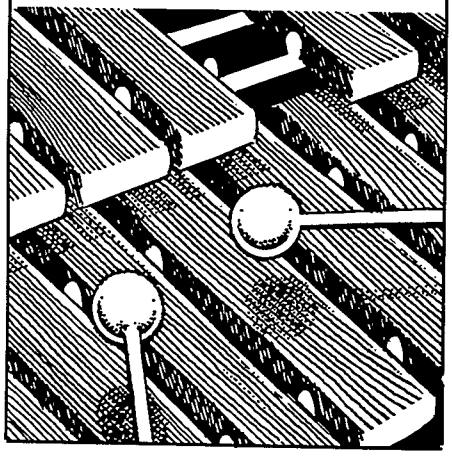
Marimba Clinic



Edited by
Leigh Howard Stevens

DEVELOPING INTERPRETATIVE SKILLS IN MARIMBA PERFORMANCE

by John Raush

The marimba is a very old instrument, traceable through at least eleven centuries to ancient Southeast Asian prototypes; however, the marimba is a virtual newcomer to the art music of the West. It has been only twenty-one years since Harold Schonberg, music critic of the *New York Times,* in a review of Vida Chenoweth's premier performance of Robert Kurka's *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra,* assured the music world that the marimba "...decidedly does possess musical possibilities."

As teachers, we should be heartened by Schonberg's encouraging words, and hang them in a conspicuous place to remind our marimba students of the "musical possibilities" of their instrument, not only on those occasions when they perform in public, but perhaps more importantly, when they practice! Although students must go through their daily calisthenics, all of their practice should not be spent playing one note after another in a mechanical, mindless sort of way; if it is, we need not expect them to be able to walk onstage and, by some miracle, play musically.

Our students now have available to them an ever-increasing array of material designed to hone their technique to the point necessary to turn out technically impressive performances, and yet, as every musician knows, such an exhibition, even if it is note-perfect, does not a musical performance make. In fact, it may be argued that on any page of music, there is more that defies notating and has, therefore, been omitted, than appears in ink.

An actor must constantly seek the particular inflection of the spoken word with which a phrase is turned into a moving theatrical experience that seizes the listener's ear and strikes a responsive chord deep within. Similarly, expressive inflection or "expression" is the primary goal of the musician, and should be of fundamental concern to the teacher. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is a topic that is difficult to discuss, for it can be argued that since musical expression comes from within it obviously cannot be taught. True as this may be, taken as a general statement, there must be more to the subject as far as teaching is concerned.

Playing expressively is a phenomenon of broad dimensions. At one extreme are deep-seated intuitions and insights of interpretation which cannot be analyzed and are akin to the miracle of musical creativity itself. Certainly, these cannot be developed from the application of theoretical principles alone. However, at the other extreme is basic training in what we may characterize as a sort of elocution for the instrumentalist, which includes knowledge and practice of the skills necessary to interpret music expressively.

When a child learns to talk, he imitates not only word sounds, but the appropriate inflections for the particular thoughts those words express. Unfortunately, such a mode of learning is often not characteristic of music students in whose training note learning and expression are kept academically separate. The immediate goal of music lessons often focuses upon the physical conditions of performance. Notes are played, one by one, with no thought given to their relationships, or to the ultimate goal of molding them into meaningful musical statements. When practicing, students mechanically repeat exercises, scales and arpeggios, using only one rhythm and dynamic level, even though the very same scales and arpeggios, when found in the repertoire for the instrument, are present in various rhythmic guises and dynamic gradations.

It is incumbent upon us as teachers to help our students develop the insights and skills necessary to solve interpretative problems as well as problems of note reading and technique. We would perhaps do well to begin by concentrating on the problems of articulation.

"Phrasing" and "articulation" are often used interchangeably. Phrasing deals with the process of delineating and connecting the subdivisions of musical thought, whereas articulation has to do with the joining together or separation of the individual notes.

