

Christian Dierstein, Michael Roth and Jens Ruland, *The Techniques of Percussion Playing: Mallets, Implements and Applications*. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2018. 375 p. ISBN: 9783761824961. Paperback. €58.00 (£50.00 approx.)

With a diverse and expanding variety and number of instruments, the richness of possible timbres and continuing rapid development of both instrument and repertoire, coupled with a history that goes back thousands of years, it is no wonder that the study of percussion is one that is of continual inspiration, reflection and fascination. This new work, written by percussionists Christian Dierstein and Jens Ruland with composer Michael Roth, demonstrates an interesting perspective – one that focuses purely on mallets. The area of mallet production and development has grown as quickly as that of instrument manufacture and repertoire expansion but is not an area that is generally focused

on specifically in this much detail. But once we start to delve a little deeper we begin to see that what we strike an instrument with and how we deliver that stroke is of fundamental importance to how that instrument resonates and responds. An interesting observation is made early in the book – rather than use a larger number of instruments to convey a rich pallet of colour, use a smaller number of instruments, but play them with a carefully chosen selection of mallets and beaters utilising a range of performance and delivery techniques in order to draw out a larger variety and range of timbres. In this way I feel that this book is of great importance not only to percussionists but also to those who write for percussion to highlight and demonstrate the fundamental and extended possibilities of what each type of mallet, stick or implement might be when played on either one or a range of instruments.

The book is comprised of three elements – the first, and largest part is the main text, written in both German and English, and illustrated with examples of musical notation and repertoire excerpts alongside diagrams, photographs and pictures of the subject matter in question. The second is a series of short articles written by a number of guest authors who are leading performers and professors in a range of percussive and musical genres. And the third is an accompanying series of video presentations (available online) delivered in German but with clear English subtitles throughout to demonstrate various aspects and examples to which reference is made throughout the book.

I found the text to be extremely interesting with detailed content that was both thorough and concise. Whilst most of the musical examples used and referred to were of a more contemporary nature, there was enough historical context and this to me is of great importance – for us to truly understand the construction of a mallet we need to know not just how it is made but why. To appreciate how a mallet has developed into the implement you are using it is important to be aware of the journey of development that has been made over the course of time through various ‘landmark’ points in the history of percussion generally and over years of research and development in that area. Whether that be the instruction by Hector Berlioz to use ‘sponge-headed’ sticks on the timpani in certain passages rather than the wooden sticks that had solely been used up to this point, or the development of the range of the marimba into a five-octave model which necessitated the manufacture of a mallet that could be used on the thinner, lower pitched bars of the instrument which required a softer mallet to avoid damaging the bar. No brand names are mentioned in the book with the emphasis being more on the materials used, the structure of the mallet and the development of each type of implement.

Areas covered include foot pedalling techniques – more usually found in a method regarding drum kit playing but an increasingly important factor in contemporary percussion writing and performance. Articulation is also

covered in depth from the basic fundamentals through to more advanced concepts. As percussionists we don't hold our instrument so there is a natural detachment (with the mallet being the connection) but the most advanced performers can make even a hard mallet produce a soft tone with careful delivery and articulation.

The short articles written by guest authors are interspersed through the chapters and are extremely interesting, practical, thought-provoking and forward thinking whilst acknowledging the history of the topic from a performer/practitioner perspective. The focus on what sound character a composer may require, the process of how the performer went towards achieving this and the journey that was taken I found inspiring and refreshing – a prompt to think in a more timbral aspect regarding what sort of sound one makes and how that can be manipulated with the mallet that is used.

The video tutorial clips are a very useful resource to practically illustrate the accompanying text. This is a hugely beneficial aspect to the book as the method of actually demonstrating a concept will always naturally expediate learning and understanding, and the accompanying commentary/subtitles are fully explanatory.

From the fundamental sound of clapping through to the use of electronic implements such as electric toothbrushes, all possible variants of mallet, stick or striking implement are covered. From the widely used brushes, bows, rods, pedals and rutes to the slightly more unusual knitting needles, billiard ball mallets, fly swatters, dolls legs and milk frothers, the over-riding message is that what you choose to strike an instrument with has a fundamental connection with the decay and response of what you are hitting and therein lies the possibility of such a wide variety and richness of timbre. This book encourages and guides one to explore deeper into the sound world of percussion instruments to achieve that.

*Simone Rebello*