

PULSE PERCUSSION

2019 Front Ensemble

Technique Manual

*****ALL AUDITIONEES*****

You must prepare a 1:30-2:00 solo excerpt that showcases your individual skills. It can be anything, but standard literature is preferred. Preparation and musicality is more important than a “cool” piece – choose wisely!

Thank you for your interest in the Pulse Percussion Front Ensemble!

Hey guys, Ian Grom here! This is not meant to be an all-encompassing guide to mallet technique, but a reference for you to use throughout the season. Much of this material has been compiled from various sources but it has all proven to work very well for us in the past so it will be our ever-evolving guide for technique and approach. If there are any questions about the material in the guide please do not hesitate to send me an email at grom@box-six.com

RULE #1 – THE PIT ALWAYS PLAYS TOGETHER

RULE #2 – ALWAYS MAKE GREAT MUSIC, ALWAYS

Now that we covered that, let's get into details!

KEYBOARDS

Posture: Our feet will be shoulder width apart with our knees slightly bent, to enable us to move behind our instruments. Your feet will move A LOT depending on the context so don't get too grounded in your stance. Each keyboard should be at an appropriate playing height, with the forearms angling down at approx. a 60-70 degree angle. Keep your shoulders square and your head relatively up. But how do I see the keys!?! Look down your nose and slightly drop your chin to open your vision up to the full range of the keyboard.

Vibraphones: Your right **toes** only will be on the pedal. This is to ensure that your right foot/heel will be providing balance for you as you move behind your keyboard with your left foot.

Set Postion: Mallet heads are set based on the dynamic we are about to play. We will only use these 3 dynamics to start, which will give us a definitive base to reference as we expand our dynamic palette as needed.

Forte: Full wrist extension up with no extra lift from the arm. This should NOT be 90 degrees to the keyboard as that is an over stretch and will cause a serious loss in control and result in injury.

Mezzo-forte: The mallets are set at halfway between forte and mezzo-piano. It's literally that simple. The key to controlling this lies in knowing you have to restrain the wrist extension up! This limits your range of motion so you don't overplay this deceptively difficult dynamic range.

Mezzo-piano: The bottom of the mallet (where you make contact) is 3" above the keys. This has often been confused with putting the center of the mallet at 3" which really doesn't give you enough room to generate a usable sound OR room to get softer into piano.

To prep or not to prep, that is the question! We do not "prep" with the standard visible "tick tocks" of yesteryear, but will often define the prep as a natural inhale/subtle lift that is relative to the following dynamic. This will also ALWAYS start on an exact beat and last an exact number of counts. When in doubt, ask the section leaders who will most likely have already explained it.

Stay relaxed at all times.

2 Mallet Technique

Divide the mallet shaft into thirds with your eyes. You will place the bottom third in the palm of your hand gripping the mallet with your pinky and ring fingers. Your index finger and thumb should line up directly on the third division of the mallet leaving approx. Depending on the size of your hand, you will have varying degrees of mallet visible from the back of the hand. That's why we make the balance point of the mallet based on this thirds idea, and not define an exact amount of mallet sticking out the back.

Shrek's hands are large, but physics is a thing so he would still hold his fulcrum in the same place as a non-Ogre. Otherwise, if he decided to have 2" of mallet sticking out, his hands would envelop the mallet!

The thumb and index finger should connect with the mallet at your first knuckle. A natural space should occur between the first and second and the thumb and index fingers. Depending on your hands, they may not make the same shape as the picture below, BUT it's a starting point for reference.



Front fulcrum, back fulcrum, middle fulcrum, WHAT DO I USE!?! The answer is definitively, YES. You use all the fulcrums all the time in real music applications, there is no one way to always hold the mallet. The technique should ALWAYS adapt to make the best musical sounds. We essentially want a grip that can be a fulcrum chameleon at any point. Fulcrum pressure and fulcrum leverage/balance points make massive differences in every aspect of your playing, so you will want to learn how to use all of them to your advantage.

Wrist/Arm Ratios – this is to help you understand how to generate a consistent quality of sound and continue to understand the concept that our technique must constantly adapt to every musical moment.

Forte: 90% wrist 10% arm

Mezzo-forte: 75% wrist 25% arm

Mezzo-piano: 50% wrist 50% arm

These are some starting points to experiment with on your own, but I have found them to be pretty accurate in an average situation. All of these details are based on middle of the keyboard, moderate tempo, standard mallet hardness, etc. Our baseline for which we will inform all other decisions.

Articulation Modifiers – These are the motions and muscles that change the “bite” on the front end of the note which allows our sound quality to have a clear initiation without overdoing it.

Fulcrum pressure – The softer the dynamic, the more fulcrum pressure you need to articulate. The louder dynamics need less pressure because the increased height of the mallet is already generating a more articulated stroke. Softer mallets often require a firmer fulcrum to still maintain clarity, while the hardest mallets might need an unusually light fulcrum approach for certain contexts like delicate xylophone playing.

