CRYSTAL LAKE Thunder

# 2026 Front Ensemble Audition Packet

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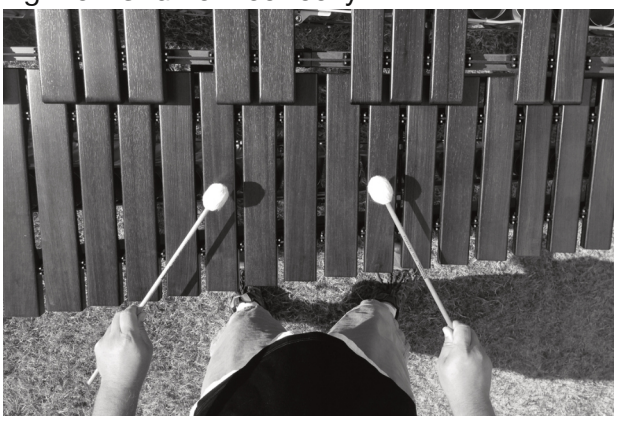
# *GETTING STARTED*

**POSTURE IS EVERYTHING**. Knowing how to stand behind the instrument (as well as where to stand) is what makes great performance possible. If your upper body is awkward or out of balance due to poor posture or poor positioning behind the instrument, your performance will suffer greatly. Also remember that drum corps is a visual idiom. We are judged before we even play a note based on our appearance. Looking great is the first step to playing great.

To begin, stand with your feet shoulder width apart. Your legs and shoulders should be relaxed and your torso should be upright, not hunched over the instrument. The space between your torso and the instrument will be determined by the exercise you're playing. Generally, though, you want to stand where both manuals are easily reachable. Many people will stand where their arms are totally relaxed while playing the naturals but then have to lunge or hyper-extend their arms to reach the accidentals. In actuality, neither manual will be at the perfect distance: it is a compromise. You shift your weight forward or backward depending on which manual you are using (or which one you're using most). To accomplish this, place one foot slightly closer to the instrument. This will allow you to move side to side or front to back slightly without losing balance.

**Instrument height and arm placement cannot be overlooked.** To determine if you are playing on a properly adjusted instrument, let your arms hang down at your side while facing the instrument. When your shoulders are completely relaxed, bring the hands up and set them, palms down, on the instrument as though you were setting them on a table. While remaining relaxed, look at the angle of your arms. The forearm should be slightly below level, around 30 degrees. If the arm angles down too much, you need to raise your instrument. If your arm is completely level or is angled up, you need to lower it. Keep in mind that unless your shoulders are relaxed while you do this, you will not be setting the instrument correctly.



**It is impossible to make a great sounds unless you hit the right part of the bar.** Whenever possible we strive to play every note directly over the resonator. This is what will create the most and best tone out of the instrument, especially when we are outside. This will require to play with the mallets side by side, and not stacked. If you're used to stacking the mallets one on top of the other, you break this habit as soon as you can with this ensemble. We play in the middle of the bar or at the very edge of the bar (at very fast speeds only), never off-center.

# *Two Mallet Technique*

**Crystal Lake Thunder employs what is best characterized as a "rear fulcrum" grip.** The mallet is held primarily by the rear two fingers. This facilitates the fact that we involve the in the stroke as well as a smooth rebound.

With about 1.5 to 2 inches extending from the back of the hand (depending on how large or small your hands are), wrap the two rear fingers around the shaft of the mallet. Then lightly place the remaining three fingers on the shaft with the index finger slightly extended. The two rear fingers are there to hold the mallet. The index finger and thumb are there to "guide" the mallet. Do not squeeze the front of the mallet.

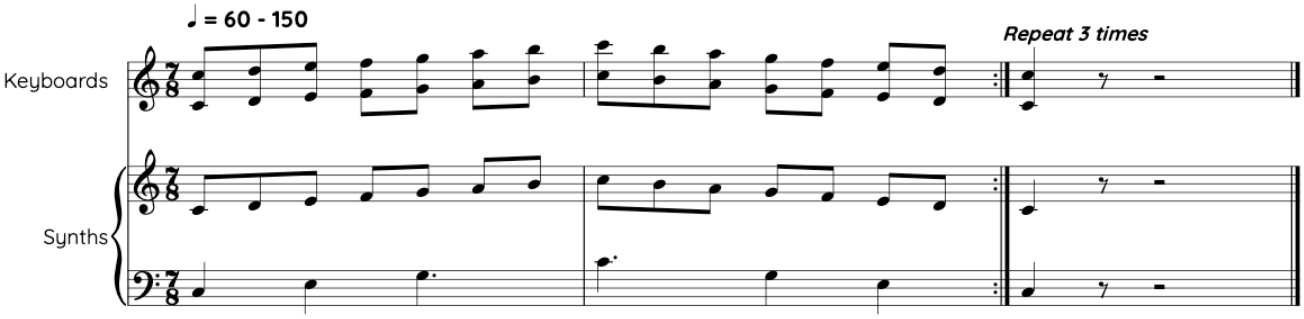
The hand should not be flat (palms down) but rather should be turned inward at a slight angle. The wrist and arms should form a natural angle that puts no stress on the wrist joint. The mallets, when brought together, should form about an 85-degree angle (slightly less than a perfect right angle).

When performing a stroke, always lead with the mallet head, not the wrist or arm. From a resting position (about a half-inch above the bar), the motion is initiated by the head of the mallet, followed by the wrist and arm in a seamless fluid motion. The mallet head should move straight up, not in or away from the body (and, of course, not side to side). Upon reaching the apex of the stroke, the mallet is brought down by the weight in the back of the hand (where the two fingers are holding the mallet).

As the mallet comes down, the wrist turns to accelerate the mallet head into the bar. After contact is made, the looseness of the front of the grip allows the mallet to immediately rebound, and again the mallet head is leading the hand and arm on the way up.

At a moderate tempo, the stroke is 85% wrist motion and 15% arm motion. As the tempo increases, the stroke will become more wrist-oriented and the mallets will stay lower to the bar. As the tempo decreases, the stroke will become more arm-oriented, and the mallets will come higher off the bar.

## OCTAVES




**Octaves is the most basic exercise that we do.** It defines our stroke and sound. It would be easy to simply learn the notes and move on, but there are several important concepts to learn and reinforce within this very straight-forward exercise.

