

A Survey of Comments Regarding Movement and Posture as Found in Selected Methods for Marimba Commonly Used in Brazil

By Guilherme Misina, Prof. Dr. Eduardo Lopes, and Prof. Stephan Frolejks

This article is an excerpt of an ongoing PhD project that deals with movements and posture related to marimba performance. It describes current methods as well as the possible development of exercises and methods related to these topics for both practice and performance.

Though movement and posture are generally less discussed than other technical and musical aspects of marimba performance, the methods examined in this study, all written by highly skilled and respected musicians, each contain significant information on the topic and should serve as a basis of study for all students. Hopefully, the completed study will deliver comprehensive, complete, and coherent materials that will assist students of all levels in their approaches to the practice and performance of the marimba.

It can be said that playing a musical instrument relies on personal choices with due consideration to many musical aspects, such as dynamics, phrasing, tempi, etc. However, in regard to body move-

ment and posture, the “personal choice” is often limited by the specific physical characteristics of the performer’s body, such as height, arm length, and hand size. Each of these, and others, should be taken into consideration when playing or practicing for long periods of time, and adjusted to be as healthy as possible. Methods utilizing this approach to the instrument are discussed in the few selected method books, with a goal of pointing out key aspects that are vital to healthier playing techniques.

A wealth of documented information related to movement and posture has been published regarding the health of musicians. For example, Davidson (2002) talks about how the musicians’ gestures can be connected to a piece’s tempo, and Pierce (2007) shows how body movement can contribute to the development of rhythmic precision. Wong (2022), Shoebridge et al. (2017), Blanco-Piñeiro (2013), and Pierce (2007) are classical examples of research on how good body posture and attention to specific muscles can help a musician deliver a higher-level perfor-

mance, as well as what constitutes good posture. Specifically in the percussion field, there are articles or books by Colton (2013), Broughton and Stevens (2009), Broughton (2008), Dahl and Friberg (2007), and Dahl (2000).

Most of the methods chosen for this study were selected due to the authors’ experiences as students and what was available to them during their studies in several university settings, which explains why half of the methods mentioned are from Brazil. It should be mentioned that several books are available to purchase or freely downloaded according to the academic access one might have. In addition, it is highly likely that new material is currently being written/composed about this topic. Finally, it is important to state that none of the considerations made are presented with the intention to negatively impact or criticize the works mentioned, but to show how frequently the subject of “body movement” and “posture” is mentioned in known percussion methods and how several authors approach the topics.

Method of Movement
by Leigh Howard Stevens

One of the most important methods ever written for the development of four-mallet technique – and one that holds true not only for marimba but for all percussion keyboards – is Leigh Howard Stevens' *Method of Movement for Marimba* (1990). There is no doubt that this book brings valuable information to the student of percussion. Presented in two parts, the first is introductory and theoretical, wherein he explains permutations of strokes with four mallets, describes the possible techniques of four mallets, and clarifies the movement of the mallets before, during, and after the strokes. The second part, consisting of over 500 short technical exercises, demonstrates the possible permutations of strokes with four mallets.

The first part, which is often skipped, has extremely valuable information designed to help students understand how playing can become an easy and thoughtful task. Stevens eloquently states how players can improve their skills by simply thinking about the amount and kinds of movement implied when, for example, simply playing two distinct notes. One insightful phrase states, "Accuracy and efficiency are reduced by mismanagement of distance and momentum. The mallets should not be moved anywhere that is

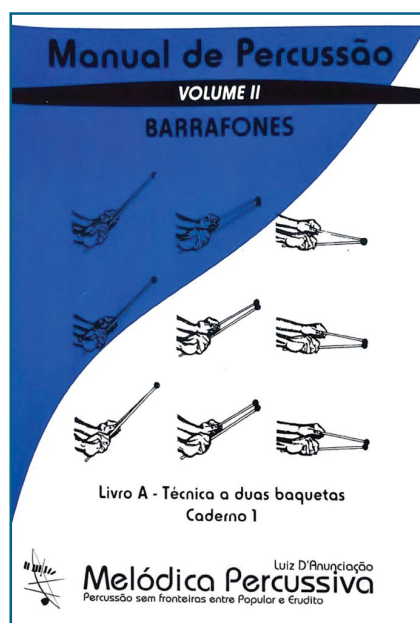
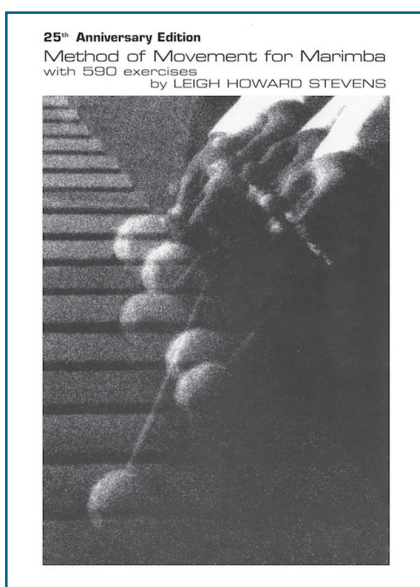
not directly related to the task of striking the bars from the proper height and recovering to the proper height for the next one" (Stevens, 1990, p. 18).

