

Traditional Four-Mallet Grip

By Nancy Zeltsman

THE MORE I TOUR AND TEACH, THE MORE SURPRISED I AM to see how rarely traditional four-mallet grip is used. It really isn't "traditional" anymore. Still, it's the grip used by Japanese marimbist Keiko Abe as well as many Asian players. It was taught to me about twenty years ago by the New York City-based xylophone and mallet virtuoso Ian Finkel.

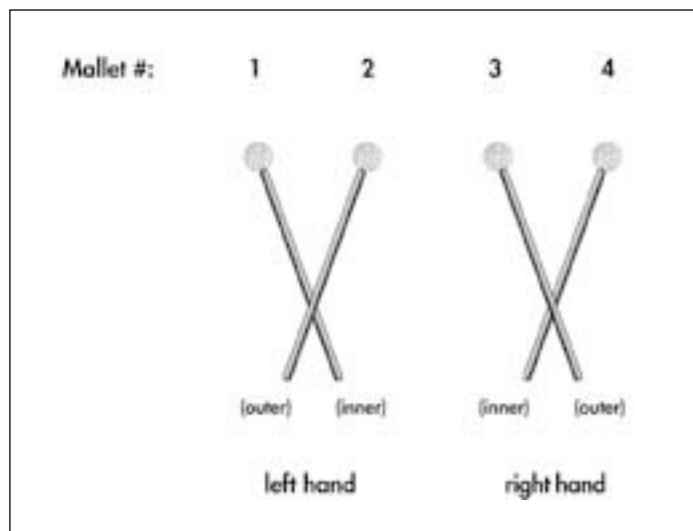
Traditional grip always seemed to me to be very natural, comfortable and musically versatile; I never gave a moment's thought to using another. While it worked well for me from an early stage, I've gradually discovered more and more technical and tonal possibilities it affords, and imagine that I will continue to do so. I've never come across a technical challenge I couldn't meet with traditional grip. Conversely, I've seen other grips render certain passages extremely awkward—ones that would not have been awkward with traditional grip.

I believe that traditional grip has sadly become far less traditional than it deserves to be because a clear written description of it doesn't exist or hasn't been widely distributed. One of the most frequently used grips is the "Stevens" grip. One explanation for this, I think, is that Leigh Howard Stevens' *Method of Movement*, in which he teaches his version of Musser grip, is widely available. It's a very clear explanation of a four-mallet grip that people can use on their own, even if a teacher isn't available to them.

I never insist that my students switch to traditional grip if they've already been using a different grip. The most important considerations for which grip you choose are: (1) you can meet basic technical challenges with it; (2) the grip *feels* good to you; and (3) you can achieve every conceivable musical and tonal nuance with it. Some students who had been using Stevens grip or Musser grip have tried traditional grip since starting to work with me. Some immediately found it easier and got good results.

The point of this article is not to start a debate over which is the best grip to use. Peoples' hand sizes and structures vary far too much that any one grip could be comfortable and effective for everyone. My hope is that this introduction will encourage people to try traditional grip and that it may appeal to them. My thanks to Michael Rosen, who first prodded me several years ago to write an article on my grip.

Throughout these steps, I will be referring to the four mallets with the following number system:



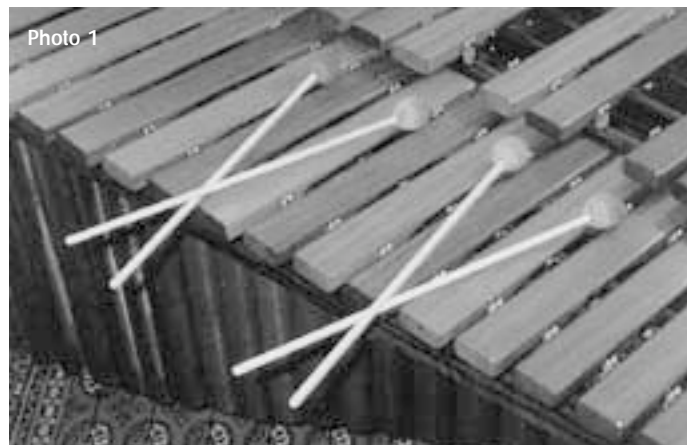
Nancy Zeltsman is the marimbist of the marimba/violin duo *Marimolin*, which has premiered over 75 pieces, performed across the U.S. and in Europe, and recorded for GM Recordings and Catalyst/BMG—which issued *Marimolin*'s most recent album, *Combo Platter*. Zeltsman also performs as a soloist and teaches marimba at The Boston Conservatory and Berklee College of Music. Her solo marimba CD is entitled *Woodcuts*. She endorses *Marimba One* marimbas and her own line of *Encore Mallets*.



