

ARIZONA STATE FRONT ENSEMBLE

Rehearsal Ideas and Practice Tips

By *Jim Bailey*

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit."

-Aristotle-

Have a goal....accomplish the goal.

Whether you have 15 minutes or 3 hours; make sure you make great use of your time. Have a goal for your practice session and try to form a habit of accomplishing your goal every time. Start with a broad musical goal and begin to construct your practice time around it. If you want to work on a piece of music in 6/8, you may want to warm up and rehearse etudes and exercises in this feel to build a cohesive practice session. This may seem easier said than done for most, but here are a few suggestions to think about....

Goals are important to maximizing you time. If you have only a few moments in a practice room before you have to leave, don't try to learn that new concerto you have wanted to learn.

Shorter practice sessions are great for reinforcing musical ideas and material you have been working in previous lessons. This time can often be used much like the study sessions before a test. Quiz yourself on how well the goals of yesterday's rehearsal were learned and tweak areas that still need improvement. These sessions can also be used to unearth new areas where you need focus your time during longer sessions. In doing this you are starting to organize and use your time effectively even when your time is minimal.

Longer practice sessions are great for taking your time and breaking down musical ideas into smaller, more digestible parts. In music, we call this wood-shedding. During this time is when you want to really pace yourself and accomplish a large scale task. Maybe you want to learn a new piece of music, or begin to develop a new musical concept. This time is best suited for larger tasks such as this.

Use your resources as a model for how to achieve your music goals. I am sure you have at least one ensemble that you perform with which functions at a high level of organization. Keep your eyes and ears open for rehearsal tips and ideas. See how the warm-up program focuses on the goals of the day's rehearsal and try to incorporate these elements into your practice session. Try to align your warm-up and reading time with the musical elements that are to be focused on in the music you are rehearsing. When looking for ideas from your ensemble leader or conductor, take into consideration pacing, approach, and other aspects you think might be useful in the practice room....you will be surprised at the amount of information you can pick up and use!

Using a Metronome



Many people think that using a metronome means turning it on at the start of your rehearsal and off at the end. In this case you are using the metronome as a crutch more than a tool. Often I can spot students who fall prey to this because they can play a musical excerpt with a metronome VERY well until I shut it off and ask them to play it again. I find that their ability to feel themselves drag or rush is hindered because they are more used to playing time with the metronome than keeping time themselves (which takes energy and thought). Here are a few suggestions to try when using a metronome.

- Hit more than just the standard times (100, 110, 120, 130...). In doing this, you are increasing your sensitivity to time. You are teaching yourself to feel the difference between 110 and 112 instead of 110 and 120. A famous musician was quoted saying that "...no one plays truly 'in tune', the GREATS just catch it before others do." The same is true for time. Increase your sensitivity to time and you will find yourself among those who can keep great time.

- Rhythms are like harmonies.....they need to be resolved. Let's face it; syncopations scare a lot of musicians. More times than not, these syncopations end on an up-beat or another unfriendly count. Use the metronome to find and solidify the quarter note pulse in a syncopation. In doing this, you will find that you can play the rhythm more effectively. The metronome can also be used to resolve these syncopations, which do not end on a downbeat. The more you can identify and feel the quarter note through rhythms of this nature, the more you will be able to master these difficult rhythms. Count! "If you can 'say it' you can 'play it.'"
- Try using the metronome in a creative way like setting it to a comfortable tempo and playing your favorite exercise or etude while using the click as the upbeat! Now try the same with the click representing other notes of a subdivision (maybe 'e' or 'a' of a 16th note based exercise). Also try playing 8th note based exercises with triplets set on the metronome or vice versa.
- Rehearsing odd meters with a metronome is one of the best ways to solidify time and feel. Try practicing 7/8 or 5/8 to a metronome and you will find that the quarter note falls on the beginning of the measure every 2 bars. Try practicing scales and other exercises to the quarter note and don't shy away from the metronome when facing an odd meter.

