



# A Guide To The Front Ensemble

**By: Russell Davies Jr.**

The Following is a compilation of materials, expectations, basic technique and practice suggestions addressed on a regular basis in any front ensemble. The approach to the activity and the means with which you achieve your goals are customized to the ideals of sound, performance, and representing your group in the best way possible. Your achievement will be directly related to how much individual preparation you put in, as well as the effort within the group. Keep an open mind and stay positive as you learn these materials.

# **Required Materials Checklist**

**Binder**

**Non-Glare Page Protectors**

**Mechanical Pencils with refill lead**

**Pencil Pouch**

**Your own water bottle**

**Hat / Sunglasses / Sun Block**

**Band Aids** – Keyboard players will need these to protect from blisters on their hands

**Appropriate Rehearsal Attire** – Clothing that allows for free movement should be worn. You move heavy instruments and equipment. Sneakers or other fully covering footwear are required. Your rings, watches and bracelets should be removed to help with good technique.

**A POSITIVE ATTITUDE!**

## **Front Ensemble Expectations**

### **Professionalism / Public Perception**

You are always being judged by people, from teacher to community members, as well as school staff and our peers. Even the custodial staff! Your actions on and off the field represent all Front Ensemble members of the past, present, and the future.

### **Pre Rehearsal Setup**

Rehearsals begin at the scheduled time. That means setup occurs before the scheduled start time. You have A LOT of set up to do, and it starts before rehearsal to minimize the amount of rehearsal time lost. Once you finish your setup, help someone else until everything is done. Everyone is required to help at all times. Laziness is unacceptable.

### **Minimize Talking & Playing (Read: Hacking) During Rehearsal**

Great groups typically share one common factor – they have great rehearsal etiquette. You like to have enjoyable and productive rehearsals, and all must do our part to achieve that. When you are not being worked with, remain patient, quiet, and pay attention to what is going on. You can learn a lot by listening to information others are receiving.

## **Setting The Standard**

When you are in ensemble rehearsal, you need to set the rehearsal standard for the rest of the group. Even when we as a section are not being worked with, which often happens with the front ensemble, you still need to be focused so that we do not distract everyone else and so you know what is going on with the rehearsal. Keep in mind that talking and hacking during ensemble is most noticed because of the proximity to the box, as well as the fact that you might have microphones all over the place!

## **If You Don't Get It The First Time, Ask!**

You have to understand instructions so that you can maximize the rehearsal time and give the staff and leaders an accurate feel for where the group stands. You don't want to be judged poorly by staff because you didn't know what was going on! For example, if you aren't sure what the rehearsal segment is, do not guess, and ask for clarification!

## **Instrument / Equipment Care and Respect**

The Front Ensemble is unbelievably fortunate to have so much support from directors, administrators, and corporate sponsors. Some marching bands do not have front ensembles. You should take great care of the equipment. Use caution when transporting instruments. The pedals should always be lifted on vibes when moving or adjusting the height! Use the mallet bags and respect the mallets and other equipment including cymbals. You should bring tarps with when rain is forecasted. If anything gets wet, dry it off immediately and completely!

## **Tear Down Responsibilities**

At the end of rehearsal, all equipment will be transported back to its assigned storage area. You need to keep our area of the band room looking nice. Everything has a home. If you are not sure where something goes, ask! No one should leave until everything has been put away. Once you finish, help someone else.

## **You're Music Binder**

Your music, this packet, and any other handouts you get throughout the season go in your binder in sheet protectors. Bring this binder to every rehearsal. Make sure pencils are in your pencil pouch. You write often! Even once music is memorized, you still need to bring your binder to rehearsal. There will be times we need to reference something or recheck that crazy lick, etc.

