

Using Blocking to Learn Four-Mallet Keyboard Literature

By David M. Wolf

Learning a new piece of four-mallet marimba literature can be a challenge at any level. While a performer should not rush the process of learning music, there are methods of practicing and studying the music that can facilitate the process. Blocking can allow the player to focus on the notes of the music, the physical position of the hands, and the motions required to transition between notes.

The basic premise behind the concept of blocking is to deconstruct the music in a logical manner that is quicker to learn and absorb. Blocking is achieved by simplifying the rhythms and groupings of notes according to mallet positions, which can allow the player to focus on different aspects of the music independently. Two basic methods are used when applying the blocking concept: (1) playing chorales without rolling and (2) creating a reduction of the music. This article will demonstrate different settings and applications of blocking and include examples of varied levels of four-mallet marimba repertoire.

It should be noted that a “piston stroke” approach, as described in Leigh Howard Stevens’ *Method of Movement for Marimba*, should be used so that the starting position for each stroke is at the top of the stroke and the mallets immediately rebound back to the starting position. The shifting needed to change to new notes should occur within the rebound, immediately after the last repetition of a chord. This shifting motion should be very deliberate, which will ensure that the mallets are over the new chord by the time they reach the top of the stroke. This will help to reinforce proper motions between chords.

CHORALES

The first setting, and the most straightforward scenario, occurs within a four-voice chorale. Playing a simple rhythm such as sixteenth notes at a slow tempo, rather than initially rolling the chords, allows the player to focus more on the notes being played. Simultaneously, the player is able to figure out the motions required to shift between the chords. Figure 1 illustrates a basic chord progression in a rolled chorale setting.

Figure 1



There are several methods in which blocking can be applied to a musical passage such as this. The first method, shown in Figure 2, is playing all four mallets together in a slow, steady rhythm with double vertical strokes in each hand. To begin this process, playing at least four strokes for each chord is recommended to allow the player time to mentally process the next chord change. It is important to choose a tempo that will allow the player to make the chord changes without breaking the rhythm.

Figure 2



The next step is to alternate the strokes between the hands as a very slow double vertical roll as illustrated in Figure 3. By slowly increasing the tempo, the player will gradually reach the desired roll speed.

Figure 3



The player should keep in mind that the goal of blocking is to think about the notes and the transitions between them and not the final application of the music. Another step in the process that can be used at any point is playing each chord once and shifting immediately to the next, thus increasing the speed at which the player needs to think ahead to the next chord.

This process can be applied to any chorale section within a piece of music. Figure 4 contains the first phrase of the opening chorale in the second movement of Toshimitsu Tanaka’s “Two Movements for Marimba.” In this excerpt, the four voices do not always move together. There are points when one or two voices remain the same. Blocking will allow the player to focus on the voices that move while others stay stationary.

Figure 4



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Figure 5 shows an example of how to apply a beginning stage of blocking to this excerpt. Since the harmonic motion moves in eighth notes, it is recommended to subdivide each beat into slow thirty-second notes and observe the marked tempo of the original music. Once the player is comfortable, increase the tempo and/or reduce the number of repetitions within each eighth note of the original music. Next, the player should alternate hands, as demonstrated in Figure 3. With all steps in this process, slowly increase the tempo and/or decrease the number

of repetitions required to create shorter processing times between chord changes.

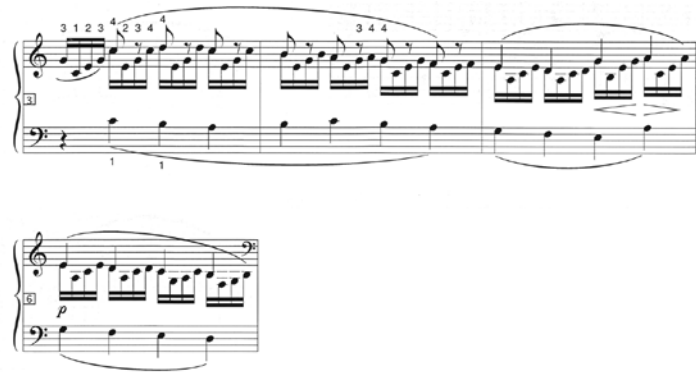
Figure 5



CREATING A REDUCTION

Blocking is also beneficial for single-note line music when single alternating and/or double lateral strokes are needed to execute the passage. Such a passage occurs in “Dr. Gradus ad Parnassum” by Claude Debussy, as transcribed by Leigh Howard Stevens, shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6