Practicing Performance



If you are like many young students, performance can be a different animal than practicing. Besides, if you make a mistake in a practice room, you can do it over and over again. I always tell my students that it's not worth as much if you get it down the third time...for you only have one shot in a performance setting. So why not practice this technique in the practice room. This works well once you have mastered the technical skill and can perform the music at an acceptable level. Then practice the routine as if shooting a free throw! Each segment, if performed at the desired level, represents a swish! To work on consistency in practice performance, try to hit '5 out of 5' or '10 out of 10.' If you hit this or even close, you are headed towards consistent performance!

Think about a performance like a Biology test. First you have to learn the steps of photosynthesis and what each entails. Next, you practice your

comprehension and understanding of each step, which might involve homework or worksheets. Finally you test yourself on the 'testing process' by way of a homemade test (flashcards or such). Parallel this with your music. First you have to learn the notes, fingerings, and other techniques. Next, you rehearse these to gain a sense of fluency and understanding of how the pieces fit together. You run it, and run it...stopping to correct errors that occur along the way. But do you ever quiz yourself on the process of performing on a stage, unable to return to a missed note or notes? If not, you may want to develop and sharpen your performance skills. Here are a few tips....

- Exercise great decisions by allowing your mistakes to go through a stage many musicians often try to ignore- recovery. The ability to play a great performance depends on you allowing for your mistakes to be corrected. When trying to implement this in a practice room, don't allow yourself to stop for every little thing, instead of stopping and correcting a problem, and more valuable skill for a performer is to correct the problem in the midst of the performance. This will display that you have more control over your performance than it has over you!
- Perform for "people" before you perform for people! I know, it sounds weird, but getting the jitters out of a performance before the actual performance is worth its weight in gold. And don't think you have to perform for someone who plays your instrument or knows the piece you are performing.

Performing in front of anyone can be a great way to practice performance as well as exercising great decision-making in front of a live audience. Also, imagine people watching you perform! Fill a stadium in your mind before your next show, or imagine your lesson teacher before your lesson, whatever your performance situation, see it in your mind first.

FRONT ENSEMBLE Technique Outline

By: Gary Rudolph, Alan Miller, John Theisen, and Joe Millea

The following is a compilation of the basic technical aspects addressed on a regular basis in the Arizona State University Front Ensemble. The approach to the instruments and the means with which we achieve our goals are customized to our ideals of sound, performance, and representing the ASU Marching Band in the best possible way. The techniques discussed herein may therefore not be appropriate for some mediums of performance (i.e. concert percussion ensemble, wind ensemble, orchestra, etc.)

Posture:

From the ground up....

We will begin with our feet shoulder-width apart. Your legs should be relaxed, knees slightly flexed. Rigidity will greatly inhibit your range of motion, so it is best to maintain your flexibility from the beginning, and start forming good habits on even the simplest exercises. Keep your back and neck straight, and allow your arms to hang naturally at your sides. There should be NO tension in your neck or shoulders. Stand with your chin up at all times, and look down your nose to see the instrument (as opposed to hunching over to see the keys!)

Things to keep in mind:

- Avoid crossing your feet while playing and never stand with your feet crossed. In general this also will inhibit your range of motion, and prevent you from moving fluidly behind the instrument.
- When moving from instrument to instrument, use large, graceful steps as opposed to shuffling with small steps. You will move much faster this way, and look less frantic. Remember, we are professional in everything we do at all times.
- Vibraphonists should stand with their right toes on the pedal at all times. Do not use the entire foot it is not necessary to exert that much energy. Instead, keep your weight distributed evenly between both feet, and use only the toes for pedaling.
- Marimba players should be flexible with their body position to the instrument. There will be times when one foot may need to be placed in front of the other to shift between the upper and lower manuals of the instrument, or make large lateral shifts behind the instrument. The correct foot position will help you shift for accuracy of notes. All of these motions should be done gracefully, keeping in mind that people will be watching your every movement.

