

# Teaching Mallet Instruments: Let's Start Differently!

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Throughout my years of teaching percussion students how to play mallet instruments in North Texas, I have consistently come across a few common problems. While students easily identify notes on the page and the instrument, and can perform technical exercises well, their sight-reading skills are weak and they are slow to learn solos, region etudes, and ensemble music, often needing to memorize them in order to play. Such issues can be alleviated by utilizing a different approach when teaching mallet instruments to beginner percussionists.

If you examine mallet music for middle school and high school bands, the segments of melodies are commonly written in groups of notes with a “stepwise” motion. Training students to read stepwise melodies is essential and practical. However, more often than not, instructors teach note identification using a space-line system: F-A-C-E for spaces and E-B-D-G-F for lines on staves in treble clef. Students learn note names as the first seven letters of the alphabet (A-B-C-D-E-F-G), which is in stepwise order.

## Example 1



Then they move on to the space-line system. The space-line system of learning notes does not support the concept of stepwise motion, causing some trouble for students learning new music.

I have observed students who were taught using the space-line system and found that many have a tendency to focus on the “individual” note. These students do not see the relationship from one note to another, which presents two problems. First, while students can identify notes with little difficulty, they may play the notes in the wrong octave. Second, it takes more time to figure out following notes. For example, when reading a dyad, D and E, noted on the fourth line and fifth space in treble clef, students already know D. However, they may not recognize that E is immediately next because they rely on the space-line system to find out that E is in the fourth space (although it is really just one step away from D on the keyboard).

## DESIGNING THE CURRICULUM FOR TEACHING MALLET INSTRUMENTS

Teaching students note-reading skills and providing ample training in technical exercises are equally important in a successful curriculum for teaching mallet instruments. Technical exercises develop the kinetic movements on mallet instruments that are necessary to accurately execute a musical passage. The following content explores a few methods that are helpful in enhancing students’ reading skills and lists examples of technique exercises that are complimentary to one’s sight-reading ability and learning process.

### Reading Skills

#### 1. Stepwise Motion

Piano pedagogy is a good place to start when seeking a better method of teaching beginner percussionists. Many piano pedagogical books for beginners start with playing one pitch on the piano and then move to the pitch’s “neighbor” tones gradually, in a stepwise motion, either higher or lower (Example 1). This trains a student to adapt to the instrument: physically feeling the layout and intervals between the keys. It is similar to teaching small children how to walk on a staircase one step at a time. Once physically accustomed to the size of each step, children gain the ability to skip one or two steps as they move up or down the staircase.



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### Technique Exercises

When teachers work on reading skills, it is also essential to teach fundamental technique exercises to students. For example, exercises such as tetra-chords, scales, and green scales are great for muscle memory when playing stepwise melodies. Patterns of skip exercises are often constructed upon scalar passages. Here a student can start with double stops of these skips and then do variations based on it (Example 4). Note that the technical exercises should be transposed in different keys. Another important figure of skips is the “arpeggio” which should be introduced as well.

#### Example 4

Example 4 consists of three musical staves in 4/4 time. The first staff is labeled "Basic Pattern" and shows a sequence of chords: a pair of eighth notes (C4, E4), a pair of eighth notes (G4, B4), a pair of eighth notes (A4, C5), and a pair of eighth notes (B4, D5). The second staff is labeled "Variation I" and shows a sequence of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, B4, A4, C5, B4, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The third staff is labeled "Variation II" and shows a sequence of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, B4, A4, C5, B4, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.

Some technical exercises are patterns of mixed stepwise motion and skips, and progress in a “sequence.” A few of these patterns, like Example 5, are commonly used by composers. Teachers can create exercises based on the music students are learning.

#### Example 5

Example 5 consists of three musical staves in 4/4 time. The first staff is labeled "5a." and shows a sequence of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, B4, A4, C5, B4, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The second staff is labeled "5b." and shows a sequence of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, B4, A4, C5, B4, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The third staff is labeled "5c." and shows a sequence of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, B4, A4, C5, B4, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.

One thing teachers should keep in mind: they need to relate these technical exercises to reading skills. If not, students may fail to execute what is written or they may learn the music slowly, because they do not recognize the melodic movements and patterns in the score.

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### Patterns Are Friends

There are often repeated patterns in music for mallet instruments but recognizing these patterns require some experience. Repeated patterns can be melodic figures of a few measures long or sometimes just some groups of a few notes (Example 6). They can also be figures moving in melodic sequences (Example 7). Once patterns are identified and analyzed, players can learn the piece faster and choose appropriate sticking to help with execution and consistency. Identifying patterns ultimately helps with the memorization and phrasing of a piece.

There are great method books available for teaching beginners mallet instruments: *Fundamental Method for Mallets* by Mitchell Peters, *Simple Steps to Successful Beginning Percussion* by Kennan Wylie, and *A Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion* by Mark Wessels. These books expound upon concepts discussed earlier and include fundamental technical exercises. When using these books, teachers should relate the technical exercises to reading music, and teach students to identify the patterns of melodies. It ultimately helps students learn mallet music much more efficiently on their own!

Example 6: excerpt from Allegro, Sonata for Violin in F Major, HWV 370 by G. F. Handel



The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The first staff has a bracket above it labeled "two-bar pattern" and a note below it stating "F is repeated, L.H. plays moving voice". The notation consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed together. The second staff continues the melodic line with similar rhythmic patterns.

Example 7: Morris Goldenberg, Modern School for Xylophone, Marimba, Vibraphone Etude XXXV, mm. 7-12



The image shows a single staff of musical notation in 2/4 time. The key signature has two flats. The notation features a sequence of eighth notes. A bracket above the first two measures is labeled "figures of similar melodic change". A vertical dashed line is placed after the second measure, and a bracket above the next six measures is labeled "6th in sequence". Arrows below the staff indicate the continuation of the melodic sequence across the measures.

Dr. Yi-Jan (Rachel) Liu holds a doctorate of musical arts degree in percussion performance from University of North Texas where she also received her master's degree. She has been an active musician and has presented recitals, clinics, and master classes at different venues. In 2017, Dr. Liu has won the 2nd place and the reward of best interpretation at the Australian Marimba Competition in Melbourne, Australia. Dr. Liu also has significant teaching experience at different levels ranging from college to high school and middle school. Currently, she teaches percussion lessons at both the middle and high school levels in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area.

Dr. Liu is endorsed with Innovative Percussion.