Father Ryan High School
Technique for the Front Ensemble

Presence/Posture

Our look is very important. You will be judged by how you look behind the instrument. Our appearance is to be professional, confident, and "politely arrogant". The way we stand is also important to the mechanics and uniformity of our performance.

1. Stand relaxed with your feet shoulder width apart. While you want a "big look" to your posture, make sure not to tense up your legs or shoulders.
2. Your torso should be upright, not hunching over the instrument.
3. Make sure the instrument is at the correct height for your body. To determine your instruments proper height, let your arms hang down at your side. With your shoulders relaxed, bring your arms up and rest your hands on the keyboard just like you were setting them on a table. Your forearms should be angled slightly down. If the angle is too steep, you need to raise your instrument. If your arms are flat or angled up, you need to lower your instrument.
4. Head should be relaxed but up. Looking down your nose at the instrument.
5. Shoulders should be square to the instrument whenever possible.
6. Your body should be in the center of the range in which you are playing.
7. The space between your body and the instrument changes with any given phrase or exercise. You should generally try to stand where both manuals are easily reachable.
8. You will have to shift your body weight forward, backward, and sometimes even sideways. In four-mallet playing this is called "shifting" and is required when you play on both manuals of the instrument at the same time.
9. Usually, you should stand with one foot slightly more forward than the other giving you better balance as you "shift" or lean while playing.
10. Remember that you are a performer. Body language and movement is at times choreographed but mostly it is left to the individual to do what comes natural to communicate the feel of the music being performed.

Two mallet technique

Grip:

1. The grip we use can be best described as "rear fulcrum" grip. Use primarily the back 2 fingers to hold the mallet. With about 2 inches sticking out from the back of the hand.
2. Wrap your 2 rear fingers around the shaft of the mallet.
3. Lightly place the other 3 fingers on the shaft keeping the index finger slightly extended.
4. Don't hold on tight with the 2 rear fingers, they are there simply to hold onto the mallet.
5. The thumb and index finger help to guide the mallet.
6. As tempos increase the front fulcrum engages only as needed to control the mallet.
7. To create the correct angle, stand with your arms relaxed at your side. Then, lift them to the instrument. Make sure your hands aren't flat with your palms down. You should have a slight angle inwards, but make sure your wrist and arms form a natural and relaxed angle.

Stroke:

1. Rebound is the key to the stroke. Mallets will first start in the up position at the height that you want to play. This will be adapted to include a prep stroke. The prep stroke will begin on the subdivision of the beat that we are about to play. Lift one note value's length prior to playing. For instance, if you're playing eighth notes, you would lift on (actually, just after) the "and" of 4. *Under no circumstance should you finish an exercise with the mallets down near the bars.*
2. Forearms and elbows are relaxed. The wrist makes the stroke the forearm follows.
3. At the top of the stroke the mallet is brought down by the weight of the rear fingers in the back of the hand. As the mallet head comes down, the wrist turns to accelerate the mallet head into the bar. After contact with the bar, the looseness in the front of the hand allows the mallet to rebound. Even here, the mallet head leads followed by the wrist and arm.
4. At a normal moderate tempo, the stroke is 90% wrist motion and 10% arm motion.
5. As the tempo increases, the stroke becomes more wrist oriented and the mallet height becomes lower to the bar. At a slower tempo, the stroke becomes more arm oriented and the mallet height becomes higher off the bar. Always rebound, even through the last note of an exercise.
6. **Piston Stroke** - A type of stroke where the starting and stopping point are the same (with the exception of horizontal motion across the keyboard creating a Shift). No wasted motion is created by a piston stroke. You go straight down to play and straight up to return back to the original playing position. The stroke is relaxed yet precise. At slower tempos there will be a pause in between the strokes, and as the tempos increases you want to smoothly connect the motion when it becomes comfortable to do so.
7. **Legato Stroke –** The downstroke is the same speed as that of the piston but the recovery is slower on the upstroke, creating a "slow-mo" movement upwards from the note. The momvent is always lead by the mallet head and should like you are slowly pulling every bit of sound possible out of the bar. The arm is used at times to create a more fluid look and to generate more sound from the bars in louder passages. Most legato strokes will have either a defined ending beat or continue the motion until the next note. Common mistakes with this include pushing forward with the mallets, using too much arm, and generally overdoing it. This technique will be used most often in the Vibraphones, but will be utilized throughout the ensemble.
8. **Shift** - When going from one note to another you use the return stroke of a piston stoke to travel to your next destination. We will refer to it as a "checkmark" type of motion.

Playing Zones:
This refers to where you strike the bar.

Center of the bar – this is the best general playing area. Playing over the resonators (tubes under the bars) gives you the fullest, darkest sound with the most projection.
Edge of the bar – this area is used for faster passages when playing two mallets or to make an awkward four mallet voicing easier to play. When using this zone think of splitting the mallet head in half (half on half off) on the edge of the bar. It is difficult to get a consistent sound on the edge and should only be used if playing in the center is too difficult or not practical.
Avoid playing on the node – this is the part of the bar where the string goes through. It is a dead sounding zone with no projection and should be avoided.
Sound quality is the key element of a good stroke. Consistent fulcrum, playing zone, velocity, height, and striking with the same part of the mallet each time are all essential to good sound quality.