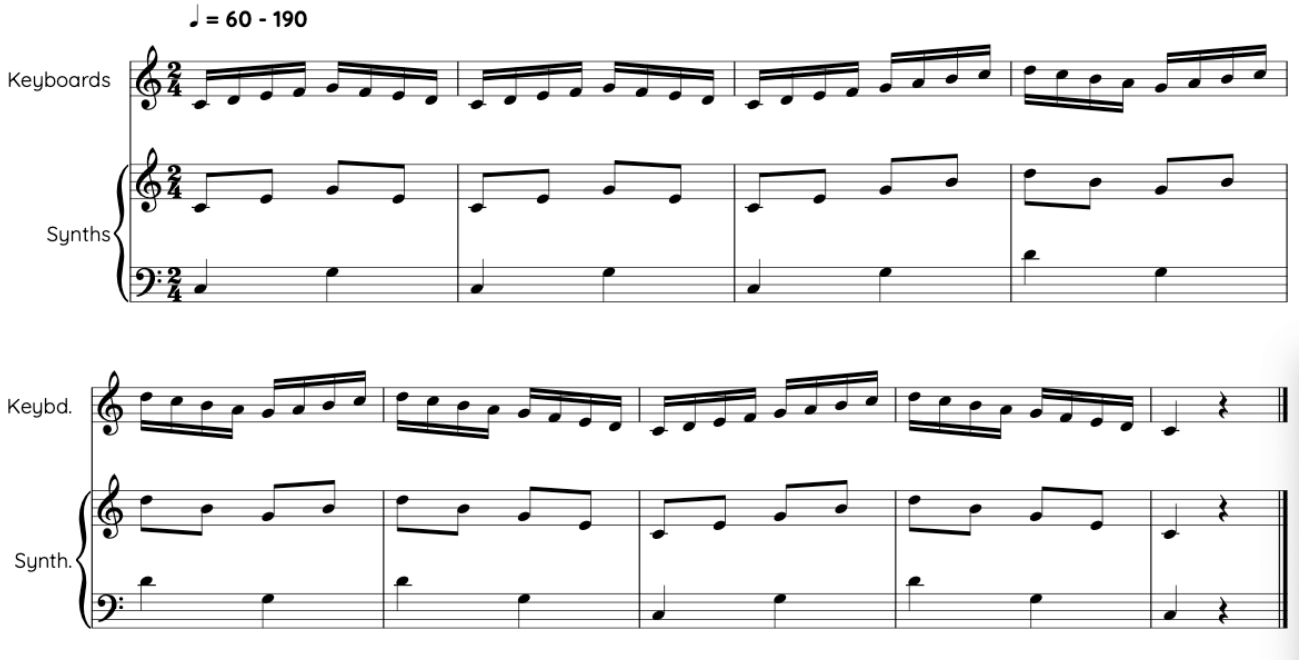
**Always keep the mallet moving.** Don't allow the mallets to stop, either near the keyboard or at the apex of the rebound. The mallets must be in continuous vertical motion at all times. Fluidity and consistency are the keys to playing this exercise perfectly in tempo. If every motion (stroke + rebound) is exactly the same, then every note will be exactly the same distance apart, hence, perfectly in tempo. What makes that more
difficult is...

**You must always separate vertical and horizontal motion and not allow the two affect each other.** Inexperienced (and sometimes even experienced) players tend to let the front-to-back and left-to-right lateral motion around the instrument affect the timing of the stroke and rebound. Sometimes this causes them to be slow when making a big leap up or down the instrument. Sometimes it can cause them to rush when reaching for an accidental, as the increased lateral motion spills over into the vertical motion. So before you play the whole exercise, take a look at the four short examples below and play through each of them at a slow tempo.

**The bigger the lateral motion, the more you must focus on keeping your vertical motion consistent.** In this exercise you'll be using both naturals and accidentals. Remember to position yourself so that both sets of bars can be reached without being unbalanced. Listen for both the timing and the volume of notes as you move from naturals to accidentals and back. The goal is to make it sound like you're playing the same note over and over with only the pitch changing.

**Additionally, you need to think about body placement before the exercise begins.** We want to avoid "stepping" behind the instrument during the exercise. To keep your body centered, you should stand behind the center of the full range of notes that you're going to use (in the written example, this would mean to stand behind 3rd-space C). Shift your weight left and right to keep your torso more or less centered as you play. Avoid leaning or lunging. Due to the nature of the instrument, not every note will feel "perfect" while standing in any given position, but you should strive to avoid ever feeling "clumsy" or "awkward."

## GREEN




**Green is probably the most common exercise in the front ensemble world.** It is a very basic scale exercise. There are lots of variations on the structure of Green, though, so make sure you take the time to make our version comfortable.

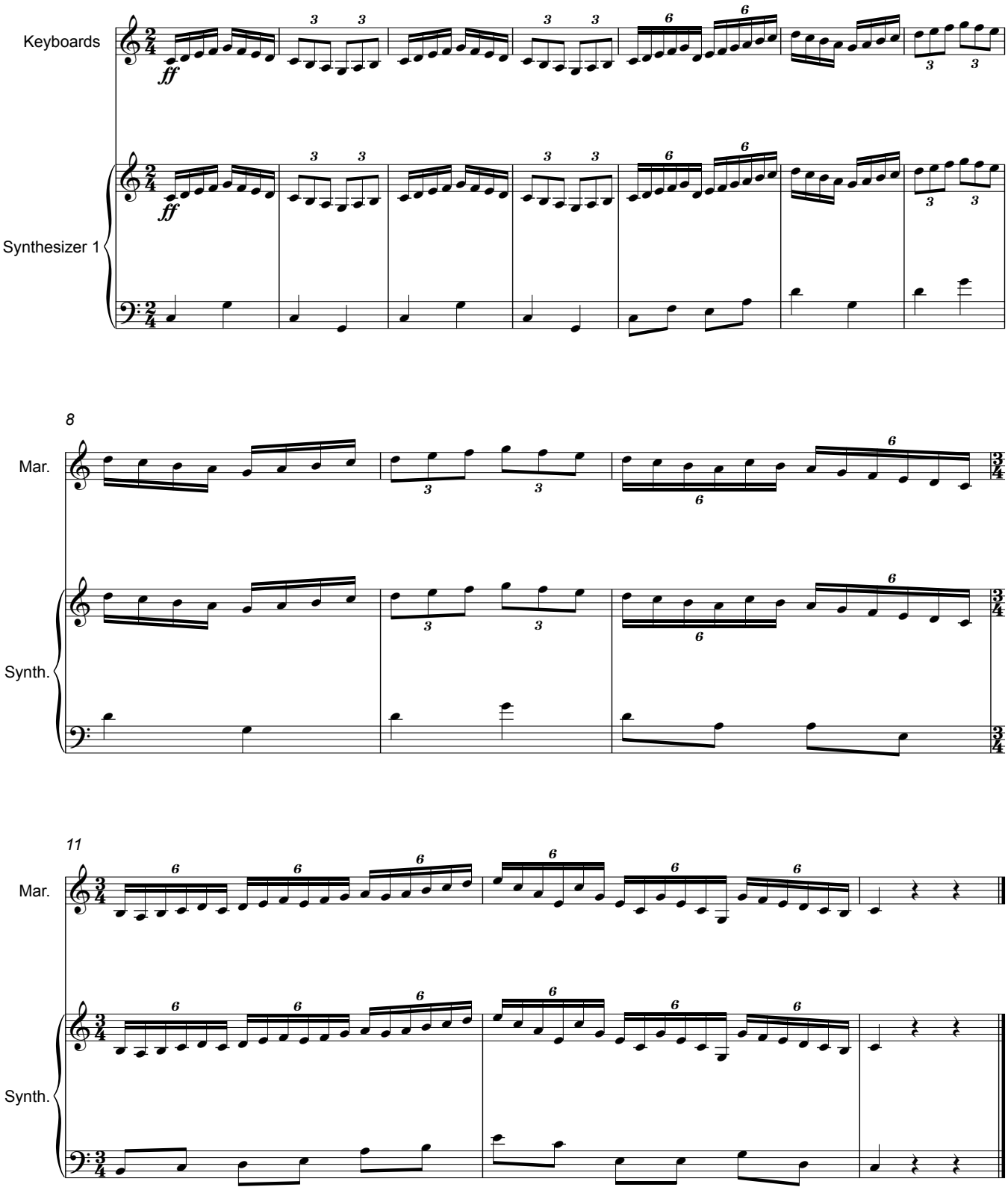
There are a few key concepts we should discuss when practicing Green...