Our posture and physical approach to the instrument will be one of the first indications to the judge and the audience exactly what kind of ensemble we are. Everything we do must be professional, charismatic, and confident-down to the most miniscule details. The professionalism we present ourselves with will earn us points before we play a single note!

There is no need for “choreographed” movements in the front ensemble. Visuals, dynamics performed with the upper torso of the body, and other non-characteristic movements are not necessary and actually hinder the performance. Performers must look the part and move with music without over-exaggerating to the point of absurdity.

Two Mallet Technique:

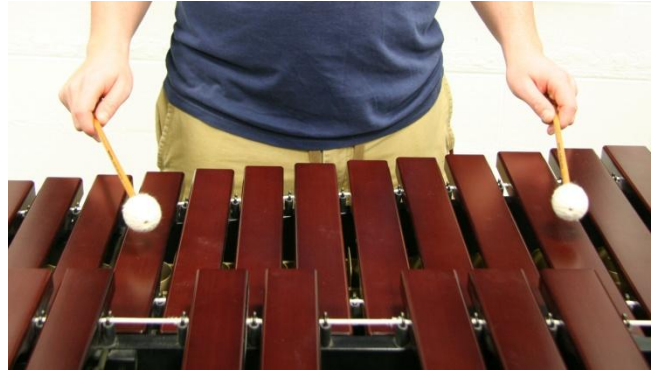
Unlike the snare drum, there is of course no rebound from a mallet instrument. In most ways, our approach to mallet instruments is exactly the opposite of the snare drum. First and foremost, the fulcrum is created with the middle, ring and pinky fingers wrapping completely around the mallet. This is contrary to snare drum with the fulcrum placed between the index finger and thumb (to utilize the rebound of the stick).

Rationale for the back finger approach:

- We must create our own rebound off the instrument. This allows us to control the mallet at all times.

- The more of your hand is on the mallet, the more weight is distributed to the keyboard. This increases tone production tremendously.
- Enhanced projection of “concert hall” marimba and vibraphone sounds played within football stadiums.
- This allows the index finger to remain relaxed, which promotes legato tone (by preventing over-squeezing with the index finger and thumb).

There should be no tension in the back fingers, yet at the same time the fingers should remain on the mallet at all times (picture the tips of the back fingers remaining in constant contact with the palm of the hand). The back fingers will not move AT ALL, except when performing extremely fast passages that require more finger flexibility. These fingers are the anchor of the grip. They provide more contact to the mallet and thus are a large part of dynamics and tone production. There should be 2” of mallet sticking out the back of the hand. The index finger and thumb merely aim the mallet, and should not squeeze the mallet at any time.



Similar to Steven’s Method four mallet technique, the index finger should be RELAXED, OFF THE MALLET SHAFT. Place the stick at the first joint of the index finger, and set the thumb on lightly. There should be minimal pressure between the index finger and thumb; tension will only create a choked or forced sound. This also reduces the amount of energy that goes into producing a stroke. Both hands should angle away from one another slightly, as opposed to the tops of the hands being flat.

Stroke

The basic stroke is always initiated from the wrist. It should be emphasized that wrist is 90% of the stroke, and arm is added only to complement the wrist and enhance projection outdoors. Fingers are not used to produce most strokes, merely to lightly grip and aim the mallets at the desired keys.



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Four Mallet Technique:

The approach to four mallet playing is very similar to the STEVENS grip invented by Leigh Howard Stevens, marimba virtuoso and owner and operator of Mallettech instruments and mallets. The use of the STEVENS, method on both marimba and vibraphone is meant to attain a more uniform sound and technical approach; if mallet dampening or double strokes are to be played, Burton grip may be used.

