

Expanding and Re-Conceiving the Rhythmic Palette: Polymetric Patterns for the Improvising and Composing Bassist

1. A Brief Overview

The word rhythm derives from the Ancient Greek ῥυθμός (*rhuthmós*) meaning “any measured flow or movement” and ῥέω (*rhéō*) meaning “flow, run, stream, gush.” ῥέω (*rhéō*) is hypothesized to come from the Proto-Indo-European *srew- meaning to “to flow” and its cognates include the Sanskrit *sravati* and Old Church Slavonic *struja* meaning “stream.”¹

The word meter derives from the Ancient Greek μέτρον (*métron*) meaning “measure”, “rule”, “length”, “size.” While the distinction between meter and rhythm is somewhat porous in our contemporary uses of the terms, definitions of meter such as “rhythmic shape” or “measured rhythm” help to provide a sense of where these terms overlap and are differentiated.² Perhaps we can say that meter tends to be strict and quantitative whereas rhythm is broad and qualitative.

While academically interesting, these etymologies are also relevant to us as players of the music; we want our music to flow, stream, and gush forth, but part of us still needs the grounding fabric of measurement. So often we define rhythm in its strictest sense as a synonym of meter: a pattern, a repetitive configuration of sounds over time. But in a broader (and perhaps more ancient) sense, rhythm is an infinite overlaying of individual patterns. As in water flowing over a streambed, the rhythm of the moment is the addition of this gurgle here, that gurgle there, a rounded boulder thumping its way over another, that wave lapping up periodically on the far shore, and the low hiss of the waterfall downstream. It has flow and rhythm even if we cannot map it in a one-to-one way on staff notation. It is rhythmic in the way that quantitative elements layer upon each other to give a qualitative result. Individual atoms bounce off each other's electro-magnetic fields and yield a broad cacophony of sound, a single consciousness of the moment. This is the polymetrics of the stream. And our music mirrors the stream.

The first steps in playing and accessing a polymetric conception of music is to be able to hear and be conscious of its inhabitation within our bodies. This is the aim of this presentation.³ The long-term goal is to play in line with a broad conception of rhythm, to play as the stream plays. One plays by leaning into different meters from a central meter or pulse. Perhaps we may develop into a place where there isn't necessarily a center, but a lattice of rhythmic relationships one can travel through.

¹ A Greek–English Lexicon by Liddell & Scott, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1940

² MacPherson (1930, 3) preferred to speak of “time” and “rhythmic shape”, Imogen Holst (1963, 17) of “measured rhythm”

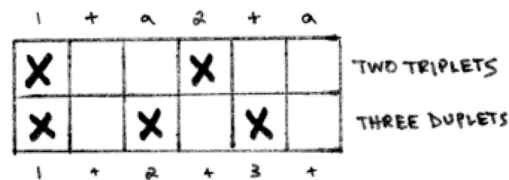
³ The typical development of us as musicians is: we hear, we practice, we play. I have found that occasionally and miraculously this process presents itself singularly as we play/hear. This is a mystical moment of integration.

2. Introduction to Cyclic Verticalism⁴ and Basic Polymeters

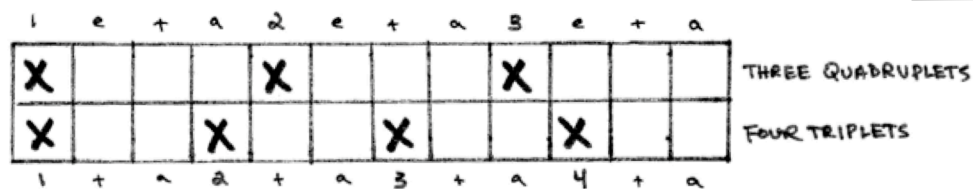
“Every rhythm is made of two elements: something odd and something even. 3 (odd) and 2 (even) are the fundamental building blocks from which all existing rhythms are created; from a most simple heartbeat pattern to the most abstract.” – Adam Rudolph (*Pure Rhythm* 2005)

The following examples are to be demonstrated and then practiced by the class. Each row is designated a hand. When both hands are playing the pattern comfortably, drop one out—without stopping or dropping a beat. Keep the one hand going for a few cycles and identify with that side of the polyrhythm. Then bring the other hand in on beat one. Do the same with the other hand. When these moves can be made comfortably, change hands without dropping a beat and repeat the whole process.

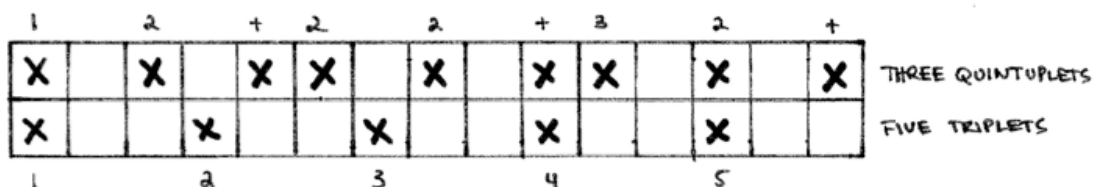
2 against 3 (6 total pulses)



3 against 4 (12 total pulses)



5 against 3 (15 total pulses)



3. Listening Examples

- a. The Jazz Waltz: a combination of 3/4, 6/8, 6/4, and/or a broad 12/8
 - i. Chick Corea “What Was” from *Now He Sings Now He Sobs* with Miroslav Vitous and Roy Haynes
 - ii. Miles Davis “Footprints” from *Miles Smiles* with Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams

⁴ I will use Adam Rudolph’s term Cyclic Verticalism. Much of this presentation is informed by this master percussionist’s thoughts and writings.

