

FOCUS ON DRUMSET/STUDIO PERCUSSION

A Study in Expanded, Five- and Six-Mallet Solo Vibraharp Techniques-Part 2 Wesley Bulla

IN PART I OF THIS DISCUSSION WE covered the three mallet grip, some technical observations and the possible musical applications of expanded mallet techniques. In this discussion, we will use examples of practical, musical applications of the previously discussed techniques.

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. Also, for the purposes of this article, as an introduction to these techniques, the following discussions will focus on three mallets in one hand via the five mallet arrangements.

The arrangements used in this discussion and the techniques involved were developed by allowing music to dictate the performance requirements. Due to the compositional style of each arrangement, they each call for distinctive approaches to subtly different musical and technical challenges, for the most part, one at a time as the musical situation demanded.

Musical Challenges

This study began with three mallets in the left hand and two in the right. *La Fille Aux Cheveux de Lin* is composed in the traditional style of melody with accompaniment. The right hand serves the melody and the left hand, except where help with the melodic chores are required, is supporting the right.

The first time in *La Fille Aux Cheveux de Lin* that five notes are necessary is in the repeat of the opening theme beginning in measure 8. It is harmonized with dominant 7th chords until the cadence at the end of the phrase which is harmonized with minor 7th chords leading to the tonic in measure 10. In order to maintain the original texture it is necessary to have an open interval on top harmonized with the unstable, closed voicing.

In the arrangement for vibraharp, in order to stay as close to the "feel" of the original as possible, the chord is voiced on the 3rd with a 5th on top. This maintains the open, yet unstable sound of the original. Technical performance of Example 1 is fairly simple. The melody is split

between the mallets in the right hand and the left hand supports with the chordal accompaniment.

Later in the piece there is a variation of the main theme (see Example 2). Only this time the harmonization is a Π minor 7/9 moving to V7/9. The melody descends on a pentatonic scale and carries the melodic 9th stacked on top of each chord voicing. Mallet 1 carries the melody while mallet 2 and the left hand support with the accompaniment. In the second measure of this figure we have an example of the split sticking technique discussed earlier. The mallets shift positional voicing. The right hand then plays the 3rd inside the chord and the 9th on top. The left hand plays the root-5th-7th of the chord. In this case, for ease of hand placement it helps to use the outside edge of the bars for part of the left hand voicing. This also will enhance the melodic clarity by allowing the melody note to be struck in the center of the bar insuring that it will remain audible and tonally above the accompaniment.

In *Minstrels*, Debussy's approach is the compositional opposite of *La Fille Cheveux de Lin*. Throughout much of the piece he has given the melodic chores to the left hand. In the opening theme, the right hand serves to embellish the melodic figures played by the left. In Example 3 notice the theme is a single line melody with only a three note "grace" embellishment to dress it up. In order to perform this piece it is necessary to reverse the grip from the previous 3-left/2-right and utilize a 2-left/3-right technique.

In the opening theme of *Minstrels*, as well as later in the piece, the right and left hand functions can be split completely. Mallet 5 is able to stay in position and play the "bass" notes while mallet 4 moves up the scale and carries the melody. The right hand is then free and can easily play the grace note slur in much the same way a pianist would with three fingers. In the second measure, I found that using mallet 3 to play the D under the F \sharp allowed mallets 4 and 5 to remain spread and easily returned to the G bass note on the down beat of measure 3. In this way, there is little movement within the left hand while the musical figure is spanning a major 7th.

Example 1



Example 2



Example 3

Musical notation for Example 3, showing a rhythmic pattern with mallet numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 written above and below the staff.

Example 4

Musical notation for Example 4, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with mallet numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 written above and below the staff.

Example 5

Musical notation for Example 5, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with mallet numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 written above and below the staff.

Example 6

Musical notation for Example 6, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with mallet numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 written above and below the staff.

Example 7

Musical notation for Example 7, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with mallet numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 written above and below the staff.

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Beginning in measure 13, the figure can be divided among the mallets. This will minimize hand movement while the music covers two octaves. In Example 4, once again mallet 5 is assigned the bass note on beat 1, the two inside mallets, 4 and 3 will then be in position to play the G/A on the “and” of 1. This will allow mallets 2 and 1 to be in position to play the melodic figure on the top. Meanwhile, all mallets remain in their relative positions and are ready to strike the up coming chordal punctuation on the “and” of beat 2. Mallet 5 then moves again to the bass note on beat 1 of the next measure and mallets 2 and 1 take over the melodic figure. Once again, all mallets are in position for the extended chordal figure beginning on the “and” of beat 2 in the next measure.

The real beauty of expanded mallet techniques for vibraharp are shown in measures 24-27 of *La Fille Cheveux de Lin*, (Example 5). The passage begins with close-voiced chords and expands to lush open voicings, then contracts, pauses and expands again. The phrase then resolves with a II minor 7/9 to V7 cadence. Maintaining the full texture throughout the complete section helps capture the original quality of the piano score. In *Danseuses de Delphes*, in the repeat and embellishment of the opening theme, (Example 6), as well as throughout much of the piece, the ability to double notes on triads allows the vibraharp to emulate the original piano voicings thus maintaining the rich texture intended by Debussy.

Also, at the end of the piece, the final statement of the theme is repeated in a condensed, chromatic harmonization using augmented chords and echoed with a widely spread, dominant/augmented voicing. Doubling the root and 3rd during the theme adds to the richness of the harmonization. But most of all, the ability to play low F with an F octave above and then voice a third, augmented fifth and another F on the top end of the instrument, is a wonderfully open, rich texture.

One of the best examples of expanded mallet techniques

in this style of music is shown in Example 7, measures 65 and 66 of *Minstrels*. Debussy uses a II7/9 to a V7 cadence resolving to a I9 with the 9th resolved in the melody inside the voicing. The A7/9th voicing has a 9th and 3rd in close position inside the chord and a 7th/9th melodic figure resolving to a 3rd/5th figure on top. These chords have to be in root position to achieve their full effect. The ability to play A on the bottom and then move up to a D in root position while maintaining the tension inside the voicing and the descending melodic figure on the top, allows the descending to maintain the lush chordal voices and contrary motion originally set up by Debussy.

Final Notes

Using five mallets as our reference, I have touched on only a few of the musical and technical challenges of this exciting approach to vibraharp performance. Using expanded mallet techniques challenges a new way of thinking and consequently, playing the instrument. In the same way four mallets moved performance styles closer to a pianistic approach, five and six seems to take it one step further and open even more possibilities.

The instrument lends itself wonderfully to the full, rich textures of expanded mallet techniques. Once mastered, the grip and these techniques meet all of the accepted criteria for a viable, musical approach to solo, mallet performance. ■