

Vibraphone: Technique, Methods, Solos

Jim McKinney

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The vibraphone has had a resurgence in popularity during the last decade. This “new-found” appeal is due for the most part to players like Gary Burton, Milt Jackson, Mike Mainieri, and David Friedman. While these players (and others like them) had to search and scramble to find appropriate studies and literature, today’s students have a much easier task. Unfortunately many teachers and students still use outdated material and solos. Marimba and xylophone literature, while challenging, is not written specifically for the vibraphone and does not focus on such vibraphone techniques as pedaling and dampening. This article will attempt to explain some of the various techniques and identify some of the newer methods and solos that are composed with the vibes in mind.

Because of unique technical problems, a lot of the standard keyboard percussion literature is unusable. The sustain pedal, mallet dampening, hand dampening, motor use, note bending, mouth vibrato and arco playing all are unique to the vibraphone. Due to these techniques and resulting sounds, care must be taken in selecting appropriate material.

First of all I would like to define and clarify the techniques mentioned above:

SUSTAIN PEDAL: Because of the sustaining power of the vibes bars, a dampening pedal is necessary. As a very general rule the pedal is used between chord changes. Many solos and etudes notate when to use the damper pedal much in the same way as notated for the piano. Either ped or may be used notate this effect.

MALLET DAMPENING: The symbol for mallet dampening is an “X” between each note head. The old note vibration should be stopped by pressing a mallet head into the bar as the new note is struck. The attack of the new note covers up the impact of dampening the previous note.

HAND DAMPENING: Basically the same as mallet dampening except the player uses the bottom side of the little finger to stop the vibration of the bar.

MOTOR: Many of today’s modern players do not use the motor at all! If the motor is used in a selection, by all means experiment with various motor speeds to determine the most appropriate one.

NOTE BENDING: This wonderful effect takes a bit of practice to master. Strike the note and then to bend (flatten) the pitch place a hard rubber mallet on the nodal point (the

place where the string passes through the bar). Press the rubber mallet into the node and pull the mallet towards you. This will give you the effect of the pitch of the note lowering or bending.

MOUTH VIBRATO: This effect will only work on the upper notes of the instrument. After striking one of the upper notes, put your mouth about one to two inches above the bar. By opening and closing your mouth the bar will respond with a “vibrato” type of sound. The mouth cavity is approximately the size of the upper resonators; therefore, by opening and closing your mouth, the intensity of the sound is diminished and amplified.

ARCO: Draw a contra bass or cello bow across the ends of the vibraphone bar. This will produce a very different sound, the most audible being harmonics. A composer will ask for this sound by indicating “arco” on the score or part.

ONE-HAND DAMPENING: After striking a new note, immediately go back and mallet-dampen the old note with the same mallet that struck the new note. This technique needs to be used if either hand is busy and can't be used to help out the other hand. It will also work to play a double stop (two notes at once) with the same hand: strike two notes and then move back to and mallet-dampen the original two notes. This is especially effective on thirds and sixths and is often referred to as a “Catis Paw”

ONE HAND ROLL: With the sustain pedal down, use either hand to rock back and forth between two different notes. With a little practice this technique will sound like a smooth roll and will free up the other hand to play an independent line.

Here are a few solos and method books that use some or all of the above effects. Grading is 1 and 2 for easy, 3 for medium, 4 for medium difficult, and 5 for difficult.

