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Marimba Technique

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by Mark Ford

The first time you hold four mallets in an attempt to make music at the marimba can be pretty frustrating. The beginning four-mallet player has a lot to think about: moving intervals, proper grip, different strokes, and, of course, playing the notes! This beginning process can be overwhelming. Here are some marimba floor exercises that I have developed for beginners. The idea is to practice the technique of four mallets to gain confidence before playing the instrument. More information on marimba technique is covered in my method book, *Marimba: Technique Through Music* (Innovative Percussion Publications).

Hit the Floor

Practicing basic marimba techniques on the floor is a good way to introduce students to playing with four mallets. When the grip is taught, double lateral and vertical strokes can be learned in confidence without the anxiety of missed notes. I usually start students on these floor exercises while they are still involved with two mallet exercises and solos. After a week or two, most students are ready to start musical assignments on four mallets with enthusiasm and confidence.

A. Getting Started:

1. Sit on the floor with your back against a wall.
2. Legs should be straight out in front
3. Place mallets on the floor in a comfortable interval (usually a 4th or 5th). With the thumbs up, the hands should lightly touch floor.
4. Pull the wrist back to raise the mallets to a chosen playing height or level. Do not adjust this playing level by the elbow, use the wrist. Make sure all of the mallets are at the same level.
5. Perform the following exercises with a metronome, keeping the performing level consistent. If the levels set in #4 are not consistent, slow down the tempo so you can control the levels. Gradually build up speed.

B. Floor Exercises: Double Laterals

1.



1 2
3 4
2 1
4 3

1 2 3 4

Practice one hand at a time. Be sure the wrist turns for the grace note and then immediately returns to the correct playing level.

2.

1 2 3 4 4 3 2 1 1 2 4 3 2 1 3 4

Play one at a time. Start slowly and watch your levels.

3.

2 1 2 3 4 3 1 2 1 4 3 4 1 2 1 3 4 3 2 1 2 4 3 4

Again, play one at a time. Concentrate on levels.

4.

2 1 2 1 3 4 3 4 4 3 4 3 1 2 1 2

1 2 1 2 3 4 3 4 4 3 4 3 2 1 2 1

All of these exercises can be practiced in different variations. However the tempo should be steady at all times with consistent playing levels. After these concepts are acquired, the above exercises should be applied on the marimba and varied by means of interval transposition and dynamics. When applying them to the marimba, start with the interval of a 5th in each hand (example: C,G and C,G).

D. Floor Exercises: Double Verticals:

2 1 2 1

4 3 4 3

Play this exercise on the floor one hand at a time. Start with a close interval and move to wider intervals. Concentrate on technique and levels. When applying to the marimba, start with 3rds moving to an octave.

Conclusion

Isolating marimba technique on the floor can help the student build confidence with the grip and different strokes. These floor exercises will not create great musicians, but they can help performers achieve better control of the marimba to allow musical ideas to come through.