As the book's title, *Method of Movement for Marimba*, states, Stevens does indeed do a marvelous job with what this first part says.¹ However, Stevens doesn't elaborate or discuss details related to body movement during marimba playing or practicing. He does write about body consciousness regarding the importance of knowing, for example, how players should think about their elbows, shoulders, and fingers.

**Manual de Percussão, Vol. II:
Barrafones, Livro 1**
by Luiz A. Anunciação

Anunciação's method is one of the few percussion methods written in Portuguese by a Brazilian musician, which makes it a valuable resource for beginning students in Brazil and enriches the Brazilian academic nest by adding to the list of easily available materials. The method begins with a theoretical part, which explains how to use his method, how to practice, what to be cautious about, and basic information about positioning and body posture. In regards to body posture, Anunciação writes, "Certify yourself

Photo courtesy of Dr. Pedro Sá



Read this article in Portuguese.



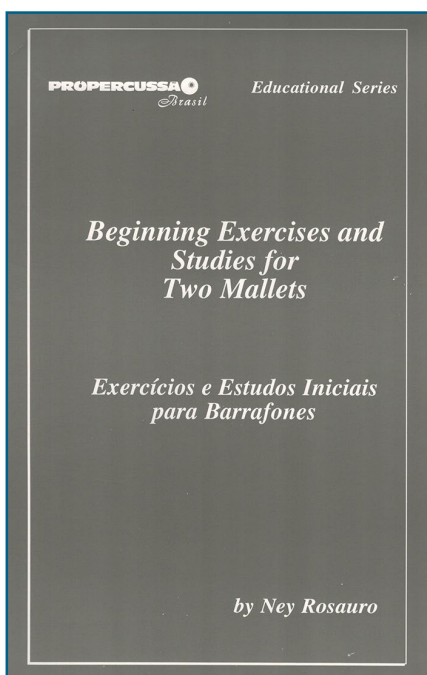
that hand and arms position are natural and relaxed and try to avoid any kind of muscular or postural stiffness that alters the natural state of your physical stature (Anunciação p. 37).² Anunciação even has a similar view as Tarcha (1997) when he writes, "The posture before the instrument should embrace the scope of the musical material to be played. Have your feet slightly further apart from one another and stand the body equally on both legs (ibid, p. 40)."³

Continuing through Anunciação's method, one finds a series of exercises called "preliminary," "tonal," or "melodic" exercises. These are well composed for beginners to gradually develop senses of technicality and musicality. As Anunciação continues through the next sections ("cadernos" or "nível"), he often reminds the reader "not to look excessively to the keys of the instrument." This is helpful advice regarding a player's posture as it prevents the student from repeatedly bending the head down from looking at the score, then to the instrument, and then back up to the score. Furthermore, this helps students develop a sense of familiarity with the instrument and hit the correct bars using their peripheral vision. This skill, a useful and important one for a percussionist, can become highly developed by following the steps contained in *Ideo-Kinetics* (2001), by Gordon Stout.

Beginning Exercises and Studies for Two Mallets
by Ney Rosauero

Ney Rosauero's book is probably the best known and used beginning marimba method in Brazil due to its availability and the fact that it is written in Portuguese. The instructions are concise and valuable, and the music educational material is lightly and creatively composed. Though only 24 pages in length, and depending on the progress of a student, it can likely be used for some months while the student gathers sufficient musical maturity to fully understand the exercises and etudes contained within the book.

