

Blue Knights Front Ensemble Technique Packet

Purpose:

- To play comfortably, naturally, and efficiently.
- Uniformity

Our technique will be split into five large categories: Posture, Wrist, Fingers, Stroke and Sound Quality.

Posture:

- Feet shoulder width apart.
- Stand up straight with shoulders rolled back.
- Head should be positioned like you are looking straight ahead. Chin parallel to the ground. Then look down with your eyes not with your head.
- The upper arm should be even with your torso.

Wrong!



Right



Fingers:

- Mallet goes in between the thumb and the first joint from the end of the index finger.
- The middle finger should be wrapped around and for most people touch the palm of the hand.



- Joints should be curved naturally and not inverted.

- Wrap the back fingers around. These should also touch the palm. These fingers should also be relaxed.



- The index finger and middle finger should remain in the exact same position when the back fingers are wrapped around.
- There should be about two inches of mallet shaft sticking out of the back of the hand.
- The end of the mallet should be in the fatty part of the hand.

Wrong!



Wrong!



Right 😊



- All of the fingers should be as relaxed as possible. At any point in time it should be possible to easily pull the mallet out of the hand.

Wrist:

- Hand should be mostly flat on top.



- There shouldn't be a kink between the lower arm and the wrist.
- The wrist should remain extremely close to the playing surface. When we strike our playing surface the mallet shaft should be parallel to the ground.

Stroke:

- The stroke should be executed with the wrist alone.
- Both arms should be relaxed and will slightly move because of the wrist motion.
- Our stroke is called a **Piston Stroke**. It starts at the dynamic we need for a note and ends at the dynamic for the next note.
- Forte to forte preparation.

Beginning



Contact



End



- Forte to piano preparation.



- While moving to the height of the next dynamic we will also be moving over our next note or instrument.

Sound Quality:

Imagine a huge football stadium or basketball arena filled with thousands of people, this is our playing venue. Respectively a marimba or vibraphone has very little chance of balancing to a horn line or full drum line, if you've ever played in symphonic band or wind ensemble you know this. So with this in mind our sound quality is extremely important. There are a number of things that control sound quality. First, let's talk about bar placement. As with all playing areas there is not a right or wrong place to play things but rather a desired sound that can be achieved by playing things in appropriate areas. If you look at a keyboard bar there are three nodes (places that the bar does not vibrate as much), 2 right where the string goes through the bar and a smaller one right in the middle. If we play in these areas we will get a very attack-oriented sound, meaning it will sound "ticky." If we play just $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 " off the center of the bar we will get a very resonant full sound so this will be our default playing position. If we are playing something that is faster we will be allowed to play on the very end of the black notes. In general though we should strive to play everything in the center of the bar.

The next thing that controls sound quality is what I call depth. It is important that we don't play the top side of the bar but rather play through the bar, meaning we are aiming for a point 6 inches below the bar rather than the bar itself. As Bruce Lee said when asked about his famous 1 inch punch (he could injure a person from punching them just one inch away), "I aim for a point 6 inches behind their back."

Synopsis:

This ends our general two mallet technique. As stated previously all these elements are meant to make us play with a good sound while being relaxed and efficient. It is extremely important that every person takes each of these elements to heart and gets over their own little foibles in order to move forward. Speaking of moving forward let's talk about some extended techniques.

Alterations to Sound Quality and Visual Appeal:

As stated previously, our default stroke consists of all wrist with a little bit of arm movement by virtue of the wrist moving. Let's describe this ratio between wrist and arm as 90% wrist 10% arm. Since percussion is such a visual instrument along with an audible one, it is good for us to respect the visual representation of music along with the

audible one. In order to do this we are going to smooth our stroke for legato passages and sharpen it up for staccato passages.

First for the staccato we are going to firm up our arm so that only the wrist is moving and then we are going to make the mallet move in a much sharper motion. Keep in mind to not alter your depth while doing this, you are just altering the speed of the stroke. For this our wrist to arm ratio will be 100% wrist 0% arm. Along with this I like to firm up my fulcrum to maintain precise control of the mallet. This technique is especially helpful for fast sixteenth note passages.

Next a legato stroke. This one is a little harder to master since it is substantially different than our default stroke. Whenever the music is moving in long tones or just has more of a relaxed feel we want our motion to represent this. The ideal way for this to happen is for the motion to be continuous and smooth. I think one of the easiest ways to do this is for us to use more arm along with the wrist. Let's put this wrist to arm ratio at about 60% wrist 40% arm. We can also use this feel to represent music that feels extremely weighty. If the music feels like it is prodding along or that it has a more lethargic feel, we can use this technique to give the feeling of adding weight to our stroke.

Keep in mind if we keep the force into the bar constant as we do these different strokes they do not actually change the sound the bar is producing. Next let's change up our sound quality a little bit.

Let's say we are playing a passage that is supposed to be extremely staccato and we've already sharpened up our stroke and firmed up our fulcrum. Do we have any options after that? How about altering our bar placement. As stated before the nodal points on the bar have a much more attack oriented sound. Typically we do not play over the strings unless it is for some type of special effect, but we can play in the exact middle of the bar since it has a good attack and a little bit of sustain afterwards.

How about if we have a passage that has a lot of sharp sounding things and then a short legato section afterwards and we have no time to change mallets? What can we do then? Well with most marimba mallets this answer is extremely easy, all we need to do is raise our wrists so that we are playing on top of the mallet. There is more wrap on that part of the mallet so it is easier to create a rounder sound. Also, this can be helpful is we have a roll passage that begins at niente (nothing) because we can start on the top of the mallet and slowly move to our default playing position.