**How we lift the mallets before playing tis the key to playing clean and together.** The hardest notes to clean in any exercise or piece of music are the first two. The first note determines the timing of the start of the exercise, the second determines the speed of the notes. Lifting properly is the key to playing attacks clean. In general, you should always lift one note value before you play. If you're playing 8th notes, you would lift one 8th note before the attack (the "and" of 4). Another way to think of it is to make the lift feel exactly like a rebound. If the lift is at the same speed as a rebound, then the mallets are already moving at the correct speed before you play the first note. This also ensures that the first note will sound the same as the rest of the notes. It is very difficult to get the first note of an exercise to sound like the rest. Lifting at the proper time will make this possible. (This principal also applies to the previous exercises, think about it the next time you practice 7/8 Octaves or Timing.)

**The problem with green is that we don't play both hands at the same time.** One mallet is going to play slightly after the other. To account for this we will execute a "two-handed lift," wherein one hand (the first hand that plays) will lift slightly before the other hand. In the case of Green, if we're playing right hand lead, the right hand would lift on the "and" of 4, and the left would lift right after it. Practice this concept slowly at first as it can be awkward until you get used to the sensation of one mallet moving before the other.

**Many players are used to moving both hands simultaneously on the lift, which causes problems right away.** If the hands move simultaneously on the lift, one of two things will happen: either the second note will be weak or the second note will be out of tempo, due to the fact that its not moving at the same speed as the first hand.

