



Front Ensemble Technique Manual

Technique Outline

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The following is a compilation of the basic technical aspects addressed on a regular basis in the Music City Mystique front ensemble. The approach to the instruments and the means with which we achieve our goals are customized to our ideals of sound, performance, and representing Music City Mystique in the best possible way. The techniques discussed herein may therefore not be appropriate for some mediums of performance (I.E. Concert Percussion Ensemble, Wind Ensemble, Orchestra, etc.)

General Considerations

The way we present ourselves is of the 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, membranes tuned, and “show” equipment (mallets, towels, cymbals, etc.) prepared.

The front ensemble is approached in some ways just like a 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. Be prepared!

Posture...from the ground up

We will begin with our feet shoulder width apart. Your legs should be relaxed, knees slightly bent. Rigidity will greatly inhibit your range of motion, so it is best to maintain your flexibility from 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 side. 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 instruments (as opposed to hunching over to see the keys!)

Things to keep in mind:

- Avoid crossing your feet while playing and never stand with your feet crossed. In general, this also will inhibit your range of motion and prevent you from moving fluidly behind the instrument.
- When moving from instrument to instrument, use large, graceful steps as opposed to shuffling with small steps. You will move much faster this way and look less frantic. Remember, we are professional in everything we do at all times.
- Vibraphone players should stand with their right toes on the pedal at all times. Do not use the entire foot – it is not necessary to exert that much energy. Instead, keep your weight distributed evenly between both feet and use only the toes for pedaling.
- Marimba players should be flexible with their body position to the instrument. There will be times when one foot may need to be placed in front of the other to shift between the upper and lower manuals of the instrument or make large lateral shifts behind the instrument. All of these motions should be done gracefully, keeping in mind that people will be watching your every movement.
- It is easy to hunch and form bad habits while sitting on a timpani stool. **SIT UP STRAIGHT!** It is a proven fact; the better your posture, the more attuned you are to the things around you. Good posture will also allow you to move from pedal to pedal more easily, as well as do your neck and back a favor (since you will be spending a lot of time on this stool!)

Our posture and physical approach to the instrument will be one of the first indications to the judge and the audience exactly what kind of ensemble we are. Everything we do must be professional, charismatic, and confident – down to the most miniscule details. The professionalism we present ourselves with will earn us points before we play a single note!

There is no need for “choreographed” movements in the front ensemble. Visuals, dynamics performed with the upper torso of the body, and other non-characteristic movements are not necessary and actually hinder the performance (refer to “Choreographed Expressivity in the Pit” by Brad Fuster, Percussive Notes, December 1998). Performers must look the part and move with the music without over-exaggerating to the point of obscurity.

Two Mallet Technique

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

First and foremost, the fulcrum is created with the middle, ring and pinky fingers wrapping completely around the mallet. This is contrary to snare drum with the fulcrum placed between the index finger and thumb (to utilize the rebound of the stick).

Rationale for the back finger approach:

- We must create our own rebound off the instrument. This allows us to control the mallet at all times.
- The more of your hand is on the mallet, the more weight is distributed to the keyboard. This increases tone production tremendously.
- Enhanced projection of “concert hall” marimba and vibraphones sounds played within gymnasiums.
- This allows the index finger to remain relaxed, which promotes legato tone (by preventing over-squeezing with the index finger and thumb.)

There should be no tension in the back fingers, yet at the same time the fingers should remain on the mallet at all times (picture the tips of the back fingers remaining in constant contact with the palm of the hand). The back fingers will not move AT ALL except when performing extremely fast passages that require more finger flexibility. These fingers are the anchor of the grip – they provide more contact to the mallet and thus are a large part of dynamic and tone production. There should be 2” of mallet sticking out of the back of the hand.

The index finger and thumb merely aim the mallet, and should not squeeze the mallet at any time. Similar to Steven’s Method four mallet technique, the index finger should be RELAXED, OFF THE STICK. Place the stick on the first joint of the index finger, and set the thumb on top lightly. There should be minimal pressure between the index finger and thumb, to prevent tension, which in turn prevents a choked or forced sound. This also reduces the amount of energy that goes into producing a stroke.