Selected Method Books

1. All Alone by the Vibraphone by Victor Feldman (Tre Publishers). A collection of original solos which include a swinging blues, chord changes for open improvised solos (optional) and a chord-stretching arrangement of Danny Boy. Grade 3 to 4.
2. Mallets in Mind by Tom Brown (Kendor Music). All of these solos are original compositions. Utilizing both 3 and 4 mallets, the chord symbols are given (allowing the possibility of adding a bass line). The collection is heavy Latin flavored with clear pedal markings. Grade 2+ to 4.
3. Six Unaccompanied Solos by Gary Burton (Creative Music). Refreshing keys, clear articulation and technique mark these extremely difficult solos. Only advance players need apply! Grade 5 to 6.
4. Solos for the Vibraphone Player selected and edited by Ian Finkel. (Schirmer). These transcriptions are classical pieces from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A variety of keys and forms are used. Grade 2 to 4.
5. Music of the Day by Bill Molenhof (Kendor Music). This group of solos is accompanied by a recording. These wonderfully fresh solos have clearly written

- pedal and mallet dampening markings. Excellent recital or solo material. Grade 4 to 5.
6. Recital for Vibraharp by Tom Davis (Barnhouse). Five original compositions are combined with two traditional and six transcribed solos. All of these solos make excellent recital and/or solo pieces. Mr. Davis' complete understanding of the instrument combined with his excellent compositional skills make this book a must for every library. Grade 3 to 5.
 7. Contemporary Solos for Vibraphone and Marimba by Gitta Steiner (Belwin Mills). Some solos are for vibes, others for marimba and still others for either instrument. All selections are in the contemporary vein and require moderately advanced techniques. Two and four mallets are used and bass clef playing is required on the marimba solos. Grade 2+ to 3+.
 8. Vibraphone Technique by Ron Delp (Berklee Press). A good theoretical approach to chords, chord voicings and comping. This book offers a new direction to vibe improvisation in that it is primarily concerned with explaining the theory of improvisation. Several original lead sheet solos are included.
 9. New Works for New Times by Bill Molenhof (Kendor Music). These six solos range in difficulty from Grade 5 to 6 and some are recorded on Molenhof's record *Beach Street Years* (Mark Records MJS - 57596). Some solos include improvisation over the chord changes for the soloist and all involve a more modern harmonic approach. Grade 5-6.
 10. The Solo Vibist, Vol. 1 by Tom Brown (Permus Publications). A very good beginning approach to vibe playing. Clear pedal markings and easy melodic tunes make this a useful addition to any library. Two, three and four mallet work is required. Grade 2+.
 11. Vibraphone Technique Dampening and Pedaling, David Friedman (Berklee Press). This book is a must for the serious vibist. Written in three parts: Mallet Dampening, Pedaling, and Pedaling and Dampening, it is the book for developing these essential techniques. The last section contains etudes suitable as recital material. Grade 3 ½
 12. Jazz Vibes by Gary Burton (Creative Music). Although copyrighted in 1965 this book still offers an amazing insight into Vibe improvisation and performance. The book covers numerous technical exercises and includes sections on jazz, phrasing, pedaling, dampening, grace notes and other vital information. Grade 3 ½.

Selected Solos

1. Ballade by James Stabile (Western International Music). Subtitled Night Song, this solo is a standard in the vibraphone repertoire. Played without use of the motor, it requires competent four mallet technique and advanced mallet independence. A must play and a definite audience pleaser. Grade 3+.
2. Two Preludes, Scriabin/arranged Serge de Gastyne (Fereol). The first prelude is very warm and melodic and the second is fast and technical. These preludes make a great addition to the recital literature. They must be carefully practiced because of their somewhat hard-to-read manuscript, level of difficulty. One of the few solos requiring different mallet hardness at the same time.

3. Preludes for Vibraharp by Serge de Gastyne (Fereol). Seven original preludes carry on techniques required in Two Preludes. Mallet dampening, fast articulations and open chord voicings are required. Contemporary sounding; written without key signatures.
4. Impression by Michael Lang (Southern Music). A very slow moving tempo is punctuated by four-note chords and some usage of 32 notes. Clearly written, this solo sounds quasi improvised. Grade 3.

The new-found love of the vibraphone is due to both its versatility (jazz and symphonic) and because of its sustaining power, sensitivity and musicality. If you have marimba players, introduce them to the vibraphone. If you don't have mallet players, then the vibraphone is a great place to start!

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