

How to Play Steel Drums (Steel Pans)-The Basics

Steel Drum Height, Body Stance and Position

When you play steel drums, they should be hung at approximately waist height. Hanging your instrument too low may result in you having to bend and can cause your waist to ache. Hanging it too high may cause you to lose the natural position of your arms and inhibit effective playing. Your body position and stance should allow you to play steel drums (steel pans) comfortably. Proper body position also will facilitate good playing technique and musical creativity. If you experience discomfort such as aching feet when you play steel drums, this may be due to a poor playing stance. Pain will inhibit both the mental and physical aspects of your musical progress on your instrument.

Stand with both feet firmly planted and your weight evenly balanced between them. Standing with most of your weight on one foot may cause that foot to ache if you play for an extended period. This poor playing stance will not allow you to comfortably shift your playing between pans for steel pans (steel drums) such as double tenors and the other lower steel pans (steel drums) that use more than one drum

How far from the steel pans (steel drums) should you stand? When you play steel drums, you should stand at a distance that allows you to play every note without your body resting against the steel drums. Your elbows should be kept slightly away from your body so that you will be able to move freely without feeling cramped when you play the notes that are closest to your body.

Gripping the Pan Mallet

When you play steel drums (steel pans), a proper grip on the pan mallet will facilitate good steel drum playing technique by enhancing your ability to strike each note effectively. (The picture below shows the proper way to grip a pan mallet). Note that the thumb and index fingers form a pivot at a point roughly one third from the bare end of the pan mallet. It should balance between these two fingers, which form an approximate 90 degree angle with each other. If the pan mallet should be pulled from your hand while a proper grip is maintained, your thumb should drop into the second segment of your index finger. The index finger curls around the pan mallet but should not grip it too tightly. The remaining three fingers also loosely curl around the pan mallet. Do not grip the pan mallet tightly as this will inhibit the flexibility that is required for good playing technique.



Examples of incorrect pan mallet grips are: Closing your whole fist around the pan mallet; allowing your index finger to lie on top of the pan mallet which can cause you to involuntarily press on it with that finger; holding the pan mallet between the thumb and first or first two fingers without curling the remaining fingers around it; holding the pan mallet at the very end (which makes it difficult to control the mallet); gripping the pan mallet more than one third along its length - this can cause the notes to have a muted sound due to lack of bounce when striking the notes of the steel pans (steel drums). These are respectively illustrated in the pictures below.

Gripping Pan Mallet with Fist



Index Finger Pressing on Pan Mallet



Holding Pan Mallet With Three Fingers



Gripping More Than One-Third of Pan Mallet



Striking The Notes

It helps to remember that the notes of the steel pan (steel drum) must be allowed to vibrate freely in order to for them to sound properly. This means that the duration of contact between your pan mallets and the notes must be as short as possible. One way to achieve this is to imagine that you are striking a hot surface with your bare fingers. You will want a very short contact time between your fingers and the hot surface. This is exactly how you should strike the notes of the steel pan (steel drum). It is important that you grip the mallets as described above, as too tight a grip will not allow the notes to resonate freely.

The following clip shows the technique used to play successive notes. Observe the slight changes of the position of the arms in order to get maximum the resonance from the notes.

An excellent way to improve on your playing technique is to obtain a book of scales and to play them on your steel pan (steel drum).

Here are a few more tips:

Problem	Possible Cause/Action
Note sounds muffled	Mallet allowed to remain in contact with note after striking. See video.
	Body resting against steel pan (steel drum)
	An object is resting against the note from above or below.
Notes sound out of tune	The steel pan (steel drum) has been exposed to the sun for too long.
	Body resting against steel pan (steel drum)
	There is liquid on the playing surface.
	Instrument needs to be tuned by a tuner.
There is a vibration other than the note that was played.	Check that the stand has no loose nuts or screws.
	Check for nearby instruments such as snare drums and toms which can vibrate when you play your steel pan (steel drum)
Playing one note causes other notes of the steel pan (steel drum) to sound.	You should have the steel pan (steel drum) examined by a tuner.

Playing Scales on Steel Drums (Steel Pans)

Playing scales is very important to the mastery of every instrument, including the steel drum (steel pan). The benefits of practicing playing scales on steel drums include: improved dexterity, the acquisition of finesse, a deeper understanding of the steel drum (which is essential if you want to begin improvising) and improved ear training.

Most melodies utilize scale fragments, so a firm knowledge of the most common scales on steel drums will make it much easier to learn melodies on your instrument. Professional musicians understand the importance of practicing scales, and therefore make it a major component of their practice regimen. They continue practicing scales until the scales are firmly ingrained in their muscle memory so that the scales could be recalled without thinking while playing.

If you analyze ‘**Joy to the World**’, a popular Christmas carol, you will find that the first eight notes are nothing more than a major scale that runs backward from one octave to a lower octave.

When practicing scales, the most common ones to work on are major, melodic minor, harmonic minor and the chromatic scales.

It is important that you use logical hand coordination when playing scales on steel drum in order to avoid awkwardness. One suggested rule of thumb is that you should not strike more than **three** consecutive notes with the same hand. Ideally, a maximum of **two** consecutive notes are desirable when playing scales on steel drums; this may be entirely possible on the soprano pan (tenor pan). With the double tenor and double second pans, the exclusive use of the two-note rule of thumb is a little harder to achieve.

Suggested hand sequences for playing major and minor scales on the frontline steel drums (steel pans) are given below, with R and L depicting your right and left hand respectively. Begin with the lowest octave of the first scale note and ensure that each note is higher in pitch than the previous note.

Of course, if you find that you can play the scales on your steel drum using hand sequences that are more comfortable to you, then use them by all means. Just bear in mind that your hand sequence should allow you to play the scale through the entire range of your steel drum.

C Major: C D E F G A B C

Soprano pan: L R R L L R R L

Double Second pan: L L L R L R R L

C Melodic Minor: C D Eb F G A B C

Soprano pan: R R L L R R L R

Double Second pan: L L R R L R R L

C Harmonic Minor: C D Eb F G Ab B C

Soprano pan: R R L L R L L R

Double Second pan L L R R R L R L

Now, experiment with hand sequences for the chromatic scale and stick with the one that you favor the most.

Chromatic Scale: C Db D Eb E F Gb G Ab A Bb B C