Legato and Staccato

The marimba is, by nature, a staccato instrument. To play legato, we must rely on a subterfuge—the roll—to create the illusion of a long tone. If it is not practical or possible to roll, as, for example, in fast-moving or contrapuntal passages, the player can only hope to change the quality of the staccato sounds he produces. For this purpose, mallets of different size and hardness may be tried, although, in many cases, articulation is controlled in a more subtle manner, by changing the velocity of the strokes used. [*Struck note counterpoint can be clarified and enlivened by a separate dynamic shape in each voice. Couple this idea with Raush's suggestion of different mallet types, and the marimbist can perform with a level of contrapuntal clarity that will make pianists and violinists intensely jealous! Ed.]*

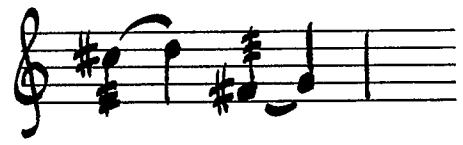
As the speed of each stroke is increased, the quality of the resulting attack changes, becoming progressively heavier as strokes gain momentum.

The slowest strokes produce the lightest attack and, conversely, the fastest strokes produce a heavy, marcato attack. Although a true legato is impossible to achieve without rolling, a quasi-legato connection between two successive non-rolled notes may be conveyed if the interval between them is so brief that the attack of the second note blends into the ring of the first. [*For a "perfect" quasi-legato,* **match** *the attack of the new note to the ring of the previous note. The longer the rhythmic wait, the softer the second note needs to be. Ed.*] The primary object, therefore, of non-rolled "legato" playing is to disguise the attack of each note as much as possible.

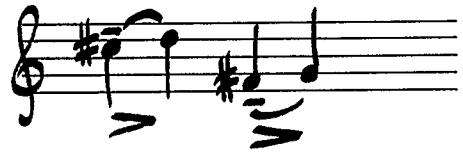
The Interpretation of Articulatory Patterns

When confronting articulatory patterns in a context of rolled notes, the marimbist, like wind or string players, defines the particular pattern by utilizing a combination of long (rolled) and short (non-rolled) notes. For example, in Ex. 1A below, the marimbist, by rolling on beats one and three, links those notes to the following tones and imparts to the C# and F# the weight they require. If, however, the same passage occurs without rolls (Ex. 1B), linkage can only be conveyed if the player uses heavier strokes on beats one and three, followed by lighter strokes on beats two and four.

