

# Learning Approach to Keyboard Percussion

2016 Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic

Thursday, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 3:00 pm, W186

**Dr. Brian Zator, Head of Percussion at  
Texas A&M University-Commerce**

All musicians develop their own performance by achieving long-term goals, short-term goals and by building a diverse repertoire. Long-term aspects that performers are constantly tweaking include sound quality and technique. Short-term goals unique to learning a new piece, and the order at which performers learn, include correct notes/rhythms, dynamics, phrasing and performance presence. Combining all six of these characteristics will help musicians of all levels develop a complete performance.

In addition to *how* music is played, it is equally important to *what* music is played. This presentation will include a wide variety of marimba works from the beginning to advanced levels. Also, the pieces will represent a logical order of student development through various stages of their musical development.

***Dreamscape, Mvt. II: Jonathan Ovalle***

*~ 3 min., self-published by composer*

## I. Sound Quality

Sound quality is one of the most important aspects about playing *any* instrument. In regards to keyboard instruments, there are multiple factors to consider. There are various playing areas and amounts of resonance for each playing area, different mallet choices, range, and technical concerns. Percussionists need to first train their ears to recognize different sounds according to the above factors (i.e. was a thin sound created by poor technique, incorrect playing areas, hard mallets, or a combination?). Once this attribute is achieved, one must train their hands to achieve a good sound quality on a consistent basis. (This will be discussed further in the technical portion of this presentation.)

- A. What type of sound are you looking for?
  1. Full
  2. Rich
  3. Resonant
- B. Can you hear differences between thin and full sounds?
  1. Once you can hear this difference, decide what you did differently to produce a full sound – was it technique or playing area?
- C. How will mallet selection affect the sound?
  1. Mallets should have enough weight to create the warm sounds desired
  2. The mallets should do most of the work for you
- D. Where should you strike the bar?
  1. Differences between playing areas
    - a. Center – most fundamental, not as much overtone resonance

- b. Just off Center – large gamut of overtones and a strong fundamental tone
  - c. Node – no resonance or fundamental
  - d. Edge of Accidentals – good amount of overtones and fundamental, but lacks full resonance in the lower to middle registers
2. Should you play on the edge or off center of the accidentals?
- a. Playing on the edge is a different sound quality
  - b. Decisions made by preference of sound and tempos
  - c. I prefer to play just off center as much as possible

***Study in C: Dionisio Aguado, Classical Era and Spagnoletta: Anonymous, Renaissance Era***  
 ~ 1 min./each, published in the “*Anthology of Lute and Guitar Music for Marimba*” collection  
 compiled/arranged by Rebecca Kite, published by TakiMusic, distributed by Alfred Music:  
 this book contains many solos from beginner-advanced levels

## II. Technique

There are obviously different schools of thought in regards to technique. Whatever technique you use, the end result should allow you to ALWAYS produce a good sound without having to think about the specifics of your hands. Your technique should not hinder you in achieving the other five aspects discussed in this presentation, and should encompass *RELAXED* and *NATURAL* movements.

***Overall, your musical ceiling can only be as high as your technical ceiling.*** Developing “chops” and a strong foundation of correct motions will make learning music easier and increase your ability to perform music at a much higher level.

- A. 2-mallet Fundamentals
  - 1. Scales
  - 2. Intervals: Thirds, Fourths, etc.
  - 3. Arpeggios
  - 4. Double Stops
  - 5. Double Strokes
- B. 4-mallet Fundamentals
  - 1. Double Vertical
  - 2. Single Alternating
  - 3. Single Independent
  - 4. Double Lateral
- C. “Keyboard Fundamentals with Play-Along Tracks” method book, compiled and arranged by Brian Zator, published by Innovative Percussion
  - 1. [http://www.innovativepercussion.com/products/keyboard\\_fundamentals](http://www.innovativepercussion.com/products/keyboard_fundamentals)
  - 2. This exercise book consists of 2-Mallet and 4-Mallet exercises that have unique play-along tracks. Musical styles of the tracks include Rock-n-Roll, Latin, Samba, African, Jazz, Pop, and Funk.
  - 3. Multiple tempos are used for all Fundamentals, allowing players and ensembles from beginner to advanced levels to build upon their technical abilities.
  - 4. The book comes with two full-size posters to hang and easily view while learning and playing through the exercises.