Basic ideas to keep in mind with four mallet technique are:

- Keep the index fingers relaxed at all times (as well as all other fingers)
- Keep the mallets above the instrument by turning the wrists back, not by raising the arms. (The mallets should return to this position whenever they are not in motion, similar to the hammers in a piano).
- Keep the hands as low to the instrument as possible. (Your knuckles should be low enough to rub against the edge of the keys).
- Remain relaxed in grip and smooth in motion at all times.



The approach to the instrument in an outdoor environment must be aggressive, even at the softest dynamic levels. Just as an athlete conditions himself for his sport, you should practice with heavy mallets to begin developing muscle and control at all dynamic levels. But, it is important to note that there should be no tension in the grip! For a more detailed description of four mallet technique, consult Leigh Howard Steven's "Method of Movement." The material covered in the RHS technical program are only a small portion of the ideas covered in this text.

Stroke Types:

Each stroke should be relaxed in nature, exerting weight through the bars, yet allowing the mallets to rebound off the keyboard. Wrist will be the primary force for creating strokes. The **piston stroke** "concept" will be used primarily with four mallet technique. The general premise behind the Piston Stroke is that the mallets start up, perform a stroke that is quick in motion, and end back where the mallet started. The only part of the body used to create this stroke is the wrist. The stroke is somewhat rigid and technical; it uses no preparation and no unnecessary motion. The rationale is simply energy conservation and prepare for the next stroke. This may be vertical, or both vertical and horizontal (shifting to new tones).

The **upstroke** is the default two mallet stroke, and utilizes the same basic premise as the piston stroke. The one major difference is that the upstroke is more relaxed, and does allow for a preparation. The mallets should move smoothly from stroke to stroke, with the head of the mallet never coming to rest. Unlike the piston stroke the upstroke may or may not use arm, depending on dynamic level. This stroke will be used with 2 mallets, and with 4 mallets only after the piston stroke is mastered.

With both piston and upstrokes, dynamic contrast is achieved through stroke length, not change in grip pressure! Do not mistake soft dynamic levels for a weak approach to the instrument. Strokes in which the wrist breaks and the mallet is used to "pull the sound out" of the instrument are an unnecessary change in technique. This contradicts our approach to the instrument and compromises our sound. Do not "hammer nails" or overplay when attempting to achieve louder dynamics.

The legato stroke is used for slow and sometimes high volume playing. Rather than using only wrist, the stroke also adds forearm rotating from the elbow. Similar to the upstroke, the head of the mallet will be in constant motion during passages that use the legato stroke. The mallet head will generally move more slowly than using other strokes.

Technical alterations to Achieve Legato Strokes:

- Relaxed grip pressure
- Slower strokes
- Rounded off, smooth flowing motions
- Absolutely no tension in the upper body, including arms and hands (although this should not be an alteration from previous technique!)



Ensemble Technique

Rule #1: IF YOU MOVE TOGETHER, YOU PLAY TOGETHER. There is no exception to this rule. Therefore, technique and uniformity are of the utmost importance. We must strive to look and sound the same at all times.

While audio communication is an important aspect to the front ensemble and music making in general, it is important to communicate with each other visually. In other words, watch each other and match style. The ASU Front Ensemble uses the legato motion, this means whenever possible and/or applicable, the player is filling up the space between the notes with continuous motion.

Placement of mallets on the keys: For out-door purposes we will use the dead center of the keys, (directly over the resonators). This may be contrary to other schools of thought, but again this is customized to the outdoor approach. The edge of the keys should be used only when is absolutely necessary (due to speed or implications from four mallet stickings and voicing of the music).

Preps: Whenever we begin an exercise, musical segment, or piece of music, we will establish a common tempo from a single tempo source. The number of preps, and person giving the preps may vary according to the situation. Preps should be a small precise relaxed marcato motion. The hands and mallets are all that should move-no arm, body, or head movements. Preps are not intended for a judge or the audience to see.