## THUNDER GREEN



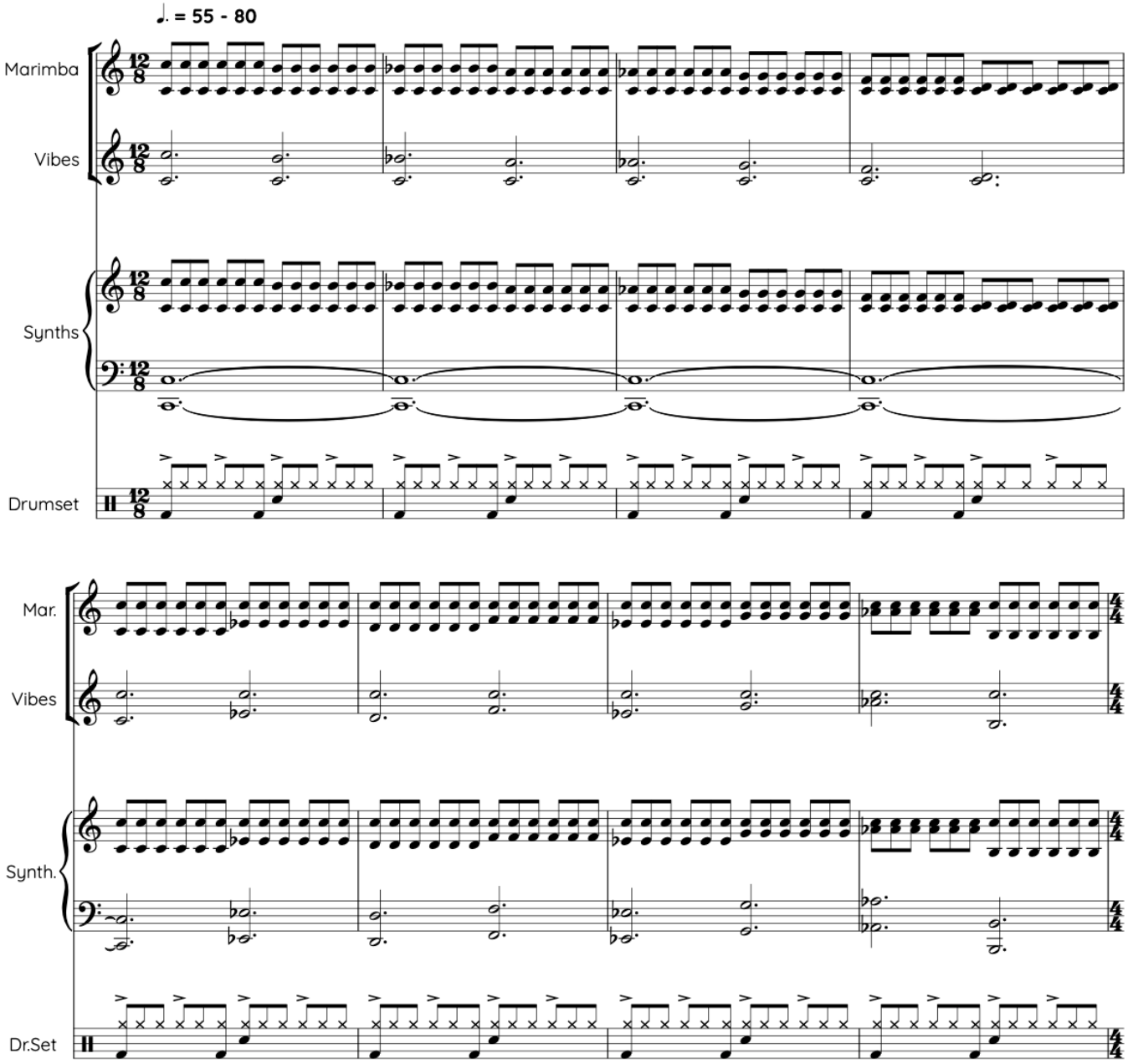
## 67

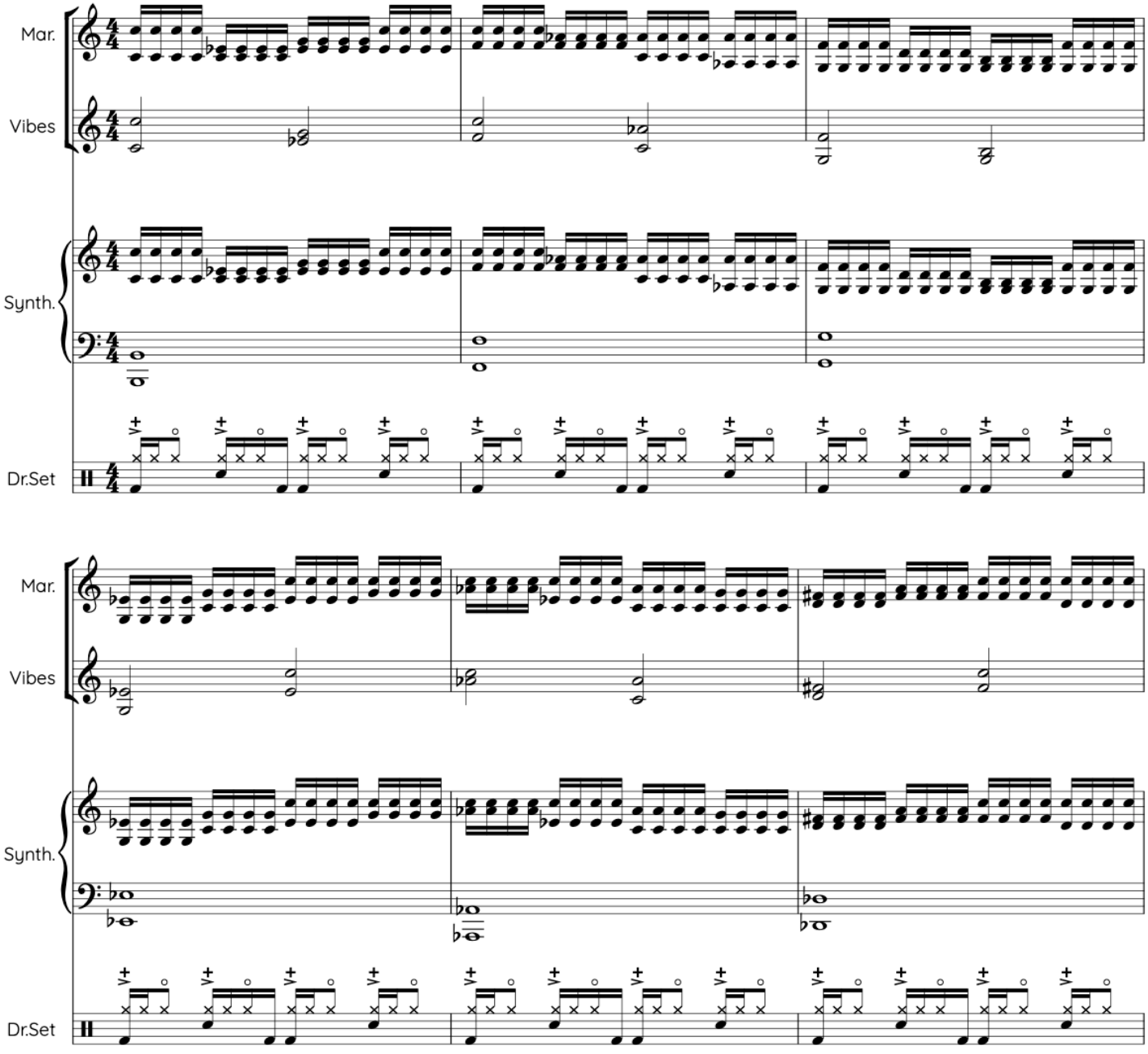
**67 is the first technical etude we will play.** Its purpose is to take the concepts worked in the above and to apply them in the context of a piece of music.

Don't let the "jumps" from one chord to the next cause you to make a rhythmic mistake. The same concept applies in the final section (measure 17 to the end), the only difference being that the hands are now staggered instead of playing together.

**Think about your body placement as you play.** Make sure you are balanced at all times and can reach both manuals with ease.

Drum set players are encouraged to play the etude as written at first, but then create their own time patterns. Stick to the style of the etude, but feel free to create new patterns(and don't be afraid to throw a fill in at the end of a phrase).