***Ballades for Koto Solo: Vol. 2, Spring: Minoru Miki, arr. Brian Zator***

## I. A Young Sprout

~ 3 min.: published by Zamiki Music

Brian Zator's video performance guide of this piece is available in iBooks

### III. Correct Notes/Rhythms

When learning a new piece of music, musicians learn the correct notes and rhythms. This is fairly obvious, but it is extremely important. This is one of the first steps to learning a piece of music and is required to properly express the ideas of the composer.

#### A. Consistency

1. When first learning a new piece of music, the tendency is to learn the notes and rhythms at too fast a pace, which ultimately leads to inconsistent accuracy
2. If the foundation of the correct notes/rhythms are not present, the application process of the other five aspects is more time-consuming and frustrating
3. Keep the tempo slow until the notes/rhythms can be performed consistently; the final tempo will be easier to achieve and feel more comfortable if the notes/rhythms are part of your natural motions
4. It is much more difficult to re-train yourself to play the correct notes/rhythms after you have been playing the piece incorrectly for awhile
5. Work on small sections/phrases, as well as transitions from phrase-to-phrase

#### B. Tempo

1. The proper tempo is, at times ambiguous, according to some markings by composers. Other times, the tempos are clearly marked and serve as a goal for musicians
2. Whatever tempo is desired for a performance, one must work up to it and not force things; the correct notes/rhythms will suffer if a faster tempo is the player's primary goal

## 9 Peanuts: Anders Koppel (6<sup>th</sup> movement: Funky)

~ 1.5 min.: published by Wilhelm Hansen

Entire 9 movement work ~ 20 min

### IV. Dynamics

Dynamics are very important to express the composer's ideas in greater detail. Without dynamics, the life of the music does not exist. While dynamics are usually clearly marked by the composer and editor, it is the performer's decisions that will determine the final result.

#### A. Wide dynamic spectrum

1. To fully express your musical thoughts, ideas and expressions, one needs to have a wide range of dynamics and a clear difference between each dynamic marking
2. Exaggerating the dynamics will help deliver the music to the audience

#### B. Here are some questions you need to ask yourself once you get more involved with the music.

1. What relationships do I want to provide between an 'mf' and an 'mp' marking?
2. Is there a difference between one section marked 'f' and a different section also marked 'f'?

#### C. What is written and not written in the music?

1. Since you can't always talk to a composer and ask them about specific details of their music, you need to interpret what they wanted
2. You also need to be able to express the music the way you hear it as well
3. *This is a fine line between 'what the composer wants' and 'what the performer wants'; There is flexibility but it is the performer's responsibility to fully express the composer's intentions in his/her own personal way*
4. A good game-plan to perform the dynamics:
  - a. First, play the dynamics exactly how the composer has written
  - b. Then, as you get more involved in the music, experiment with some of your own ideas
  - c. Write down personal notes in the music about what you would like to adjust and certain dynamic relationships you would like to portray
  - d. Listen to professional recordings and videos regarding their interpretations

***Kampf der Samurai and Silvias Lied, Nebosja Jovan Zivkovic***

~ 1.5 min./each: published in the *Funny Mallets: Marimba, Book I* collection by Gretel Verlag: this book contains ten pieces intended for the beginner to intermediate level marimba student

## V. Phrasing

The phrasing aspects of music deal with 'big-picture' ideas. When performing music, one must know the overall form of the piece and the structure of the different melodic and rhythmic motives that give shape to the piece. Knowing where the 'peaks' and 'valleys' occur in the music will help accurately communicate the 'big picture' to the audience.

### A. Form

1. The overall form of the music (i.e. sonata, theme-variations, ternary, etc.) should be established very early in your preparation.
2. Once the large-scale form is established, break down the smaller sections to find similar and contrasting elements throughout.
3. Mark primary cadences and determine their importance in the overall form

### B. Direction of the line

1. Because of harmonic and motivic elements, the musical motion is usually moving forward.
2. It is the performers duty to determine where, if any, arrival points exist within phrases and sections of music
3. Having direction will create interest so the music does not remain static

### C. Making Music

1. Use your own musical judgment to determine where phrases exist and what to do with those phrases
2. Good music will speak for itself and at times, the performer needs to just get out of the way and let the music move where it wants to go

