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When the Groove Is Strong, No Note Is Wrong: Emphasizing Rhythm with Students

By Rick McLaughlin, Berklee College of Music and the New England Conservatory

Rhythm is one of the most important elements of music. After all, along with melody and harmony it completes the triumvirate of sounds that unite to create music. Yet it seems to be an under-discussed topic in music education, especially with aspiring jazz musicians. Whereas concepts abound on selecting the best pitch choices throughout a given harmonic passage, little written guidance has been authored with the sole purpose of improving an improviser's sense of rhythm. One approach taken by teachers points young improvisers to drum books or to African, Afro-Cuban, or South Indian rhythmic traditions, but these solutions are most appropriate for advanced students.

The lack of resources for addressing rhythmic skills presents a significant issue for all musicians, especially beginning and intermediate students. To focus solely on pitch choices in one's study can lead to dismay when the student finally understands the pervasive adage, "There are no wrong notes, only wrong resolutions." Conversely, a focus on rhythm, with an analogous adage, "When the groove is strong, no note is wrong," can inspire students to greater musical results. In fact, for musicians at every level, from beginners to sometimes the most advanced professional, a focus on basic rhythmic skills offers a wealth of possibilities. These skills serve as the foundation for melodic writing, melodic improvisa-



Photo by Phil Stiles.

tion, accompaniment ("comping"), and internalizing the harmonic rhythm of chord progressions.

The Metronome

As a way of setting the stage for some basic rhythmic exercises, let's begin with the metronome. While every student seems to know they should practice with a metronome, my own informal polling shows that few actually do, and most don't know how to use it effectively. Listed in the table below are two common approaches to utilizing the metronome, set to a moderate tempo of $q = 120$ in 4/4 time. The third approach, $w = 40$, is a method of transferring the tempo responsibility onto the student.

In my view, perceiving a metronome click in a measure of music as $q = 120$ or $h = 60$ are good strategies for helping a student learn a piece of music, but the ability to perform using one's internal clock is better exercised with less information from the metronome; that

is, just enough information to keep the student on track, but not so much that the metronome provides the answer [N.B. Most manual metronomes have clicks ranging from 40-208 bpm, which is what this table is based upon].

Metronome	Clicks/Beats	Notes
$q = 120$	1, 2, 3, & 4	The click represents each beat of a 4/4 measure. This is the de facto approach for most young students and a good way to begin studying a new piece of music.
$h = 60$	1&3 or 2&4	The click on 2&4 is the "jazz" or "swing" metronome approach. The click on 1&3 underscores "straight eighth" rhythms like salsa, bossa nova, and rock.
$w = 40$	1, 2, 3, or 4	The downbeat is the strongest beat in the measure, making a click on beat 1 the easiest to play along with, typically. For most students, perceiving the click on beat 2 will be the most difficult, and the click on beat 4 being nearly as tough. The click on beat 3 feels like a back beat, making this rather easy for anyone familiar with 20th- or 21st-century pop music.

Other Things to Consider

These metronome markings target some common medium tempos. Consider these markings a guide, but be sure to include a wide range of tempos, including those at the extremes, in your practice regimen.

The decision to limit the perception of a click as downbeat whole, quarter, or half notes stems from a hope to keep the metronome portion of this rhythmic approach relatively simple. Having said that, one could easily extend the approach to perceiving the metronome click on the “ands” of eighth notes, or the “a’s” and “e’s” of sixteenth notes.

Displaced Rhythms

The practice of displacing a rhythm—moving a fixed rhythm from its original location to another (for example, shifting it over by an eighth or quarter note)—is certainly not new, but the displacement of simple rhythms can prove to be strikingly difficult. Musicians of all levels often find gaps in their internal sense of rhythm and “time” when going through these rhythmic displacements.

