



YAMAHA

Educator Series

PERCUSSION



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Dr. Michael Varner is professor of percussion and ethnomusicology at The University of Texas in Arlington Texas. He frequently presents solo recitals of traditional and newly composed works for percussion throughout the United States. Dr. Varner has presented numerous clinics for the Music Educators National Convention, various educator conventions, as well as Percussive Arts Society state chapters. He is an endorsee for Yamaha Percussion, Sabian Cymbals and Innovative Percussion. Varner hosted the 2000 Percussive Arts Society's International Convention. A record-setting 7,593 attended making it the largest percussion convention in history. You may contact him at: www.uta.edu/mvarner/acover

Developing the Mallet Percussion Roll

By Dr. Michael Varner

One of the greatest challenges facing a young percussionist is the development of a smooth roll on mallet percussion instruments. Students should begin in the low range of the marimba where the large bar size more easily allows a successful smooth roll with slower roll speeds. Use of a softer yarn marimba mallet such as Yamaha MR2040 or Innovative Percussion IP200 will help the young player learn the desired feel and full sound of a good legato roll.

The secret to achieving a great sustained sound is a relaxed even single-stroke roll. Part of every percussionist's daily practice should be a long series of alternating strokes beginning very slowly and gradually increasing in speed until any sign of tension begins. Gradually decrease speed returning to the starting point (Ex. 1). The stroke should be a relaxed "piston" stroke from the wrist with no arm motion. Keep your palms flat to the floor with your little fingers almost scraping the keyboard to allow the largest part of the mallet to strike the bar and achieve the fullest sound. The single stroke roll should be started from a high full-stroke position. As the stroke speed increases, the mallets should be lowered closer to the bar returning to the full position as the roll slows down.

Ex. 1



Pay particular attention that the grip, stroke, height, and sound quality are exactly the same between the right and left hands. The mallet head path should travel straight up and down avoiding any oblique or circular motions. The speed of the roll must vary depending on the register in which you are playing. Lower range marimba notes should be rolled more slowly than higher notes. The most efficient place to strike the natural bars is off-center close to the accidentals. Position the right mallet closer to the accidental bars and in front of the left mallet (see illustration). Strike the accidental bars on the end as close to the edge as possible.

Beginning students should practice legato connected notes by keeping the roll speed constant when moving from bar to bar. When playing ascending passages, lead with your right hand. While many professional mallet players feel legato





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rolled passages should be played with an un-metered roll, younger students need the exact metering of exercises to help build confidence and to smoothly move from note to note without a break. Begin with half-notes moving upward on a C-major scale. Concentrate on smoothly shifting from note to note without accenting or interrupting the flow. Although a fast roll is desirable, make sure you are maintaining a relaxed wrist stroke with no tension or tightness. Slow down the roll speed if necessary until you can move smoothly with a relaxed motion and full tone. As you become more confident, add scales that require shifting to accidental bars. Move smoothly from the beating spot of the natural bar to the end of the accidental bar. The E-major scale is particularly good for this because the student must shift upward, from E to F#, move horizontally from F# to G#, and finally return to the natural bars (Ex. 2). Lean your body forward slightly as you move to the accidental bars.

Ex. 2

Written:

R R R R

Played:

Go back to the original single-stroke roll exercise and begin with the left mallet.

Ex. 3

Whenever you move downward, lead with your left hand

Written:

L L L L L

Played:





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Exercise #4 helps the student approach passages that move both up and down. When changing directions, increase the roll speed slightly to facilitate sticking. While no single rule covers every situation, these basic concepts will allow the student to gain the dexterity necessary for a smooth legato sound.

Ex. 4

Written: *Played:*

Gradually widen the intervals to arpeggios and finally octaves. Observe the path between widely separated notes to make sure the mallets are traveling in a smooth curved line. Exercise #5 is excellent to test legato roll technique.

Ex. 5

Listen carefully to the roll speed so the double-stops sound smooth and even. If they begin to sound like staccato sixteenth-notes increase the roll speed.

You will also encounter rolls that are not connected. Approach them like a breath mark on a wind instrument by slightly shortening the note's duration (Ex. 6). Lift the mallets off the bar to avoid ending with an accent. Untied rolls on the same pitch can be accomplished with a gentle lift of the wrist. If you encounter a roll that is accented, try slightly increasing the roll speed or raising the mallet height at the beginning of each roll. Be careful not to add unintentional accent or resort to a stroke that causes a marcato abrupt sound.

Ex. 6

The concepts and techniques described here should help you develop a great sounding roll that will apply to a wide range of musical situations. Always listen carefully and strive to produce a smooth, beautiful, full tone!