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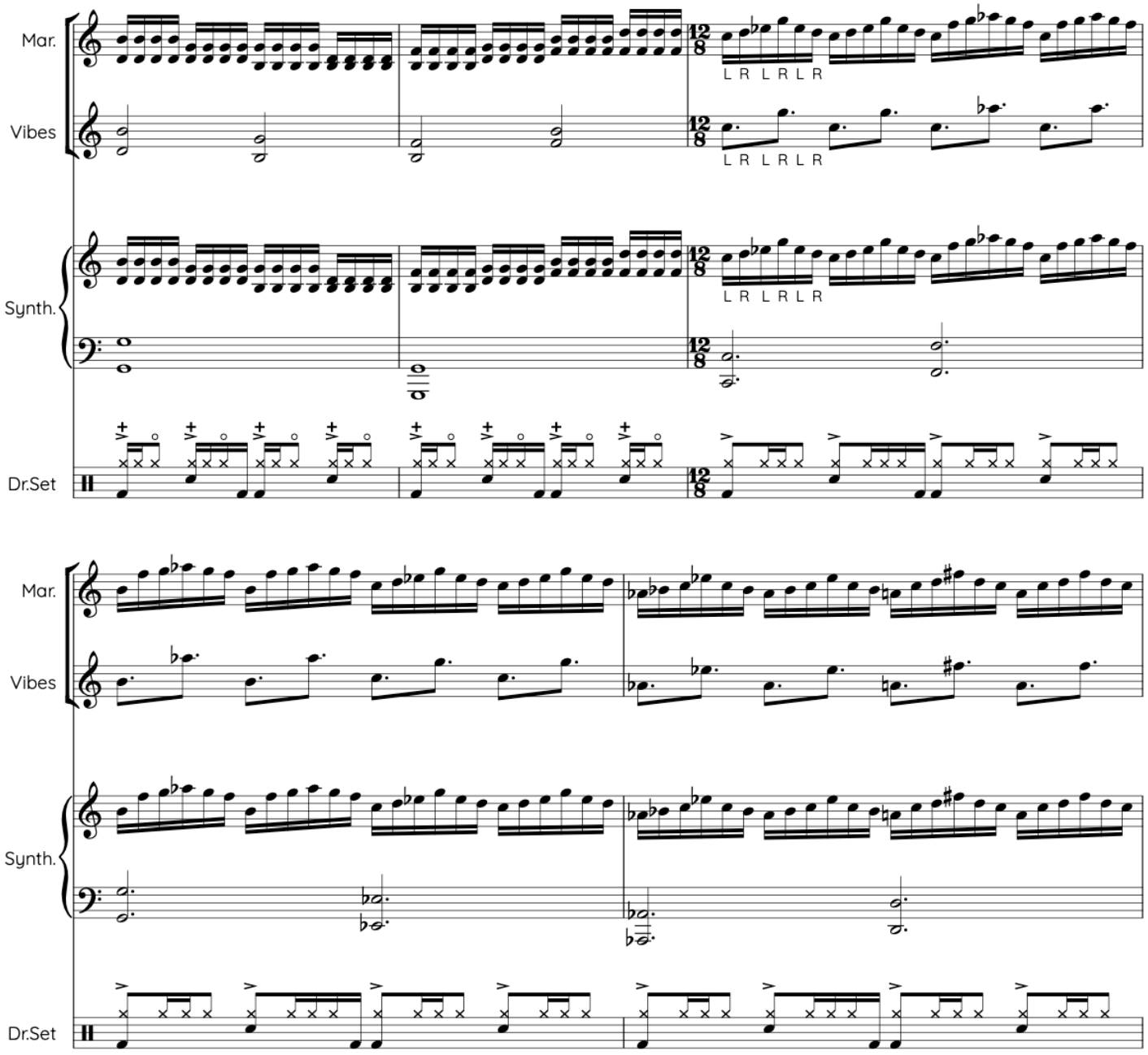
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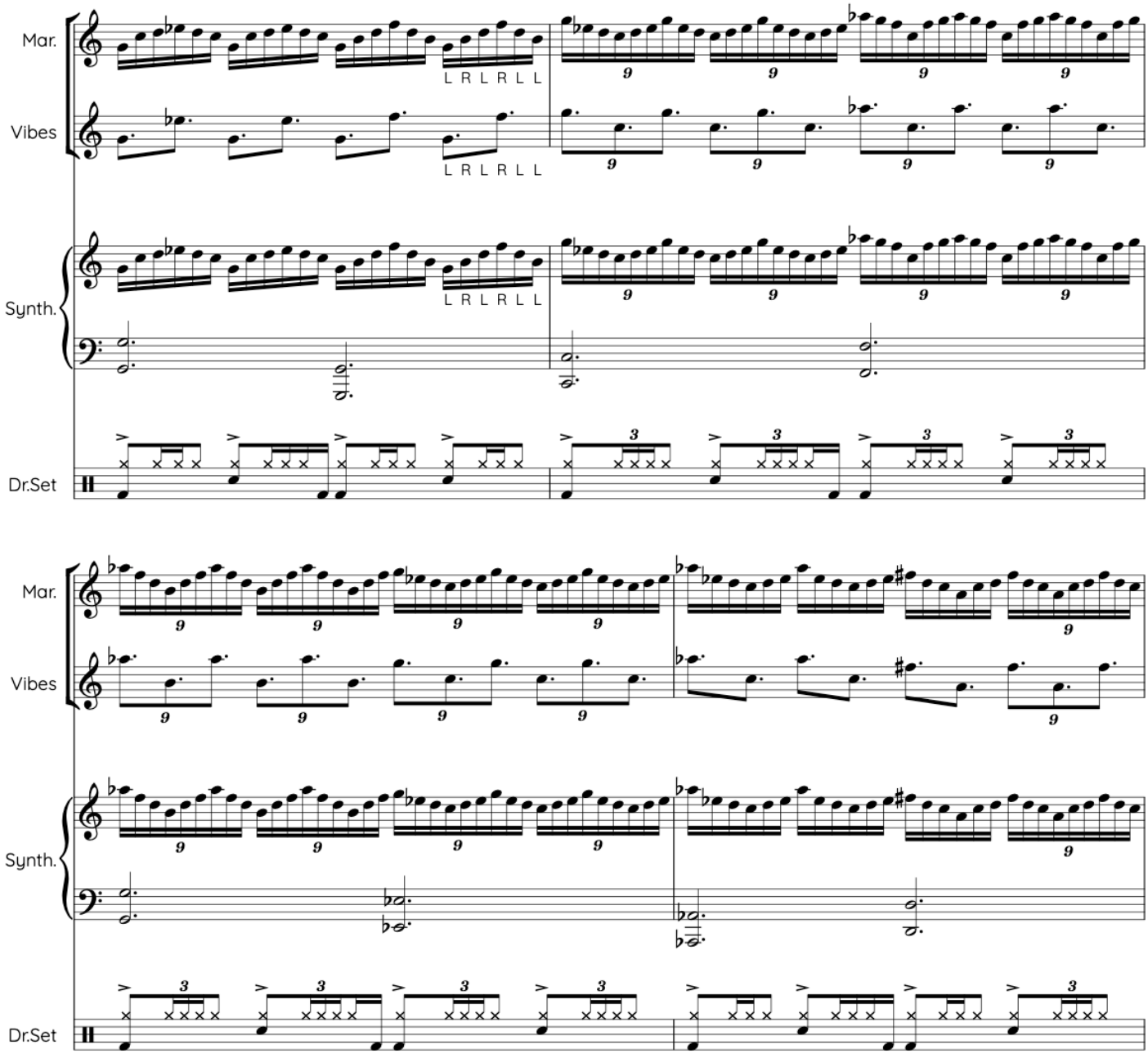
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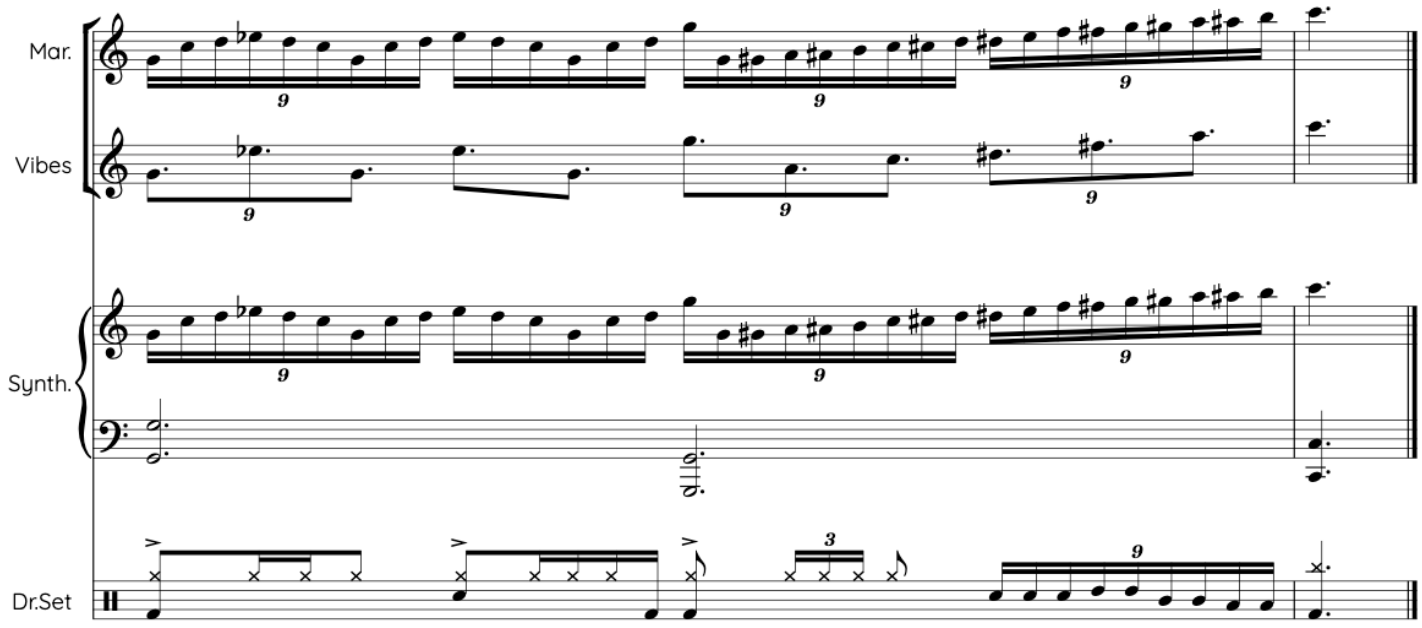
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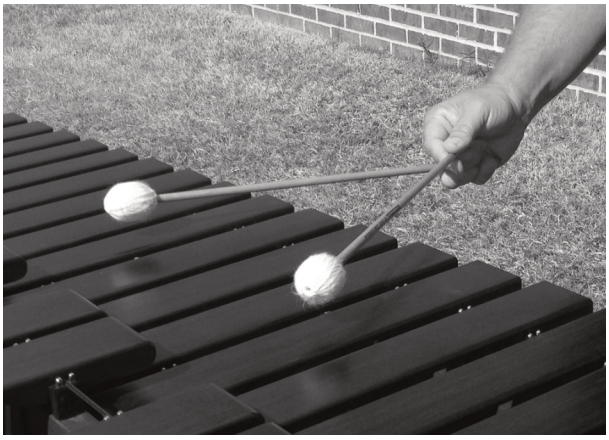
# *Four Mallet Technique*

**Crystal Lake Thunder Front Ensemble uses the standard Stevens Grip when playing with four mallets.** With the hand turned sideways in a “hand-shaking” position, the outside mallet is gripped with the bottom two fingers with no more than a half-inch extending beyond the back of the hand.

