

Learning to Read Melodic Notation on Keyboard Percussion: A Sequence of Study

Learning to read and play melodic notation on bells, xylophone, vibraphone and marimba is one of the more difficult and tedious skills to acquire for many young students of percussion. One of the primary challenges is that the player is not in direct contact with the instrument. The mallets create a barrier to the instrument so one cannot “feel” one’s way around the instrument as most instrumentalists in the band, orchestra, choir or even a pianist can. Another challenge to the young percussionist is that bell kits, which are the most common and affordable practice medium, have very small bars. In order to play accurately the player must develop precise motions as the size of the bell kits allows little margin for error.

There are two main phases to the sequence of learning keyboard percussion.

Muscle Memory—The first phase is to have students learn the visual nature of the keyboard or keyboards and transform this picture into muscle referencing. Begin with scales, arpeggios and exercises which can be learned easily and quickly with minimal reference to notation. It is important to have your students keep their eyes on the instrument, their mallets, hands, wrists and arms. Perpetuate this phase of study and this phase only, for as long as possible.

I would recommend 30 minutes of daily practice for at least three to four months before introducing any notation. This is not to suggest that introducing notation sooner than three months would in any way compromise a student’s ability to read melodic notation. This first phase is intended to build up muscle referencing, confidence and technique. Learning scales and key signatures is not the primary reason for this first phase, but it is an important and welcome benefit of this method.

Once students are consistently demonstrating major scales in one octave, have them start to look up, periodically, at an empty music stand. Do this with all exercises. Eventually have your students look at the empty music stand almost constantly while playing scales, arpeggios, exercises. Ultimately have them look over the music stand in the direction of the conductor. It is important to note that no one can play a keyboard percussion instrument with consistency and accuracy without glancing at the keys from time to time.

No matter how much experience a player has, the principles detailed in the first phase should be a constant fixture of daily refinement.

Introducing Notation – In the second phase I try to stress to students that every symbol on the staff (middle C for example) equals a bar on the keyboard. The idea is to equate a specific point on the staff with a specific target on the instrument. This is similar to what one does in reading drumset notation or multi-percussion notation.

The resource I use to start most students reading melodic notation is Morris Goldenberg’s, *Modern School for Xylophone Marimba Vibraphone*. Because of the relatively quick pacing of Goldenberg’s book I promote “cycling” through any of the various sections. That is, begin a section at a slow to moderate tempo, play through all melodies (etudes, etc.), then restart the same section at a faster tempo (perhaps five to ten bpm each cycle). Repeat each section until consistency and confidence in note recognition is achieved up to about 130 bpm.

When using resources such as Goldenberg’s be sure to give students a solid foundation for developing their single stroke roll. A resource such as *Goldenberg’s Modern School...* is more appropriate for older beginners (at least ninth grade). For younger beginners I would recommend any of the following:

- Keith Bartlett’s *50 Short Pieces for Tuned Percussion (Elementary Intermediate)*
- Anthony Cirone’s *The Orchestral Mallet Player*
- George Hamilton Green’s, *New Elementary Studies for Xylophone & Marimba*
- Thomas McMillan’s *Percussion Keyboard Technic*
- Mitchell Peters’ *Fundamental Method for Mallets, Book 1*
- Mark Wessels’ *A Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion*
- Garwood Whaley’s *Fundamental Studies for Mallets*,
- Any Band Method Series.

These resources are not as “roll” intensive. Players could use the same “cycling” principle outlined above as necessary.

Keith Bartlett’s *50 Short Pieces for Tuned Percussion (Elementary Intermediate)*, concludes with the final ten pieces with piano accompaniment. Resources with accompaniment can have great motivational elements to them.

A unique feature of the Mark Wessel’s *A Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion* is that he minimizes the player’s need of an expansive field of vision by using a limited range, extra-large notation, and utilizing only the accidentals. Wessel gradually expands that field of vision throughout his resource by expanding the range, reducing the size of the notation and incorporating the natural keys.

Let me offer another approach for learning to read melodic notation. It is contrary to the above sequence and was brought to my attention by my friend and mentor Jack Diani, President of Volkwein's Music in Pittsburgh and an exceptional percussionist and timpanist. This approach is more in line with the way many brass, woodwind and string players learn melodic notation. Brass, woodwind or string players will relate a symbol on the page with a fingering and embouchure formation the way a keyboard percussionist will equate a specific point on the staff with a specific target on the instrument. The distinction is that brass, woodwind and string players have constant visual contact with the notation.

There is a much more intimate connection between notation (the desired pitch) and the production of a pitch than the disconnected and mechanical reproduction of pitches already created for the keyboard percussionist. This is why I suggest having your keyboard percussionists learn scales, arpeggios and the myriad of exercises by maintaining visual contact to the notation. Players should balance their time between muscle referencing and maintaining visual contact with the notation. Mitchell Peters' *Fundamental Method for Mallets, Book 1* is organized well to offer this balance.

Phil Kraus's, *Modern Mallet Method, Volume 1* is an excellent resource for muscle referencing and should be used in addition to any of the resources listed above for maintaining visual contact with the notation.

A resource not well-known or widely used but by a well-known author is George L. Stone's *Mallet Control*, which offers short, repetitive patterns that gradually build into complete scales. A non-percussion resource that Mr. Diani suggests is Arban's *Complete Conservatory Method for Trumpet*. It is similar to Stone's but offers hundreds of patterns that will help to promote a keyboard percussionists visual contact with the notation.

Another practice tip is to work in as many short sessions as possible throughout the day. Try three or four 10 or 15 minute sessions rather than one 30 or 45 minute lump. The more often we are exposed to something the more likely it is to become commonplace or comfortable. Practicing this way may increase the willingness to practice and increase one's overall practice time each day.

Try a combination of these approaches and do not let students become discouraged when the notes don't come as fast as *Summer 2015*


they would like. There are two sayings that percussion students should remember: "Patience is a virtue" and "Repetition is the mother of all teachers."

'There are many percussionists and non-percussionists alike who advocate this type of process. I do not claim it as my own. I am stressing its value here.



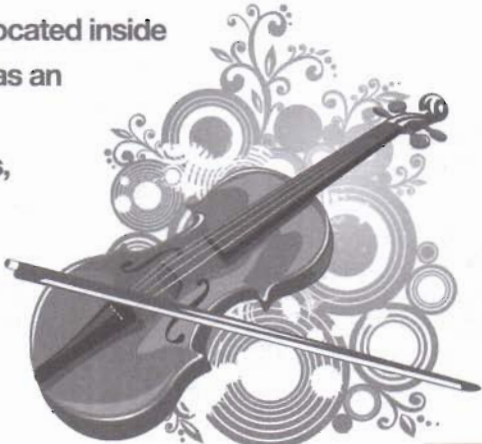
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