

Wrap It Up

An Introduction to Marimba Mallet Wrapping

BY JANIS POTTER

Why wrap your own mallets when there are so many companies producing fine mallets today? Because you can save a lot of money by recycling your mallets, and you can produce a more customized wrap. Some people are daunted by the idea of wrapping their own marimba mallets, but it only takes a little practice and patience to learn the art of mallet wrapping.

It is nearly impossible to recreate the original sound of a mallet when you rewrap it unless you use the exact same yarn and wrapping style. Even then, tension, weight, and other factors could cause it to sound different than the original. Those who want to recreate the original should send it back to the manufacturer. (At the end of the article, I have provided a list of companies that will rewrap mallets for less than the cost of new ones.) For those who are willing to do a little experimenting, read on. Remember, it's only yarn; if you don't like the way it turns out the first time, you can cut it off and try again.

MATERIALS

The type of yarn you choose is very subjective. Some of the most popular choices are acrylic mixes, wool, cotton, and nylon cord. In my own wrapping, I have primarily used an acrylic four-ply yarn made by Caron called "Simply Soft." It is a good, general-purpose yarn that doesn't fray easily and has just a little stretch to it. Some acrylics, especially four-ply ones, tend to be very "poofy," and if you do not pull tightly enough, you will end up with a gigantic mallet head.

Wool is very popular, but it's more expensive and a little more difficult for beginners to use. Its grainy texture can give you "rope burns" when you are wrapping a lot. I have also found that certain wool blends fray or break after only a few weeks of playing. There *are* wool mallets on the market that last, but the manufacturers I contacted would not give away their secrets. (I don't blame them!)

Cotton yarn, like baby yarn, tends to be thinner, so it takes more wraps to cover a stick. However, that can be good if you want to add some depth to your wrap. The drawback is that it can fray or break rather quickly.

Nylon (cord) is generally used when a more slappy sound or a definite attack is desired. It does not break easily, but it can slip off of the core or lose its shape by flattening out.

Note: These descriptions are based on my personal experience when trying to wrap with yarn available in most craft or hobby stores. You may be able to find specialty yarns by mail order or by contacting a yarn manufacturer for suggestions. All of the above types of yarns have been used successfully by a major mallet manufacturer, so I would recommend experimenting until you find something that suits your taste.

Choosing needles for the stitching of your mallets is also subjective. The easiest ones for beginners to use are number 16 tapestry needles. They have a very large head for threading

and are fairly dull—so you won't bleed if you stick yourself! For more experienced sewers, a slightly sharper 14 or 18 yarn darning needle will do nicely. Some people use curved upholstery needles, but I don't care for them.

You will also need sharp scissors, good lighting, and, of course, a mallet. (A glass of wine and a Gary Burton CD round things out perfectly—but those are optional!)

PREPARATION

For those who want to start with the easiest kind of mallet to wrap, choose one with a rubber core that is doughnut-shaped rather than a true round ball. The first step is to remove the old yarn. Cut the yarn at the top or bottom so you do not damage the core or any rubber or other materials that are under the yarn.

Then check to be sure your core is glued on tightly. If you noticed any kind of "ticking" sound before you unwrapped the stick, the glue seal has probably been broken. If this is the case, you may have to remove the core, scrape out the old glue, and then reapply. You may want to contact the original mallet manufacturer for suggestions on regluing. I have had some success with hot glue, and not much success with Super Glue, but I know people who will swear to the opposite results. You can also check a hardware or craft store for glues that are made for the type of core you have (i.e., gluing rubber to wood, plastic to wood, wood to wood, etc.).

You also want to check any materials that are over your core, or you may want to add some. Rubber tubing can be cut and slid over the core, using liquid soap as a lubricant. Be sure the tubing is tight or it can tick. One thing to be aware of when using rubber is that you can never make a mallet sound harder than the core. So test the unwrapped mallet on the range of the marimba it's intended for. If the rubber makes it too soft to speak in the upper register, wrapping will only make it heavier, not harder.

The advantages of using rubber are that it allows you to use a heavy plastic core if you like a heavy mallet or want a two-toned stick. It also helps protect your bars from being cracked. Moleskin or tape can also be used for different effects or to add weight; just be careful about creating a seam.