The inside mallet is balanced between the center of the palm (actually, slightly off center, towards the base of the thumb) and the curled-in index finger. The middle finger secures the mallet in the palm, while the thumb rests on top of index finger.



**COMMON PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH FOUR-MALLET TECHNIQUE**

**Make sure to keep your hands turned on their sides.** The angle of the hand is very different from the 2-mallet technique, but it is common to confuse the two.

**Avoid putting too much pressure on the fulcrum.** Only squeeze enough to keep the inside mallet secure. Squeezing causes excess tension, which will slow you down and hamper your ability to play well.

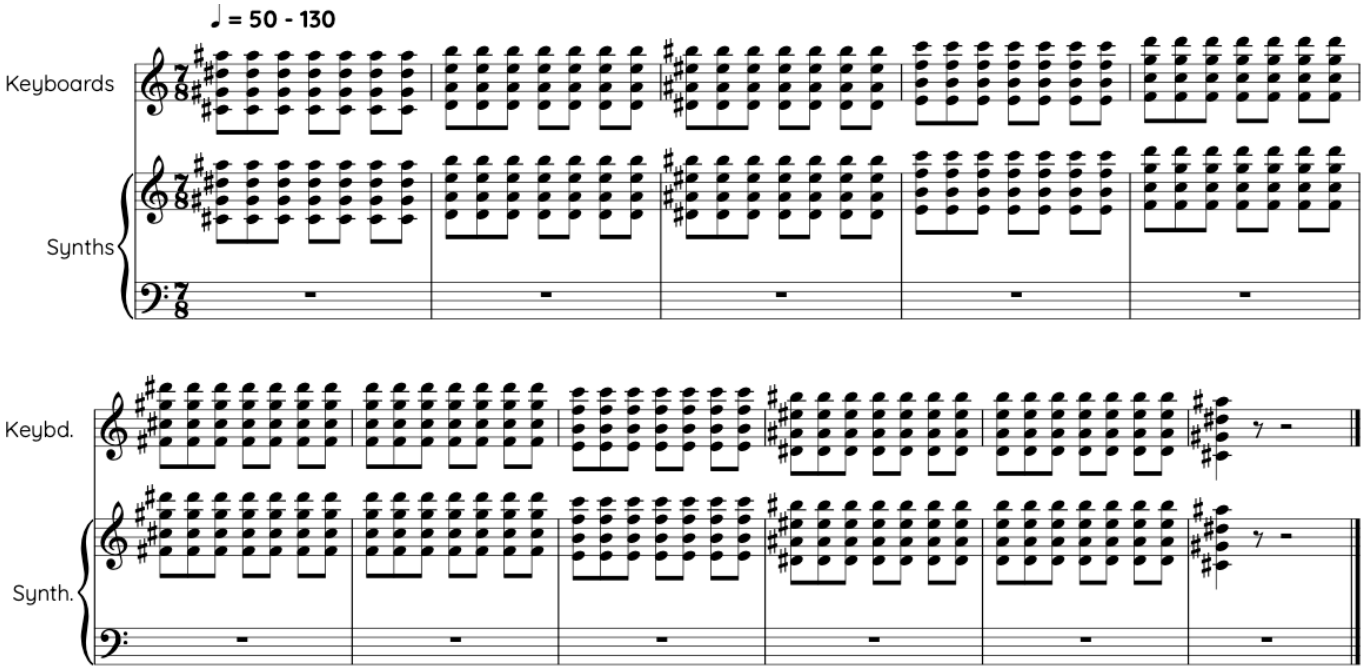
**The thumb and index finger must always be across from each other**. Many players, even very good ones, have a tendency to curl in their index finger. This must remain relaxed and support the inside mallet. The index finger and thumb meet to form a fulcrum, and that fulcrum should look exactly like the fulcrum of our two-mallet grip.

**STROKE**

**When playing with four mallets, the mallets should move in the exact same way as if you were holding two mallets**. The motion of the mallets is identical, only the playing mechanics have changed. When in doubt, try the same thing with two mallets and watch how the mallets move.

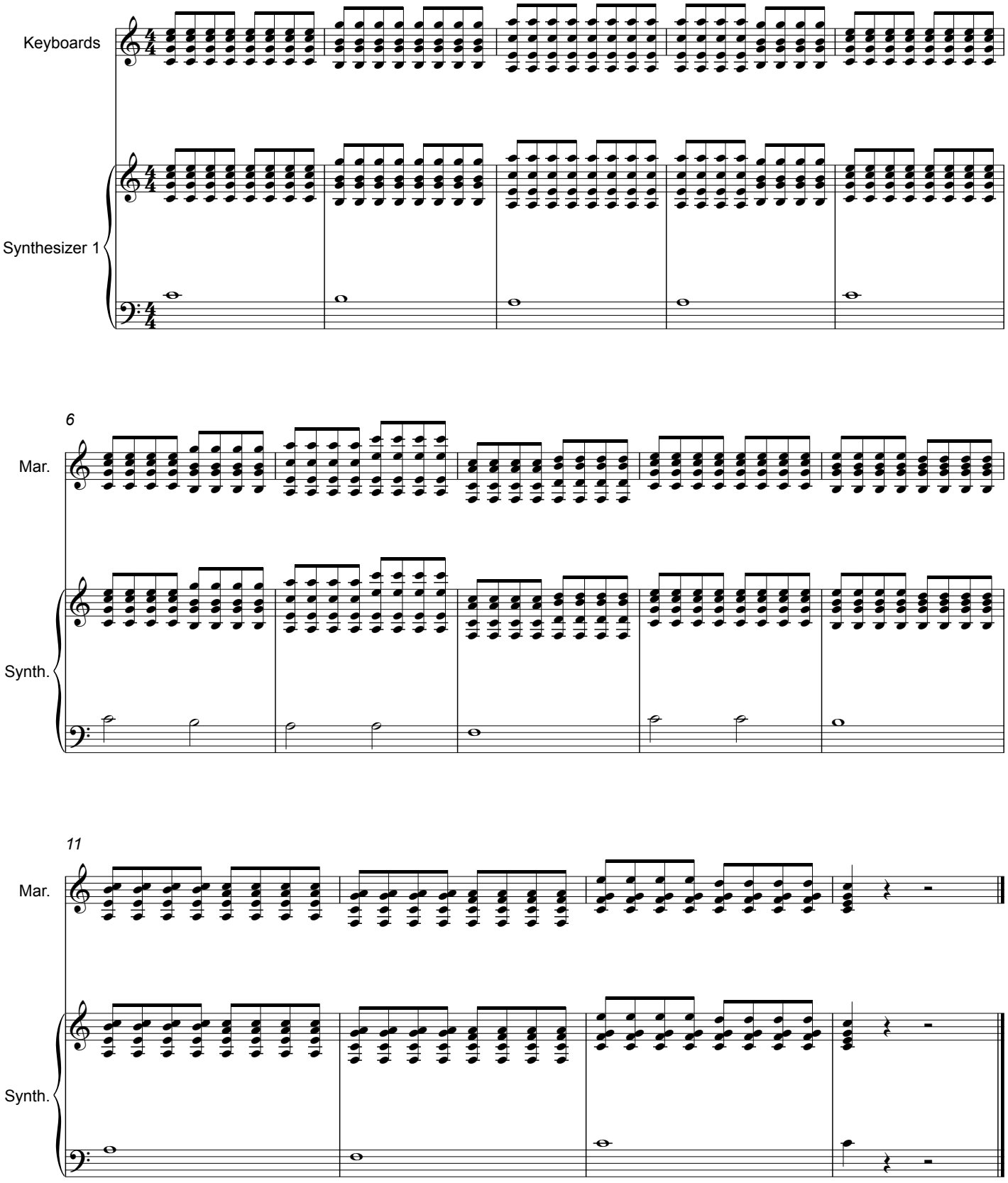
For the purposes of building strength and flexibility, all four mallet exercises should be learned first using only the wrist. Arm motion should only be incorporated once sufficient wrist strength has been achieved.