SUSAN WILSON

Step 1

Lay out the four mallets in two pairs with the handles crossed about three-quarters of the way down the mallet shafts (from the mallet heads). The outer mallet handles should be on the bottom, i.e., mallets 1 and 4. It helps to have the handles extending off the marimba or a table. (See Photo 1)



Step 2

Begin with only your right or left hand. Put your second (index) finger down through the top of the X (where the mallets cross). (See Photo 2) Wrap your fourth and fifth fingers around the crossed handles (keeping the mallets stacked, with the outer handle on the



bottom). An inch or two of the handles should extend out the back (side) of your hand (not under your wrist).

The fifth finger (“pinky”) must stretch across and touch the palm of your hand. It will *always* touch your palm and sometimes needs to be really clenched. The fourth finger will often help the fifth finger clench and anchor the mallets; other times, it will be relaxed and loosely curled around the sticks (not reaching over to the palm). It may help to think of your fourth and fifth fingers as extending across the mallets to the heel of your hand, as opposed to being curled around them with the nail of the fifth finger digging into the palm. (See Photo 3)

Step 3

The first step in situating your “front” fingers—1 (thumb), 2 and 3—is to orient the outer mallet to the spot on your index finger



between the first two joints. Think of this spot as “home base” for the outer mallet. (See Photo 4) This is the basic orientation point where the mallet will be when you’re playing midsized intervals: roughly, thirds through sixths.

Basically, the thumb always rests on top of the inside mallet with its tip *between* the two mallets. It should be bent slightly in a convex, rather than a concave, curve. The two main orientation points on the thumb for the inner mallet are: (1) just below the first joint (i.e., between the first and second joints; see Photo 5); and (2) just above the first joint (i.e., between the first joint and the nail; see Photo 6). The former (below the first joint) tends to be most comfortable for intervals of a fifth or larger. The latter (above the first joint) tends to be most comfortable for intervals of a fourth or smaller. However, the individual hand and musical context may supersede this generalization.

Meanwhile, your third finger should be loosely curled and relaxed. It creates a sort of supporting shelf for the outer—and sometimes, both—sticks. (See Photo 7) With smaller intervals, it should be wrapped around both sticks. With large intervals, you may gain support for the outer mallet by having the third finger curled around it. Be careful, however, that the tip of the third finger doesn’t come up between the mallets as you move back to smaller intervals; it will prevent you from drawing the mallets closed. Pulling the third finger in toward the thumb allows the second finger to push out (toward the third finger) and “grab” the stick at the orientation point.

By squeezing the fifth (and maybe also fourth) finger(s) around the X, you should gain the necessary resistance for the mallets to feel really anchored—almost *glued*—to the second finger and thumb at the basic orientation points. If you play a lot, you will probably form a callus on the second finger at the orientation point.



Step 4

Play a comfortably-sized interval (with both mallets). Probably this will be a fourth or fifth. Repeat it slowly. Try to play with a full sound, at a dynamic of *mp* to *mf*. Play fairly slowly, about quarter note = 70.

As you do so, think about your basic body posture. You should have both feet on the floor and be standing up straight, squarely facing the marimba. You want your arms to feel very relaxed and long, extending from your shoulders, elbows in. Your palms will be facing down (rather than having your hands rotated with the thumbs up). Your basic strokes, up and down from the wrists, will be similar



Photo 8



Photo 9

to that of matched-grip snare drum. Keep your mallet handles as low to the marimba as possible without quite touching. If you have trouble feeling relaxed with this, go ahead and let the handles touch the bars sometimes until you get accustomed to your arms feeling naturally extended. (See Photo 8)

There are three reasons for keeping your hands low to the keyboard: (1) your movements across the keyboard will look very smooth; (2) you'll feel most connected to the keyboard; and (3) you'll take advantage of the greatest surface area of the mallet striking the bar, for the "fattest" sound.

