

Two VS Four by Jerry Tachoir

The eternal question, Are you a two mallet player or four?
OK, here goes!

The contemporary way of playing and what is expected of mallet players today, is 4 mallets - period!

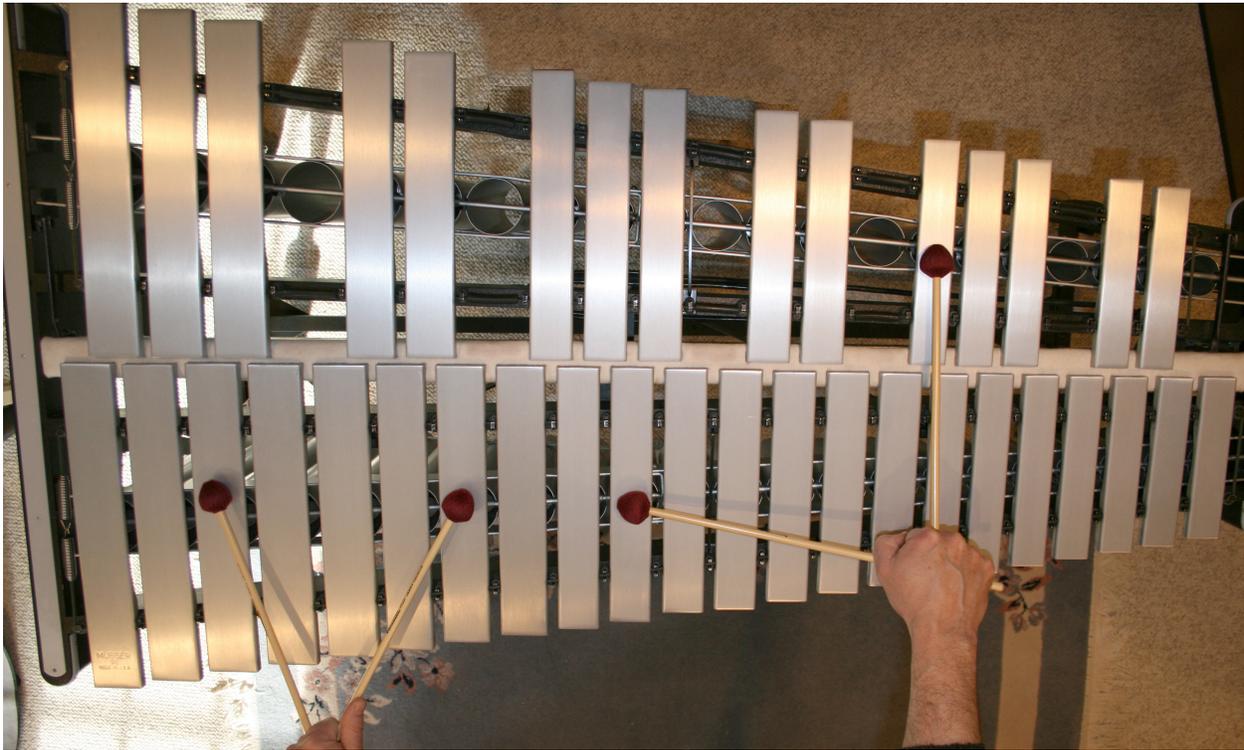
Most mallet players, and myself included, started out by holding two mallets, as though playing the snare drum with match grip, and we learned our notes, keys, arpeggios, etc.

Soon, we started to get better and our teacher would say, Let's add another mallet and be able to play some triadic chords. This became very clumsy and we felt like we took several steps backwards. Shortly, we got pretty good at holding 3 mallets until our teacher would say, let's add the 4th mallet and be able to play bigger chords incorporating 7th's. Here we go again - back to uncoordinated and clumsy only to feel more confident and capable after several months.

Here is where it gets interesting. Several players from years past and even some current players look at holding 4 mallets as only necessary when playing chords. Some would set down two mallets to play linear lines and to solo and then re-grip 4 to comp chords behind the next soloist. This always looked silly to me and created a delay while the player had to stop and regroup and physically pick up the other two mallets and fit them into ones grip. I've observed players actually set the two non-used mallets on the lower octave of a 3 octave vibe losing the bottom 5 notes reducing the instrument to a 2.5 octave one. This again never made sense to me.

As the years passed, and I became totally comfortable in controlling 4 mallets both as a soloist and in the comping role, I found that 4 mallets increased my ability to play faster cleaner lines especially ones with large intervallic leaps and arpeggios. With very little motion, I could just roll my wrists to play these large intervallic lines with very little effort and less likelihood of a wrong note. Wow! Eureka! this made total sense. I could very easily play singular lines with a mallet in either hand while hold four and never miss a beat.

Large Arpeggio example (no movement necessary)



I think of this technique as I watch my wife teach piano. As a beginner student starts to learn piano, it is 10 fingers on the piano from day one. They don't start with 2 and after several years add another and so on and so on. They use the expected and contemporary way of playing piano from day one.