***Yellow After the Rain: Mitchell Peters***

~ 4 min.: published by Mitchell Peters/Alfred Music Distributors  
Brian Zator's video performance guide of this piece is available in iBooks

## VI. Performance Presence

Musicians have a great opportunity when they perform to express their emotions and feelings about a piece of music using the five other aspects to effectively communicate their ideas. One aspect, however, that gives a performance that certain ‘spark’ is the performers’ presence on stage. Your presence will help engage the audience into the music at a much higher level. We, as percussionists, have a great advantage over other musicians because our instruments provide us the opportunity to be extremely visual. In regards to marimba, we have nine feet of space (5-octave marimba) to move around, we are holding 2, 4 or 6 mallets at a time and our natural motions to play the marimba are bigger than other instrumentalists.

If you haven’t worked on the following aspects, it might take some time to feel comfortable instilling these into your performance. They must be practiced in the practice room and the use of a mirror will help you see your improvements. Overall, you should not force yourself or over-plan your actions because they will seem artificial.

### A. Facial expressions

1. When playing a fun and light piece, don’t be afraid to enjoy the music; if the audience sees that you enjoy playing the piece, they will most likely enjoy listening to the piece
2. Without over-exaggerating your expressions, small differences will make mood changes or transitions flow from one section to the next
3. Don’t ‘tell’ the audience with a facial expression that you missed a note

### B. Body movements

1. Set mood for the opening of the piece
2. Can help denote phrases
3. Aid in providing seamless transitions
4. Bring attention to melody lines

### C. Overall – Display confidence

1. To the audience, everything you do should seem like you meant to do it
2. Never let the audience know something didn’t go as you had planned
3. No matter what happens, you must stay calm, forget about what went wrong and focus on the rest of the work

### ***Variations on Japanese Children’s Songs: Keiko Abe***

*~ 7 min., published in the Works for Marimba book by Schott Japan: this book also contains Memories of the Seashore, Wind in the Bamboo Grove, Ancient Vase and Little Windows*

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Dr. Brian Zator – BIO, [www.BrianZator.com](http://www.BrianZator.com)

Dr. Brian Zator is the Head of Percussion at Texas A&M University-Commerce, having joined the faculty in 2001. He holds degrees from Baylor University, the University of Michigan and the University of North Texas, and is also a student of world-renowned marimba artist, Keiko Abe, having performed and studied with her in Japan. Dr. Zator has performed at seven Percussive Arts Society International Conventions (PASIC), TMEA, TBA, Midwest, conventions and festivals across the United States, at Carnegie Hall, and abroad in Brazil, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, and Luxembourg. He has two CD’s released on Equilibrium Records: “Zamiki: Music for Solo Marimba” and a chamber-works CD entitled, “Zoomorphs”. His

method book, “Keyboard Fundamentals with Play-Along Tracks” is published by Innovative Percussion.

Dr. Zator’s students are perennial winners at PASIC competitions, winning the College Keyboard division 4 of the last 7 years, College Multiple-Percussion division twice, Timpani division, and the Small Ensemble Competition. The A&M-Commerce Percussion Ensemble was one of the three winners of the prestigious 2010 PAS International Percussion Ensemble Competition and performed a showcase concert at PASIC 2010. The ensemble also presented a concert at PASIC 2006, featuring works of Minoru Miki, and has released two CD’s since 2007. His students have earned graduate assistant positions at prestigious programs across the country and are becoming successful professionals in their chosen fields.

Active within the Percussive Arts Society (PAS), he currently serves as the Executive Committee President-Elect, and will begin his 2-year term of President on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. He has also served as Secretary, on the Board of Directors, on the Keyboard and Percussion Ensemble Committees, written reviews for *Percussive Notes*, and has adjudicated the PAS International Percussion Ensemble, Composition, and Solo Marimba Competitions. Providing instructional videos for popular marimba solos, Dr. Zator is the primary keyboard artist for the iBook publications by Pocket Percussion Teacher. He is also the Chair of the Texas Prescribed Music List (PML) Percussion Committee that regularly edits, updates and revises the primary percussion solo and ensemble list used by high schools across Texas and the country. Dr. Zator is a performing artist and clinician for Dynasty/Bergerault, Innovative Percussion, Sabian, Evans, and Black Swamp Percussion.