- b. Western Art Music examples
 - i. Guillaume de Machaut R19. “Quant ma dame les maus...”
 - ii. Charles Ives “Three Places in New England” Movement II. Putnam’s Camp, Redding, Connecticut
 - iii. Steve Reich “Sextet” Movement III.
 - iv. John Adams “Short Ride in a Fast Machine”
- c. Gnawa Music from Morroco
 - i. Hassan Hakmoun “Danya Balmal” from *Life Around the World* with Bill McClellan, Anthony Michael Peterson, Rick Rivera and Kweyao Agyapon
 - ii. Abdellatif Oughassal “Chabako” from *Gnawa Music of Marrakesh Night Spirit Masters* with Abderrahim Oughassal, Abdelhak Bou Naam, Samir Zougari, Abdel Kbir Msolom, Abdenbi Binizi, Aziz Radi, Hassan Zougari, Mohammed Mslomi, Said Oughassal, Abdelqader Oughassal
- d. Mbira Music of the the Shona people of Zimbabwe
 - i. Ephant Mujuru & The Spirit of the People “Mbavaira” from *Mbavaira*
 - ii. Sekuru Gora “Kuzanga” from *Vakuru Chaivo* with Chigamba Gora and Moyo
- e. Ewe Music of West Africa
 - i. Anlo Afiadenyigba Gadzo Ensemble “Gadzo - Hafi naye afeme 'de” from *Music of the Secret and Forgotten Societies of Africa* Volume IV
 - ii. Ashanti and Ewe Tribes of Ghana “Parago” from *Drums of Death*

4. Practicing Exercises

- a. Re-contextualize a static line against shifting meters. This can be done by playing a repetitive figure on your instrument and changing the meter of your tapping foot. You can put bells or shells around your ankle, or wear tap shoes. When you change meters, practice phrasing the line you’re playing to match the new meter. Below are examples. Please make up your own as well!

- i. 2 against 3

The image shows a musical exercise in bass clef. The top staff contains a melodic line with four notes: a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a half note. Below this are two percussion staves, labeled '1' and '2'. Staff '1' contains three eighth notes, and staff '2' contains two quarter notes. This illustrates a 2 against 3 polyrhythm where the melodic line is divided into two groups of three eighth notes.

ii. 3 against 4

Musical notation for exercise ii. 3 against 4. It consists of three staves. The top staff is in bass clef and contains a melodic line with a '2' above it, indicating a pair of beamed eighth notes. The middle staff has a treble clef and contains a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. The bottom staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes with diamond-shaped accents.

iii. 3 against 5

Musical notation for exercise iii. 3 against 5. It consists of three staves. The top staff is in bass clef and contains a melodic line with a '3' above it, indicating a triplet of eighth notes. The middle staff has a treble clef and contains a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. The bottom staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

- b. Change a line in order to put it in a different meter. Try to maintain most of its melodic/pitch content. You can play against a metronome sounding the subtactile pulse or against a polymeric beat from a drum machine or prerecorded backing track.

i. 2 against 3

Musical notation for exercise i. 2 against 3. It consists of three staves. The top staff is in bass clef and contains a melodic line with a '2' above it, indicating a pair of beamed eighth notes. The middle staff has a treble clef and contains a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. The bottom staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes with diamond-shaped accents. The notation includes repeat signs and a double bar line.

ii. 3 against 4

Musical notation for exercise ii. 3 against 4. It consists of three staves. The top staff is in bass clef and contains a melodic line with a '3' above it, indicating a triplet of eighth notes. The middle staff has a treble clef and contains a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. The bottom staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes with diamond-shaped accents. The notation includes repeat signs and a double bar line.

iii. 3 against 5



5. Compositions or recordings by the author exemplifying potential directions and possibilities.
 - a. Three Sisters – Michael K. Harrist (see attached score and recording)
 - b. Sunshine Soul – Richard Sheppard and Ameranouche (see score and recording)
6. Closing Remarks
 - a. All sound is to be found hidden just below the surface of every piece of music. A particular tune, composition, or improvisation manifests Rhythm in its own particular way. It may do so by exemplifying one meter, or by exemplifying multiple meters. Meters may be quickly juxtaposed, or they may evolve out of one another. One may “lean” towards a new meter from the perspective of the old one, until the association with the old meter becomes too tenuous and breaks. The space between two meters is a beautiful place to exist. Furthermore, it is beautiful to exist between meter and non-meter. I will close with remarks from my teacher:

“When you feel comfortable playing in duple and triple meters, try deliberately playing without any underlying pulse—outside the house, where time is wind. Then play in meter again and know the difference between the measured and unmeasured realms. Now without it again, and savor that difference.” W. A. Mathieu (*The Listening Book* 87)