Depth of stroke – “DIG IN MARIMBAS!!” has been screamed at countless hordes of our mallet brethren. The softer the dynamic, the more deeply we need to play past the keys to create a definitive “soft but clear” sound. The louder dynamics don’t need as much stroke depth because the increased height of the mallet is already generating a more articulated stroke.

There’s plenty of resources out on the interwebs regarding legato/piston/shifting etc., but I have found most recently that the above mentioned ratios and articulation modifiers have the most profound and immediate effect on teaching you how to control your SOUND, and not just your LOOK. We will go way deep in this at auditions, but it helps to see this in writing.

4 Mallet Technique - Stevens

The following process is the same for both hands.

First, grip a mallet with your pinky and ring finger. The pinky is our “anchor” and must wrap all the way around the mallet providing the foundation for the grip. There should be minimal excess mallet protruding from the bottom of your pinky. The outer mallet should go up at about a 45 degree angle in relationship to the forearm. This will ensure the mallets will hang evenly when the inner mallet is added to the grip. There is a delicate balance between gripping too tightly with the pinky and letting your outside mallet droop down.



Second, place the other mallet in the center palm of your hand just under your thumb muscle. Everyone’s hands are a little different so you may need to do experiment somewhat with the exact spot that “sticks” for you. Your middle finger is wrapped around the mallet, holding it into your palm/thumb muscle with the fingertip. Your index finger now acts as a shelf for the inside mallet, and the mallet should be able to rest without any pressure in your hand. We will call this the “bridge”. Just like any real bridge, it must never falter or bend. The mallets should naturally set at the interval of a fifth-ish depending on the range of the board you are in. **Stay relaxed at all times.**

Finally, place your thumb on the inside mallet directly over the first knuckle of your index finger. The thumb rests on top of the mallet and applies only the minimal amount of pressure to keep it in place. The thumb contacts the mallet with the fleshy part of the thumb, not the tip of the thumb (as seen below). **NO BENT THUMBS!** This will allow you to freely change intervals as well as maintain a relaxed grip. Avoid the “white thumbnail syndrome” caused by death gripping the inner mallets.



4 Mallet Stroke Types

There are four basic stroke types that we will use with the Stevens technique:

1. Double Vertical strokes
2. Single Independent strokes
3. Single Alternating strokes
4. Double Lateral strokes – 2 versions

1. Double Vertical strokes:

This stroke should be played primarily with the wrist. The thumbs will remain on top of the grip the entire time. Never turn the hand flat as in our 2 -mallet grip regardless of difficult intervals (major seconds, etc). Both mallets must remain parallel to the keyboard at all times to eliminate flammings of the mallets. Gradually, we will learn to incorporate the arm into the stroke. The addition of using arm should be a by-product of a relaxed stroke with correct technique. Do not misinterpret this for using arm to execute the stroke. The mallets should travel straight up and down without any side-to-side motion. Make sure to keep your fingers relaxed and the speed of the stroke fluid and consistent.

2. Single Independent strokes:

We will primarily be using this stroke type for mallets 2 and 3 (the inside mallets). The playing position will be achieved by rotating the "active" around the unused mallet (i.e.: mallet 3 will rotated around mallet 4). In order to develop independence, in this case, with the inside mallets, it is important to keep the outer mallets as still as possible. The outer will be defined as being half the height of the playing position. In order to achieve this DON'T USE ANY TENSION!! Relaxed fingers act as shock absorbers-tension will cause the outer mallets to twitch vertically and/or horizontally. Make sure that you keep your index finger and thumb firm, but relaxed. This will help to keep control of the inside mallets. When at set position, the outer mallets should be slightly angled up, not parallel with the keyboard. This should happen naturally.

3. Single Alternating strokes:

This stroke type is closely related with the Single Independent stroke, but without concern for motion in the other mallet. The set position and playing position are the same as in the Double Vertical stroke. As one mallet strikes the bar, the other mallet will raise in response much like a pendulum transferring its momentum. Be sure to not simply rotate the wrist: instead, think of the pivot point as bouncing from one mallet to the next. This will allow us to control the articulation, rhythm and dynamic of each mallet. It is important to note that TEMPO is a major determining factor for when a Single Alternating stroke TURNS INTO a one-handed roll motion. As the tempo increases, the ability to control each mallet will decrease, until the motion is solely a rotation of the wrist.

4. Double Lateral strokes:

The standard Double Lateral stroke is most commonly used for the “ripple roll” or “lateral roll” technique. It should not operate like the other 3 stroke types. The goal here is to produce TWO strokes through ONE hand motion. Again, the set position and playing position are the same as a Double Vertical stroke. In the case of the outside Double Lateral stroke, play as if you were going to perform a Single Independent stroke (the outside mallet will strike the bar first) and then rotate your wrist counter-clockwise to strike the bar with your inside mallet. This motion is almost impossible to put into words, so please ask questions in person regarding - this stroke. The main thing is to stay completely loose and relaxed in the hands and practice A LOT!