## **Bathroom, Water, and Well-being**

Ample breaks will be provided. DO NOT SHARE WATER! THIS IS HOW PLAGUE SPREADS! Try to use the restrooms during breaks. If you need to leave, ask someone and return quickly. Believe it or not, playing in the front ensemble can take a physical toll on you, particularly with our hands. Also, standing still is not always comfortable either. You should stretch prior to warming up and you should periodically stretch on your own. Take care of yourself with proper protection from the sun including sun block, hats, sunglasses, etc., and always stay hydrated!



## **Leave The Rehearsal Site Better than you found it**

The Front Ensemble is a class act both on and off the field. Your rehearsal sites are a privilege, not a right. Wherever you are, you will always leave the rehearsal sites in better condition than how you found them. Everyone helps to pick up trash when needed.

## **Have A Great Time Creating Awesome Music**

Hang out together. Go bowling. Eat lunch. Take a trip to the zoo. No doubt – in your instructors' experiences, a front ensemble that chills outside of rehearsal and knows each other always ends up performing better together.

## **Posture...From The Ground Up**

You will begin with our feet shoulder width apart. Your legs should be relaxed, knees slightly bent. Rigidity will greatly inhibit your range of motion, so it is best to maintain your flexibility from the beginning and start forming good habits on even the simplest exercises. Keep your back and neck straight and allow your arms to hang naturally at your side. There should be NO tension in your neck or shoulders. Stand with your chin up at all times and look down your nose to see the instruments (as opposed to hunching over to see the keys!)

### **Things to keep in mind:**

- Avoid crossing your feet while playing and never stand with your feet crossed. In general, this also will inhibit your range of motion and prevent you from moving fluidly behind the instrument.
- When moving from instrument to instrument, use large, graceful steps as opposed to shuffling with small steps. You will move much faster this way and look less frantic.
- Vibraphone players should stand with their right toes on the pedal at all times. Do not use the entire foot – it is not necessary to exert that much energy. Instead, keep your weight distributed evenly between both feet and use only the toes for pedaling.
- Marimba players should be flexible with their body position to the instrument. There will be times when one foot may need to be placed in front of the other to shift between the upper and lower manuals of the instrument or make large lateral shifts behind the instrument. All of these motions should be done gracefully, keeping in mind that people will be watching your every movement.

Your posture and physical approach to the instrument will be one of the first indications to the judge and the audience exactly what kind of ensemble you are. Everything you do must be professional, charismatic, and confident – down to the most miniscule details. The professionalism you present yourself with will earn you points before you play a single note! The biggest part of knowing what you are doing is “looking the part.”

# Two Mallet Techniques

Unlike the snare drum, there is, of course, no rebound from a mallet instrument. The fulcrum is created with thumb and first knock of the pointer fingers wrapping completely around the mallet. You will wrap your other three around the mallet using them to help create rebound off the mallet instrument.

- You must create our own rebound off the instrument. This allows you to control the mallet at all times.
- The more of your hand is on the mallet; the more weight is distributed to the keyboard. This increases tone production tremendously.
- Enhanced projection of “concert hall” marimba and vibraphones sounds played within gymnasiums.
- This allows the index finger to remain relaxed, which promotes legato tone (by preventing over-squeezing with the index finger and thumb.)

There should be no tension in the back fingers, yet at the same time the fingers should remain on the mallet at all times (picture the tips of the back fingers remaining in constant contact with the palm of the hand). The back fingers will not move AT ALL except when performing extremely fast passages that require more finger flexibility. These fingers are the anchor of the grip – they provide more contact to the mallet and thus are a large part of dynamic and tone production. There should be 2” of mallet sticking out of the back of the hand.

The index finger and thumb merely aim the mallet, and should not over squeeze the mallet at any time. Similar to Steven’s Method four mallet technique, the index finger should be RELAXED, OFF THE STICK. Place the stick on the first joint of the index finger, and set the thumb on top lightly. There should be minimal pressure between the index finger and thumb, to prevent tension, which in turn prevents a choked or forced sound. This also reduces the amount of energy that goes into producing a stroke.