With the double-stop, focus on lifting up from your wrist rather than using your forearm. To really get a feel for this, try playing a natural down-stroke, after which you bring your mallets only slightly above the keyboard; freeze there. Then lift the mallets up very slowly, bending up from your wrist to an exaggerated degree. You actually may never raise your mallets as high as shown in Photo 9 during regular playing; this is just one of the best ways to feel the particular wrist muscles you'll be using. Repeat this: natural down-stroke—at about *mf*—and exaggerated, *sloooooo* up-stroke.

Whenever (this goes for the next steps, as well) the mallets feel like they're slipping; or you feel you're losing the basic orientation points for the second finger and thumb; or the mallet handles are clicking together, the problem will probably be that you're not clenching the fifth finger around the mallets at the back of your hand. Remember that the fifth (and sometimes also, fourth) finger(s) squeezing *up* on the mallets provide the crucially needed resistance for the "front" fingers (second and thumb) to push against. Your little finger may feel utterly overwhelmed by the responsibility required of it. Building isolated strength in that finger, so that the "front" fingers can feel relaxed even though the fifth finger is clenched, is for some people the most difficult aspect of traditional grip.

Step 5

Repeat Steps 2 through 4 with the other hand.

Step 6

So far, I have described the basic grip for conservatively-sized intervals (thirds through sixths). The basic grip changes slightly for smaller and for larger intervals. Let's continue through the spectrum.

Starting with your right hand, play a fourth—say, a C and F—a few times. Open the F out to a G and play the fifth a few times. In opening to the fifth, the thumb orientation point may go from the spot above the first joint to below the first joint—or maybe not. Open out to a sixth and play it a few times. Now the thumb orientation point is likely to be most comfortable below the joint. In opening, you should feel like you're stretching out with second finger *and* with the thumb (in opposite directions). With wider intervals, the orientation point on the second finger may shift up above the first joint (near the tip). Open out to a seventh, then an octave, then (if you're daring) a ninth (and beyond, depending on the width of your bars and the register you're in). Play each a few times. With these last few widest intervals, you may need to hold onto the X with *only* your fifth finger. Also, the thumb orientation point may change to *farther* back on your thumb than previously discussed—to the little notch just above the bone of the base joint or even below it. In addition, it will be easier to play wide intervals if you shift your basic grasping point on the mallets to nearer the tip. (See Photo 10)

Now work your way closed: octave, seventh, sixth, fifth, fourth—reviewing the slight adjustments as you go (e.g., by the sixth, your

fourth finger may be able to be back across the X along with the fifth; the thumb orientation points may change along the way). Basically, to state the obvious, you're gradually bringing your fist closed. For a third, the most comfortable thumb orientation point will almost definitely be the spot above the first joint.

One slightly tricky thing is the interval of a second. We'll begin by going from the interval of a third to a second and back. For the interval of a second, you need to get your second finger forward and out of the way. Straighten it out, but be extremely careful to keep the tip of it hooked under the outside mallet. (See Photo 11) Your thumb will help to bring the mallets closed for this small interval by pushing down on the inside mallet and pulling it in. You can push down with the thumb because of the resistance offered by the fourth and fifth fingers clenching upward. It is crucial that you keep both the thumb and second finger in between the two mallets or you won't be able to get a hold on them to open back out to regular position. With the interval of a second, your third finger will be wrapped around both mallets underneath along with the fourth and fifth fingers.

When you go from the second back to the third (intervals, not fingers), you're reclaiming the basic position. To do so, one of my students thinks of "bumping" the outer mallet over the first joint. With the third, you have just enough room for the outer stick to be in basic position on the index finger, and the thumb to be at the orientation point above the first joint. Practice going back and forth between the second and third. Don't play the next one until your hand is set. Keep thinking: *second/special position* with extended second finger and thumb hooked in between mallets; *third/basic position* (a cramped-feeling version of it).

