

“PRESS”

FOR SOLO VIBRAPHONE

BY BRIAN GRAISER

“Press” is an intermediate etude for vibraphone that allows students to explore the instrument’s unique capabilities without requiring the use of four mallets. Many vibraphone-specific techniques are variations on the act of pressing, whether with the mallets (for dead strokes, mallet dampening, or harmonics) or with the pedal. There is also a more abstract representation of pressing in the musical material, which can be found in the numerous driving repetitions of the upwards scalar figures.

I finished writing the piece on Valentine’s Day, which makes perfect sense given my love for the vibraphone. My goal in writing “Press,” beyond providing an educational resource, was to write a piece that couldn’t possibly work on any other instrument. Too many people think of the vibraphone as simply a metal marimba or a low glockenspiel, but no other keyboard percussion instrument comes close to producing as many different articulations and textures as the vibraphone. At the risk of upsetting marimbists, I believe that if we measure “technical demand” by the total number of defined physical motions and musical decisions necessary to play any given instrument, the vibraphone is clearly the most technically demanding keyboard percussion instrument. Anyone who approaches it like they would a marimba, or even a piano, is putting limits on themselves *and* the instrument.

Compositionally, this piece represents my earliest experimentation with ideas I’ve been toying with in regards to harmonic development based on expanding symmetrical pitch sets, rather than traditional chord progressions (although two traditional cadences did make it into this piece). For this initial effort, which I knew would be intended for students, I limited my harmonic palette to a simple diatonic scale, making the symmetry obvious: the piece begins solely on D (the hinge point of this symmetrical system), branches out one step in either direction (C-D-E), then expands to a “hingeless” set (A-B-C-E-F-G) before collapsing back on itself in similar, but reversed, fashion, all the while providing a dialogue between the “D-only” material and the “everything-but-D” material. I look forward to further explorations of these ideas beyond the diatonic scale in future projects!

Although I’ve written many works for the vibraphone in the past, this is the first time I’ve deliberately written an educational etude for the instrument. It is my hope that this will be the first of many such etudes, and I would like to dedicate this initial offering to Paula Williams, my former percussion teacher at Alan C. Pope High School and the first person to encourage me to explore my

fondness for the vibraphone. I hope you enjoy playing the piece, and that it opens your eyes to the unique (some would even say superior) possibilities the vibraphone has to offer!

PERFORMANCE GUIDE

An “etude” is literally a “study,” and in this case performers will study the various pedaling, dampening, and extended techniques that make the vibraphone such a uniquely versatile instrument. Therefore, it is extremely important to strictly observe all pedaling and dampening indications, as they are crucial not only to the musical content, but the educational experience as well. For example, if one were to clear the pedal between the first and second measures, the ringing harmony from the first measure would not be present to color the dead strokes as intended (the same idea occurs with harmonics and dead strokes in the last line of the piece). There is no harm in using four mallets to perform this piece if you wish to do so, but it is not necessary to use more than two mallets; none of the techniques, nor meter changes or rhythms, should be beyond the grasp of any high school percussionist.

I'll also offer a word of advice on mallet dampening, which I believe should be a technique taught in middle school (after all, every other section of the band knows the difference between legato and staccato before they reach high school). Mallet dampening is very similar to timpani muting, only instead of using your hand to dampen a note, you use your mallet. Any time mallet dampening is involved, the accuracy demand doubles: performers must not only hit the correct notes, but dampen the correct ones as well. Furthermore, *where* you dampen matters a great deal; just as playing on the bar's node (where the string runs through) will produce a poor tone, dampening on the node will have almost no effect on stopping the bar's vibrations.

Following is the notation key for this etude:

Here are a few more detailed suggestions for specific points in this piece:

- Measures 2–4: Dead strokes don't have to be loud, and in this case should be fairly soft. It is much easier to play these with both hands, rather than attempting to do them with the right hand alone.

