

FRONT ENSEMBLE TECHNIQUE

By Shilo Stroman

The overall technique is always relaxed with quality of sound as the highest priority.

Mallet Instruments:

Posture: from the ground up...

We will begin with feet shoulder-width apart. Your legs should be relaxed, knees slightly flexed. Rigidity will greatly inhibit your range of motion, so its best to maintain your flexibility form the beginning and start forming good habits on even the simplest exercises. Keep your back and neck straight and allow your arms to hang naturally at your sides. There should be NO TENSION in your neck or shoulders. Stand with your chin up at all times and look down your nose to see the instrument as opposed to hunching over to see the keys! Our posture and physical approach to the instrument will be one of the first indications to the judge and audience exactly what kind of ensemble we are.

Everything we do must be professional and confident down to the most miniscule details. The professionalism we present ourselves with will earn us points before we play a single note!

Unlike snare drum, there is no rebound from a mallet instrument. In most ways, our approach to mallet instruments is exactly opposite of snare drum.

Fulcrum:

The fulcrum is created with the middle, ring and pinky fingers wrapping completely around the mallet. There should be no tension in the back fingers, yet at the same time the fingers should remain on the mallet at all times (the tips of the back fingers remaining in constant contact with the palm of the hand). There should be 2" of mallet sticking out the back of the hand. The index finger and thumb merely aim the mallet and should not squeeze the mallet at any time. Place the mallet at the first joint of the index finger and set the thumb on lightly. There should be minimal pressure between the index finger and thumb: tension will only create a choked or forced



sound. This also reduces the amount of energy that goes into producing a stroke. Both hands should angle away from one another slightly, as opposed to the tops of the hands being flat.

Stroke:

The basic stroke is always initiated from the wrist (piston stroke). It should be emphasized that wrist is 99% of the stroke and arm is added only to complement the wrist to enhance projection. Fingers are not used to produce most strokes, merely to lightly grip and aim the mallets at the desired keys. The stroke starts up and ends up. This stroke type allows for a resonant sound and speed toward the next note.

Timpani:

Sizes and Ranges: Knowing the sizes and ranges of a standard set of timpani are critical for any timpanist. This information assists in choosing specific drums to be used and determining approximate location of the indicated pitches within the range of the drum. A complete set of timpani is typically 4 or 5 drums with the optional drum being the smallest one (20"). Sizes and ranges are as follows (note that ranges are approximate and the best sound for each drum is in the mid-high portion of the range): 32" - D to A 29" - F to C (octave below middle C) 26" - Bb to F 23" - D to A 20" - F to C (middle C) Timpani are typically set up with the largest drum on the players left (American style).

Tuning: The first and most important step in tuning timpani is knowing the pitch to which you are tuning the drum. Though this seems obvious, many beginning timpanists neglect the time necessary to establish the pitch in their head before striking the drum. Regardless of the source (tuning fork, pitch pipe, mallet instrument, etc.), the player must establish pitch before attempting to match it. After establishing pitch and choosing the appropriate drum for that pitch, move the pedal to a spot a bit below where that pitch should be. Tap the drum once lightly with your finger and move the pedal up until the pitch on the drum matches the one in your head. Always move the pedal from below the pitch. This makes tuning easier to hear and avoids the risk of the drum settling lower in pitch while playing.

Posture: You should sit on the front third of the timpani stool. You can rest your feet on the pedals of the 29" and 26" drums or on the ground if height allows. Its very important that your back remain straight in order to rotate around the drums correctly.

Getting around the drums: We will use the American way of setting up the drums, or largest on the performers left to smallest on the performers right. When moving from drum to drum, your playing spot should not change. When rotating to the 32" drum you right arm will touch your torso and your left arm will be angled in toward your torso so your wrists are parallel. When playing the 23" drum its just the opposite idea.

Playing Spot: All playing and tuning should take place in the same spot on the head. That spot is directly above the pedal approximately 1/3 of the way toward the center of the drum (2-4 inches from the edge depending on the size of the drum). The desired result should be a full and resonant sound that sustains for several seconds. Playing too close to the center reduces the sustain of the drum. Playing too close to the edge produces a thinner quality of sound.

Grip and Stroke: We will use French grip which is similar to the basic snare drum grip except the hand is rotated 90 degrees with the thumb facing up. This grip allows proper movement around the drums as well as good roll control. The stroke is 99% wrist with the fingers used only for rolls. The stroke starts up and ends up (piston style). This allows for increased articulation and a resonant sound. There should be 2 triangles formed in your grip. The first one is from the beads of the mallets to your wrists, the second is from your wrists to your elbows.



ROLLS: Timpani rolls are performed as single stroke rolls (like mallet percussion). The speed of the roll will typically be faster on the smaller drums or when the pitch is in the upper range of the drum. For a more legato sound, mallets may be separated by as much as 6-8 inches, although they still must remain the same distance from the rim.

General Concepts:

IF YOU MOVE TOGETHER, YOU PLAY TOGETHER. There is no exception to this rule. Therefore, technique and uniformity are of the utmost importance. We must strive to look and sound the same at all times.

Placement of the mallets on the keys should be dead center. The edge of the keys should be used only when speed is a concern.

Preps will be given by the section leader to establish a common tempo among the front ensemble in relationship to the hornline and drumline. Preps are not intended for a judge or the audience to see. Preps are produced by the hands and mallets ONLY and should not include any head or body movements.

The way we present ourselves is of utmost importance to performing at the level we strive to attain. Proper care and maintenance of the instruments, continually cleaning all the equipment and looking the part of a professional musician are all part of the image we make for ourselves. For that reason, it is expected that the instruments and equipment

look and sound superb at all times. Before any performance all equipment must be cleaned thoroughly, heads tuned and all necessary mallets prepared.

The front ensemble is approached in some ways just like an indoor percussion ensemble. We do not stand at attention with our sticks in. Instead, we stand at the ready, using good posture. Hands are placed left over right in front of the body, with or without mallets in the hands. Stay relaxed, look calm and be ready for anything. Perform at all times. Meaning, when you have rests printed on your page you are still “in” the performance.