

Ten Technical Tips by Dr. Splatbar*

1. **Keep your wrists stiff and use your forearms to hit the bars.** Don't worry about what your teacher says, this is the most basic stroke used by beginners. Only great players keep their arms level and stroke with their wrist. In fact, artists like Gordon Stout and Bob Becker take it to such a silly extreme that it looks like their forearms move up a little when the mallet goes down. Why would you want to look like one of those guys when you were playing -- people might say you were just a copy cat.

2. **Use big tall strokes.** Hitting correct notes is too easy if you keep the mallet heads one or two inches away from the keyboard. If you do this for a couple of years, playing keyboard percussion instruments might become so boring you might even give it up and have wasted all that practice time. Challenge yourself: never play from lower than six inches away from the bars. Use big, manly strokes. Plus, stroking the instrument from high up looks more difficult and will impress audience members who know nothing about keyboard percussion instruments (it might even impress audience members who know very little about keyboard percussion instruments...).

3. **Avoid Piston Strokes whenever possible.** Don't be fooled by euphemisms: Some people call them "Down Up" strokes, or "Full Strokes". Avoid these two-part strokes that start and stop at the same height and just go down to the bar and back up. Can you imagine practicing using the same simple stroke over and over? How boring! That would make music like learning tennis.

3a. **Use complicated three part motions of the mallet head every time you play a note.** These strokes are easy to recognize by the fact that they start with an upward preparation before the actual stroke. They could be described, "Up Down Up". These strokes burn off extra calories and assure that you will never be a fat marimba player. They are less accurate which serves to keep you on your toes. Also, because of their three parts, they can't be performed at a rapid rate. This can actually serve as a handy reminder: if you notice you're using a stroke with preparation, you know you're probably practicing. You can always switch to a piston stroke later on if you decide to work a passage up to speed.

4. **Don't waste your valuable time learning scales and arpeggios.** If you have managed to get this far without them, why bother? Sure, there are people with half your intelligence who learned them all in a couple of weeks, but what kind of social life did they have in the meantime? The most important thing is to play and enjoy music. Life is too short for exercises. Dr. Splatbar says, "Groove, don't grind!"

5. **Don't repeat. Don't repeat.** See? It only drives any mistakes you might be making into your brain. George Lawrence Stone and George Green, two of the greatest xylophone players of all time, both recommended repeating short passages over and over. Look what good it did for them -- they have both been dead since before you even knew what a mallet was! While we can't be sure that repeating short passages and death were connected, it's better to be safe. Dr. Splatbar advises, "Start at the beginning. Go to the end. Do something else." Avoiding repetitive practice of small sections keeps the piece fresh.

6. **When reading, keep the music stand high, so you can't see the bars out of your peripheral vision.** First of all, looking would be cheating. Second of all, since keyboard percussion instruments are the only melodic instruments that you don't touch with your hands (aside from timpani and the Theremin), there is something tidy about not looking at them either. Plus, it's very impressive to tell people that you neither touch nor look at your instrument, and still manage to sight read music on it. . . after a fashion.

7. **Ask your teacher frequently whether you should be striking the sharps on the ends or near the centers.** Don't waste time examining how the sound changes as you move your striking spot on the bar -- even if you did manage to figure this out and started making these decisions on your own, your teacher might feel rejected. Gordon Stout teaches that for the first year or so you should only strike the very ends of the sharps and off center of the naturals. He says having only one permissible striking spot per note helps develop a better feel for intervallic distances around the keyboard. Dr. Splatbar disagrees: "Striking on the string or halfway between the end and the string adds an impulsive, improvisational, and unfettered emotional dimension to your playing."

8. **Don't plan your practice time.** Practice time for many of us is limited, so enjoy it. If you took the first five minutes of every practice session and planned your time and decided what single thing you most wanted to accomplish, think how rotten you would feel if you used up your time without reaching that goal. By planning your practice you are actually setting yourself up for disappointment. If there is nothing special you need to accomplish today, there won't be any frustration about not doing it!

9. **Don't use your fingers.** Save them for things in life that require fine control: writing, turning stereo dials, brushing your teeth, playing the piano -- not crude things like bashing percussion instruments.

10. **Make sure the keyboard is at an uncomfortable height.** Having the instrument at the perfect height for your anatomy fosters complacency. Discomfort fights boredom. Do the following test: Play some "air marimba" or vibes and notice what height you naturally want to strike. If your keyboard is about the same height, adjust it with magazines, blocks or a built-in height adjustment mechanism until it feels odd. Here are some of the beneficial signs of awkwardness: the mallet handles are at a 45° angle to the bars when the head contacts the instrument; the handles occasionally click against the bars; your legs are tense from flexing at the knees; your back aches. Lastly, watch for that sensation of feeling like you might be more comfortable sitting down. Not only is this a sign that the keyboard is properly adjusted too high for you, it's also a classic symptom of needing a break. Go ahead!

*Dr. Splatbar plays concerts, records albums, designs marimbas and mallets and has authored a book on four mallet playing, Method of Movement, all under the pseudonym Leigh Howard Stevens.