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Again, repeated double vertical strokes on each chord are recommended for the beginning stages of this process. As success with the notes and shifting between the blocked chords is achieved, the player should start to think about the chords in the context of the passage. This means playing only one chord for each beat of the music as illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7



An additional example of this scenario is found in the first movement of Alice Gomez’s “Gitano.” Figure 8 requires the left-hand mallets to alternate between two intervals of fifths, while the outer mallet of the right hand also moves. The blocking pattern found in Figure 9 will be especially helpful for the shifting that is required of the left hand.

Figure 8



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Figure 9



At first glance, the excerpt of Paul Smadbeck’s “Etude #2 for Marimba” in Figure 10 appears daunting. The vast majority of the material in this piece consists of octaves in each hand that are played in a triple lateral sextuplet pattern.

Figure 10



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For many players who work on this piece, part of the challenge is not just learning the notes, but working on the triple lateral stroke. Therefore, blocking can help divide the learning process into two different tasks. The first solely focuses on the triple lateral technique without worrying about the notes on the page. The second focuses on learning the notes by blocking the octaves. Figures 11 and 12 contain two stages of the blocking process: hands playing simultaneously and then hands alternating as required by the triple lateral technique, respectively.

Figure 11

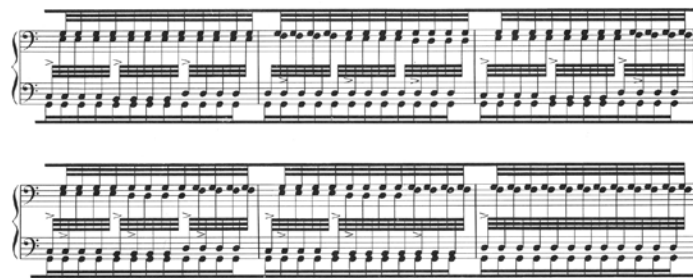


Figure 12



Blocking can also be used to simplify the music by reducing it down to do the bare minimum amount of information needed. In Keiko Abe's "Memories of the Seashore," many sections are composed as written-out, metered rolls. This results in many notes in each measure and a lot of "black" on the page. In Figure 13, parts of the opening section demonstrate the harmonic motion moving as often as the quarter note. Therefore, the music can be simplified to read as quarter-note chords to allow the player to more easily see the movement between voices.

Figure 13



Abe, MEMORIES OF THE SEASHORE
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Figure 14 is a reduction of the original passage found in Figure 13. Remember that the goal of this method is to first concentrate on the notes and to practice the interval changes. By only looking at one chord, rather than repeated thirty-second notes, the player can see each chord and the changing voices more easily with only the necessary information on the page. After becoming comfortable with the note pattern, the next step would be to play four sixteenth notes per chord, but with the hands playing simultaneously. It is in this step that it is recommended to add any dynamics and articulations that are in the music. By following these steps, playing the music as written should be an easy transition.

Figure 14



CONCLUSION

The practice method of blocking is a tool that can be very beneficial when used properly. It is also important to be able to recognize when blocking can be used. Incorporating blocking as part of the learning process will create more efficient practice sessions. Not only can it help the player learn the notes and physical movements more efficiently, but it can also aid in pattern recognition, harmonic analysis, and mental organization of the music.

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Columbus, Ohio area. He recently held the position of Interim Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. Wolf received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from The Ohio State University, a Master of Music degree from the University of Oklahoma, and a Bachelor of Music Performance and Education degree from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. PN

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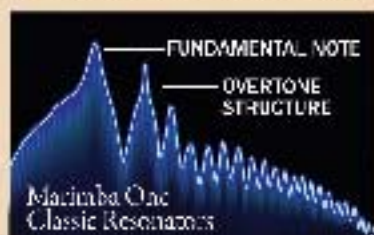
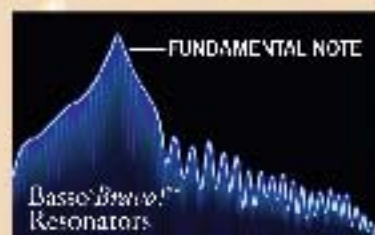
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