The thumbs should face one another, just like matched snare drum grip. If the hands are turned over similar to French timpani grip, control of the mallet will be lost. This will inhibit accuracy and tone production.

The basic stroke is always initiated from the wrist. It should be emphasized that wrist is 99% of the stroke, and arm is added only to complement the wrist and enhance projection outdoors. Fingers are not used to produce strokes, merely to lightly grip and aim the mallets at the desired keys.

More technical info:

Preps or Tacet: Whenever we begin an exercise, musical segment, or piece of music, we will establish a common tempo from a single tempo source. Typically, the section leader will begin with some prep strokes which will be followed by some preps by all members of the front ensemble. The number of preps and person giving the preps may vary according to the situation. Preps should be small and precise – the mallets are all that should move – little arms, body, and head movements and no hands. Preps are not intended for a judge or the audience to see. If you have long areas of rests you will use the body tacet. This is when you pulse the tempo with your body by being on your platforms and keeping the quart note in your heels.

Rule #1: If you move together, you play together. There is no exception to this rule. Therefore, technique and uniformity are of the utmost importance. You must strive to look and sound the same at all times.

Placement of mallets on the keys: You will use the dead center of the keys (directly over the resonators avoiding the “nodes”). This may be contrary to other schools of thought, but again this is customized to the approach. The edge of the keys should be used only when is absolutely necessary (due to speed or implication from four mallet sticking and voicing.) Please make sure you play through the key getting a good quality of sound from the instrument.

## **Four Mallet Techniques**

The use of the Stevens method on the vibraphone is meant to attain a more uniform sound and technical approach; if mallet dampening or double strokes are to be played, Burton grip may be used. Just make sure the grip is used across the section!

Basic idea to keep in mind with four mallet technique:

- Keep the index fingers relaxed at all times (as well as all other fingers)
- Keep the mallets above the instrument by turning the wrists back not by raising the arms. Keep the head of the mallet level between hands. (The mallets should return to this position whenever they are not in motion, similar to the manners in a piano.)
- Keep the hands as low to the instrument as possible. (Your knuckles should be low enough to rub against the edge of the keys.)
- Remain relaxed in grip and smooth in motion at all times.

The approach to the instrument in any environment must be aggressive, even at the softest dynamic levels. Just as an athlete condition himself for his sport, you should practice with heavy mallets to begin developing muscle and control at all dynamic levels. But, it is important to note that there should be no tension in the grip as this will only hinder a performer’s sound. For a more detailed description of four mallet technique, consult Leigh Howard Steven’s “Method of Movement.” The materials covered in this technical program are only a small portion of the ideas covered in this text.



# Stroke Types

Each stroke should be relaxed in nature exerting weight through the keys, yet allowing the mallets to rebound off the keyboard. Wrist will be the primary force for creating strokes.

The piston stroke concept will be used primarily with four mallet technique. The general premise behind the Piston Stroke is that the mallets start up, perform a stroke that is quick in motion, and end back where the mallet started. The only part of the body used to create this stroke is the wrist. The stroke is somewhat rigid and technical; uses no preparation and no unnecessary motion. The rationale is simple – conserve energy and prepare for the next stroke. This may be vertical or both vertical and horizontal (shifting to new tones).

The upstroke is the default two mallet stroke and utilizes the same basic premise as the piston stroke. The one major difference is that the upstroke is more relaxed and does allow for a preparation. The mallets should move smoothly from stroke with the head of the mallet never coming to rest. Unlike the piston stroke, the upstroke may or may not use arm depending on dynamic level. This stroke will be used with 2 mallets and with 4 mallets only after the piston stroke is mastered.

With both piston and upstrokes, dynamic contrast is achieved through stroke length and NOT through a change in grip pressure!