General Front Ensemble Considerations:

The way we present ourselves is of utmost importance to performing at the level we strive to attain. Proper care and maintenance of the instruments, continually cleaning all the equipment, and looking the part of a professional musician are all part of the image we make for ourselves. For that reason, it is expected that the instruments and equipment look and sound superb at all times. Before any performance all equipment must be cleaned thoroughly, membranes tuned, and “show” equipment (mallets, towels, cymbals, etc...) be prepared.

The front ensemble is approached in some ways just like an indoor percussion ensemble. We do not stand at attention with our sticks in! Instead, we stand at the ready, using good posture. Hands are placed left over right in front of the body, with or without mallets in the hands. Stay relaxed, look calm, and be ready for anything.

Front Ensemble Exercises

(Memorize these as soon as possible)

Two Mallet Exercises

Octaves

7/8 Octave is a scalar exercise to be played in a chromatic, or circular (circle of 4th or 5ths) progression covering all major scales. It can also be used in minor keys, modes, other scales, or even backwards. Challenge yourself with different variations. This will help you with everything else that we do as an ensemble!

Green

“Green” is our scale exercise. Players should be comfortable in all keys (major and minor) and in all modes and should be able to play it from 60-200 bpm. At all but the fastest tempi, strike the note in the middle of the bar. As you approach 160-170, begin to use the edges. When striking a note on the edge, go all the way to the edge. When playing on the edge, the mallet should literally be **half on** and **half off** the bar. Try to match the sound of the edge to that of the center.

When playing Green or any scale-like passage, a particular problem is presented with the type of lift in preparation we use to begin playing.

With a double-stop of single-hand exercise, we lift one note's value's length prior to playing. For instance, if you're playing eighth notes, you would lift on (actually, just after) the “and” of 4. If you're a more physically oriented learner, think of it the following way. We want to lift to feel like a rebound, and with good reason. If the lift feels like a rebound that means the mallet is moving the correct speed before we play the first note. This makes playing in tempo and with a good tone at the beginning of an exercise much easier. It means that the first note will sound like the fifth note (Which is not as easy as it sounds).

With “Green” though, the hands do not start together. We must perform a “**two-handed lift.**” One mallet (the first hand) is going to move before the other. When playing this exercise, most players immediately lift both hands together, causing the mallet to move at two different speeds on the first two notes, thus ensuring that the beginning of the exercise does not sound even. By moving one hand and then the other in rapid succession, both hand speeds are the same, and the beginning of the “phrase” is linear and even. Green is intended to work on accuracy and speed development, don't be afraid to challenge yourself at faster tempos.



Pitchfork

For the ASU Front Ensemble

Matt Holm
2008

Mallets

2

4

6

8

10

12

Scharton

Scharton, or "Workout Plan" is essentially a double-stop exercise. The player is to avoid flams at all costs. However, this is also a good piece to practice independence between melody and accompaniment. The melody (right hand) must be brought out slightly more than the stationary line (left hand). In doing so, it becomes very easy to produce flams rather than true double-stops. Timpanists beware! This is a very difficult exercise from a pedaling and tuning standpoint. One would be best served to learn the exercise on a keyboard first before attempting it on the drums.

The musical score for the Scharton exercise is presented in two systems, each with a keyboard (Kbd.) and timpani (Timp.) part. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The exercise consists of 18 measures.

System 1 (Measures 1-5): The Kbd. part features a melody of eighth notes with a dotted quarter note, while the Timp. part provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes. The melody starts on G4 and moves through A4, B4, and C5.

System 2 (Measures 6-10): The Kbd. part continues the melody, and the Timp. part maintains the accompaniment. The melody reaches D5 and E5.

System 3 (Measures 11-14): The Kbd. part continues the melody, and the Timp. part maintains the accompaniment. The melody reaches F5 and G5.

System 4 (Measures 15-18): The Kbd. part continues the melody, and the Timp. part maintains the accompaniment. The melody reaches A5 and B5.

Workout Plan/Scharton p.2

24

24

28

28

32

32

37

37

43

43

Tempe Sunset

Tempe Sunset integrates dynamics as well as technical combinations. It is a great short practice/comprehensive exercise.

