

Advanced 4 Mallet Stevens Techniques: A Guide

By Josh Spaulding

Introduction

In the Steven's 4 mallet technique, there are a variety of different stroke types that combine together to form how we play with Steven's Grip. They are listed below:

- Double Vertical
- Single Independent
- Double Lateral (in/out, out/in)
- Triple Lateral (in/out/in, out/in/out)
- One Handed Rolls (continuous lateral)

Further detailing and definition of each stroke can be found in Leigh Howard Steven's "Method of Movement" book. I highly recommend every percussionist buy this book, especially if you are serious about getting better as a mallet player.

Today, I'm going to be focusing on triple laterals and one handed rolls along with several other more advanced topics. However, I can't reiterate how important it is to learn the basic fundamentals in order to work on more advanced technique. Everything about Stevens grip is only ever mastered when the following is produced:

- a firm, but loose and relaxed grip in the hands. It should be so relaxed that you should be able to pull out each mallet from your hand with no resistance from the grip itself.
- a clear stroke from the wrist and rotation from the wrist that is based around the opposing mallet (for single independent, etc.)
- a very open perch, and a solid grip point for mallets 2 and 3 that comes from the middle finger only, NOT the thumb and index finger!!!
- the ability to achieve a true independent rotation for each individual mallet to the point where the other mallet barely moves.
- and most importantly, strive to NEVER NEVER NEVER have tension in any aspect of your technique!

As you may have noticed from your own experiences, some of these points you may not have been doing, or they are very hard for you to achieve. I cannot stress to you enough that you need to keep practicing and isolating these things in order to get better. Not only will it be extremely hard or impossible to achieve many of the

Modern one handed rolls are simply continuous lateral strokes that are fast enough to create a roll effect. Thus, in order to obtain them, you have to get good at doing double and triple laterals, and you also have to build up enough chops/stamina in order to maintain them.

Try working on the wrist motion for one handed rolls by using the exercise for triple laterals that is written earlier. Also, later in this packet, I've attached another one handed roll building exercise that will help you get better at this technique, however the only real advice that you need to keep telling yourself is to relax your grip and your strokes. Too often young players try to "push the roll out" instead of relying on good technique to produce the roll. Not only will this get you a smoother, better sounding roll, but it also will help keep your chops from burning out.

It is also very important to note that you need to practice both triple laterals and one handed rolls at ALL intervals. Don't get in a habit of just practicing in comfortable 4th and 5th intervals. Practice them in octaves, practice them in 2nds or even single notes, and also practice them while changing intervals as well.

Octaves

Obtaining an octave in Stevens grip is one of the hardest technical skills to learn and master. There are two types of octaves: a "locked" octave and a stretched octave. The difference between the two lies with where the bottom of the inside mallet (the part controlled by your middle finger) ends up staying. A locked octave has the inside mallet resting BEHIND the thick roll of skin that rests over the knuckles between your fingers and your hand. You lock the inside mallet in a pocket between this roll of skin and your middle and ring fingers. The stretched octave stays IN FRONT of this roll of skin. The stretched octave is the easiest to obtain but the hardest to maintain. The opposite is true for the locked octave, which is harder to obtain but easier to maintain. Another thing to keep in mind is that locked octaves take more time to get in and out of.

When practicing octaves, the best way to build up control for them is by doing an interval exercise like the one below (do this with both hands independently then together):



Another point to consider is that you should practice pushing beyond an octave in order to make the regular octave position comfortable.

Seconds and First Intervals

Second and First intervals are possible by extending the perch until it is straight and rolling the inside mallet out with your middle finger until it is resting PARALLEL on the fleshy part of your hand under your thumb. Use the same interval exercise above to practice moving to seconds and first intervals.

Inverting Double Laterals

Try practicing the exercise below. The difficulty with these is lies in preventing your mallets from see-sawing. Be sure to practice slowly so that you rebound each mallet evenly!



Polyrhythms Between & in the Hands/True Mallet Independence

This topic is a bit more experimental, but nevertheless I find it important to keep progressing in your technique! Many times in keyboard literature we see composers asking us to create two independent patterns between our hands. This is often seen with one handed rolls like this example:



Another thing that has occurred more recently is composers asking keyboard players to play alternating single independent patterns or even lateral patterns between the hands and *in individual mallets* as well! I've shared a couple examples below for you to try!

Fugue-like (♩=60)

Double Strokes

Another currently popular technique is utilizing double strokes in individual mallets. Technically, these are simply repeated single independent strokes. Obviously, there is no way to produce a true “double stroke” on the marimba like we can with a drum. In other words, in order to make these fast, repeating strokes work, we have to obtain a high amount of endurance in order to push the mallets to go that fast. In addition, it is important to practice maintaining a high degree of velocity on the entire stroke. If the mallet fails to rebound, the stroke doesn’t work. Practice the following exercise as one way to work on 4 mallet double strokes:

Tone and Touch

As you advance your technical and musical skills, something that is often not talked about or sparsely brought up are the concepts of tone and touch. For me, there is a visual side of this as well as a mechanical side. First, I can't tell you enough how much your visual appearance affects how you play as well as how people perceive that you play. Even if your sound quality is not different at all, research has shown that visual changes greatly amplify how you look to your audience. Hence, when you are working on a piece of music, try to really get involved in the piece emotionally not just using your dynamics and musicality, but also using your body as a reflection of emotion for your audience. If this is something you are not comfortable with, don't worry! It takes a while to get used to it. I recommend video recording your practices to see how you are progressing. If you don't like how you look, take some steps and push outside your comfort zone until you like how you look in your performance!

The other aspect of tone and touch is the mechanical part. Mechanically, we can control our touch and tone by the following:

- Where we strike the bar
- How much velocity is in our stroke/how we approach our stroke
- What part of the mallet hits the bar

By combining these three things together, we can get a wide variety of sounds. In fact, marimba virtuoso, Pius Cheung, has a whole entire catalog of the different sounds and nuances he can create with different adjustments to the three things I listed above. I recommend finding out more about him in order to see what I mean.

The important thing to consider is how these variables work together to create the sound that you are producing. This is the difference between making a sound and *KNOWING* what sound you are going to make. The only way to do this is by experimenting and becoming aware of what sounds you are making.

Mallet Choices

Another aspect of sound production can be found in our mallet choice. Of course, it is mostly common knowledge that a harder mallet will make a brighter or more brittle sound, while a softer mallet will make a warmer and more fluid sound on the keyboard. It is also pretty common knowledge that having a graduated set of mallets will give you a wider and more appropriate range of sounds throughout the keyboard. In fact, unless you are only playing in a 1-2 octave span of notes, I believe it is lazy for a performer to not have a set of graduated mallets. You are limiting your ability to make good sounds across the keyboard if you don't use graduation. Keep these factors in mind when thinking of your sound that you want to produce!

Closing Remarks

Hopefully this packet has been informative, and I hope it continues to be useful to you in the future! One of the biggest and most important points that I want you to remember is that you have the biggest control over how you progress from here on out! You have the knowledge in your hands, and now it is all up to you. You decide what you need to improve upon, you decide how you want to sound. Your individual voice is what in the end matters most, and overall always strive to perfect that voice whatever it may be! Please don't hesitate to contact me if you ever have any questions!

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