

FOCUS ON DRUMSET/STUDIO PERCUSSION

A Study in Expanded, Five- and Six-Mallet Solo Vibraharp Techniques-Part 1

Wesley Bulla

I BEGAN THIS STUDY SEVERAL YEARS AGO while learning a commercially published, four-mallet arrangement of Claude Debussy's "La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin." While comparing the original piano score to the vibe arrangement, I noticed a difference in the "character" of some of the chord voicings. After some basic analysis I found that some voicings require the use of at least five notes in order to completely emulate the texture of the original.

When I first started this study, I simply wanted to learn a little of the wonderful music of the French Impressionist Master, Claude Debussy. After several years, five transcriptions and uncounted hours of experimentation, it has become a quest to expand the repertoire and performance techniques of the vibraharp.

Aside from the physical limitations of the instrument, "what does the music dictate?" is my primary rule of operation. Ultimately, technique that allows performance with complete facility and musical control is the objective.

My arrangement of "La Fille Aux Cheveux de Lin" requires five mallets, three in the left hand and two in the right. "Danseuses de Delphes" and "Minstrels" require two in the left and three in the right. The other two require three mallets in each hand. Since there is limited literature available on expanded mallet techniques for the vibraharp, i.e., three mallets in one hand, an explanation of my grip and some technical observations will be helpful. Also, for the purposes of this article, as an introduction to these techniques, the following discussion will focus on three mallets in one hand via the five mallet arrangements. Six mallet techniques are a logical extension of the five mallet techniques.

THE GRIP

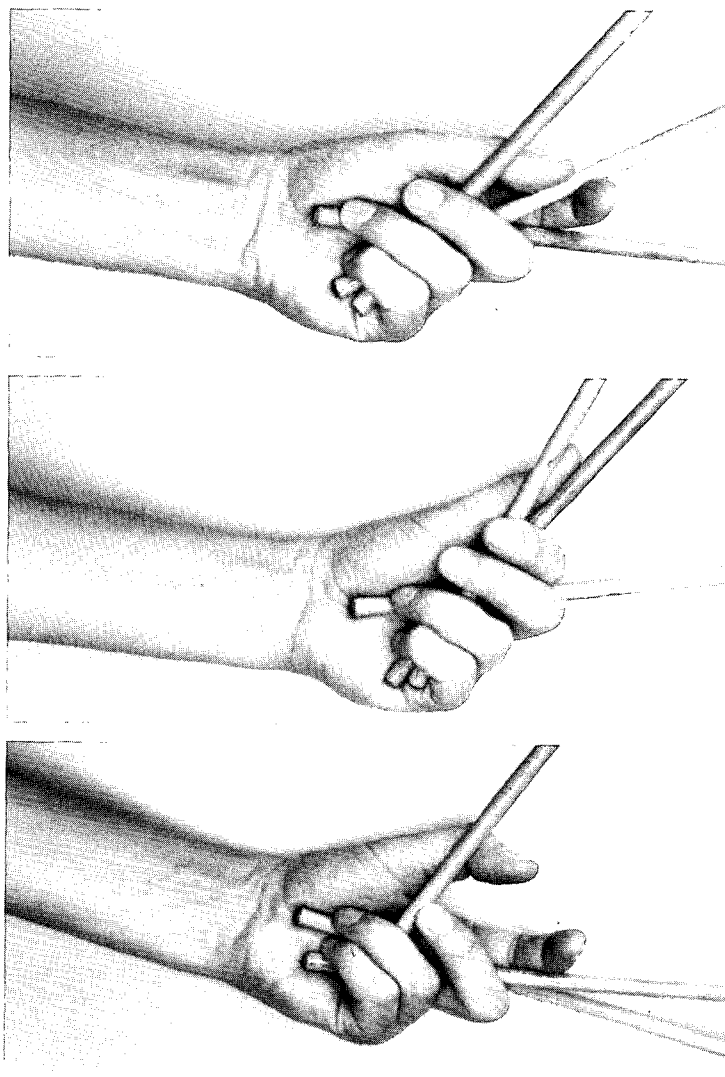
Begin with what is commonly referred to as the "Burton" grip. The extra mallet is added to the INSIDE of the hand and will be referred to as mallet 3. The middle and outside mallets become 4 and 5 in the left hand or in the right hand, 1 and 2. Looking at the palm, the end of mallet 3 should rest at the base of and in the curve of the little finger. As in the Burton grip, the fingers are curved around the mallets and mallet 3 and 4 will be manipulated by the thumb and first finger.

MALLET MOVEMENT

Movement of the middle mallet is obtained by the opposing movement of the thumb and first finger. By

curling the first finger between mallets 4 and 5 you will force mallet 4 to move toward mallet 3 (photo 2). An opposing movement can be obtained by using the thumb to push mallet 4 toward mallet 5. Occasionally for wide spread voicings, the first finger will shift position and move to the top of mallets 4 and 5 and apply downward pressure (photo 3). When moving the middle mallet, the inside and outside mallets can and sometimes will remain stationary. With a little practice, you should be able to move mallet 4 from touching mallet 3 to touching mallet 5.

