

# Repertoire and Improvisation for Mallet Percussionists

BY ED SAINDON

**W**ith marimba and vibraphone, mallet percussionists have many diversified opportunities to play great music in all kinds of styles and genres. The marimba, with its huge melodic range as well as vast array of colors, has much potential in creating wonderful music in a solo or group format. The same can be said of the vibraphone, along with the deft utilization of pedaling and dampening.

The level of musicality and craftsmanship of today's mallet player is impressive, and the bar is continually being raised. Many keyboard percussionists come from a classical background and have focused on adaptations from the classics as well as contemporary and newly commissioned works. That being said, it seems that many mallet percussionists (more marimbists?) shy away from incorporating improvisation into their playing or coming up with their own adaptations of existing material.

For mallet artists, being able to arrange and create their own adaptations of existing compositions opens up a whole world of new music. It also allows them to be much more personal in their repertoire selection and, consequently, brings more of their personality into their performances.

The absence of improvisation in many of today's mallet keyboardist's performances is unfortunate, since the art of improvisation offers a unique perspective and process in making music. Incorporating improvisation into a piece can give a composition a sense of spontaneity and immediacy. Also, in a group performance, improvisation allows the player a great deal of potential for interacting and responding with each member of the group.

The art of improvisation can be applied to many styles and is definitely not limited to jazz. Incorporating improvisation into a performance does not have to be complicated and can be as simple and easy as choosing a mode and improvising with that scale over one chord. Learning about improvisation will benefit the mallet percussionist's playing in general. Although a mallet player may initially be hesitant with improvisation, I've seen many players en-

joy improvising once they understand the mechanics of the process.

In my mallet keyboard class at Berklee College of Music in Boston, we generally have a mix of mallet percussionists who are either coming from jazz or classical backgrounds. The classical players really thrive and have a great time improvising once they understand the basic fundamentals. More often than not, the classical players will bring many positive attributes to the music that they developed from playing classical music, such as a beautiful tone, musical phrasing, varied articulation, and a fluid and refined technique.

## REPERTOIRE

One of the best ways for mallet players to come up with and develop their sound is to create their own compositions or adaptations of existing material. In terms of existing repertoire, there is a vast pool of material for the mallet percussionist to choose from. A few suggestions include a song from the Great American Songbook, a Brazilian choro, a Jobim bossa-nova, a Scott Joplin rag, an adaptation of a classical piece such as Bach's "Sicilienne" (pianist Kenny Werner's rendition is powerful and beautiful), a Latin montuno, or a contemporary jazz composition by Corea, Jarrett, or Metheny.

The potential in terms of repertoire is very broad in scope and can cover a wide variety of musical styles. With the music of today being so global, all of these musical styles are very prevalent and accessible. How about the mallet percussionist playing a program of all Astor Piazzolla music arranged and adapted for vibraphone and marimba? What about a program of all Beatles music? Regarding musical styles, there's no reason why the keyboard percussionist can't successfully function in the many different and varied contexts such as pop, Latin, tango, folk, hip-hop, funk, etc. The list is expansive, and the music can be

very deep and virtuosic regardless of the style.

The mallet percussionist should have a comprehensive musical background in terms of theory, harmony, arranging, com-

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position, and improvisation. Ultimately, playing music transcends the instrument, and it comes down to being a good musician who is well-versed in all areas of music. Many keyboard percussionists have all the technique they need; it's more a matter of being comfortable with the different process of reading a classical piece versus coming up with a spontaneous arrangement of a song, embellishing a song's melody, or incorporating improvisation in their performance.

There's no reason why the keyboard percussionist shouldn't be able to play an excerpt from the Bach *Sonatas and Partitas for the Violin* and then improvise over the progression of the excerpt. How about adding a left-hand bass part while the right hand plays the melody or improvises over the progression of the excerpt? In order to do that, one needs to analyze the composition's harmony and develop the ability to improvise and "play over the changes."