To prepare a skein of yarn for its first use, be sure that the tail end of the yarn and the starter end are both untucked from the skein. (These are at opposite ends of the skein.) If that confuses you, most yarns have instructions and arrows telling you how to properly start the skein. If you don't start it properly you could end up with a giant knot. A quick way to measure yarn—rather than counting wraps—is to count the number of arm's lengths you pull out of the skein. Three or four arm's lengths is about the maximum I would recommend pulling to begin.

WRAPPING

Now you are ready to wrap. Note: The following instructions are given from a right-handed person's point of view and directions (left, right) are given from the wrapper's perspective.

1. Position the back end of the mallet so it is stable (not floating in the air). I like to hold it with my left hand, firm against my leg, so the top of the core is easily visible.

2. With your right hand, pick up the yarn and put the end of it under your left thumb, just under the core.



3. Wrap the yarn around the base of the core clockwise two times (still bracing with the left thumb) and then bring the yarn to the top of the core ("north pole") and continue across to the opposite side and down to the "south pole."



4. The right hand should hold the yarn firmly against the underside of the core while the left hand turns the stick a quarter of a turn, counterclockwise. Be sure to keep the yarn just under the base of the core; otherwise, subsequent wraps could creep down onto the shaft, creating a very long mallet head.

5. The right hand guides the yarn to the "north pole" again

and continues across to the opposite side and down to the "south pole" as before. You should now have an X pattern on the top of the mallet head.



6. Continue turning the shaft counterclockwise with the left and wrapping with the right until the spaces have been filled. Be sure to continue crossing at the "north pole" so a small point begins to form. During this process, the yarn should be kept as taut as possible.



7. Once the core has been covered so that there are no more spaces, you must adjust the top so that you are now crossing approximately 1/8 inch to the left of the point. When you turn the shaft with the left hand, you will now turn in much

smaller increments—perhaps 1/10 of a turn. This will create a very distinctive pattern on the top of the mallet.



During this stage of the wrapping, you may adjust the tension of the yarn for various affects. If you want an articulate mallet, continue to wrap tightly. If you want a rolling mallet, wrap a few more layers tightly and then gradually decrease the tension until the last layer is rather loose. If you want a two-toned stick, wrap loose immediately after the core has been covered.

I suggest that beginners continue with a relatively tight wrap, but not so tight that your hands turn red; otherwise, the sewing step (to come) will be too difficult without the aid of pliers to pull the needle through the yarn.

8. This is perhaps the most important step—and one that people too often ignore. You must test the mallet BEFORE you sew it. To do that, bring the yarn to the bottom of the core and wrap it around the shaft two or three times. One hand can hold the yarn while the other tests the mallet. Be sure to check the entire range in which you want to use the mallet. If you don't like anything about the sound, weight, or look of the

mallet, change it now before you cut the yarn. Simply remove layers or add layers as needed, and then retest.



9. Once you are satisfied with the mallet, cut the yarn about two feet from your last wrap and thread the needle. Be sure you have pulled enough yarn through the needle head so that you can get a good grip on it while sewing.

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10. The first stitch is on the top of the mallet. Put the needle in the hole ("north pole") and point it to your left. Push it through the top couple of layers to the outside of the mallet. It should come out approximately 1/8 inch to the left of the hole.



11. With your left hand, turn the shaft counterclockwise just a tiny bit for the next stitch. Continue stitching until you have gone all the way around the top circle. (I prefer to put the stitches right next to each other, but some people sew only 8 or 10. It is a matter of preference.)



12. When you make your last stitch on the top, push the needle through the mallet as far down as possible (angling out so as not to damage the core). It usually will come out about

halfway. Then put it in the same spot it came out and push it down so that it comes out next to the shaft, under the core.



13. Flip the mallet over so you are looking at the underside with the shaft sticking up in the air. Put the needle in next to the shaft and sew through a few layers, coming out approximately 1/8 inch from the shaft.



14. This time the left hand turns the mallet clockwise, so you will be sewing to your left. Continue stitching just like on the top of the mallet, being sure to pull the stitch toward the top of the mallet head—not toward you.