In jazz (or any dance-based style of music), becoming comfortable with displaced quarter and half notes will provide a great deal of insight into how the music works and create more comfort with the syncopated nature of the music. For members of the rhythm section, this will strengthen the section’s connection, or “pocket.” For non-rhythm section instruments, this will help to increase not only an awareness of how accompaniment works but also to improve lines of communication. Comfort with displaced quarter notes provides an opposing rhythmic viewpoint to what the bassist typically plays while highlighting common tension and resolution points. Work with three- and five-beat phrases (or more!) will continue to strengthen a musician’s rhythmic sense while adding some fascinating rhythmic phrasing to an improviser’s solo concept or composer’s rhythmic palette. Legendary drummer, Bob Moses exposed me to the use and importance of displaced rhythms (see his “Moveable Rhythms” concept in *Drum Wisdom*). Jerry Bergonzi’s *Inside Improvisation, Vol. 4: Melodic Rhythms* further extends this concept to include three-, five-, and seven-note groupings.

Displacing 4s

There are only two permutations of displacement for single beats—downbeats and upbeats. Figure 1 shows each quarter note of a 4/4 measure hitting “on” the beat, while figure 2 shows each quarter

note hitting “off” the beat. Generally speaking, students are able to clap along with “downbeats,” no matter which metronome setting used above, but the “upbeats” pose a few significant issues. Those issues are compounded by the feel of the upbeat, whether straight or swing. The straight upbeats are difficult for many students, but swinging the upbeats, even with more regimented, tripletized upbeats, can be challenging for musicians of all levels.



Figure 1. Displacing 4s, downbeats



Figure 2. Displacing 4s, upbeats

Displacing 2s

There are four permutations of displacement for two-beat groupings (half notes) in 4/4 time. Figure 3 consists of half notes on beats 1 and 3, while Figure 4 opposes that with half notes on beats 2 and 4. Figures 5 and 6 are similar in opposition, with figure 5 articulating half notes on 1& and 3&, while figure 6 has half notes on 4& and 2&. In the case of figure 6, the phrase is presented as “starting” on 4& because of the pervasive use of anticipations in dance-based styles of music, including jazz.



Figure 3. Half notes on 1 & 3



Figure 4. Half notes on 2 & 4



Figure 5. Half notes on upbeats (1&, 3&)



Figure 6. Half notes on upbeats (4&, 2&)

Metronome	Click	Rhythm
q = 120	Quarter notes in 4/4	Cycle through the Figures (#1-8). Play each figure about 16 times correctly before moving on to the next.
h = 60	Half notes on 1 & 3 in 4/4	As above
h = 60	Half notes on 2 & 4 in 4/4	As above
w = 40	Beat 1 of a 4/4 measure	As above
w = 40	Beat 3 of a 4/4 measure	As above
w = 40	Beat 4 of a 4/4 measure	As above
w = 40	Beat 2 of a 4/4 measure	As above

Displacing 3s

Figure 7 is a three-measure phrase consisting of every possible dotted quarter note displacement. Unlike displacing 4s (a quarter-note based displacement) or displacing 2s (a half-note based displacement), displacing 3s reduces the rhythmic displacement to the more granular level of eighth notes (each dotted quarter is the equivalent of three eighth notes). This polyrhythmic approach results in phrasing “over the bar line” much of the time, creating an intense feeling of forward motion—be careful not to rush!



Figure 7. Displacing 3s

Displacing 5s

Figure 8 is a five-measure phrase consisting of every possible quarter/dotted quarter note displacement. This grouping contains five eighth note-based beats (quarter=two eighths, dotted quarter=three eighths). Like displacing 3s, it is very easy to rush this rhythm.



Figure 8—Displacing 5s

What to Practice

The first and most important task is to internalize these rhythms. You want to memorize them and practice them against every metronome marking listed above in order to ensure that no matter what tempo or style, no matter what happens in your accompaniment, you will be able to play the rhythms fantastically.

Begin by clapping the rhythms against the metronome. In the beginning stages of this process, it is often helpful to stand up and either march, dance, or stomp quarter notes. A suggested practice structure might look as shown in the table above.

