

Marimba Choreography

A Guide to Enhancing One's Marimba Performance

By Dr. Jeffrey Barudin

The motion and position of a marimbist's body are crucial aspects of any successful performance. There are many techniques on which students and teachers focus, such as grip, stroke, and rotation. I have found that a lesser-emphasized technique—marimba choreography—is key to effective and efficient playing. Marimba choreography consists of the planned and intentional physical movements that enhance one's musical performance. When incorporated into one's practice sessions, musicians can expect increased accuracy, more comfortable playing positions, and a more efficient, ergonomic, and consistent approach.

In my experience as a collegiate professor and private percussion teacher, one of the most consistent and pervasive flaws I've noticed among students of all levels has been an unawareness of either natural or prescribed body movements while playing. I have also noticed that many students are not sure how to incorporate choreography into their playing. I find that including marimba choreography overtly and specifically along with the techniques they are already learning greatly improves my students' awareness. Based on these experiences, I now fully integrate choreography into my marimba curriculum.

BODY MOVEMENTS AND LOCATION

I started by identifying specific motions and grouping them based on the body parts involved—feet, knees, hips, and shoulders. Foot movements include the directionality of the feet and the sliding motion that allows for movement throughout the range of the instrument. Knee movements primarily include ducking, or lowering the torso. Hip movements include the weight distribution of the body and the angle of the torso relative to the instrument. Shoulder movements allow for easy travel between the natural and accidental notes. These movements can be used singularly or in conjunction with each other, and if done correctly, will add efficiency and consistency to one's marimba playing.

After categorizing these body motions, I created a notation system to indicate these specific moves. This system is easily integrated into music scores, and allows the performer to set body positions with precision. When these symbols are lined up with specific beats, body motions become part of the music. This is truly the goal: to make marimba choreography just as natural as every other performance technique. Figure 1 shows the notation system I have devised. These symbols are included in the figures throughout this article to show how I incorporate them into musical examples.

USING MARIMBA CHOREOGRAPHY

Marimba choreography can be used in a wide variety of situations, and vary based on the technique or musical goal. Below I have highlighted five examples that show the benefits of planned and prescriptive movements while playing.

Example 1. Mallets on Multiple Planes



This is when the two mallets held in one hand are on different planes, one on the naturals and the other on the accidentals. Let's use a B Major chord as an example. The left hand must angle inward to play the B and F-sharp,

Figure 1. Body Movement Notation Symbols

Foot movements,
indicating direction
and spacing



Knee movements,
indicating when to
lower the torso



Hip movements,
indicating direction
of the torso



Shoulder movements,
indicating elbow
placement



and the right hand must also angle inward to play the D-sharp and B. Both hands come in towards the body to achieve the correct angle, resulting in a squeezed feel with both elbows pressed against the torso (Figure 2).

To counteract this tightness, simply place one foot behind the other. Be sure to remain balanced; the heel of the front foot should line up with the arch of the back foot. This simple motion allows the performer to position the elbows in front of the torso, rather than squeezed into the sides (Figure 3). There will be significantly less tension in the arms, and the body remains in a position that will still be responsive and prepared for the next phrase or chord.

Figure 2



Figure 3



Example 2. Large Intervallic Spreads or Jumps

Let's consider the end of the first movement of Peter Klatzow's "Dances of Earth and Fire" (Figure 4). This example requires the performer to cover nearly the entire length of a 4.5-octave marimba. In this case, bending the knees allows the performer to more easily reach wide intervallic spreads. Try this at the instrument and you will notice that as you bend the knees while keeping the mallets in position, the elbows begin to bend as well. Now, you not only have added arm length, but also a shorter distance to the bars. Another benefit to this movement is that you maintain the correct mallet angle, hitting the bars with the core and not with the upper wrap. Bending the knees during these major distances helps with accuracy, comfort, and sound production (Figure 5).

Figure 4. "Dances of Earth and Fire"



"Dances of Earth and Fire" by Peter Klatzow
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Figure 5



PAS THANKS ITS ALL ACCESS PASS FRIENDS

Anders Astrand . Arthur Avila
John Baldwin . John R. Beck
John Beckford . Robert Bell
Paul Berns . Joel Bluestone
Jerry Bolen . John Bosworth
Michael Bump . Paul Buyer
Ruth Cahn . James Campbell
Ben Cantrell . Steven Day Carter
David R. Ciarvella . Gary Cook
Diane Downs . Karl Dustman
Peter Erskine . David Eyler
Patrick Fulford . Julia Gaines
Brian Gildea . Genaro Gonzales
Michael Gould . Jim Guglielmo
Jonathan Haas . Chris Hanning
Stefon Harris . Douglas Hazelrigg
George Hill . Julie Hill
Jim Holland . Richard Holly
Steve Houghton . Christopher Karabin
Michael Kenyon . Glenn Kotche
Adam Laarman . Johnny Lane
Deborah Loach . Brian Mason
William Moersch . Jeffrey Moore
Ken Murphy . Valerie Naranjo
Christopher Norton . Eugene Novotney
Gary Olmstead . James Petercsak
William Platt . Mickey Price
Lisa Rogers . Jim Royle
Sherry Rubins . Jim Rupp
Alison Shaw . David Steele
Mark Stempel . Brian Stephens
Saturnino Tiamson . Chris Treloar
Richelle Treves . Lauren Vogel Weiss
Paul Vogler . Kelly Wallis
Brian West . Gregory White
Brian Zator . Glenn Zeinemann

