



## CHOOSING THE RIGHT MALLETS

BY JOSH GOTTRY

One of the few things we have complete control of as we prepare a piece of music is the mallets we use. The right mallets can dramatically assist in the presentation of a quality performance, while the wrong mallets can waste the many hours spent in preparation. Many of us already carry a large selection of mallets and several others are gradually building that collection. Here are a few things to think about as you are choosing, or possibly purchasing mallets for a piece.

### PERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Remember, you're buying these mallets for your use. They will need to meet your personal preferences so you can be comfortable with them in a performance! Some things to think about include:

Weight of the mallets - this will affect maneuverability, sound quality (in general a heavier mallet produces more depth in the sound), and overall comfort.

Shaft type and length - different 4-mallet grips usually dictate different shaft material (i.e. burton - rattan, stevens - birch), longer shafts tend to reduce maneuverability but increase interval spacing ability (shorter shafts - the opposite).

Style of playing - choose mallets that complement your style by accentuating your strengths and covering your weaknesses. For example, if you typically play very aggressively, you might consider slightly softer mallets to smooth out your sound in most situations.

### PIECE CONSIDERATIONS

Unfortunately, a great set of mallets won't work for every piece you play. Each piece of music has unique characteristics that will benefit from careful mallet selection. Here are some things to consider:

Range of the piece - top and bottom note, primarily used range (where do you spend the most time), dynamic levels required in the extreme ranges (do you have to play *forte* in the top octave or *piano*, etc.) how many mallets (and which ones) are required in the instrument extremes?

Nature of the piece - style (i.e. rapid & articulate, fanfare, delicate & graceful), texture (thick vs. thin), overall dynamic range (basically loud or soft).

### INSTRUMENT CONSIDERATIONS

As always, these mallets we're choosing have to strike something, and the mallets we choose should consider the nature of that instrument as well as the piece of music. Here are a couple things to think about:

Bar material - the most obvious example is the difference in sound between a rosewood and keylon marimba.

Bar width and spacing - obviously a narrow bar instrument would not work well with larger mallets and a larger bar instrument would benefit from those same wide mallets.

Resonance and response - how quickly does the bar speak after striking? how long does it ring? is the fundamental very present or is the sound normally thin?

Overall sound quality - just like picking the mallets to complement your style, you should select mallets that complement the nature of the instrument - accenting the positives and hiding the negatives.

### TO GRADUATE OR NOT TO GRADUATE

One additional consideration when playing a 4-mallet piece is whether or not to use graduated mallets. This is especially important when playing on larger instruments (i.e. 5 octave marimbas). Often, it is very beneficial to use softer mallets in the lower voices while graduating to harder mallets in the upper parts. On the other hand, there are some pieces that do not work well at all when using graduated mallets. Here are the why's and why not's of using graduated mallets:

Why graduated mallets - balanced voicing with normal to wide spacing, additional articulation options for single line passages, appropriate mallets for both instrument extremes, capable of an articulate treble melody with a full and legato bass and tenor.

Why not graduate mallets - primary use of tight mallet spacing, narrow instrument range used, hand displacement or mallet crossover required, very little use of all four mallets in standard voicing (1, 2, 3, 4).

*One more note:* If you haven't already begun accumulating a wide selection of mallets from which to choose, let me offer this suggestion. With each new piece you play, buy one set of mallets appropriate for that performance. Gradually, over your next several performances, you will accumulate quite a collection of choices for future pieces without a large purchase all at once!



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