Ex. 1A



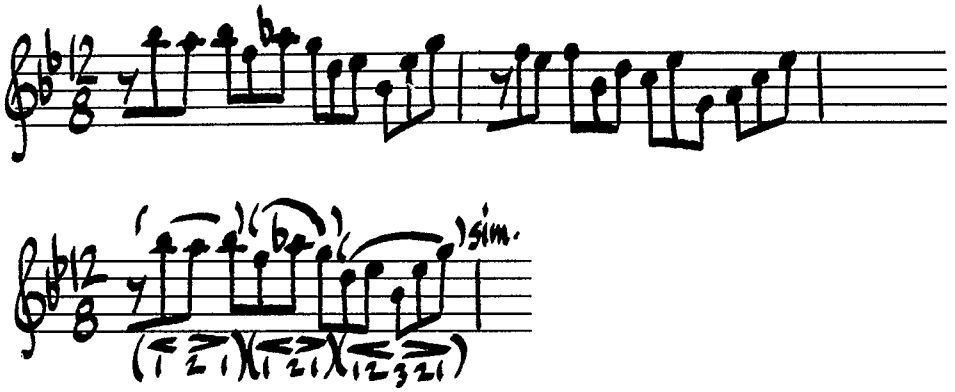
Ex. 1B



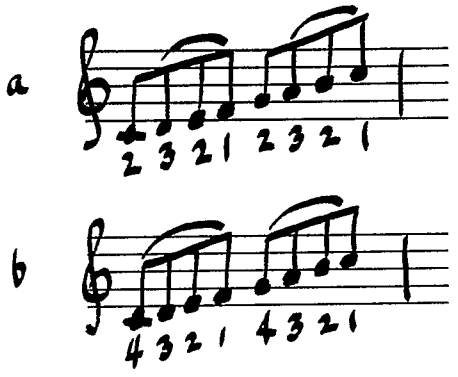
The interpretation of such passages requires great flexibility in the use of strokes of constantly changing weight. [*The student should realize that the rolls in 1a, will not necessarily produce the marked sluring. A diminuendo similar to 1b should be used even with the rolls. The "d" could be slurred to the "f#" (contrary to the way the passage is marked) by rolling the "d" and matching the dynamic of the "f#" to the end of the roll. Ed.*]

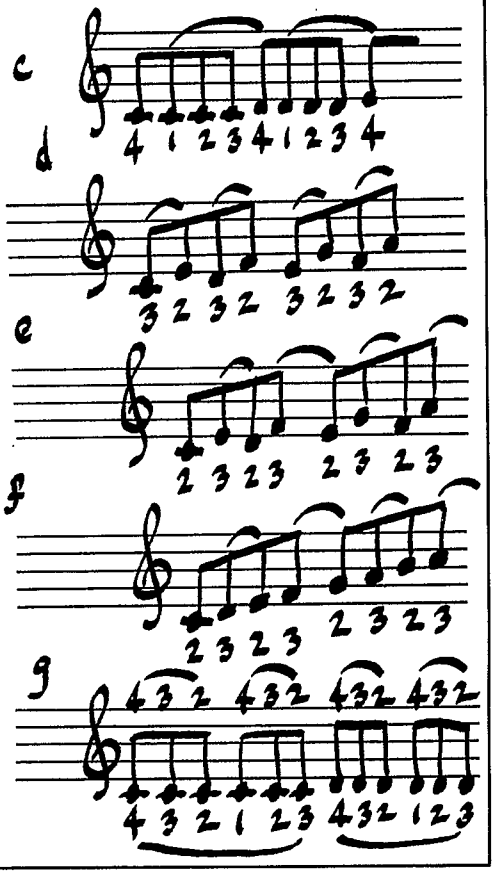
In melodic lines devoid of rolls, expressive playing is largely a matter of the recognition and convincing execution of changing articulatory patterns. In Example 2, contrast in your imagination, an all-too-often-heard performance in which every note is played with exactly the same stroke weight (except for the last note in the measure, which is usually accented for some inexplicable reason), with the interpretation indicated in Example 3 (using numbers [1, 2, 3] to indicate a range of strokes of increasing weight [1 = lightest]).

Ex. 2 *Praeludium* J.S. Bach



Developing the control necessary to interpret passages such as the example given above should be a primary goal of the student's daily practice routine. Below are examples of simple exercises that students can use to practice the stroke differentiation necessary to define various articulatory patterns. Numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) are used to indicate relative stroke weights (1 = lightest).



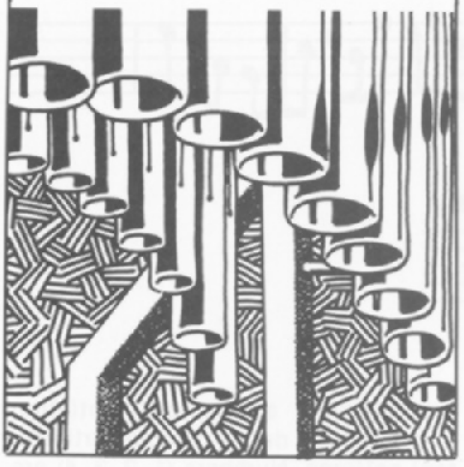


Teachers must take our share of the blame if our students fail to appreciate music as an art that communicates with its listeners and moves them to the heart. We must find models of interpretative performances to hold up to them to study. Recordings are helpful; live performances by outstanding artists are even better. Occasionally, something appears in print that is exceptionally rewarding. Such is the case with a recent book by David Blum, which should be required reading for every serious student of music, entitled *Casals and the Art of Interpretation,* published by the University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Raush is Assistant to the Dean and instructor of percussion in the School of Music, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. He earned a DMA in percussion performance at the University of Texas in Austin. He has been a member of the Chicago Civic Orchestra, the orchestra at the Berkshire Music Festival, Tanglewood, and the Austin Symphony. Currently, he is timpanist of the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra.

