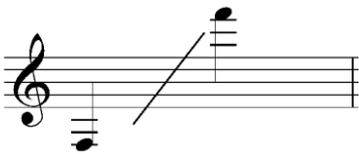


Composing for the Vibraphone

By Nick Parnell

Vibraphone's Range

3 Octaves: F3 to F6



Number of Mallets

Most modern vibists will play with 4 mallet technique. This allows many more musical possibilities than just using 2 mallet technique.

Note: Nick Parnell plays with 4 mallets.

The Motor

While many of the early vibraphone players utilized the motor which produces a vibrato effect, many of today's players choose not to use it. This is because the vibrato may not be suited to a particular style of music or the player is aiming for a more modern sound. Some models of vibraphones are not equipped with a motor so it is best to check with the performer if they have a motor available to them.

Note: Nick Parnell does not use the motor.

Effective Writing for 4 Mallets

- Chords of 2, 3 or 4 notes are achievable
- Maximum interval in each hand is one octave

- Melodies can be played in the right hand while the left hand plays harmonies or accompaniment. Here is an example of melody in which the right hand will primarily play the melody while the left hand provides harmonic support:



IMPORTANT: Be aware that there is a limit to how quickly one hand can play a succession of notes. For rapid passages, two hands would be utilized therefore limiting the left hands availability to play additional notes.

- In the following examples, the left hand plays chordal notes only at particular times in order to emphasise the high/strong points in the music:



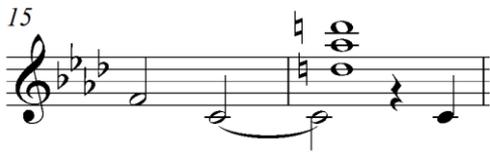
- In this example the melody is accompanied by broken chords:



- “Layering” is where a chord is played and a subsequent group of notes are played shortly after, usually in a different register of the instrument. This creates an interesting effect and also expands the number of chordal tones that can be applied as shown in the example below:



- In the following example, a chord is applied in the second bar after the melody to add colour and create texture to the overall sound:



- While four notes can be played simultaneously, much of the time the vibist will play singular lines particularly when performing with other instruments which provides harmonic support.

Mallets & Sound

It is not necessary to indicate what type of mallets a performer should use (eg. hard or soft). Mallets are a very personal choice for the performer and are determined by a performers playing style and sound preference. The same set of mallets will also sound vastly different depending on the acoustic of a performance space. Rather than specifying what mallets to use, give indications to the character of sound you want produced. For example: *legato*, *smooth*, *staccato* etc.

Pedalling

Pedalling indications are not necessary for the professional player. The experienced vibist will know how to best utilize pedalling and dampening techniques in order to produce a desired musical outcome.

Understanding the different registers of the vibraphone

Each register of the vibraphone has its own particular characteristics and sound. It is therefore best to approach writing for the instrument's different registers in a slightly manner to achieve maximum effect.

F3 to C4: These notes can produce a "bass" type of tone when played. They are useful for producing very full sounding notes. If a composer wants a chord or grouping of notes to sound full, big, rich and contain a "bass" element of sound, this can be achieved by ensuring that at least one note of the chord is voiced in this lower register.



C4 to F5: This range is has a strong, full, and very pleasing sound to the ear. It is excellent for melodies and prolonged passages. The majority of a composition would normally be based around this section of the instrument.



F5 to F6: As notes ascended on the vibraphone, they tend to sound weaker and thinner in texture. The composer should exercise caution in focusing too much on the top octave of the instrument. It can be used effectively and sounds appealing when combined with notes in other lower registers, but too much of it can be hard on the ear. Exercise particular caution when writing sustained notes which are an interval of a third or smaller. Sustained major or minor seconds should rarely be used in this register as the ring of two notes this close together can produce a very unappealing tone.

