

Building Four-Mallet Technique through Traditional Rudimental Exercises

By Eric J. Willie

The front ensemble in the contemporary marching percussion section has seen rapid technical evolution throughout the past decade. Fast, two-mallet obligato parts that were once technical requirements for a show are now considered

“must haves” for keyboard performers who are expected to have the facility of a virtuoso four-mallet player. Keyboardists must begin building their facility from the ground up, beginning with the exercise program.

When creating an exercise packet for the

fall marching season or for the winter indoor season, it is important to write studies that can be performed as a full percussion ensemble (including battery and keyboards). The following examples illustrate four-mallet exercises that parallel traditional battery warm-ups.

Exercise 1 Eight on a Hand/Legato

Exercise 1: Eight on a Hand/Legato. The score is in 4/4 time. The first system shows a Keys part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment and an SD part with a pattern of eighth notes: R R R R R R R R, L L L L L L L L, R R R R R R R R, L L L L L L L L. The second system continues the exercise with more complex rhythmic patterns and includes fingerings (1-4) and mallet markings (R, L) for the SD part.

Exercise 2

Exercise 2: This exercise is in 4/4 time and features changing time signatures (6/4, 4/4, 6/4, 4/4, 6/4, 4/4). The Keys part includes complex melodic lines with slurs and accents. The Battery part includes patterns of eighth notes with 'R' and 'L' markings. The second system continues the exercise with similar patterns and includes fingerings (1-4) and mallet markings (R, L) for the Batt. part.

I. EIGHT ON A HAND/LEGATO

The Eight on a Hand/Legato exercise is traditionally employed to loosen the muscles and to serve as the daily “wake-up call” for the forearm. Keyboardists are strongly urged to begin with a two-mallet version of this exercise before progressing to the four-mallet version.

Adaptation of this exercise for four mallets should include three separate, fundamental techniques: (1) single-independent strokes, (2) single alternating-independent strokes, and (3) double-vertical strokes.¹

The goal of this exercise is to improve fundamental stroke types. Superfluous movement should be minimized throughout the performance of these exercises (see Exercise 1).

II. ACCENT/TAP

As the title indicates, this exercise should focus on alternation of dynamics to include: (1) accent (loud) and (2) tap (soft). For the battery percussionist, this will involve alternation of down and up strokes to achieve clarity. For the keyboardist, this exercise can serve a dual role by: (1) improving the aforementioned downstroke/upstroke technique (Exercise 2), and (2) as a transitional exercise between double-vertical strokes and single-independent strokes (Exercise 2a).

For Exercise 2, the keyboardist should employ a technique identical to that of the battery percussionist by employing down strokes and up strokes. For Exercise 2a, the keyboardist should work to develop a smooth transition between these two techniques, thus ensuring that full strokes are achieved whether they be double-vertical or single-independent.

III. TIMING

Regardless of the instrument (brass, woodwinds, strings, percussion), performers must work to control rests and space in music. As such, attention to basic subdivision is essential for precision and artistry. Justification for use of timing exercises in four-mallet playing is two-fold: (1) it improves rhythmic subdivision, and (2) it builds interdependence between the hands.

In Exercise 3, one hand focuses on the timing exercise while the supporting hand performs the basic, rhythmic subdivision. This exercise also serves to develop one-handed rolls.²

IV. ROLL BUILDER

The skills developed in a traditional roll exercise will lead to the development of more advanced techniques. Single-alternating independent strokes should progress to the more difficult double-lateral strokes as the tempo increases. The number of permutations that can be applied to this exercise is virtually infinite (this applies to two notes (Exercise 4a), as well as three notes (Exercise 4b) on each hand).

By working Exercises 4a and 4b, students will develop the ability to maintain rhythmic



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integrity for each hand through isolation. By focusing on one hand at a time, keyboardists can (1) develop a smooth flow between hands, and (2) improve rhythmic precision, all while exploring a myriad of permutations.

By maintaining the initial, eighth-note hand flow, the performer has only to employ a horizontal wrist turn to execute the linear permutations. It might be helpful to think of all double-vertical strokes as vertical motions and all single-independent and double-lateral strokes as horizontal motions.

By adapting traditional battery exercises for use by keyboardists, students can develop four-mallet technique in a group setting. These

techniques will easily transfer to standard solo repertoire and will prove valuable in daily concert band and orchestra rehearsals. Enjoy!

ENDNOTES

1. For descriptions of terminology, refer to Leigh Howard Stevens, *Method of Movement* (New Jersey: Keyboard Percussion Publications, 1990).
2. For further information about one-handed roll development, refer to: (1) Jeff Moore, "Developing a One-Handed Roll," *Percussive Notes*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 1998): 45-51, and (2) Janis Potter, "Building a Strong One-Handed Roll," *Percussive Notes*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (June 2004): 38-44.

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Exercise 4a Double-Stroke Roll Builder

The score for Exercise 4a is divided into two systems. The first system is in 4/4 time and contains 12 measures. The second system is in 2/4 time and contains 12 measures. The 'Keys' part is written for both hands, and the 'Battery' part is written for four mallets. Fingerings and mallet strokes are indicated below the notes.

Exercise 4b Triple-Stroke Roll Builder

The score for Exercise 4b is divided into two systems. The first system is in 4/4 time and contains 12 measures. The second system is in 2/4 time and contains 12 measures. The 'Keys' part is written for both hands, and the 'Battery' part is written for four mallets. Fingerings and mallet strokes are indicated below the notes.