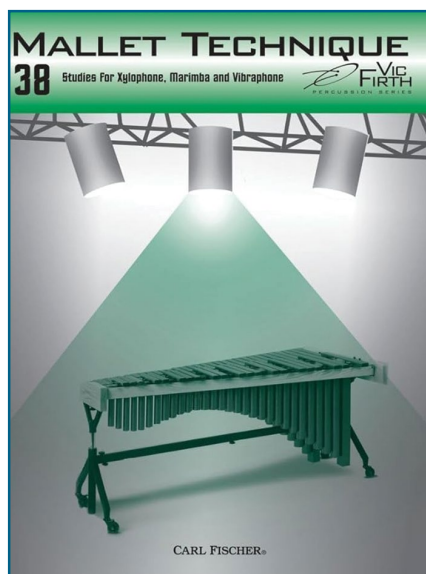
Throughout his method, Rosauero insists that it is vital a student not look at the keyboard, as it helps in "memorizing the distance between notes (kinetic memory) (p. 2)." This follows what Anunciação stated in his method and, considering that Rosauero was a student of Anunciação, one would expect that he would recommend what he was taught from his professor. Besides this and its indirect consequences on posture and movement during the playing of mallet instruments, Rosauero does not explicitly mention anything else involving the importance of one's posture or movement during performance.



Mallet Technique: 38 Studies for Xylophone, Marimba, and Vibraphone
by Vic Firth

Vic Firth's book brings a traditional, technique-expanding series of exercises (or "Studies," as Firth calls them) that definitely help develop ear training and technical execution by working with dominant chords, and major, minor (harmonic and melodic forms), augmented, and diminished scales. In general, the exercises have an ascending or descending melodic idea (often incorporating an arpeggio at the end) or are entirely based on an arpeggio idea. Also, each study has a written explanation regarding what one should look for while practicing. Some of these comments mention body movement and posture.

Although Study No. 18 is the first with a caption to mention physical location, the same idea occurs in Study No. 7. This study consists of a rolled, two-octave, repeated arpeggio beginning on C4, ascending to C6, and descending back to C4. After completing the exercise chromatically up to C7, the study inverts the arpeggio idea, beginning on C7, and descends chromatically until returning to the original starting point of C4. Hence one must cover wide range of the keyboard. Study No. 18 uses the same process, but begins on A, thereby practicing the same arpeggio idea, but now beginning with a minor



scale. At the end of both exercises Firth rewrites the exercise, but now students must play only once, and not twice in a roll – i.e., they have less time to stay in the same arpeggio – resulting in a better exercise to develop dexterity.

Before Study No. 7, Firth writes, "In the second part of the study,⁴ the mind and the eyes must actually travel ahead of the hands to direct the hands to the correct notes. (Refer to the notes of Study No. 18)." (Firth, 1965, p. 11). The introduction for Study No. 18 states, "It should be noted that the physical location of the player to the instrument is very important, owing to the wide span involved in two-octave arpeggios. An improper position before the instrument will tend to limit the player's facility for speed." (ibid, p. 18). Since both exercises have a two-octave range, as well as the same tempo practicing recommendations, it would be wiser to place this last quotation before Study No. 7, or even in the beginning of the book, as such valuable knowledge, which is important to percussion students, would be a helpful learning process for the entire book.

Studies No. 8 and 9 are also excellent exercises regarding body movement and position at the marimba, due to the fact that one must play ranges of more than two octaves – for example, A3 to C6. Both exercises consist of a 4-measure scale, ascending and descending, the major difference being that Study No. 8 is based on the harmonic minor scale, whereas No. 9 is based on the melodic minor scale. Fortunately, there are comments that describe the studies before the exercises, but unfortunately there are no comments regarding movement and positioning of the body while playing them.

Técnica de Duas Baquetas para Teclados de Percussão: Marimba, Vibrafone, Xilofone e Glockenspiel
by Carlos Tarcha

Although Tarcha's book is dedicated to only two-mallet technique for percussion keyboards, most of the content – not just the aspects concerning body position and movement – can be seen as general

concepts. These apply independently of which technique one is playing, and are even more important when applied toward four-mallet techniques. Of course, some adjustments are needed, which can be clearly demonstrated while playing elementary technical exercises when applying different four-mallet techniques (a four-note block chord, for example). These concepts may influence the position of the arms and forearms differently depending on which four-mallet technique one is using.