Four mallet technique:
There are different types of four mallet grips. We use the Stevens grip for both vibes and marimba .

Stevens Grip:
For the outside mallet - hold the mallet shaft toward the very bottom between the middle finger and ring finger, then wrap the ring finger and pinky around the mallet. A small bit of mallet should stick out at your pinky (¼" or so).
For the inside mallet – place the end of the mallet against the base of the thumb (off center of the bottom of your palm). Let the mallet rest on the first knuckle of your index finger. The index finger should be curved and relaxed. The mallet should be able to hang in your hand without assistance from your thumb.
Place the middle finger at the base of the inside mallet and gently rest the thumb on top. Your thumb and index finger will create the fulcrum similar to then two-mallet grip. Your thumb will face the ceiling and the index finger is pointing in and curved slightly. The index finger does not wrap around or bend around the mallet. The thumb should remain flat as well.
The mallets should hang in place and the hand should be relaxed. The interval size created is usually a fourth or fifth.

Four mallet stroke types:

Double Vertical – Both mallets in one hand strike the keyboard at the same time. The stroke utilizes the "wrist pop". The wrist moves in the "hand shake" position.
Single Independent – One mallet is used independently of the other mallet in the same hand. The mallet that is not being used acts as an axis for the other mallet to rotate or pivot around. The fingers holding the unused mallet should remain relaxed, allowing the mallet to hang low to the keyboard. The pivot motion will come from the arm much like traditional snare drum grip.
Single Alternating – This stroke can be described as *alternating independent strokes* (outside, inside, outside, inside, etc), but without the concern for an axis mallet. The stroke utilizes both mallets as a unit. The two mallets in one hand take turns striking.
Double Lateral – Both mallets in one hand strike the keyboard but both mallets do not hit the key board at the same time. This is a twisting motion, that creates two notes in quick succession. This stroke is used for grace note passages and as a roll type.

Timpani

The timpanist is a solo performer in the group but does have some guidelines for technique.

Posture – Sitting on a stool at a height just below the top of the drum. Back straight, shoulders back and head up. A look of confidence and "politely arrogant".
Grip and stroke - The primary timpani grip we use is the French grip. In this grip the wrists are turned inward and the thumbs are up. The thumb is on top and the stick is supported by the index and third finger. The fourth and fifth fingers are slightly dropped away. Strokes used are: the full stroke (start up - end up), the down stoke/staccato stroke (start up - end down). Rolls are played as single strokes.
Playing area – About four inches from the rim of the drum. Mallets about 4-6 inches apart.
Tuning - The development of a "great ear" or good relative pitch is essential for the timpanist. The player must be able to discern intervals and sharpness and flatness of pitch. Gauges will be used as a guide for tuning changes because of the listening environment and the speed of the changes. Gauges must be checked repeatedly for accuracy. An electronic tuner must be with the timpanist at all times.

Rack Percussion/Drumset

The rack percussionist or drum set will be responsible for many of the impact and colors generated by the front ensemble. They will also be responsible for time keeping in many instances. Great timing and listening skills are required. The player must learn how to watch or listen to the drum line and connect the front ensemble with them. The player will play while standing (drum set while sitting) and must position the instruments on the rack for the best blend of comfort and communication. Rack percussionists and drum set must use matched grip. They are responsible for coordinating the movement that is required to perform the parts written. The rack requires a great deal of upkeep. The players are responsible for checking the equipment daily.

Rehearsal Supplies
You need these at EVERY rehearsal.

1) Your Music – Must be in a 3 ring binder. Must be the current version. No exceptions!
2) Pencil – obvious…we change a lot of things…we add lots of things. No pens.
3) Practice Pad – go immediately to this when you have "down time" in rehearsal.

Additional Helps

Listen and watch good performers and groups!

Websites:
Innovativepercussion.com – media, videos, and articles (Cavaliers videos or MCM especially)
Vicfirth.com – cyber lessons on marimba as well as videos of some great percussion groups (UMass Marimba Band is on here)
Youtube.com – videos of people playing marimba, various percussion groups (The Cavaliers and Music City Mystique especially)
Groups to watch: The Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corp percussion section (Youtube)
Music City Mystique front ensemble (Youtube)
University of Massachusetts marimba band (vicfirth.com)
MTSU Percussion Ensemble Concerts (check mtsu.edu)
University of North Texas graduate ensemble
Artists to check out:
Leigh Howard Stevens (developed the Stevens grip)
Gary Burton (developed the Burton grip)
Bob Becker - of the group NEXUS
Gifford Howrath
Dave Samuels
Michael Burritt
Keiko Abe
Evelyn Glennie