

Sound Development and Four-Mallet Usage for Vibes

BY ED SAINDON

The vibraphone is still very young relative to many other instruments. As a result, there's much untapped potential on the instrument that hasn't been explored and developed. In this article, I'll cover two areas that offer the vibist a great deal of potential for exploration. The first area is in sound development on the instrument. Sound development refers to playing the vibraphone with subtlety, nuance, and expression. It focuses on playing the vibraphone with a wide dynamic range and the ability to bring out the many potential sounds and colors on the instrument.

The second area is in the consistent utilization of four mallets using the complete range of the instrument. Thinking like a pianist, arranger, and orchestrator, the vibist approaches the instrument like a piano and focuses on a multi-linear way of playing. Regardless of whether the vibist is playing classical or jazz, the above-mentioned areas are common to both genres.

SOUND DEVELOPMENT

The vibraphone is a difficult instrument in terms of expressive playing. Basically, it's composed of pieces of metal that we are trying to "sing" on. The vibraphone does not have a lot of inherent nuance and subtlety that many other instruments possess, such as woodwind and brass instruments, violin, or the ultimate expressive instrument, the human voice. How many times have we heard a sax solo with a great deal of expression and nuance, followed by a vibraphone solo that sounded flat in terms of dynamics, articulation, and other nuances? So, that is the challenge. How do we play the vibraphone with more expression?

To be sure, playing vibes expressively is a challenge. But as a starting point, we can focus on two areas: articulation and dynamics. With these two areas, we

can greatly enhance and develop a touch and sound on the instrument. To me, technique is not only about speed; it's about playing the instrument with finesse, dynamic control, and a refined touch. It's the ability to bring out the many potential sounds, beauty, and colors of the instrument.

Articulation

A common problem with many vibists is lack of variety with articulation. Many



notes are consistently played either too short or too long. More often than not, much of the attention is given to the initial attack of the note but not to the duration and the subsequent note cut-off. As a result, there is often no space and every note rings up to and sometimes into the next note.

With my students, we may take a simple melodic phrase and explore the many possibilities of playing that phrase with a variety of articulations. We might play some notes staccato and some legato, add some slurs, simulate pitch bending, and so on. The key is to make sure there is some space in the phrase.

Some techniques to be used in accomplishing these goals include a wide array of dampening and pedaling techniques as well as the use of deadstrokes (where the mallet stays on the bar after striking it, stopping the note from ringing). Try playing some lines and randomly use some deadstrokes and dampening. Deadstrokes will give you a very staccato sound while dampening will give you a very legato sound. Experiment with using these two contrasting types of articulation. If you concentrate on playing with more articulation, you will come up with your own techniques to play what you want to hear.

In using articulation, don't be afraid of leaving space between notes in a phrase. One note may be long while the next note might be played staccato. Listen to other instrumentalists (especially such classical pianists as Horowitz and Rubinstein) and try to duplicate their articulation. Some jazz pianists to check out for clear articulation are Brad Mehldau and Keith Jarrett.

Dynamics

Another common problem is that the vibraphone is generally played with too much tension and force. The result is a very heavy, forced sound that lacks any degree of dynamic range. Very often, everything is played too loudly and there is a lack of soft to medium dynamics. If we lose dynamics in our playing, we lose too much.

I suggest playing classical music (piano, guitar, violin) as a means of refining one's touch on the instrument. Phrases

should be shaped dynamically (e.g., crescendo or diminuendo) and every note should have its own dynamic level. Ghost notes and accents with every dynamic level in between should be utilized.

Here are a few suggestions for applying dynamics to your playing: Try playing two phrases with contrasting dynamic levels. Or play one phrase ending with a crescendo and the next phrase beginning with a diminuendo. Play a scale and alternate between ghost notes and accents. Come up with your own exercises. The goal is to make the use of dynamics so automatic that you don't have to think about it. It should be a natural component of your playing.

Granted, in some playing situations this may not be possible, but that doesn't mean that the vibist shouldn't strive to play with a consistently wide dynamic range. A common problem with all vibists is that we may be playing in a band with a rhythm section that is not sensitive to dynamic levels. Typically, a vibist might start out a solo with some effective dynamic variations and reach a *forte* dynamic level. Unfortunately, the rhythm section may come up to that dynamic level and stay there for the rest of the solo. However, in a perfect musical world, the vibist should have the ability to go up and down dynamic levels many times throughout a solo. He or she

should be able to go from *piano* to *forte* in one phrase and not be covered up. Personally, I love duo playing because it gives me the freedom to play with a wide dynamic range at all times.

Combining Articulation and Dynamics

In conclusion, taking a simple melodic

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phrase and playing that phrase with a wide dynamic range and with varied articulation will make the phrase much more musical and effective. Playing a single note can be very effective when using dynamics and a variety of articulation. Playing a single note without any degree of dynamics and articulation will be boring and unmusical.

I've had many students come to me feeling that their playing lacked interest and seemed flat. Usually, this has been a result of playing consistently too loud and without any sensitivity to sound (specifically lack of articulation and dynamics). I use a book for reading—*Develop Sight Reading*, published by Chas. Colin Music—that helps fine tune sensitivity in terms of dynamics and articulation.

