

# **Keyboard Percussion Tech, Part 1**

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As a clinician who visits numerous schools (elementary to high school) throughout the course of a year, I am offered a unique opportunity to interact with hundreds of young people in the U.S. and abroad. These visits allow me to observe and exchange various percussion techniques and teaching strategies, and learn of “non-percussion” matters such as regional differences in musical interpretation, historical approaches to a specific piece, and the local color. It is probably not surprising that in most places there are more similarities than differences-positive and negative. Regarding keyboard percussion: The similarity most in need of attention is inefficient technique, as this influences basic sound production and many other musical considerations.

Inefficient technique is comprised of a number of characteristics that may include: playing into the bar (as with a hammer and nail), using too much arm motion, stiff or tense motion, and unnecessary feet motion. The resulting sound production may be dead and visually the percussionist may look uncomfortable at best, uncontrolled at worst. This article will survey possible reasons and present some solutions for inefficient keyboard percussion technique.

## **Student/Instrument Height**

Proper instrument height is an important factor, as it will aid in developing efficient motion and relaxed playing. The proper height for a keyboard percussion instrument allows a studentsí forearms to remain slightly below horizontal when in the playing position. In educational settings adjustable height instruments are conducive to efficient and effective performing because each student can adjust them to a specific height with little effort. Before a performance, audition, lesson and each practice session, time should be taken to adjust the height.

When using instruments that are not height adjustable two concerns usually arise: Either the instrument is too low or too high. If an instrument is too low a student may play hunched over and develop lower back aches after prolonged practicing. One solution is to place the instrument on blocks of wood that are tall enough to let the student play without hunching over. When placing it on blocks it is best to use two people, one on each end, so the frame will not twist and weaken. If an instrument is too high a student may not be able to reach the keyboard comfortably (or at all), which may result in tense wrist motions. This concern is common with younger students and can be eliminated by having the students play while standing on a small platform.

## **Efficient Position of Body to Instrument and Stands**

Now that a proper height has been selected, the next item to be addressed is the stance. The feet should be shoulder-width apart for balance, and the back should be straight. Efficient/effective hand position in keyboard percussion playing is very similar to “matched” snare drum technique. To find the proper playing position, the elbows should be bent and the hand turned over slightly. As mentioned above, the forearms are usually slightly below horizontal. The upper arms should be relaxed at the sides, not away from the body. If it becomes difficult for students to keep the upper arms relaxed, have them play with a block of foam between the upper arms and torso to remind them of the relaxed position. There should be just enough pressure to hold the foam in place. If there is too much pressure they will feel it on the torso. Of course if there is too little pressure the foam will fall to the floor. Another method to spot check relaxation is to set an alarm to sound every ten minutes. This gives students enough time to become engrossed in a piece of music and for bad habits to surface. When the alarm sounds have the students freeze and focus on their body positions. Eventually this will stop many bad habits. If unchecked, too often percussionists become used to inefficient motions and after a few months of playing think the motions are “natural” until physical problems develop later in their careers.

Music and tray stands are also integral parts of the instrument setup. The music stand should be placed low when performing solo so the audience can see the performance. Percussion is a visual art and playing with a music stand in front of the face is distracting. This also allows the performer to see the bars with peripheral vision, which will help accuracy. For ensemble playing the music stand should be high enough to see the conductor and the music.

When not using mallets they should rest on a covered tray stand or music stand placed at either side or at the front of the instrument. Avoid placing the tray stand behind the performer to lessen the chance of backing into it. These positions allow the performer to see both the conductor and the music. This may save undue embarrassment, especially when reading a piece for the first time. By covering the surface of the stand with a dark towel or carpet, extraneous noise is eliminated, and the mallets are prevented from rolling. The dark colored towel or carpet usually blends with the background and does not detract from the performance. In general, avoid placing mallets on the instrument unless it is necessary, such as to facilitate a fast change between instruments. This will reduce extraneous noise and the risk of knocking a mallet from the instrument.

### **Efficient Motion**

Begin the first mallet lesson by having the students demonstrate how they play with two mallets, perhaps by playing a scale or tune they know. This allows the teacher to observe the student’s technique before the introduction of a few rules. Even at an early age, students have an idea of technique from watching others, and that should be built upon. It is entirely possible for students to have a naturally fluid technique that requires only nominal adjustments.

After observing technique, fluid motion should be the next topic. Without mallets in hand, have the students visualize standing tall with their feet shoulder-width apart in a still, chest-high pool of water. Next have the students move their arms and wrists to start the imaginary water moving in circles away from them, similar to the waves made when a rock is dropped into still water. This motion is accomplished by keeping a barrel shape in the arms and smoothly bending all joints from the shoulder to the fingers. This motion is common to all percussion instruments. Horizontally, it is used when playing the tam-tam, moving between timpani or playing a cradled bass drum. At an angle it is used for playing a tilted bass drum, tambourine, etc. By practicing this motion without mallets in hand, it limits the variables and allows the students and teacher to focus only on arm motion. This strategy works well with all percussion instruments.

The next step is to approach the instrument and have the students move their hands, palms down and without the mallets, around the instrument in fluid circles. This allows the students to concentrate on the general motion. After that has been accomplished, have them do the same with small cardboard boxes, keeping the bottom surface of the box parallel to the bars. By doing this, the hands are unconsciously in the proper position. Finally, have the students hold the mallets and perform the same fluid motions. A similar approach may be taken with four mallets.

Feet motion is another topic worth mentioning regarding efficient motion. When moving laterally on the instrument, most students use too much motion in the feet. The result looks as though the student is dancing behind the instrument! If the students fully extend their mallets across the instrument, their range may surprise them. As most of the pieces at this level are usually within a two octave range, the student may turn the torso to comfortably reach all of the notes. Therefore, they only need to move their feet whenever they cannot comfortably reach the bars by turning their torsos. The sooner they realize this, the better.

## Grips

Two Mallets: The most efficient grip for general two mallet playing is very similar to matched snare drum grip.

The mallet is held between the thumb and the first knuckle of the index finger (nearest the finger tip). This facilitates quick side to side motion for intervals larger than a fifth and especially gives control when playing soft passages. Generally, soft, controlled playing becomes more difficult when the mallet is held in the second knuckle as that grip tends to restrict motion.

The mallets should be held firmly enough to maneuver them, but not too tightly. However, there are times when the mallets should be gripped tightly. For instance, assuming all other variables remain the same the tighter the mallets are gripped, the more articulate and emphatic the sound. This is mainly noticeable on the lower range of a marimba and non-keyboard percussion instruments such as timpani and bass drum.

An effective way to practice the correct grip is to approach an instrument and assume the proper position without playing. By doing this a few times slowly and with the desired technique, an efficient and comfortable grip will develop. This enables the muscles to kinesthetically memorize the desired position.

Next time: Four mallets, strokes and rolls, mallet choices.

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