

# A Learning Approach to Marimba Performance

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Several long-term and short-term goals can be applied to the process of learning a new piece of music: sound quality, technique, correct notes/rhythms, dynamics, phrasing, and performance presence. The order listed does not denote level of importance, but rather the order at which musicians learn a new piece of music. The first two aspects, however, are part of a long-term process spanning the course of one's career. Sound quality and proper technique should become natural characteristics of everyone's playing, regardless of the music. The other four aspects are short-term goals related to the specific piece of music being prepared at a particular moment.

## **Sound Quality**

Sound quality is one of the most important aspects of playing any instrument. In regards to the marimba, several salient aspects include playing areas, mallet selection, and technique. Percussionists need to train their ears to hear a good marimba sound and to understand how and why that is different from a bad marimba sound. Once this is achieved, players must train their hands to execute a good sound on a consistent basis.

Poor sound quality on the marimba is usually thin, dull, and choked; therefore, a full, rich, and resonant sound is optimal. There are three general playing areas on a keyboard. First, the center of bar has the most fundamental, not as much

overtone resonance, and a poignant attack. Secondly, just off-center has the largest gamut of overtones and a strong fundamental tone. Playing just off center also has a slightly warmer attack than playing in the center. The node, or point at which the string runs through the bar, has almost no resonance or fundamental tone. This area is most often used for special effects. In regards to the upper manual, the edge of the bar has a similar sound quality to hitting just off-center; however, there is a slightly different sound quality between the edge and just off center.

Factors such as desired sound quality, tempo, range, and physical motion will determine whether or not you can play just off-center or on the edges of the accidentals. I prefer to aim for off-center, regardless of range, in order to achieve a consistent sound. Overall, marimbists must practice to achieve consistency with their playing areas. Train your ear by listening for changes in sound quality, and strive for consistency that can be applied in your exercises, warm-ups, sight-reading, and ultimately, your performances.

Mallet selection also affects the sound. There are many brands and types of mallets on the market, so experimenting and finding what you are comfortable with, both in feel and sound production, is important. Mallets should have enough weight to create the rich sounds desired, as the mallets should do most of the work

for you in regards to producing that full, rich sound.

## **Technique**

There are many different schools of thought in regards to technique. Overall, whatever technique you use, the end result should allow you to *always* produce a good sound without having to think about it. Your technical motions should encompass *relaxed* and *natural* movements and should not hinder achievement in the other aspects of playing.

As previously mentioned, technique can directly affect sound quality. An exercise I use with my students is to have them play a scale exercise using different amounts of pressure. They first play with a tight fulcrum and no wrist motion, and then they play with a relaxed fulcrum, wrist motion, and added arm weight. Instantly, they can hear and feel the difference between the two methods. I also have them stand on one end of the room with their eyes closed as I demonstrate these two methods. With their eyes closed, their sense of hearing is heightened and they are able to detect aural differences between the two.

Without discussing specific techniques, there are important technical building blocks applicable to four-mallet and two-mallet performance. These fundamentals are the rudiments of mallet playing. Isolating, practicing, and developing the following techniques will allow you to learn music easier and much faster.

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Four-mallet rudiments/sticking patterns include double vertical, single alternating, single independent, double lateral, and triple lateral stroke types (names adopted from Leigh Howard Stevens' *Method of Movement for Marimba*, Keyboard Publications Productions).

Two-mallet rudiments include techniques found in standard keyboard literature. The patterns include scales (step-wise motion), intervals (thirds/fourths/fifths/etc.), arpeggios (chord patterns), double stops (used at different intervals), and double strokes (used with step-wise or larger interval patterns).

Applying these fundamental stroke types in different warm-up and exercise patterns in different key areas will improve motion between the upper and lower manuals and knowledge of all scales. Breaking down two-mallet playing to the basics helps build stronger technique. This allows one to concentrate on making music while playing with relaxed and natural motions.

These two and four-mallet patterns and exercises can be found in my method book, "Keyboard Fundamentals, with Play-Along Tracks", published by Innovative Percussion. The play-along tracks contain a wide variety of musical styles and tempos to allow students of all ages to enjoy practicing the fundamentals. Large posters containing the two and four-mallet fundamentals (similar to the drum rudiment posters) are also included with every book.

### Correct Notes/Rhythms

One must learn the notes accurately and be able to play them correctly on a consistent basis. Although this is stating the obvious, this assertion is extremely important. When first learning a new piece of music, the tendency is to learn the notes and rhythms at too fast a pace, which leads to inconsistent accuracy. If a foundation of the correct notes and rhythms is not present, the application process of the other aspects discussed here is more time-consuming and frustrating.

Keep the tempo slow until the notes and rhythms can be performed correctly. The final tempo will be much easier to perform and will feel more comfortable if the notes and rhythms are part of your natural kinesthetic motions.

Whatever the final tempo is desired for a performance, one must progress naturally and not force things; the correct notes and rhythms, and music, will suffer if a faster tempo is the player's primary goal.

### Dynamics

Dynamics are very important for expressing the composer's ideas in greater detail. Without dynamics, music is lifeless. While dynamics are usually clearly marked by the composer and editor, it is the performers' discretionary decisions that will determine the final result. Since you can't always ask composers about specific details of their music, you need to interpret what they wanted.

As musicians, we also want and need to be able to express the music the way we hear it in our own mind. This is a fine line between "what the composer wants" and "what the performer wants." Although there is flexibility, it is the performer's responsibility to fully express the composer's intentions in his or her own way.

