

Keyboard Mallet Technique

The Grip & Basic Stroke

by Kirk Gay

Keyboard technique can vary quite a bit. Depending on your venue and style it can be very different! Here we will discuss the general basics of two-mallet keyboard grip.

For the two-mallet grip, hold the mallets as you would hold drumsticks in match grip. It is important to keep your palms facing down. Don't turn your hands so that your thumb is on top. This might make things easier initially; however, down the road it will affect your overall technique and sound. Hold the mallet lightly. Someone should be able to pull the mallet out of your hand without much trouble. You don't want to have the super-powered Death Grip on the mallet! The tension in your hand will hinder your speed and, again, your sound. Also, keep all your fingers around the mallet. Don't point your index finger out and keep your pinkie around the mallet. You are playing keyboards and not drinking afternoon tea!

Because most keyboard mallets are top heavy and have thin shafts, your technique will be different than playing on a snare with drumsticks. Your use of fingers and wrists is much different. Using your wrists is very important because that is where a lot of your motion will come from. Although the mallet will move up and down slightly in your hand, you should not use too much finger movement.

The basic stroke is a combination of using your wrists, fingers and arm. The difficulty is finding the right ratio of each! Your wrist is where most of the stroke comes from. It should be a smooth up and down motion. Remember to keep your wrists low to the keyboard. They should not be more than a few inches above the keys.

As stated earlier, your fingers are important; but again, you should not rely on them for the entire motion of your stroke. Using your arm in the stroke is something that I hesitate to say just because I see so many young players using "all arm" in their stroke! Using your arm, though, does factor in to the equation. The motion should be slight and accompany the use of your wrists. When playing outdoors, the use of arm in your stroke can help projection. Let me once again stress, though, that it should not be 99% of your stroke!

Don't forget to move your body when you play. If you are playing a 2 or 3 octave scale passage on a marimba, it is necessary to move to get to all the notes. The perfect playing position is right in front of the notes. That is not always possible, so you want to get as close as you can. Also, I always encourage my students to move with the music. This is another point that I hesitate to say because you need to find a happy medium between standing there stiff as a board and looking like you are dancing in Swan Lake!

To recap, here are a few key points to remember:

- Palms face down
- Don't grip too tightly
- Keep all your fingers around the mallet
- Use your wrists to control the mallet
- Your ratio of stroke from large to small is: wrist, fingers, arm.
- Keep your hands low to the keyboard
- Move to the emotion of the music but don't over do it.

Practice and have fun. That's what it's all about! Your comments and questions are always welcome.

Kirk Gay was born in Detroit, Michigan and currently makes Oviedo, Florida his home. Mr. Gay obtained his Bachelor's Degree in Percussion Performance from Northern Illinois University. He later went on to study at the Cleveland Institute of Music where he received his Master's Degree in Timpani Performance. Kirk was a section percussionist with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic. In 1998 he toured Europe with the New World Symphony under the direction of Michael Tilson Thomas. He has performed with the Walt Disney World Orchestra, The Orlando Philharmonic and The Brevard Symphony Orchestra. He has arranged for The Crossmen Drum & Bugle Corps, The Magic Drum & Bugle Corps, and the Phantom Regiment Drum & Bugle Corps. Express Music Publishing is an online music publisher offering both original and unique traditional arrangements for Vocals, Percussion, Jazz Band, Marching Band, Concert Band and Brass Ensemble. EMP publishes a free weekly newsletter entitled Staff Notes that offers down-to-earth, real-world advice and information for teachers and students of all ages. Staff Notes covers topics in performance, arranging for bands, percussion how-to, vocal techniques, interviews with industry professionals and other great stuff. Visit Express Music Publishing on the web at <http://www.expressmusic.com>.