Tarcha's method is divided into two parts; the first one being the description on how to use and study the book, the second being a glossary. In the first part, one can find valuable information about how Tarcha approaches the position of the body while playing and practicing. For example, on the second section of the first part, "how to use it and study," Tarcha mentions that one should concentrate on musical aspects and become aware of physical posture, relaxation, and the specific movements. He also addresses the importance of learning by heart (or memory), stating that by doing so one can better observe not only the position of the mallets and the body, but also listen more clearly to what is being played (p. 5). He also mentions that the same result might be successfully achieved when one takes a few minutes to rest (or take short breaks) while practicing (p. 139).

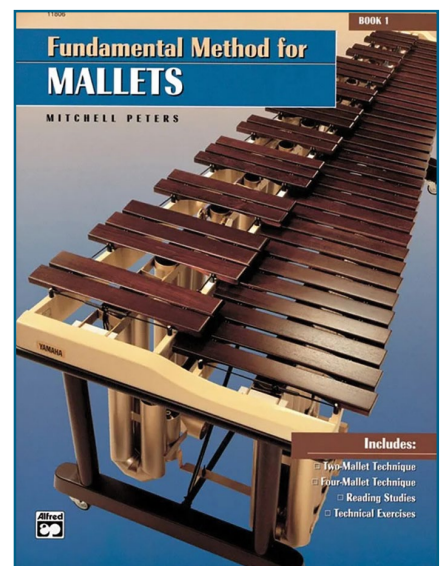


One of the most useful and important details mentioned by Tarcha regarding posture is foot positioning. Tarcha recommends placing your feet about 40 centimeters apart, with one foot in front of the other (p. 18 and 22), as this provides better stability when moving the torso forwards, backwards, and side to side. Furthermore, at the beginning of his second chapter, Tarcha presents his view on the ideal body position and the height of the instrument in relation to the player. Generally, he states that the best height is one that leaves the arms comfortable and not tense with the range of motion, allowing for full wrist movements. Furthermore, the knees should remain unlocked, that is, slightly bent. Finally, he describes muscle relaxation and body awareness as essential for developing good techniques, always remembering that trunk movements should be used more than the body movement of walking, and that taking breaks between exercises is important in order to check body positioning (p. 17–18). When practicing scales and arpeggios, Tarcha again mentions the importance of these same aspects, including "body positioning: it's best not to walk, simply displace the body by changing the foot that is supporting the body's weight and bending the knees" (p. 110 and 123).

Fundamental Method for Mallets, Vol. 1 by Mitchell Peters

In the Preface to Vol. 1 of his method, Mitchell Peters writes that it initially covers two-mallet technique focusing on scales (major, minor, chromatic, and double-stops) and some basic concepts of four-mallet technique. Many of the initial technical exercises might seem familiar and similar to Firth's method book.⁵ Peters also writes a small section about "Playing Position" immediately before the method's introduction on how his method is organized and should be used. This important overview also includes details about other mallet instruments (vibraphone, xylophone, bells (or glockenspiel) and chimes).

In regard to positioning, Peters presents



essential information for beginners, such as "try to be natural and comfortable" and "position of the body will vary, depending upon what instrument you are playing, and the range being covered" (p. 14). In contrast to Tarcha, who recommended a distance of 40 centimeters between the feet, Peters writes that one should leave the feet spread apart (in order to find body weight balance) at a distance of 12 inches (around 30 centimeters). Though one is unlikely to observe and comment on an exact measurement, it is important to note how close their suggested distances are, meaning that both agree on the same idea: keep your feet apart, because body weight distribution for mallet playing is an important trait.

Peters' approach agrees with Tarcha's in the sense that both address the importance of the instrument height. Tarcha states that "practicing on an inadequate instrument height may result in vices of posture and technique" (Tarcha, 1997, p. 16), while Peters writes that the forearms should be parallel to the floor, tilted slightly downwards and, to achieve that, if the instrument doesn't have any height adjustment system, one may "place blocks of wood under the wheels in order to raise the instrument to a more comfortable playing height" (Peters, 1995, p. 15).

**Four-mallet Marimba Playing:
A Musical Approach for All Levels**
by Nancy Zeltsman

Nancy Zeltsman's nearly 200-page book is one of the most comprehensive methods for marimba players. At the beginning of the book, she not only manages to mention the most important aspects of musically related concepts (such as mallet choice, beating spots, the basics of good rhythmic phrasing, and rolling), but also includes several original studies that address these issues. They are highly musical, detailed and, pedagogically speaking, admirably written. She also writes "this book is for players of all levels (p. viii)," which makes it a method that can be used for a long period of time covering one's beginning level through college-level studies.