## BLOCKS

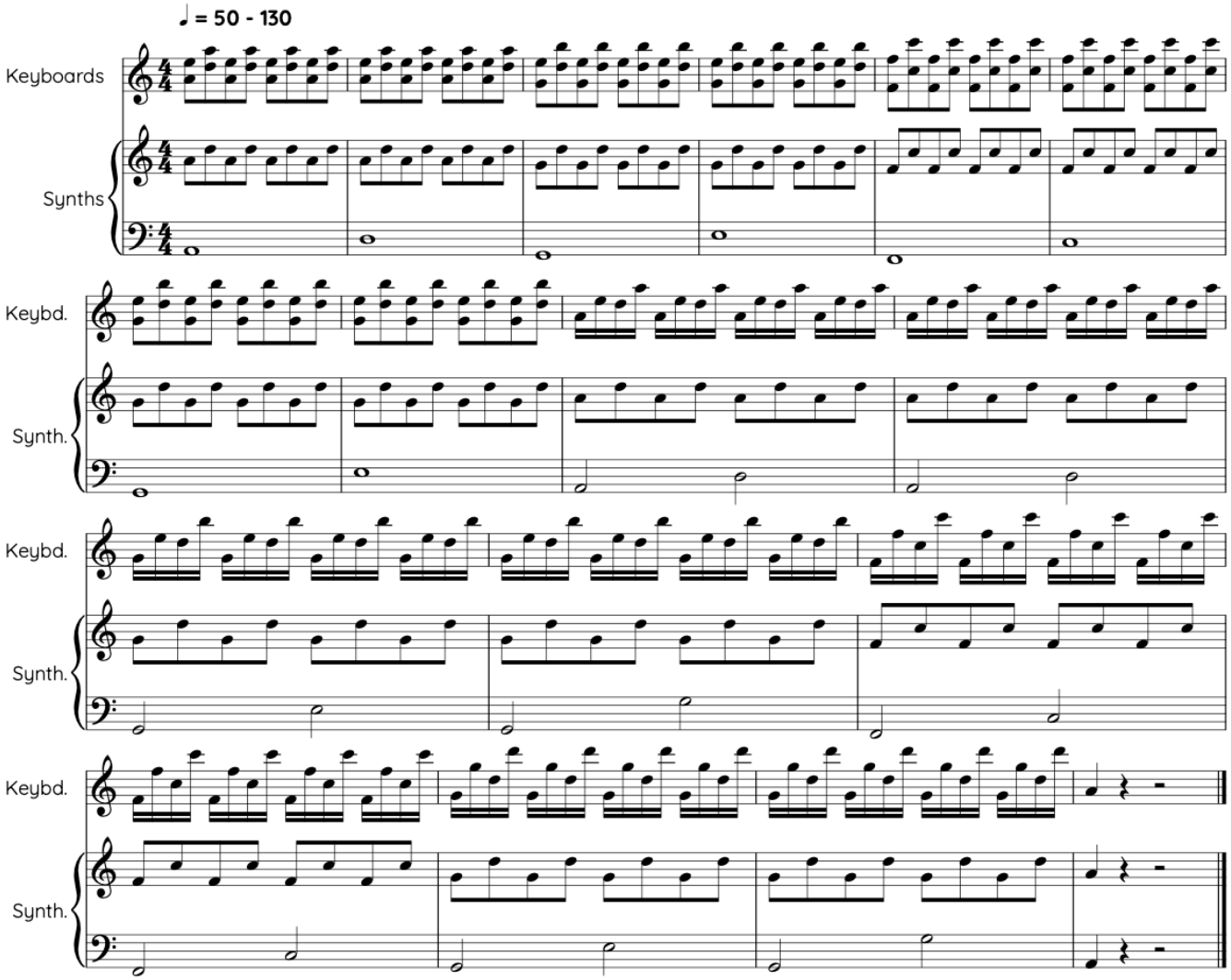



**The first technique you will learn is the double vertical stroke.** Both mallets in each hand are playing simultaneously to produce a double-stop. The wrist will bend down, striking the bars with a level shaft (is your instrument adjusted properly?). The lack of tension in the fingers will allow the wrist to rebound back to its original position quickly and smoothly. Be sure to keep the wrists turned properly (with both mallets level) as you strike to avoid flams.

