READING RHYTHMS

Text and examples by Norman Weinberg.

IT'S TIME FOR a little rhythmic review, but with a twist. So far this column has covered all the basic figures that can be written using the sixteenth as the shortest note value. By taking a look at example number I you can see all the various combinations and permutations that are possible within a single count.

This example is broken up into five lines. The first line (the figure of a single quarter rest) is a count of complete silence. In other words, there are no strokes during the count. The second line shows all the possible figures when there is only one attack point within a count. Since a single count is comprised of four sixteenths, there are only four variations. A stroke can be placed on the first sixteenth, the second sixteenth, the third, or the fourth.

The number of rhythmic figures increases in the third line. There are six different rhythms that can be formed by placing an attack on any two points within the count. The fourth line shows the rhythms that can be created if three of the four sixteenths are played, and the last line is the only possible figure if all four sixteenths are to be attacked.

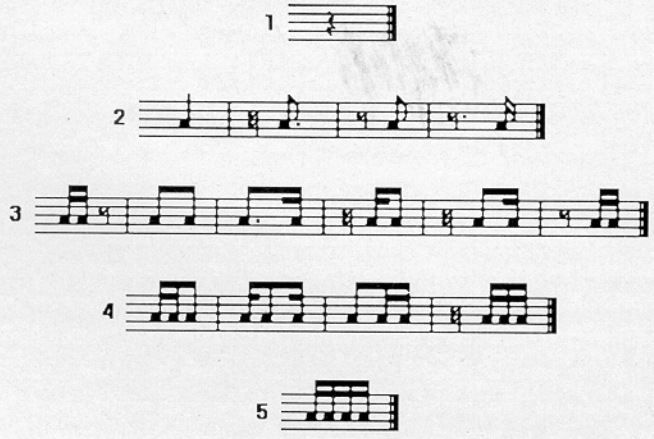
Notice that the first line and the last line are opposites. While line one shows the rhythm when no notes are played, line five is the figure that is used when all notes are played. Lines two and four are also related – line two contains the figures that result when a single sixteenth note is struck, while line four includes figures when one sixteenth is a rest (or simply not attacked).

Even though there are only sixteen possible rhythms, there can be many more visual symbols. The third rhythm on the second line (eighth rest followed by an eighth note) may appear in several different disguises. You might see this same figure as an eighth rest followed by a sixteenth note and a sixteenth rest, or as two sixteenth rests followed by an eighth note. It could even be two sixteenth rests with a sixteenth note and one more sixteenth rest! Though this rhythm's notation might vary, they all mean the same thing to a drummer: to play a stroke on the 'and' syllable of the count.

A quick way to master the additional figures is to write out all the various ways that a particular rhythm might appear. Then drill yourself on the visual symbols so that they become more familiar.

This month's reading exercise utilizes rhythmic figures that have been covered in previous months, but in different time signatures. The time signature (also called meter) is indicated at the beginning of the first line, and the two numbers that make up the meter have different functions. The upper number indicates how many counts are in each bar (we'll deal with the bottom number next month).

Example #1



So if the upper number in the time signature is two, then there are two counts to each measure. In a meter of 3/4, the quarter note still receives the value of a full count, but there are now three counts to each measure. The most common meters are 4/4 (of course), 3/4, and 2/4. Less common meters are 5/4, 6/4, 7/4, and 10/4.

Why would a composer use a meter of 3/4 instead of 4/4? Different meters have distinctive phrasings based upon their strong and weak counts. Every meter has a slightly different feel to it. If you listen to a waltz (always in 3/4), you can hear that the first count of each measure seems to have a stronger pulse or accent than the others. Triple meter has a phrasing of **one** two three, **one** two three . . . While 4/4 time also has its strongest pulse on the first count of each bar, this heavy stress happens every fourth count instead of every third (**one** two three four, **one** two three four). But isn't 4/4 meter the same as two measures of 2/4 time? Not really, as the stresses happen twice as often in 2/4 than in 4/4.

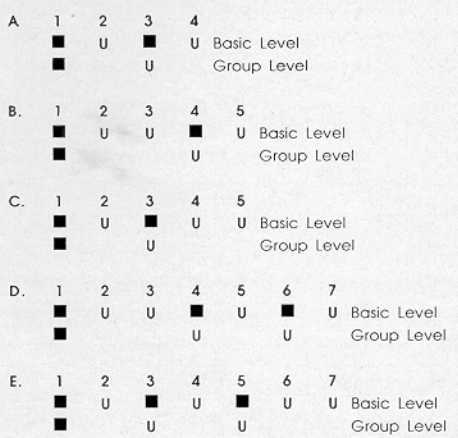
Different types of stressed and non-stressed rhythms have been used for centuries in poetry and speech as well as in music. The terms of iamb (weak-strong), trochee (strong-weak), dactyl (strong-weak-weak) and others may have a familiar ring – depending on how much time has elapsed since your last high school English class. 3/4 meter is dactyl, while 4/4 meter is trochee in character. But, how can a meter with four counts be trochee?

Rhythms can exist on several different levels at once. In addition to the strong and weak pulses of individual counts, combinations (or groupings) of counts can have their own pulse relationships. 4/4 meter (take a look at example number 2A) can be thought of as two groups of strong and weak pulses that are combined together (the solid boxes indicate strong pulses and the curved lines indicate weak pulses). At the basic level, the four counts set up a pattern of strong-weak, strong-weak. But, at a deeper level, the second group of counts is actually a little weaker than the first grouping. This creates a phrasing of **ONE** two THREE four, **ONE** two THREE four. In other words, beat three is strong, but not as strong as beat one.

Most rock music has a slightly different pulse structure. If a song has a heavy back beat, the stress points may be on counts two and four. But at the group level, the first two counts are still heavier than the second two.

Meters such as 5/4 and 7/4 can be grouped in different ways depending on their musical material. Examples 2B and 2C show how a meter with five counts can be phrased as 3+2 or 2+3. A

Example #2



measure with seven counts (as shown in examples 2D and 2E) can be phrased as 3+2+2 or 2+2+3. In both phrasings, the dactyl-style pulses are still retained (strong-weak-weak), but the lengths (or duration) of the strong and weak pulses are varied.

If you're wondering how all this pulse business and discussion of poetic meters relates to music and drumming, think about the song 'America' by Leonard Bernstein from the musical West Side Story. You know, "I want to live in Amer-i-ca. Everything free in Amer-i-ca" alternate between **ONE** two three FOUR five six, and **ONE** two THREE four FIVE six. It would be almost impossible to play this song in the correct style without thinking of these two pulse groupings.

This month, there are four different time signatures used in the exercise: 2/4, 3/4, 5/4, and 7/4 (each separated by the double bar line). Since these rhythmic figures are familiar, playing them should pose no real problems. As you practice, try to listen for the pulse points. Which are the stronger and weaker counts of the bar? By feeling which counts are stressed, the structure of the meter will become more clear, and the exercises will 'click' (*no pun intended, I hope – Ed*). Enjoy!