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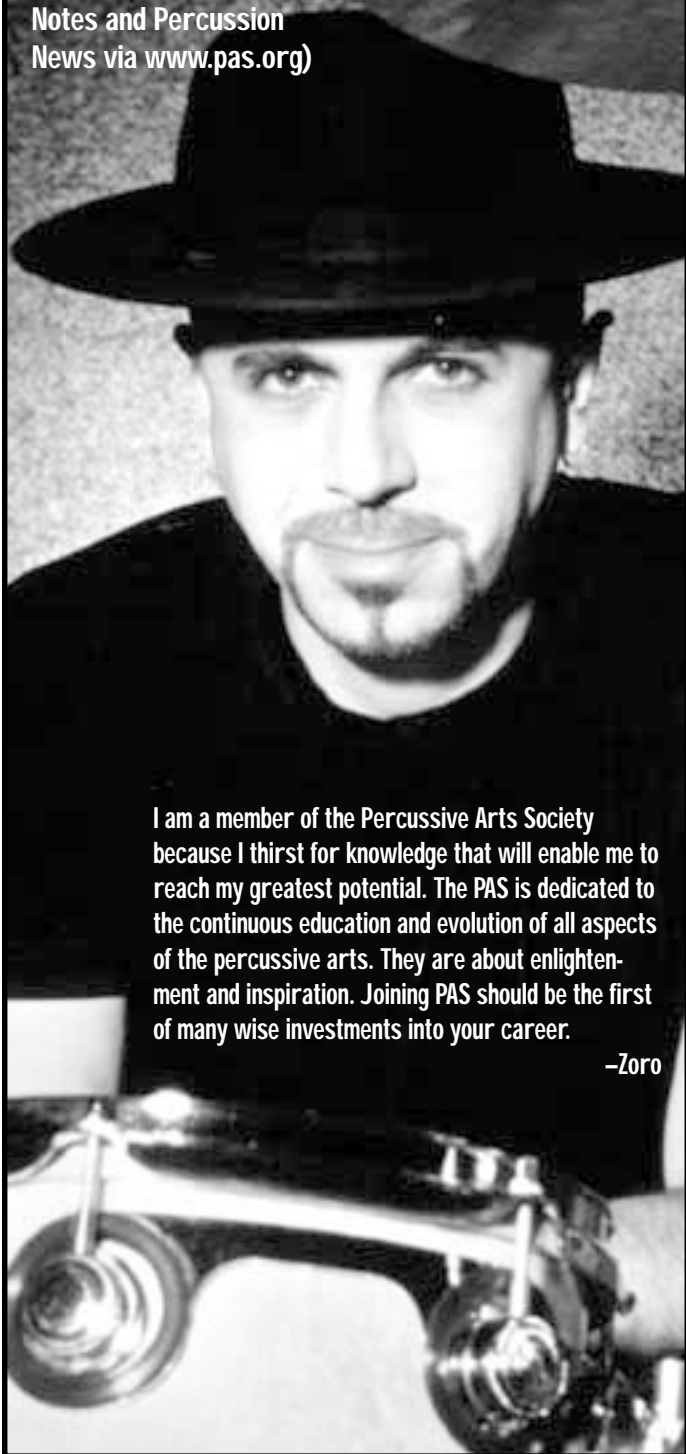
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15. When you have made your last stitch, push the needle through the mallet as far as it will go toward the top (again, about halfway). Pull it out, keeping the yarn very tight. Make your cut right next to the mallet and the end of the yarn will disappear into the wrap.



Congratulations; you did it! Photo 14 depicts the final result.



It will take some practice to get faster and to be able to make a set of mallets that match. But once you master these steps, there is no end to the creative possibilities.

Some mallet manufacturers that offer rewinding are: A. Putnam Mallets, Encore Mallets, Grover, Innovative Percussion, Malletech, The Mallet Co. (VMax), Mike Balter, and Vic Firth.

Janis Potter is a percussionist with the United States Marine Band and is also active as a marimba soloist/clinician and as coordinator for the Juilliard Summer Percussion Seminar. Several of her transcriptions are published by Go Fish Music, and her first solo CD, *Marimba Tracks*, is due to be released in June 2000.

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