I have found the need to separate a distinctly different version of the double lateral that I will refer to as the “controlled” double lateral stroke. You will find an exercise for this in the packet. The goal here is training us how to “muscle” the doubles. Not dissimilar to a drummer playing double stroke rolls on a pillow to create wrist strength. We want to create an articulate and powerful double lateral stroke that can be used with precise rhythmic accuracy. More on this when we are together in person!

RHYTHM SECTION

Drum Set

Be able to demonstrate a wide variety of grooves, with special attention paid to more unique styles (drum n bass, modern hip hop, etc.) Tasty grooves are always more impressive than busy chops...keep that in mind. **ENSEMBLE AWARENESS** is the most important thing when auditioning for drum set in this ensemble. You must be able to bury the met, follow the battery and keyboards, and show dynamic sensitivity.

Prepare all the exercises as written so I know you can follow a detailed chart. However, the drum set chair at this ensemble is constantly evolving so I will very often throw you off the kit, show you a new part, and want you to play it verbatim on the next rep. Be flexible and ready for anything!

Please prepare a 1-2 min. solo that showcases your skills. We are more concerned with your abilities as an ensemble player than a virtuosic soloist...HOWEVER...if you have some outstanding skills you would like to share, please do so!

Timpani

We don't care what technique you use as long as you are great at it! Ear training, knowledge of music theory and the ability to adapt quickly on the fly are a must! Smooth roll technique at all dynamic ranges as well as rhythmic accuracy as a drummer are vital to this position. This is a solo chair and requires a player with an extensive playing background. Please prepare a 1-2 min. etude that showcases your skills.

Synthesizers

A piano background is highly recommended. Knowing some pop and jazz theory would be an advantage for you. Tempo control and timing are EXTREMELY important! Experience in previous drumline/drum corps situations is a huge bonus. Please prepare a short 1-2 min. piece that showcases your range abilities. Be prepared to play on a semi-weighted synthesizer, not a piano.

Auxillary Percussion

Musicianship, showmanship, pocket, and appropriate techniques on a variety of instruments are the key to locking in this position. In addition, it is expected that your standard concert percussion techniques be up to par. This includes bass drum, crash cymbals, tambourine, concert snare/rudiments, etc. During your audition, be prepared to showcase your technique on various instruments.

Please prepare a short snare drum etude from any of the conventional books, Mitchell Peters Intermediate studies, etc. You will also be asked to demonstrate a long roll, both open and closed. You may have to play on a drumset snare sitting down so if you would like to audition in a standing position, you'll want to wrangle up a concert stand prior to the audition.

Rehearsal "Supplies"

There are a few things you **MUST** have at every rehearsal.

- 1) Your music - This seems obvious but we've all been there. All of your music needs to be in clear plastic sheet protectors in a 3 ring binder, no exceptions.
- 2) PENCIL – the most important tool in any musician's arsenal. We will constantly be tweaking, refining, and reworking the show. It is vitally important that you meticulously notate these changes in your music. A pen is not acceptable.
- 3) Commitment to Excellence – The excellence you strive for in rehearsal will be the excellence you achieve in performance.

Care for the equipment

The instruments are to be treated with the finest care at all times. We are very fortunate to have the best equipment in the world all around us. We need to keep it that way! Nothing is EVER to be placed on top of the keyboards or timpani for any reason short of mallets, sticks, and of course the instrument covers. Instruments are to be covered at all times when they are not being played. Use common sense and treat the gear as if it were your own...actually, treat it better than that!

NO FOOD AND DRINKS BY THE ELECTRONICS. Please keep/consume it somewhere else. The synth carts are not food storage containers or trash cans.

Care for your health

At no time should anyone play while hurt without us knowing about it. If you suspect a physical problem due to your playing, you MUST inform us immediately. We are not doctors, but if something can be done for you we will take care of it. If not, please understand that we need to avoid creating any lasting injuries such as tendonitis. The technique program is designed to avoid these problems. Much of the way we designed it was based on personal experience with tendonitis when performing and adjusting the technique so that one could play without pain or further injury. Stick to the technique, work diligently to make adjustments to match the technique and you shouldn't have any problems. There is no use in trying to hide a previous or current injury that may hold you back from playing to your fullest.

Care for the group

This is a BIG one. There are many parts of this activity that go way beyond playing. Far more important is how well you work with the group, how well you interact with others from different backgrounds, different ability levels, different ages, and different experience levels. We are all in this together and you have to take care of each other no matter what. Being able to get along with each other not only helps the ensemble play together, but also creates an environment where your performance is genuine and real. Play together and play for each other. Part of your audition will include your ability to become part of the group and bring others into the group. Even though you are in competition with each other for spots in the group, you should still help each other become great! Who knows, that might be the very action that gets you a spot.