Top to bottom: photos 1, 2 and 3



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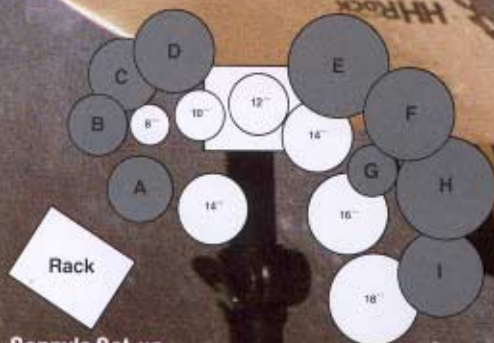
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- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
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| B 16" HH Thin Crash | G 10" AA Mini-Hats |
| C 18" HH Medium Thin Crash | H 18" HH Chinese |
| D 10" HH Splash | I 17" HH Thin Crash |
| E 20" HH Heavy Ride | (all cymbals are 'brilliant' finish) |

Photographed in L.A. by Chris Cuffaro for Sabian.

Movement of mallet 3 is obtained by opening and closing the grip. The first and second fingers pull or push mallet 3 in and out as it slides from the tip to the base of the thumb. This will generally cause mallet 4 to move to a degree and the result will be a combination of open and closed spacings from mallet to mallet.

TECHNICAL OBSERVATIONS

Without using specific musical examples, the first question you have to ask is, ...exactly what *can* you do with this grip? Using three mallets in one hand, either left or right, and two in the other, you can obviously strike three bars with one hand and two with the other. You can also perform two note voicings with two of the three mallets. You will need to move mallet 3 to the extreme inside, up and out of the way or move mallet 5 to the outside. In both cases it is possible to rotate the wrist or arm so that the mallet not being used will not strike unwanted bars.

There are some things that physical limitations will dictate. You can only play two note voicings with two adjacent mallets. It's difficult, if not impossible, to play two note voicings with the two outside mallets and not use the middle mallet. One thing I've discovered when using more than two mallets in one hand is that I'm forced to use both ends of the bars. It's standard practice to use the inside edge of the bars; but, with this technique, some musical passages require the use of the outside edges (see example 1 taken from "*La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin*").

All of the standard dampening and pedaling techniques are available. In some cases the extra mallet can be used for melodic dampening or to carry part of the melody with the two other mallets functioning to play the accompanying chord voicings.

MUSICAL POSSIBILITIES

That's the simple theory behind the technique, but not all voicings are created equally. If you consider the four basic qualities of triads, (major, minor, augmented and diminished), with three possible voicings, (root and two inversions) then you have 144 theoretical possibilities. Although some of these, such as F+ and A+, which are actually the same notes, are defined differently by the musical situation.

You *can* play 129 of these. Only 15 are not physically possible with one hand. Of that 15, you can play two of the three inversions of each chord. With the basic voicings, regardless of the inversion, mallet 1 is assigned the top, mallet 5 the bottom and the other mallets fall nicely somewhere in between. **Example 2** is a possible five mallet voicing of a typical jazz/pop progression.

The 15 that can't be played with one hand simply require a little thought before execution. A root position, E-flat major triad requires splitting the mallet functions with mallet 2 of the right hand playing the third (G natural)

inside the chord while the left hand plays the root, fifth and octave (E-flat/B-flat/E-flat). To voice a 7th or 9th move the top mallets, 1 to the 9th and 3 to the 7th.

Example 1

Example 2

G⁶ A^b A⁻⁷ D^{7/9} G⁶ G⁷ C^{maj7/9} C⁻⁷

There is also another consideration when using three mallets in the right hand and two in the left. Look at D-flat and E-flat major. On an E-flat major triad there are two different stickings. One option is the left-hand playing the root-3rd with the right hand playing 5th-octave-3rd. The next option is the left hand playing the root-5th and the right playing the 3rd-octave-3rd. With the 2-left/3-right grip there are situations where certain chords offer more choices in placement of the mallets. Example 3 shows the available stickings on a root position, E-flat 9th chord.

Example 3

Take a few minutes and experiment striking various inversions of triads and 7th and 9th major, minor, diminished and augmented chords. Using either grip, 3-left/2-

right or 2-left/3-right and the two sticking approaches described above. You will find that some variation of all chord structures are available for use with this technique.

The preceding observations were actually made in retrospect as I began to work out the logistics of my arrangements. They are only technical considerations. Without music this is all hypothesis. Ultimately, which

sticking to use will be determined by the needs of the musical situation. As with any other approach to mallet performance, where you are coming from and where you are going will be your main considerations for grip and sticking choice. In Part 2 of this discussion, we will look at some specific musical challenges based on arrangements of three of Debussy's more popular works. ■

**Musical examples © Sadhana Music Pub., Nashville, TN. Used by permission.

Over the past decade, Wesley Bulla's career as a musician, writer, and producer has allowed him to work in a wide range of musical environments. As a mallet specialist and percussionist, he has been featured in orchestras, musical stage shows, experimental multimedia theater, and pop/dance ensembles. As expected, being a contemporary vibist, he is well-versed in improvisation and jazz. Originally from North Carolina, Wesley studied music education at Elon College, Elon, North Carolina, and percussion performance and composition at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He now resides in Nashville, Tennessee, where he works as a free-lance musician and producer.



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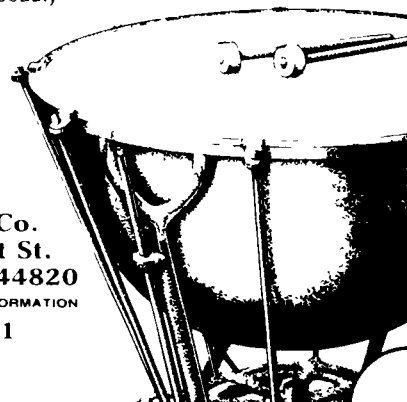
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