



GRIP, STROKE, AND SOUND PRODUCTION

BY JOSH GOTTRY

Just like the basics of basketball are dribbling, the chest pass, and free throws, the basics of performance on a keyboard percussion instrument are the grip, the stroke, and proper sound production. Without these basics, every other aspect will suffer. With proper technique, all aspects of your playing will benefit tremendously!

THE GRIP

Begin by lightly gripping the mallet approximately 2/3 of the way down the shaft from the head of the mallet. Position your thumb directly opposite the first knuckle of your first finger. Gently wrap the remaining three fingers around the shaft. The back of your hand should face the ceiling (German style grip) and the back end of the shaft should exit the hand between the base of the pinky and the wrist (on the fleshy part of your palm). Your wrist should be straight and relaxed.

THE STROKE

The stroke should be a motion primarily made from the wrist. Use of the fingers and arm should be limited, but may be required in certain circumstances. The stroking motion should be similar to that of dribbling a basketball or an up and down waving motion - lead by the grip between the thumb and first finger. Use a "full" or "legato" stroke, where the mallet will return to its original position several inches above the keyboard. Try to avoid "down" strokes where the mallet does not rebound fully after striking the bar. The mallet's motion should be almost perpendicular to the bars, not approaching from an angle off to the side. The wrists will always remain just slightly above the bars and all motions should be as smooth and relaxed as possible.

SOUND PRODUCTION

The bars will produce the best sound when struck as far as possible from the nodes (strings). The best playing spot is in the center of the bars. For rapid passages, the very edges of the upper manual (flats & sharps) can be used. To produce a full sound without additional contact noise, only allow 70-80% of the weight of the mallet to strike the bar - always think "LIFT"! For the best sound, use a mallet appropriate for the instrument and the range of the instrument used. For example, medium yarn mallets will produce a more pleasing sound than a hard rubber mallet.

USING SHADOW, SNAP, & SWITCH STROKES

There are three exercises that will help in developing the proper grip and stroke technique.

SHADOW STROKE:

This exercise uses one hand at a time and focuses on slowing down the stroke to allow for careful observation of the

motion used. Begin with one mallet (stick) in the "ready position", approximately 1/2" above the drum head or keyboard bar. Slowly bend the wrist, taking 4-5 seconds to raise the mallet to a height of approximately 9-12". Stop the mallet and briefly evaluate the grip, motion used, and current position. Next, slowly return the mallet to its original position. Again evaluate the grip, motion used, and current position of the mallet. Repeat this exercise for 3-5 minutes per hand each day.

SNAP STROKE:

This exercise also uses one hand at a time, but speeds up the motion to train the muscles at a more realistic speed. Begin with one mallet (stick) in the "ready" position, approximately 1/2" above the drum head or keyboard bar. Quickly snap the mallet to the "up" position (9-12" above the surface). Stop the mallet and briefly evaluate the grip, motion, and position. Next, snap the mallet down, striking the bar or head, and freeze the mallet in the original position. Again evaluate the grip, motion, and position. You should also repeat this exercise for 3-5 minutes per hand each day.

SWITCH STROKE

This exercise utilizes the motions of shadow or snap strokes but with both hands. Start with one hand in the "up" position and one in the "ready" position. Using either the shadow or snap motion reverse the position of the sticks. Stop and briefly evaluate. Again, reverse the position of the sticking using the same stick motion. Repeat this exercise using shadow strokes for 3-5 minutes and using snap strokes for 3-5 minutes per day.

CONCLUSION

Remember the whole basis of percussion is making music by striking an instrument. These basic grip and stroke techniques are essential in striking your instrument in such a way as to make the best sound in the most efficient manner. Whether it be snare drum, marimba, or a trash can, these concepts are still basically the same and should be applied to achieve the best result.



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