Step 7

Repeat Step 6 with the left hand. Start with a fourth—say, G and C. Keep the inside mallet on the C and gradually open out with the outer mallet (index finger) as well as with the thumb. (See Photo 12)

Obviously, you could invent countless exercises for practicing going between different sized intervals, besides just moving by scale steps. The best "exercises," however, may be applying these principles to some actual music.

Step 8

The final basic step is understanding how to use the mallets independently. First, we'll address the outer mallets, numbers 1 and 4.

With mallet 4 (in your right hand), concentrate on raising the stick in a straight line alongside your second finger. The straight line you're envisioning should continue down the tendon of that finger and up your arm. Raise the stick from your wrist, which should be *low*, near the keyboard (remember your relaxed arm extension from Step 4) with your wrist as flat as possible (rather than rotated so your thumb is above your hand). As much as possible, think of keeping the top inside corner of your wrist (below the thumb) tilting down and in. (See Photo 13)

Using the same basic playing position and wrist motion described in Step 4, slowly play single notes at *mf*. For the downward stroke, you'll push down with the index finger and thumb. After each stroke, leave the mallet just above the keyboard and then slowly raise it to an exaggeratedly high level. Focus on how it feels to make a straight down-stroke and up-stroke. The power for single strokes with the outer mallets comes from the flick of your wrist. Try the same with mallet 1 (in your left hand).





The stroke is different for the inner mallets, numbers 2 and 3. The power for single strokes with the inner mallets will come from your thumb. It is enhanced by rotating your wrist so the thumb is above your hand (as I had warned against in relation to the outer mallets). Again, we'll begin with the right hand.

Begin by playing slow, single strokes at *mf*. The exaggerated stroke you should try here—again, *just* so you'll feel the muscles that will be used—is one in which your wrist rotates outward from a flat (palm down) to a sideways position (thumb above your hand, or even rotated so palm almost faces up). Notice the tremendous weight and strength with which the bone in your thumb can bring the mallet down. (See Photo 14) Experiment to find the exact course the mallet needs to take to achieve a straight down-stroke and up-stroke. Then try the same with mallet 2 in your left hand.

At first, don't be concerned if, when you're playing with only one of the mallets in a given hand, the other mallet in that hand is flopping onto the keyboard. First, just concentrate on the basic independent strokes, ignoring any flopping by the other mallet. Then work on eliminating it. Simply squeeze with the fifth (and maybe also fourth) finger(s) to cast the temporarily unwanted mallet up and out of the way. When playing with the outer mallet only, the tip of the third finger placed against the inner mallet can also sometimes help keep it out of the way. You may wish to also tilt your hand down slightly toward the side you're playing with. Eventually, when playing with only the inner or outer mallet, the other mallet should remain relatively stationary, seeming to serve as an axis for the mallet with which you're playing.

I commonly play single-line passages with mallets 2 and 4 (especially in the high range), in that case keeping mallet 3 in near my stomach; or with mallets 2 and 3 (the inner mallets); or with mallets 1 and 3 (especially in the low range). I frequently switch back and forth between these.

Through all of these steps, pay careful attention to whether one hand happens to initially feel more comfortable than the other. If so, try to figure out why and have the slower-learning hand copy it.

The final step, obviously, is to apply traditional grip to some actual playing. Play something with which you're already familiar, approaching it slowly, trying to remember the various pointers I've laid out. Or, just try some scales.

In conclusion, here are some of the primary virtues of traditional grip:

1. Its basics can be learned quickly affording immediate application.
2. The mallets crossing in your hand and your fist around them affords natural leverage and power.
3. You can grasp the mallets at any point on the handles. This enables you to control how much length you use. In some instances, e.g., one-handed rolls on one note, less handle extension means your arm positions can be much more relaxed and natural.
4. Becoming accustomed to the subtle shifts in hand position necessary to play different-sized intervals means that your fingers are primed for and sensitized to subtle shifts they can make to achieve different tone qualities.
5. Traditional grip can be applied equally well to the vibraphone as to the marimba. It also works well in the context of multiple percussion playing that involves quick mallet/stick changes: You can pick up four mallets very quickly with traditional grip. PN

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