Regarding body posture, Zeltsman writes: "You should have both feet on the floor with your weight distributed evenly between them and be standing up straight..." and that "You want your arms to feel very relaxed and long, extending from your shoulders, with elbows in and relaxed (p. 5)." These are then illustrated by two photos of Zeltsman standing behind the marimba. Zeltsman's description and photos support and agree with what Tarcha and Firth write regarding proper or equal weight distribution when standing as well as having the elbows relaxed

and in a slightly downward-bent position. One can therefore conclude that three prominent professionals of the percussion field agree on the same general concepts regarding body position in order to optimize an efficient manner of movement for both practice and performance.

In "Section Three: Refinements," Zeltsman again addresses body positioning by stating that, in some situations, it is better to shift the body a bit to one side in order to make the playing more comfortable, even though it might "compromise all your beating spots slightly, but try to compensate and mitigate this as much as possible." This is an advantageous tip that helps in any repertoire situation that might create awkward body positionings. The not-so-obvious solution that will create a more comfortable (and probably easier manner of executing a certain passage) is actually to move, tilt, or bend one's body in some specific way. By knowing this method, keeping it in mind as one performs, and utilizing it, a player must then just manage the stated possible consequences, such as slightly compromised beating spots.

CONCLUSION

The topics of movement and posture, mentioned at varying amounts and depths in these selected methods for marimba/keyboard percussion, confirm that the topic is of importance to marimba performance by students and teachers. The information that does exist is of high value and should be recommended by all to (1) utilize the available materials in earnest, as they are likely to make one a better performer, keeping one healthier due to better posture, especially when cognizant of this during hours-long practice sessions; and (2) encourage all teachers and students to pay attention to the theoretical information provided within these methods rather than jumping directly to the practice of written musical exercises. Perhaps Leigh Howard Stevens best sums it up with the opening sentence from his *Method of Movement*: "The student should not attempt to play any of the exercises in

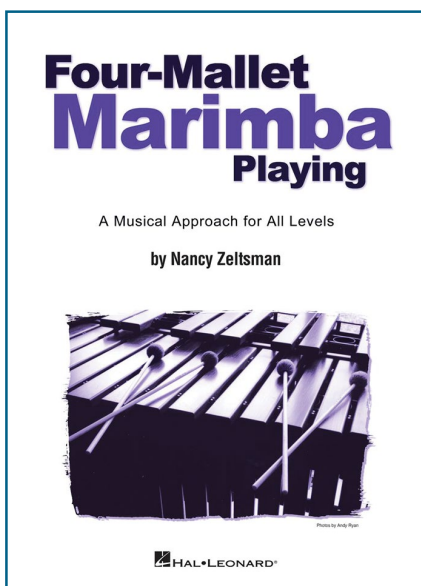
the second half of this book until *all* of the preceding text has been read."

ENDNOTES

1. Which, again, is sad that most people ignore, just to have to listen to professional professors in music festivals or summer camps saying the exact things they could've put some attention to if they had just read the book properly!
2. Original from Portuguese: "Certifique-se de que as posições das mãos e braços são espontâneas e procure evitar qualquer enrijecimento muscular ou postura que altere o estado natural de sua compleição física." About my translation, I would like to make an observation about Anunciação's use of the word "expontâneas" and my translation to "natural and relaxed." If I had translated literally to "spontaneous," that could have led some readers to think "unplanned" or "unrehearsed," like saying "I decided to go for a walk spontaneously." That was not, in my views, the kind of interpretation of the word "spontaneous" that Anunciação would be meaning to say in this sentence; hence the translation of "spontaneous" to "natural and relaxed."
3. Original from Portuguese: "A postura em frente ao instrumento deve mediar o **âmbito** do trecho musical a se executar. Tenha os pés um pouco afastados um do outro e apoie o corpo equitativamente nas duas pernas."
4. He's referring to the part without repetition, i.e., not playing two times in a roll.
5. It is not something to be diminished, though. Two highly skilled percussionists/musicians might write method books that work on the same premises, but having minute details differing on from the other makes the learning process interesting and the teaching also broader, in the sense that students might identify better with one writer rather than another.

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