Furthermore, if mallet percussionists are well-versed in theory, arranging, composition, and improvisation, their performances in any style will be enhanced with a more grounded and musical foundation. A large part of playing is making the "right" choices, and we are making small and subtle decisions every moment as we play music. The player who knows music in terms of composition, arranging, harmony, melody, rhythm, and improvisation will be more apt to make consistently better choices.

Mallet players should also have the knowledge and ability to create introductions, interludes, and endings that may involve a "vamp" (an extended, repeated

two- or four-measure phrase). Other devices may include stop-time figures, changes in time feels or time signatures, modulations, reharmonization, and medleys of

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songs with smooth transitions. In adapting and creating an arrangement of a song, the keyboard percussionist does not necessarily have to play the song as played by the original artist or anyone else. Rather, it would be more interesting for players to come up with their own version of the song that is unique to them. There are many ways and a variety of musical devices that can be used to enhance an arrangement and make it more personal and interesting.

### IMPROVISATION

Improvisation allows the individual player's personality to shine through and come out in a performance. Improvisation reflects one's personality and mood. As a result, a player's improvisation is always changing and may be different from day to day. One's involvement with improvisation is an ongoing evolutionary process that will continue to grow and develop throughout one's career in music.

Improvisation is creating in the moment, and an important part of the process is the ability to create while also listening and reacting to the other players. Consequently, having "good ears" and the ability to listen are very important components in the process of improvisation.

The art of improvisation is all about the process, not the end result. It's not about the written notes on the page; it's about stepping out of the way and allowing the music to flow and go wherever it wants to go.

Improvisation can relate to many things. It's the embellishment of a melody; it's theme and variations; it's supporting the soloist by accompanying with chords and a good time feel; it's improvising on a specific mode. Improvisation involves such musical factors as pacing, phrasing, motivic development, tension-resolution, and contrast with such components as rhythmic density, syncopation vs. non syncopation, dynamics, and articulation. All of these factors are prevalent in all kinds of music and transcend any specific style of music,

whether it is classical, rock, or jazz.

Many players think that improvisation must always be an intricate process that is only applied to difficult progressions as in a bebop composition like Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee." It can be, but it doesn't have to be necessarily that. It can be as simple as playing "Happy Birthday" and coming up with an embellished melody, or playing theme and variations on an American folk song. Improvisation does not have to be flashy, advanced, or complicated. One can improvise on a simple mode, a four-bar triadic progression, or over a two-bar Latin meringue pattern. Improvising can be as simple and direct as playing with another person and trading phrases as they relate to each other.

Improvisation can also be described as spontaneous composition. Anyone with an understanding of composition can essentially use that knowledge to improvise. It is a well-known fact that composers such as Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven were skilled improvisers and masters at theme-and-variation. A case in point would be Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas for the Violin*. The "Sarabande" and the "Double" in "Sonata II" are based on the same progression. The melodic lines in the "Double" are brilliant and filled with wonderful examples of chord arpeggiation, tension-resolution, and guide-tone line movement. If one would like to learn how to improvise, this would be an excellent piece to play and analyze.

Classical percussionists should take advantage of their background and experience performing the classics. For someone who is well versed in Bach, Beethoven,

Ravel, and Debussy, why not use that experience to improvise in the style of those composers? Take a Bach Minuet, analyze the progression, and play theme and variations on the Minuet. Try to play it in a different key without writing it out. In other words, classical repertoire and improvisation should not be thought of as two unrelated or opposing entities. There are many similarities, and one can learn from both.

A multitude of educational material is available that addresses the mechanics and techniques of improvisation. A few recommendations would be *Effortless Mastery* by Kenny Werner (published by Jamey Aebersold), *Free Play* by Stephen Nachmanovitch (published by Tarcher/Penguin), and a DVD, *The Art of Improvisation* with Keith Jarrett (produced by EuroArts).

Ed Saindon is a Professor at Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he has been teaching since 1976. Ed's latest recording features Dave Liebman along with Ed on vibraphone, marimba and piano. Advance Music (Germany) recently published *Rhythmic Phrasing in Improvisation, Volume 1* of the series *Exploration in Rhythm*. For more information, visit [www.edsaindon.com](http://www.edsaindon.com). **PN**

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