To fully communicate the musical thoughts, ideas, and expressions within a piece of music, one needs a wide dynamic spectrum and must demonstrate a clear difference between each dynamic marking. Exaggerating the dynamics will help deliver the music to the audience. First, play the dynamics exactly how the composer has written. Then, experiment with some of your own ideas and make notes in the music to ensure consistency regarding musical sections you would like to adjust and certain dynamic relationships you would like to portray. Ask yourself the following questions. "What relationships do I want to provide between a *mezzo-forte* and a *mezzo-piano* marking?" "What is the form of the piece, and how do the different sections differ in terms of dynamic expression?" "How should the stylistic differences between one section marked *forte* and a different section also marked *forte* be related or not related?"

Listen to professional recordings to gain ideas from the experts. I recommend listening to the recording to see if you enjoy the piece, then putting it away until you have learned the notes yourself. Once you have lived with the piece on your own, then go back and listen to the recording again.

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This will allow you to make your own musical decisions and not merely emulate the other performer.

### Phrasing

The phrasing aspects of a piece deal with “big-picture” ideas. When performing music, one must know the overall form and the structure of the different melodic and rhythmic motives that give shape to the piece. Knowing where the “peaks” and “valleys” occur in the music will help you accurately communicate the music to an audience.

The overall form of the music (e.g., sonata, theme/variations, ternary, etc.) should be analyzed and then used to break down the smaller sections to find similarities and contrasting elements. Mark primary cadences and determine their importance in the overall form. In regards to phrases, use your own musical judgment to determine where phrases exist and what to do with those phrases. Experiment with different ways of phrasing a section of the music. Because of harmonic and motivic elements, the musical motion is constantly moving forward, and it is the performer’s duty to determine where arrival points exist within phrases and sections of music. These phrasing aspects could be applied in the early learning stages, but should be clearer once the piece becomes performance-ready.

Understanding the form and phrase structure, along with motivic and harmonic elements, allows you to create a clear musical direction and generate interest and unity throughout the piece. Determine what works best for the music and write it down, although a good piece will oftentimes speak for itself; sometimes the performer just needs to get out of the way and let the music speak.

### Performance Presence

The previous five aspects apply foremost to learning a piece of music. This last aspect deals with delivering your

interpretation of a composer’s musical ideas to an audience. Musicians have a great opportunity when they perform, as they can express their emotions and feelings about

a piece to effectively communicate their ideas. But one aspect that gives a performance that certain “spark” is the performer’s stage presence.

Your presence will help engage the audience at a much higher level. Percussionists have a great advantage over other musicians because our instruments provide us the opportunity to be extremely visual. In regards to marimba, we have about nine feet of space on a five-octave marimba to move back and forth, and we are holding two, four, or even six mallets at a time. The added visual stimuli our natural motions create are also bigger than other instrumentalists that move a



bow, depress keys/valves, or “tickle the ivories.”

There are two categories of stage presence: what you can do on stage and what not to do on stage. If you haven’t worked on the following aspects, it might take some time to feel comfortable instilling these into your performance; therefore, using a mirror or video-taping yourself will aid in your improvements.

Facial expressions and body movements can help engage the audience as well as communicate your ideas to the audience. When playing a fun and light piece, don’t be afraid to enjoy the music (smiling is okay); if the audience sees you enjoying playing the piece, they will likely enjoy listening to it. Without over-exaggerating your facial expressions, small differences will make mood changes flow from one to the next. Elation and anxiety have two different contexts, as well as two different facial expressions. Instead of forcing or over-planning these actions, become immersed in the music and let your natural facial and body motions perform as well.

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Particular body movements can help various aspects of the music. They can set the mood for the opening of the piece and should communicate the differences before the first note is ever played. For example, the beginning of “Time for Marimba” by Minoru Miki has a different energy than “Two Movements for Marimba” by Toshimitsu Tanaka. Your body movements can also help to denote phrases and provide seamless transitions. For instance, if there is a sudden half cadence preceded by a rise in musical intensity, the audience will probably be holding its breath until the resolution. Bring the intensity to a higher level by not moving a muscle, and hold your breath before resolving the chord. You can consciously engage the audience by utilizing the other five aspects and also by your presentation of the music.

Regarding what *not* to do on stage, don’t “tell” the audience that you missed a note. Some will know that you made a mistake, but most will not. To the audience, everything you are doing should seem effortless and intentional. Never let the audience know something didn’t go as planned, as this will only deter from your overall performance. No matter what happens, stay calm, forget about what went wrong, and move on.

Overall, you should display confidence. Most likely you worked on the music for a long time and spent countless hours preparing for that particular performance. Be assured of yourself and focus on the positive aspects of your playing.

### **Conclusion**

As musicians, we are constantly striving to achieve performance perfection. While this is nearly impossible, there are ways we can continue to pursue a higher level of performance. By combining long-term goals of sound quality and technique with short-term goals associated with a particular piece of music, we can attain an approach towards a more complete performance.

*Dr. Brian Zator is the Percussion Area Coordinator at Texas A&M University-Commerce, having joined the faculty in 2001. He has performed as a soloist on five continents, at Carnegie Hall, and recently released two marimba CD’s on Equilibrium Records: Zamiki: Music for Solo Marimba, and Zoomorphs: Chamber Music with Marimba and Percussion. Dr. Zator is currently President-Elect of the Percussive Arts Society, and will be President from 2017-2018. Within Texas, he is the Chair of the Percussion PML Selection Committee, given multiple clinics at TMEA and TBA, judged the Texas State Solo and Ensemble Contest, and has selected the TMEA All-State percussion etudes three times.*