## THUNDER CHORDS

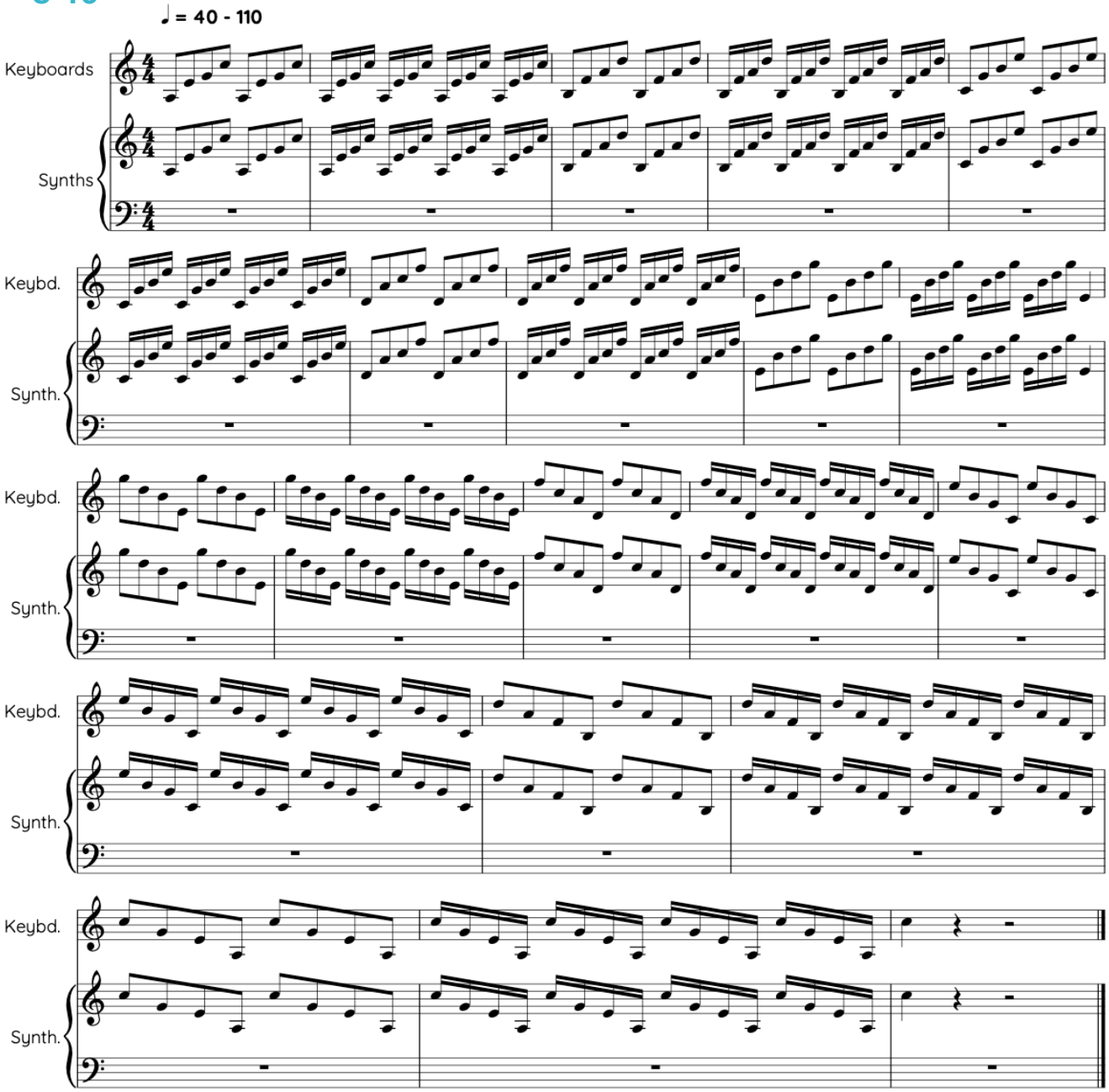


## 13-24



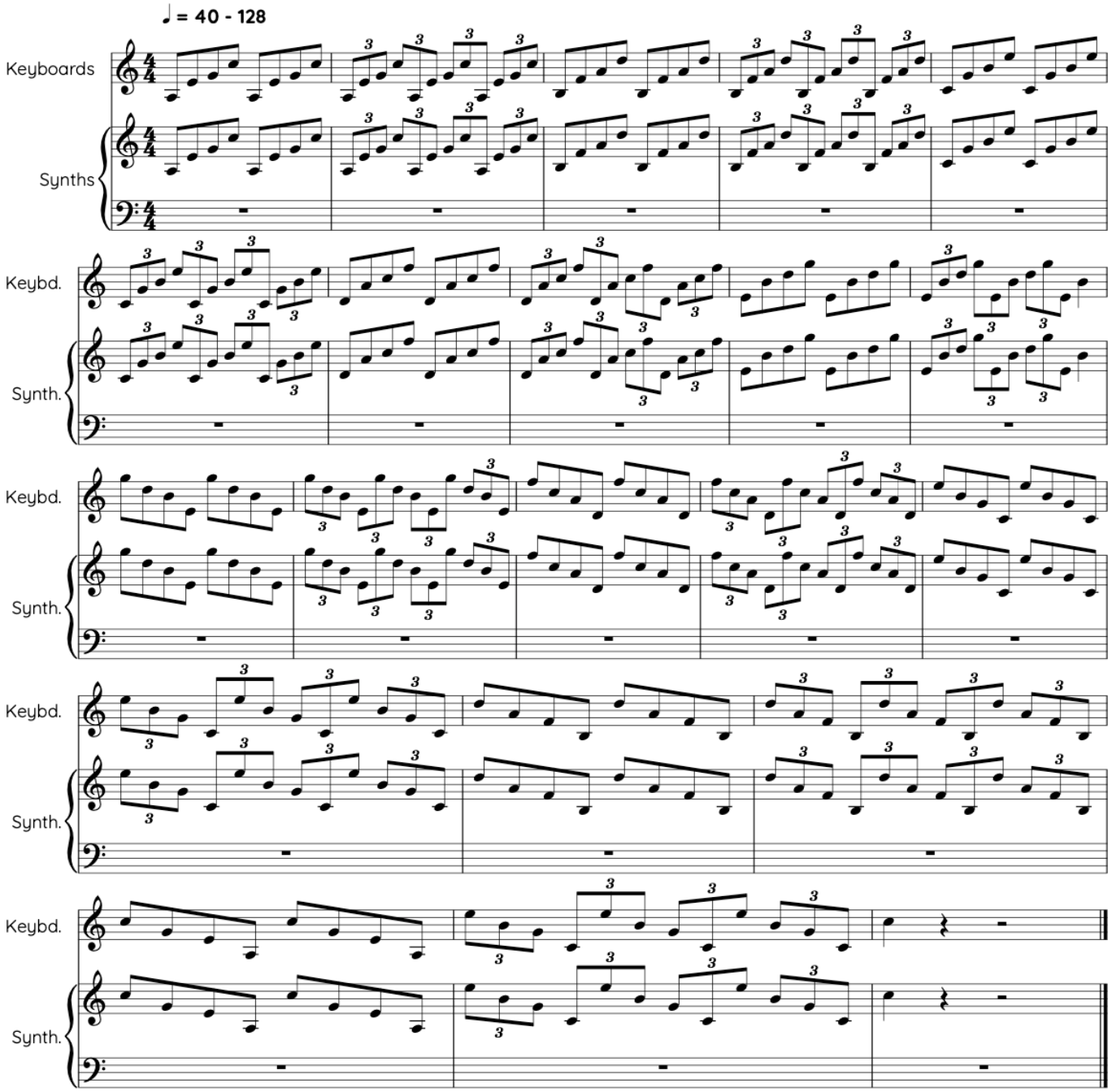

**This exercises introduces the single independent stroke**. For this exercise, move only one mallet at a time (in each hand). The wrist does not “bend” down as in a double vertical stroke, but rather it rotates on the axis of the stationary mallet. This concept is crucial to creating a full and controlled sound. Before moving on to the next note, the first mallet must fully rebound back to its original position. Then the next mallet begins to move. Avoid “flipping” the hand from side to side like a see-saw. Remember, these are called single independent strokes because one mallet is moving independently of the other.

## 8-16




**8-16 introduces Double lateral strokes. Double laterals are the keyboard equivalent of double strokes on a snare drum.** When played at slower tempos, we treat them as two separate single independent strokes. As we get faster (150 bpm and beyond) we begin to "slur" the two motions together into a single, fluid stroke. This is the exact same process one would use when playing a double stroke roll slow-fast-slow on a snare drum. Initially, we want to stroke out every note, but as the speed increases, those two separate motions gradually become one. In both examples, the key is to disguise the moment when this happens. We don't ever want to hear the transition.

## 8-12




**8-12 is nearly identical to 8-16, with the major difference being the 16th's are now triplets.**
Take your time going through to ensure that each triplet is being played accurately and in time.

## Broccoli

**Broccoli is a facility and flexibility exercise.** It is also a mental exercise. Keeping permutations straight in your head toward the end can be a bit of a challenge. Use single independent strokes throughout.