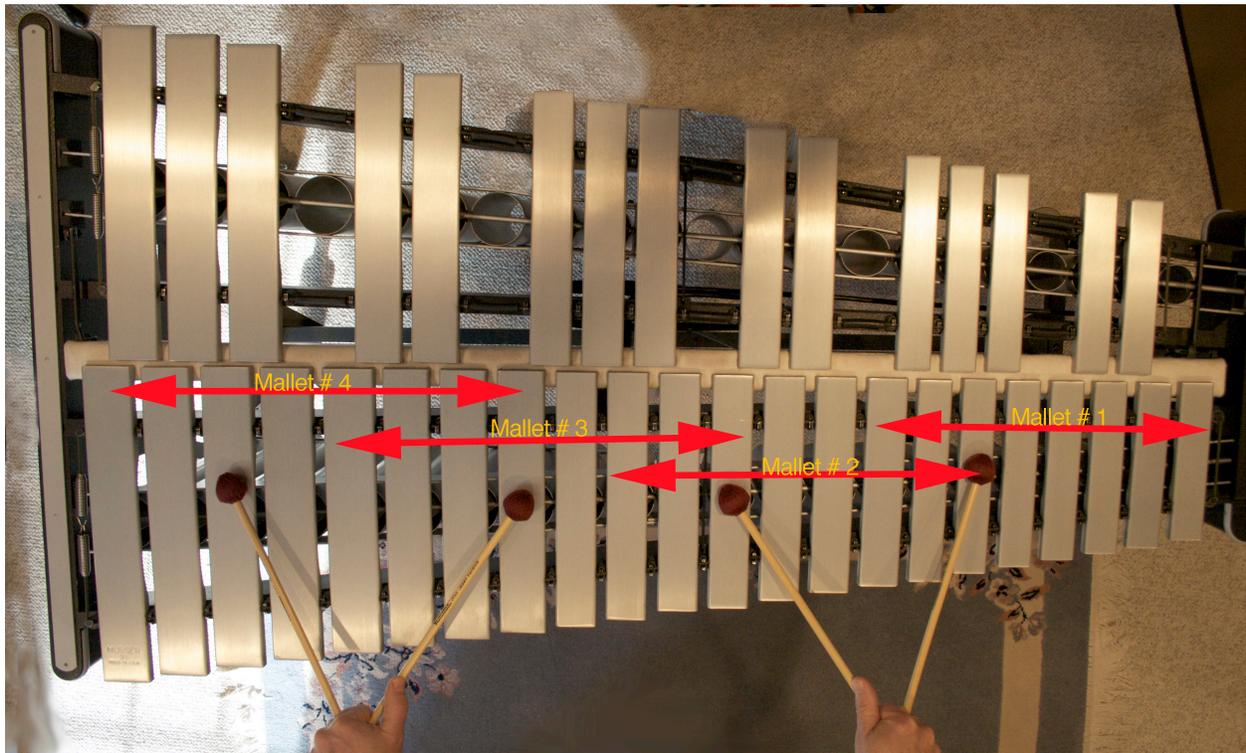
Now, when students come to me, I give them 4 mallets regardless of where they are in their technique and experience. This is what is expected of a mallet player in our contemporary world. This gives them the tools necessary to play mallet instruments without any compromise and develop a good 4 mallet independent technique. By holding 4 mallets from the start of ones studies, this technique becomes subconscious - a desired state regarding performance skills.

I still get some players who say, they can play faster with 2 and have less resistance and have a better feel. I don't find this to be true at all. I can play any two-mallet line just as fast and perhaps cleaner using my 4 mallet technique and I always have my other mallets ready and waiting for a chord or large intervallic leap.

By just standing over the instrument with 4 mallets, you have 4 notes immediately available to you with just a drop of a mallet. Then you have 4 more notes a half-step away available with very little motion and a drop of a mallet etc, etc. I can cover almost the entire 3 octave vib by opening up my mallets and assign ranges for each mallet, such as.

(Mallets numbered from Left to Right - 4,3,2,1)