Example 3. One-Handed Rolls

A more extreme use of marimba choreography would be when performing a one-handed roll, either on one note or two notes in close range (Figure 6), especially when the other hand is playing something different. To get to

Figure 6



the note(s) properly, one must bring the elbow out, putting the forearm at a perpendicular angle with the bars. The foot opposite the roll hand should slide back, providing balance, while the front foot takes the brunt of the weight. The hip is pivoted towards the bars, following the angle suggested by the arm, and the knees are slightly bent. This position aids the rotation needed for a consistent one-handed roll, while still allowing free movement with the opposite hand. One example from marimba literature that asks for this technique is David Maslanka's "Variations on Lost Love" (Figure 7).

Example 4. Tight Stickings

Many passages in marimba repertoire require tight stickings, where the hands may even be crossing each other. The same foot positioning described in Example 1 (with one foot in front of the other) would also be helpful in these situations. This keeps the arms from squeezing into the torso and causing unwanted stress and tightness. One composition that calls for this is Leigh Howard Stevens's "Rhythmic Caprice." There are instances of both hands playing the same two notes (Figure 8), in which this choreography would be beneficial.

Example 5. Extended Techniques

"Rhythmic Caprice" uses extended technique to great effect. The most frequently used tech-

nique calls for striking the bar with the shaft of the mallet. For large portions of this piece, the performer is required to play on the close ends of the natural bars and the far ends of the accidental bars simultaneously. Bending one's knees is mandatory in order to maintain a sense of balance, and also helps to avoid an extreme wrist angle while playing on the natural keys. However, the torso can't be lowered too much, as the mallets playing on the accidentals should ideally maintain a slight downward angle to ensure ease of playing, accuracy, and consistency of sound (Figure 9).

REHEARSAL TIPS

These body movements need to be fully incorporated into one's practice sessions in order to become truly ingrained in marimba performance. As with any other technique, constant repetition is necessary. As musicians, we are used to repeating phrases to work on note accuracy, mallet path, and stroke/rotation. Working on the choreography of a phrase is just as important. Using my notation system to encourage body movements will aid in quick memorization and encourage consistent note accuracy.

Earlier I mentioned lining up body movements with specific beats in the music. This rehearsal technique entails the placement of prescribed motions within the context of the music's tempo. Integrating the choreography with the music connects the physical and aural aspects of the performance. This is highly beneficial, as it quickens muscle memory and encourages memorization.

As an educator, I have found that my students display varying degrees of awareness regarding their movements while playing. As is the case with all other performance techniques, it is the teacher's job to recognize the individual nature of a student and appropriately tailor the methodology. Technique does not need to be uniform for all performers; it is merely a means for that person to achieve their highest level of ability. All bodies are unique and react differently depending on the scenario. The moves introduced in this article are meant to be a jumping-off point and hopefully a way for everyone to find the specific body moves that will work best for them.

I believe that no marimba training is complete without the consideration and inclusion of marimba choreography. Awareness of the body's positioning and movements will produce a more consistent and efficient musical performance. As marimba choreography is intentionally included in practice and performance, it will become more natural. The work done initially will reap significant rewards down the road.

It is worth mentioning that the concept of choreography is by no means limited solely to the marimba. Body movements are an integral part of percussion performance, regardless

Figure 7. "Variations on Lost Love"

Part I
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"Variations on Lost Love" by David Maslanka

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Figure 8. "Rhythmic Caprice"

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"Rhythmic Caprice" by Leigh Howard Stevens

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Figure 9



of the instrument. The specific movements mentioned in this article are directed toward the marimba but can be modified to work for any other percussion instrument. The crux of this article is the percussionist's consideration of effective body movements. An awareness of one's body while performing and practicing ultimately results in a healthy and responsive body that will reflexively know the most ideal position for any situation.

Dr. Jeffrey Barudin is a nationally recognized percussionist and educator based in St. Louis. He is an Assistant Professor of Music at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri, where he serves as the Director of Percussion Studies and Director of Bands at the LU-Belleville (Illinois) campus. He is also on the faculty of the New England Music Camp. Barudin is a Grammy Award-winning musician who has performed as a soloist and ensemble member across the nation. He has degrees from the University of Michigan and Penn State University.

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