rebound than any other percussion instrument. Use this to rebound back to your starting position. This is the rule that is most often broken! Remember, the more *relaxed* energy you put into the stroke, the more rebound you have to play with.



4. Make sure that your **mallet paths** are straight up and down. You don't want any sliced strokes or ellipses; these are very inefficient and inaccurate strokes. This will be especially important when you start to roll.

5. Make sure that your **arms and elbows stay relaxed** during this whole process. They should not contribute to the stroke motion. These "arm" strokes are very inaccurate and harsh sounding. *Rotate* from the elbow, don't *lift* from the elbow. This is another rule that is often broken.



6. Strive for a **consistent sound** between each note on each hand. This will require a consistent firmness between your fulcrums, a consistent velocity of the mallet, a consistent playing zone on the head, a consistent height of the stroke, and striking with the same part of the mallet head each time.

7. If a hand is not playing it should stay relaxed and in the "up" position.

8. All the **concepts of "touch"** on page 109 will also apply to the timpani. By adjusting the firmness in your fulcrum you can produce a variety of articulation qualities with each set of mallets. For example, if you play with a firm fulcrum with a softer set of mallets, you can still articulate fast passages on a larger drum. You don't need to go to a harder mallet unless you want a brighter sound.

9. Like the vibraphone or chimes, the timpani have a long sustain. You must learn to control the length of the sound by **dampening**. To dampen, place your finger tips on the playing zone of the head. This may take some coordination at first, but dampening is an essential element of playing timpani.



TUNING AND PEDALING

After you have a good grasp on matching pitches and singing intervals, it's time to start to tune the drums and play. Here are some pointers for successful tuning and pedaling.

1. There are several ways of checking the pitch of the drums. Start by getting your ear close to the head. Try to do this by balancing yourself on the stool, not by holding on to the rims or heads with your free hand. To hear the pitch some people **tap the head** with their fingers, some tap the head very lightly with a mallet, and some sing their desired pitch into the head (the drum will resonate when the head is in tune). There are great performers who swear by all of these methods, but tapping the head with the mallet tends to give the truer pitch of the drum. Sometimes when you tap with your finger it's hard to hear the fundamental pitch of the drum, and singing the pitch can be very difficult when other pitches of the ensemble are interfering and possibly making the drum resonate.

2. Always **tune from low-to high**, scooping up to the pitch. There's no real science in explaining this, other than common sense. When tuning down from high to low, you are releasing tension on the head. Some of that tension may still remain where the head contacts the bearing edge of the bowl. Then, once the head is struck with a mallet, that "stuck" tension is released, and will result in a pitch that is flat. In tricky pedaling passages (i.e. a descending, pedaled line), a good timpanist will know to compensate for this by not moving the pedal down quite as much.

3. Related to the above tip, if you have **tuning gauges** on your drums, use them only as a gauge (pun intended). It's very tempting for timpanists, especially less-experienced players, to rely on these devices. They are never 100% accurate. More often than not, they're inaccurate. There is no substitute for a good ear.

4. Listen to the ensemble. The best reference of how "in tune" you sound is to check it against the band. Even if you think you are right with your pitch pipe, if it's not in tune with the band, it's out of tune! Realize that the pitch of the ensemble *will* change throughout the performance. Just because you're in tune at the beginning, doesn't mean you'll be in tune at the end. Be prepared to constantly adjust the pitch.

5. There are times when you have to **pedal passages without time to check the pitches**. Passages that require this kind of pedaling should be worked out extensively. When pedaling through sequential notes on one drum, avoid the "trombone effect" by moving the pedal in a quick motion, at the last possible instant. It sometimes helps to feel as if your foot and hand are playing a "flam," making the foot the grace note, and the hand the actual pitch. As always, make sure you can sing the passages first.