As you introduce these rhythms to your students, and then as they go to the practice room with the rhythms:

- Take note of the more difficult rhythms and spend extra time on them. Also take note of the rhythms performed with ease so that in the next session you are able to merely touch upon those rhythms. Then change the tempo so these rhythms become more of a challenge. As each rhythm becomes more familiar, change the tempo of the metronome, moving gradually to extreme tempos.
- Once you are able to clap any rhythm reliably, perform them (still clapping) against a recording of music you are working on.
- Finally, it is time to transfer the rhythms to an instrument. Step 1 is to play the rhythm on a single pitch, against the metronome. Then, improvise melodies on that rhythm. The last step is to transfer the rhythms to a tune, improvising on the chord progression of the tune.

At the Berklee College of Music, at the New England Conservatory of Music, and in my own private practice, I have seen how rhythm—especially struggles with rhythm—can impact a student’s success with a piece or style of music. A little success can go a long way to inspiring a student to greater levels of achievement. If we can help musicians learn to improve and then trust their own

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students can use the site to practice along with recordings. Concert information, pictures, and videos give parents and caregivers a window into what we are learning and creating. I also give parents ways to support our program, both with an Amazon Wish List and an online fundraising store where they can buy chorus and rock band paraphernalia.

Getting the Word Out

It's amazing how little time it takes to reach out to families, colleagues, and administrators when you break it up throughout the school year. Technology has also made this task easier. Sending letters home with students can be effective, though not always guaranteed to arrive in the hands of caregivers. I have found community listservs and e-mails to be far more effective. Digital communications are easy and replicable ways to get the community involved and excited. Copy and paste, and you are one step ahead for next year. Every communication system that you can create will make next year that much easier.

Advocating for the Arts

Any time you speak in public, whether it is at a concert or a PTA meeting, advocate for the transformative powers of your arts program for students. If you typically speak only at concerts, start going to school council and PTA meetings, too, to reach new audiences. Much of what we do is overshadowed by the more data-driven areas of education, so it's necessary to remind the community of the changes your program fosters in children. Think of it as your duty to educate not just the children but your community as well. When you show parents and colleagues just how indispensable your program is, you increase the buzz for

your classes and events while educating new advocates with the tools to speak out.

Going Beyond the School

Odds are that your area has groups and individuals that would jump at the opportunity to support your program. Most communities have local arts organizations that share some of your students. It's important to build relationships with these groups as they often have missions similar to yours, and you can help each other foster support and interest. As a bonus, you can also reduce the risk of scheduling events on the same day and forcing students and families to choose between the two. Politicians and business leaders often love attending events as a way to attract voters and customers, and their presence can only help build your program's reputation. Their support may influence others to lend support as well.

Community engagement is key to growing our music programs and is something on which we should always be working. While it may seem like a daunting task, it gets easier each year as you build your reputation and create systematic approaches. Once you begin, I think you will find that the time you put into this will equip more people to advocate for your work, saving you time and effort and ultimately preserving your program. Get started; if you wait until the arts are threatened at your school, you've waited too long. •

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internal clocks, then we can help them to trust themselves in other parts of their lives. •

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- Bergonzi, Jerry, *Inside Improvisation, Vol 4: Melodic Rhythms* [Advance Music, 1998]
- Chapin, Jim, *Advanced Techniques for the Modern Drummer; Coordinated Independence as Applied to Jazz and Be-Bop, Vol. 1* [Alfred Music, 2002]
- Goines, Lincoln, *Funkifying the Clave: Afro-Cuban Grooves for Bass and Drums* [Manhattan Music Publications, 1993]
- Mauleon, Rebecca, *The Salsa Guidebook* [Sher Music, 2005]
- Moses, Bob, *Drum Wisdom* [Modern Drummer Publications, Inc., 1989]
- Reed, Ted, *Progressive Steps to Syncopation for the Modern Drummer* [Alfred Music, 1997] •

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