- Measures 5–7: Be careful not to accent the high notes, as the difference in range will be more than enough to allow those notes to speak out above the lower notes. The only times performers will need to double-stick in this section are when the high note is played twice in a row; trying to play all the low notes with the left hand alone will make the passage unnecessarily difficult.
- Measures 8–10: The tenuto notes should be played with only a small amount of extra weight, as the pedal will add additional emphasis to those notes.
- Measures 14–17: “Spot dampen” is my term for normal mallet dampening that does not involve sliding around between bars. To mallet dampen here, hit the first note with the left mallet, *downstroking with little or no rebound* (unlike the fully-rebounding “piston stroke” so many of us are taught to use in most situations), leaving the mallet head as close to the vibrating bar as possible, then firmly press the bar with that mallet at the same moment the right mallet plays the next note. The hands will then trade responsibilities, creating a legato connection between the alternating melodic notes without allowing them to ring together. Be careful not to clear the pedal until rehearsal letter B, as the lower notes should be ringing underneath the legato melody; this is not something a marimba can do!
- Measures 23–24: Even though the pedal is dry (that is, lifted up so that no bars are ringing), it is still important to play smoothly and observe the slur markings.
- Measures 25–29: Only the high melodic notes should be *mezzo-piano*; if the lower accompaniment notes get too loud, the melody will be lost in the clutter of ringing bars.
- Measures 31–33: “Slide dampening” is uncommon, but occasionally very useful. In order to do it, use a glancing stroke to play one note (in measure 31, the high A) and then quickly “slide” that same mallet onto a different (almost always adjacent) ringing note (in measure 31, the high G) and dampen it. If done properly, the amount of time in which the two notes are ringing together will be so short that the ear won’t notice it. One of the most challenging things about this technique is developing the ability to use it at softer dynamic levels; the high velocity of the mallet’s lateral motion, which is needed to “bounce” onto the other bar, cannot be allowed to affect the low velocity of its vertical playing stroke. One helpful hint to keep in mind is that the mallet does not need to go all the way to the center of the bar to dampen it effectively, and coming into contact with just the very edge of the bar is often enough to do the job.
- Measure 36: It is more important to dampen these notes smoothly and silently than quickly. If you find it difficult to dampen these notes without accidentally playing audible dead strokes, feel free to slow down a little. This is the climax of the piece, and the effect is something not even a piano can do; it’s worth taking the time to do it well. Also, be careful not to clear the pedal when

you move on after the fermata, as the lingering chord adds context to the return of the high D dead strokes.

- Measures 49–51: Be sure not to play the accented notes as dead strokes.
- Measures 52–54: A harmonic is an extended technique that most non-percussion instruments are capable of producing, in which the lowest frequency (the “fundamental”) of a note is muted so that higher frequencies (“overtones”) can be heard. Due to the unique nature of bar tuning, the first and most audible overtone for most keyboard percussion instruments will sound two octaves higher than the bar’s actual, fundamental pitch. To play it, you essentially will cut the bar’s vibrations in half, creating a new nodal point in the middle of the bar. It’s not as difficult as it sounds, though! Simply press one mallet directly into the center of the bar (you’ll need to experiment with varying degrees of firmness or gentleness), then use the other mallet to hit the bar directly on the node, removing the dampening mallet immediately afterwards so that you don’t dampen the entire bar. If done correctly, you will hear that first overtone, which in these measures will sound like your high D.

INSERT SOLO



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As an active performer, composer, and researcher, his musical exploits are highly diverse, although he is best known for his work pertaining to the vibraphone, such as his “Concerto No. 1 [‘Lulu’] for Four-Octave Vibraphone” (the world’s first concerto for the extended-range instrument), his service as Executive Director of the 2021 Vibraphone Century Project, and numerous commissioning

and research projects. He regularly performs as a soloist and with his wife Alaina as the REFLECT harp+percussion duo. Dr. Graiser earned his Bachelor of Music degrees in Music Composition and Music Performance at the University of Georgia, his Master of Music degree in Music Performance at the University of Toronto, and his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Music Performance with a Composition Cognate at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. He serves on

the PAS Composition Committee and his compositions are available through Keyboard Percussion Publications, Alfonse Production, Strikeclef Publishing, and self-published directly from the composer.