Kbd

Timp

6

13

18

Version “B”

“Version B” uses two of the three main types of stroke: **double vertical** and **single independent strokes**. Measures 1-6 use **double vertical strokes**. Essentially, each hand is playing a double stop. The wrist will bend down, striking the bar with a level shaft. The lack of tension in the fingers will allow the wrist to rebound back to its original position quickly and smoothly. Be sure to keep the wrists turned properly (with both mallets level) as you strike to avoid flams. Measures 7-23 to the end employ **single independent strokes** (unless you’re playing very fast, at which point they would become single alternating strokes, which we will not discuss here). For these measures, **move only one mallet at a time**. The wrist does not “bend” down but rather “twists,” with the stationary mallet acting as an axis around which the hand turns. This concept is crucial to creating a full and controlled sound. Before moving on to the next note, the first mallet must fully rebound back to its original position. Then the next mallet begins to move. Avoid “flipping” the hand from side to side like a see-saw. Remember, there are called single “independent” strokes because each mallet is moving “independently” of the others. Start this exercise very slowly (about 50 bpm.) so you can control and define the technique. You should be comfortable playing it at all dynamics ranges, from 50-150 bpm.

The musical score is divided into three systems, each with a keyboard part and a tympani part. The keyboard part is written in treble and bass clefs, and the tympani part is written in bass clef. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The time signature is 7/8.

System 1 (Measures 1-6): Both hands play double vertical strokes. The keyboard part consists of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand. The tympani part consists of chords.

System 2 (Measures 7-12): The keyboard part begins to use single independent strokes, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing single notes. The tympani part continues with chords.

System 3 (Measures 13-23): The keyboard part continues with single independent strokes, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing single notes. The tympani part continues with chords.

Version "B" p.2

Laterals

"8-16/Laterals" employs the third and final stroke type we will discuss: **double lateral strokes**. Double laterals are basically two single independent strokes sped up and combined into one fluid stroke. However, while this is considered one "stroke," there are three discrete motions: **1) The first mallet moving downward** and striking the bar. **2) The wrist turning**, elevating the first mallet and bringing the second down to strike the next bar; and **3) The second mallet rebounding to its original position**. When playing this exercise, avoid letting the second mallet "flop" onto the bar. **Turn the wrist strongly and produce a tone equal to that of the first**. Due to the amount of wrist strength needed to play double laterals, one should postpone this exercise until the previous two stroke types are mastered. Attempting to play double laterals before attaining requisite wrist strength will result in uneven and unsatisfactory sound. Also, at almost all tempi, even though this is a lateral exercise, the eighth notes will be moving at a speed that requires the player to execute single independent strokes. Don't get sloppy by trying to play lateral strokes on the eighth notes. Again you should be comfortable playing this exercise between 50-150 bpm and at a variety of dynamic levels. This exercise is to be performed in 1234, 1243, 1324, and 1423 permutations (reverse the pattern for the second 16 bars).

Laterals p.2

9

Musical notation for measures 9-13. The treble clef staff features a melodic line with eighth-note runs and a key signature change to one sharp (F#) at measure 13. The bass clef staff provides a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

14

Musical notation for measures 14-17. The treble clef staff continues the melodic line with eighth-note runs. The bass clef staff continues the eighth-note accompaniment.

18

Musical notation for measures 18-21. The treble clef staff continues the melodic line with eighth-note runs. The bass clef staff continues the eighth-note accompaniment.

22

Musical notation for measures 22-25. The treble clef staff continues the melodic line with eighth-note runs. The bass clef staff continues the eighth-note accompaniment.

26

Musical notation for measures 26-29. The treble clef staff continues the melodic line with eighth-note runs. The bass clef staff continues the eighth-note accompaniment.

30

Musical notation for measures 30-33. The treble clef staff continues the melodic line with eighth-note runs. The bass clef staff continues the eighth-note accompaniment.