- Do not mistake soft dynamic levels for a weak approach to the instrument. Strokes in which the wrist breaks and the mallet is used to “pull the sound out” of the instrument are an unnecessary change in technique. This contradicts our approach to the instrument and compromises our sound. The stroke speed does not change with the dynamics.
- Do not “hammer nails” or overplay when attempting to achieve louder dynamics.

The legato stroke is used for slow and sometimes high volume playing. Rather than using only wrist, the stroke also employs the forearms rotating from the elbow to all weight and assist with sound production. Similar to the upstroke, the head of the mallet will be in constant motion during passages that use the legato stroke. The mallet head will generally move more slowly than when using other strokes.

Technical Alterations to Achieve Legato Strokes:

- Relaxed grip pressure
- Slower strokes
- Rounded off, smooth flowing motions
- Absolutely no tension in the upper body, including arms and hands (although this should not be an alteration from the previous technique!)
- Avoid “Flapping” and retain the regularity of the stroke

# Practice Suggestions

## **Set Goals**

Becoming goal oriented will help you achieve more. **Set short term and long term** goals for what you want to accomplish. A short term goal would be what you want to accomplish during one practice session. A long term goal could be for a week, a month, or an even longer period of time. If you have your goals set before you go to practice, then **your practice sessions can yield better results**. Set realistic goals and keep track of your progress!

## **Practice with a Metronome**

Often times, slow tempos can be equally as challenging as blazing fast tempos! You should use a metronome for about 90% of your practicing.

## **Floor Exercises**

You can do most of your technique practicing on the floor. This is especially helpful because access to the mallet percussion instruments is often limited. You can work on two mallets, as well as four-mallet issues such as shifting, stroke types, permutations, and interval changes. If the floor itself is too loud for people around you, you can play on pillows or blankets. Not only will this be a quiet alternative, but it will help you to build even more chops!

# Sound System Do's and Do Not's

Just like a marching snare drum, a little care at the beginning of the season can prevent tragedy in a final show. Here are a few simple but important reminders when using amplification with your front ensemble:

Have an inclement weather plan.

Avoid rolling wheels over cables whenever possible.

Always make sure your speakers are in front of your microphones to avoid feedback.

Make sure you recoil all cables prior to a performance for speed of setup.

Make sure you know where your power source at the performance site is located.

If understand your sound equipment, you will become more responsible and careful with it.

Anywhere you might need spare heads or sticks, you will probably need spare cables.

Never let the sound system take priority over the performers and the performance.



# Time

## Warm-Up

Ben Folds  
R. Davies Jr.

Score

$\text{♩} = 104$

Vibraphone

Marimba

Drum Set

Vib.

Mrb.

D. S.

A

Vib.

Mrb.

D. S.

# "I" Squared +

Mallets

A musical score for mallets, consisting of five staves of music. The score is written in treble clef and features a variety of time signatures: 4/4, 5/4, 4/4, 5/4, 6/8, 4/4, 7/8, 4/4, 3/4, 4/4, 7/8, 4/4, 4/4, 3/4, 2/4, and 3/4. The music is composed of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. Accents (>) are placed above many notes. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines. The first staff contains measures 1-4, the second staff contains measures 5-8, the third staff contains measures 9-12, the fourth staff contains measures 13-16, and the fifth staff contains measures 17-20. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fifth staff.

# Spiders

Score

## A Mallet Warm-Up

Vibraphone

4

7

10

14

17



## Block Chord Accents

Now we will work on accents in a block chord setting using four mallets. As with the previous accent exercises, the performer should focus on playing the unaccented notes with a consistent sound. Again, the accents should be higher strokes, not faster, harsher strokes. **Make sure to play from the wrist**, with relaxed elbows; don't use arm strokes for this exercise. This exercise will also introduce another basic harmonic progression: I - vi - ii7 - V7 - I. For more on progressions, please refer to the basic theory appendix on page 220.

$\text{♩} = 80 - 152$

board

I

vi

ii7

V7

I vi ii7 V7 I