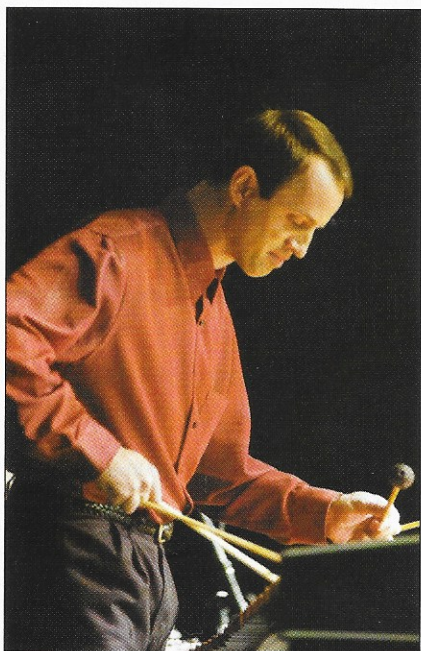




## Choosing Mallets and Strokes For Different Marimba Sounds

By Mark Ford



Many young percussion players concentrate on learning the notes and rhythms of a piece of music but often neglect to develop the interpretation. However playing only the right notes and rhythms will produce boring music. It is more satisfying to play expressively on a keyboard percussion instrument in the appropriate style. Just as a Bach prelude cannot be played well without understanding the structure and development of Baroque music, it is important to learn the background of a contemporary composer and listen to recordings of his music. This is one basic step in determining some of the styles and expressive elements of his works.

The next step is to mark the beginning and ending of each phrase and to determine the best stickings. Composers often use slurs to suggest the direction of a phrase, but a marimba cannot play a slurred phrase. The best way to imitate this effect is for each

note to be a little softer than the previous one. This creates a sense of a slur because each note blends into the ring of the prior one. It helps if percussionists study the sounds of slurs as wind and string players perform them and to imitate their sound.

The next step is to study the motion of each phrase. Some phrases move forward while others relax the motion. The choice of which is often dictated by the indicated dynamics and tempo. Beyond the standard dynamic markings, there are many subtle shadings for each. A good performer will choose the dynamic shadings that best enhance the interpretation of a phrase. If the composer offers no suggestions, a good starting point is to follow the melodic line and play the higher pitches at a louder dynamic.

Percussionists tend to view tempo and rhythms as being rigid, while musicians on other instruments will add rubato and *espressivo* more freely. Even a slight variation may change the feel of a phrase and add interest. At some places it seems compelling for the tempo to fluctuate, but a useful proviso is that too many tempo changes can confuse the musical focus.

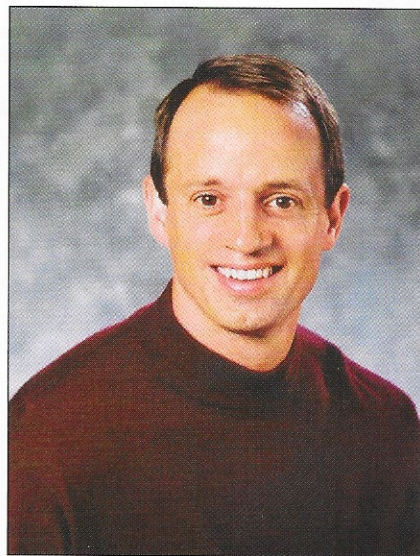
The marimba may seem to have limited articulation possibilities, but different mallets will change the articulations. Additionally, striking the bar with the center of the mallet head will create a pointed attack (*staccato*). Playing near the top of the mallet head produces a rounder tone (*legato*).

Sometimes a composer will ask for dry or dead strokes. These are played without any rebound of the mallet, which is held against the bar and cuts the note off. The sound is similar to a pizzicato on a violin. When the bar is struck halfway between the center and a node (where the string supports the

bar), the timbre and articulation will be different from a stroke in the center.

By understanding the style, phrase development, dynamics and use of time in a composition, a percussionist can add expression. It is up to the player to identify sections of the music and when to apply appropriate use of these techniques.

An excellent text based on Pablo Casals' ideas on interpretation and expression is *Casals and the Art of Interpretation* by David Blum (Holmes and Meier). It includes a variety of orchestral examples that will help students greatly. If they follow the score while listening to these excerpts young percussionists will understand some of the basic concepts of musical interpretation. □



Mark Ford is the coordinator of percussion activities at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas. A marimba specialist, Ford has recorded and premiered several new works for solo marimba. He performs and gives clinics throughout the country and is past president of the Percussive Arts Society.