Mallet 4 - F to F
Mallet 3 - C to C
Mallet 2 - A to A
Mallet 1 - F to F

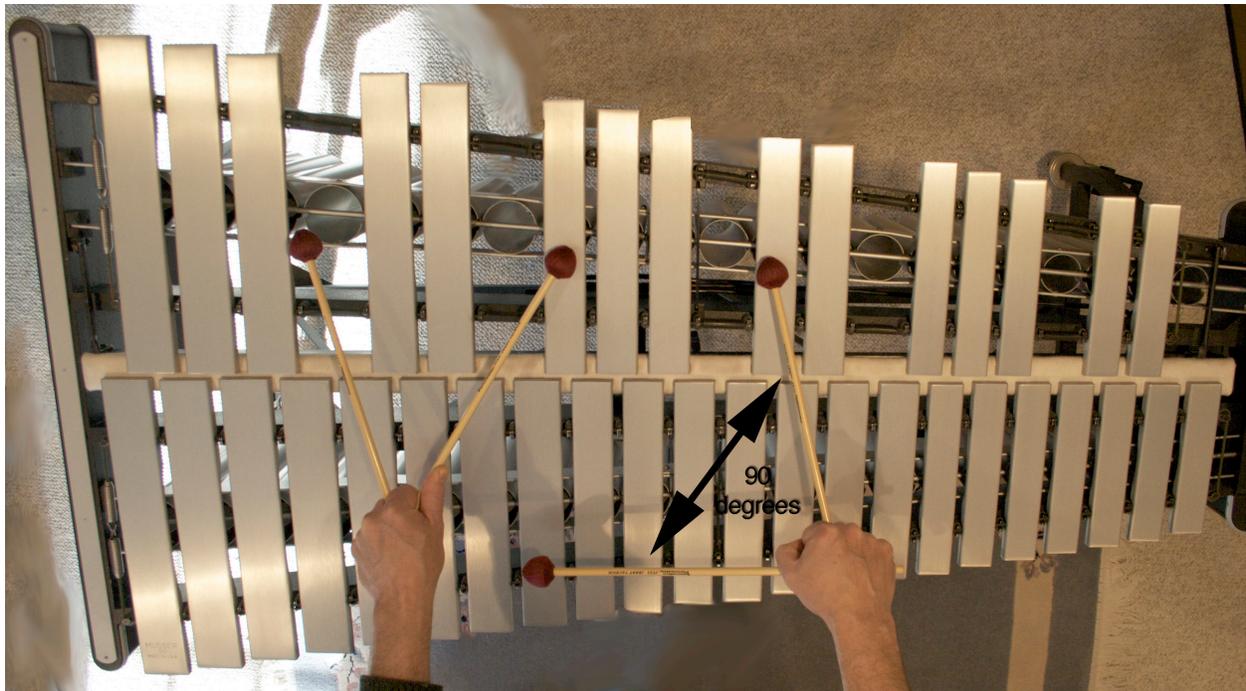


Obviously these mallet ranges are just an estimate and will vary and cross into each others range. The general idea is to use the mallet in that range to play the note, thus eliminating excess motion and allowing for cleaner faster execution with less likelihood of hitting a wrong note. Of course the need to develop 4 mallet independence takes some time with the reward being well worth the effort.

This expanded independent mallet technique works well with arpeggios and large intervallic melodies. Tight scale-type lines or melodies require a different technique. When I first started playing single lines while holding 4 mallets, having come from match grip snare drum technique, I naturally assumed I would use mallets 3 and 2 to play these two-mallet lines. I got very good at this technique and still use it a lot today. When I studied at Berklee College of Music, I saw others using mallets 3 and 1 as the primary two-mallet playing. I was told that since most of the melodies occur high on the keyboard, a logical use of mallet 1 made sense, thus leaving mallet 3 to assist with the two-mallet playing and the other mallets to fill in with chord tones, bass notes, tensions and to assist with melody notes. So, I started to convert to using mallets 3 and 1 as my

primary two-mallet playing. Having come from the other technique, I developed a pretty amazing 4 mallet independence which has been very useful to date.

When playing with mallets 3 and 1 as your primary linear mallet playing, hold mallets 4 & 3 in a comfortable spaced position and try to keep mallet 4 still when using mallet 3. Mallet 4 should stay somewhat stationary and allow the wrist to roll on the mallet 4 axis. On the right hand when holding mallets 2 & 1, spread the mallets at a 90 degrees angle to use mallet 1 allowing mallet 2 to remain still and out of the way of both mallet 1 and 3 in linear lines.



When playing with mallets 3 and 2 as your primary mallet playing, hold both hands similar and try to keep the other mallets, 4 and 1 still. This all takes some practice and observation on what the extra mallets is doing. You don't want it to wobble to much or get in the way. Now, I frequently go back and forth between the two techniques as necessary and usually in a subconscious manner as explained above where I learned one technique first then the other. This is totally a personal decision, since there is no correct or incorrect way, but how you have learned and what feels natural and comfortable to you as you play. There is still a lot of room on the mallet instruments to invent or utilize different techniques as ones hands allow.

I got to where I am so comfortable with 4 mallets that I never use just 2 for anything. I even use 4 when playing xylophone, bells, and obviously marimba. I find that the balance of the 4 mallets just feels right and actually seems to help offset the weight of the mallet doing the playing.

Choice of grips is beyond the scope of this article since there are essential two grips - a marimba grip and a vibe grip. Within each of these are various differences such as crossing vs. non crossing and which fingers go where. Again I think this is an individual decision as to what feels right and works with your hand and finger size. I did

however find out that I didn't have enough time in my day to maintain 2 grips (marimba and vibes) since each require different calluses and finger muscles. I have a difficult time as it is maintaining my hands especially on hot humid summer days. These maintained calluses are necessary to do extended performances and not have pain from blisters and bleeding. Find a grip that works and stick with it and perfect it. There are compromises in each grip and you have to make adjustments. A general statement - if you are primarily a vibraphone player who also plays marimba, a crossed grip is probably preferred. If you are a marimba player who also plays vibraphone, one of the uncrossed marimba grips will probably be your choice. This statement is not engraved in stone as there are several players who vary their grip and have subtle variations. Work with what feels natural to you should be your decision as to what grip you favor.

Remember - Reduced motion (the motions necessary to play one's instrument) increases speed, accuracy, and the ability to play faster cleaner lines.

Enjoy!