The thumbs should face one another, just like matched snare drum grip. If the hands are turned over similar to French timpani grip, control of the mallet will be lost. This will inhibit accuracy and tone production.

The basic stroke is always initiated from the wrist. It should be emphasized that wrist is 99% of the stroke, and arm is added only to complement the wrist and enhance projection outdoors. Fingers are not used to produce strokes, merely to lightly grip and aim the mallets at the desired keys.

More technical info:

Preps: Whenever we begin an exercise, musical segment, or piece of music, we will establish a common tempo from a single tempo source. Typically, the section leader will begin with 2 prep strokes which will be followed by 2 preps by all members of the front ensemble. The number of preps, and person giving the preps may vary according to the situation. Preps should be small and precise – the hands and mallets are all that should move – no arms, body, or head movements. Preps are not intended for a judge or the audience to see.

Rule #1: 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 mallets on the keys: For indoor purposes, we will use the dead center of the keys (directly over the resonators). This may be contrary to other schools of thought, but again this is customized to our approach. The edge of the keys should be used only when is absolutely necessary (due to speed or implication from four mallet stickings and voicings.)

Four Mallet Technique

The approach to four mallet playing is very similar to the Stevens method on both marimba and vibraphone. The use of the Stevens method on the vibraphone is meant to attain a more uniform sound and technical approach; if mallet dampening or double strokes are to be played, Burton grip may be used.

Basic idea to keep in mind with four mallet technique:

- Keep the index fingers relaxed at all times (as well as all other fingers)
- Keep the mallets above the instrument by turning the wrists back not by raising the arms. (The mallets should return to this position whenever they are not in motion, similar to the manners in a piano.)
- Keep the hands as low to the instrument as possible. (Your knuckles should be low enough to rub against the edge of the keys.)
- Remain relaxed in grip and smooth in motion at all times.

The approach to the instrument in an indoor environment must be aggressive, even at the softest dynamic levels. Just as an athlete condition himself for his sport, you should practice with heavy mallets to begin developing muscle and control at all dynamic levels. But, it is important to note that there should be no tension in the grip as this will only hinder a performer's sound.

For a more detailed description of four mallet technique, consult Leigh Howard Steven's "Method of Movement." The material covered in the Music City Mystique technical program are only a small portion of the ideas covered in this text.

Stroke Types

Each stroke should be relaxed in nature exerting weight through the keys, yet allowing the mallets to rebound off the keyboard. Wrist will be the primary force for creating strokes.

The piston stroke concept will be used primarily with four mallet technique. The general premise behind the Piston Stroke is that the mallets start up, perform a stroke that is quick in motion, and end back where the mallet started. The only part of the body used to create this stroke is the wrist. The stroke is somewhat rigid and technical; uses no preparation and no unnecessary motion. The rationale is simple – conserve energy and prepare for the next stroke. This may be vertical or both vertical and horizontal (shifting to new tones).

The upstroke is the default two mallet stroke and utilizes the same basic premise as the piston stroke. The one major difference is that the upstroke is more relaxed and does allow for a preparation. The mallets should move smoothly from stroke with the head of the mallet never coming to rest. Unlike the piston stroke, the upstroke may or may not use arm depending on dynamic level. This stroke will be used with 2 mallets and with 4 mallets only after the piston stroke is mastered.

With both piston and upstrokes, dynamic contrast is achieved through stroke length NOT change in grip pressure!

- Do not mistake soft dynamic levels for a weak approach to the instrument. Strokes in which the wrist breaks and the mallet is used to “pull the sound out” of the instrument are an unnecessary change in technique. This contradicts our approach to the instrument and compromises our sound.
- Do not “hammer nails” or overplay when attempting to achieve louder dynamics.

The legato stroke is used for slow and sometimes high volume playing. Rather than using only wrist, the stroke also employs the forearms rotating from the elbow to all weight and assist with sound production. Similar to the upstroke, the head of the mallet will be in constant motion during passages that use the legato stroke. The mallet head will generally move more slowly than when using other strokes.

Technical Alterations to Achieve Legato Strokes:

- Relaxed grip pressure
- Slower strokes
- Rounded off, smooth flowing motions
- Absolutely no tension in the upper body, including arms and hands (although this should not be an alteration from the previous technique!)