Vibe Workshop



Four Mallet Exercises

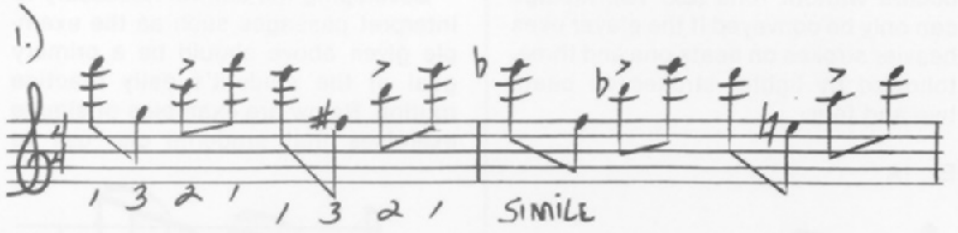
by Ed Saindon

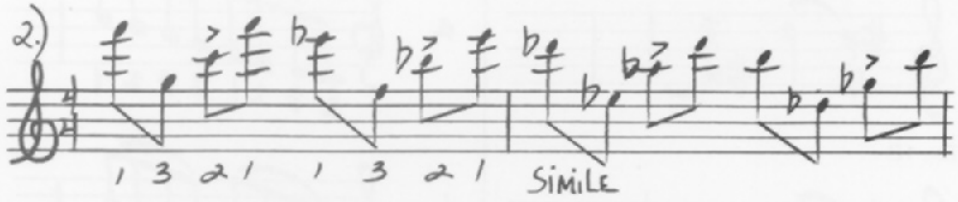
The examples used in this article come directly from a course called Advanced Mallet Technique which I teach at Berklee College. These exercises are not an end, but merely should serve as a means of acquiring dexterity with additional four mallet techniques and concepts to be used in conjunction with musical contexts.

Examples 1 through 7 are concerned primarily with executing single note lines with three mallets. (The inner mallet of the left hand and both mallets of the right hand.) The designated numbers assigned to each mallet throughout the article will be as follows:

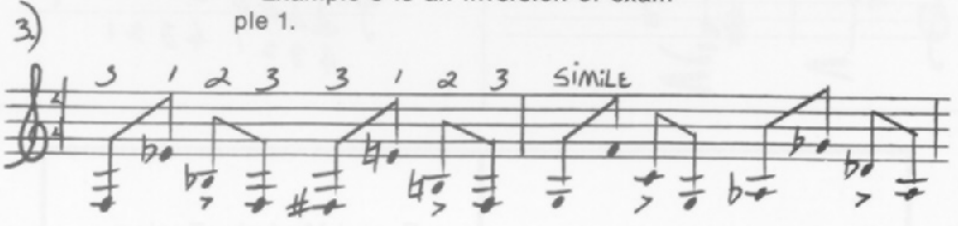
The right hand inner mallet is seldom utilized in executing single note lines, but when the situation warrants it, i.e. large intervallic lines, it can be very useful in minimizing unnecessary motion. For the sake of building up power in the inner mallet, be sure to accent the notes played by the 2nd mallet.

Example 1 proceeds to descend through the chromatic scale while example 2 descends by successive whole steps. An important requirement in executing these exercises is to be able to visualize the shapes quickly. While you're playing on one shape, visualize the next succeeding shape ahead of time.





Example 3 is an inversion of example 1.



Example 4 utilizes another shape.