CONSTANT FOUR MALLET UTILIZATION

I approach the vibraphone as a piano

and consequently play a great deal of piano. Like pianists, vibists can think in terms of arranging and orchestrating on the instrument. With four-mallet independence along with a variety of pedaling and dampening, we can approach the instrument in a multi-linear manner. There is much potential on the instrument in this area.

In four-mallet playing, we should be able to play with any mallet with equal speed and volume.

Marimbists have taken four-mallet dexterity to a very high level, utilizing many different grips. Vibists should be encouraged to try many different grips, create their own grip variations, and to experiment with their own way utilizing the four mallets.

Four-Mallet Technique

A few years ago, I started experimenting using finger control in my grip by utilizing a fulcrum point. After playing for thirty-plus years, I started refining and tweaking my four-mallet technique! That's the beauty of music; we never stop growing and learning. Originally a drummer (I still enjoy playing drums), I wondered why vibists couldn't use finger control like drummers. So my experimentation focused on trying to play with finger control (as in playing snare drum).

Basically, the mallets are held very loosely in my hand and actually come out of my palm and are snapped back with

the fingers. With the use of finger control, there is a minimum of tension in the hand, wrist, and arm. It also takes much of the responsibility off of the wrist and arm (and arm rotation, which is not a good motion and can cause problems, is minimized). Consequently, four-mallet dexterity and the overall dynamic range are increased with less work and less overall wrist and arm motion.

In addition, the use of downstrokes and upstrokes is sometimes overlooked. The wrist should be very flexible and loose when playing with downstrokes and upstrokes. Classical pianists usually have a very refined and superb sound. Observe some classical pianists and you'll see they use everything to create their sound: fingers, wrists, forearm, and upper arm as well as downstrokes and upstrokes, among other specialized techniques. Mallet players can learn a lot from listening to and watching classical pianists in terms of sound and technique.

Four-Mallet Utilization

As I said earlier, the goal is to make use of the four mallets on a consistent basis, whether we are playing jazz, Latin, classical, or whatever. I suggest playing classical music such as Bach's sonatas and partitas for violin, the Bach chorales (which necessitates many dampening techniques), or the "Two-Part Inventions" (playing both parts simultaneously). Other suggested material to use would be any classical piano music by such composers as Beethoven,

Debussy, and Ravel. Baroque guitar music is also very appropriate for adaptation.

I have many students adapt simple piano pieces on the vibraphone, or we may take a two-bar excerpt of a Beethoven sonata and figure out how to play that on the vibes. Many times, in order to play the example, we have to use octave transposition, intricate dampening techniques, and possibly leave out a note here or there. The main purpose is to use these kinds of material as sources of ideas, possibilities, and inspiration for vibraphone playing. The key is to get these various multi-linear concepts in one's playing so that it becomes natural and automatic.

Melodies and single-line improvisation should also be played with four mallets. Scales and arpeggios may be played with four mallets. In constant four-mallet playing, the mallets should be held in a position where each mallet is readily available. The spread of the mallets in each hand should constantly be changing, depending upon the intervallic makeup of the line. Experiment with playing in the middle of the bar or on the inside or outer edge of the bar.

The possibilities are endless. What about playing Latin montuno patterns, a Brazilian choro, a Piazzolla tango, stride pianistic techniques, left-hand ostinato vamps, or jazz fourth-type voicings while the right hand plays the melody or solos, improvising contrapuntal lines as in the "Goldberg Variations"? We can think like an arranger/orchestrator. For example,

play a high-end staccato (deadstroked) phrase like a violin section playing pizzicato while the left hand solos on the low end with legato articulation like a cello. In this case, pedal the left hand and not the right hand.

Contrast in articulation helps keep the various parts more separate and clear. For example, work on a two-bar phrase going from C to G7sus4 with a samba groove. In the left hand, use the notes G and E for the C chord and G and F for the G7sus4 chord. Play the left hand accompaniment as deadstrokes on beats 1 and 3. Improvise with syncopated rhythms in the right hand and make sure to pedal the right hand and keep the solo very clear and expressive (lots of ghost notes, accents, varied articulation).

Sources of inspiration can come from many places. We can be in an elevator listening to the Muzak and concentrating how we can play that type of orchestration or arrangement on vibes. If we approach vibes from a conceptual standpoint as illustrated in the preceding examples, we can further extend the instrument's seemingly limited boundaries. The goal is to try and use the four mallets on a consistent basis with a variety of four-mallet techniques.

In summary, the vibraphone has a great deal of untapped potential. Playing music and specifically growing and developing as a vibraphonist is a life-long pursuit. We should enjoy the journey since the destination should never come. At some point, we transcend the instrument and it comes down to being a good musician. So, although this article has focused on vibraphone-related issues, it's important to be a total musician, which involves the in-depth study of such areas as harmony, composition, rhythm, and improvisation. In the end, it's all about the music.

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