

READING RHYTHMS

Text and examples by Norman Weinberg.

THIS MONTH, READING RHYTHMS dives into new territory – triplets. At the most basic level, triplets can be defined as note values that divide a count or a portion of a count into three equal parts. Make a mental note that the key word in that last sentence is ‘equal’.

To backtrack just a little, the notation system that we use in Western music isn’t well suited for dividing a unit of time into three equal parts. There are two half notes to a whole, two quarter notes to a half, two eighth notes to a quarter, and . . . well, you get the idea. You remember from last month that in a compound time signature (such as 6/8 or 9/8), each major beat (dotted quarter note) consists of three counts (three eighth notes). This is one technique of dividing a single beat into three equal divisions. But, how can you possibly use regular note values to split a quarter?

Unfortunately, you can’t. Instead of using ‘regular’ note values, you must use something called ‘false notation’. Don’t let this name tag worry you, it’s really very simple to understand.

Take a look at **Example #1** In these measures, you see a few figures where three eighth notes are beamed together. These eighth notes are slightly different than normal eighths because they have the number ‘3’ written below them. They are called eighth note triplets because they use the values of eighth notes. Normally, in 4/4 time, three eighths would have the value of one and a half counts. Now, because of the ‘false’ notation, these three eighths have the value of a single quarter. It’s as if the number ‘3’ below the triplet tells you: “We all know that three eighths don’t equal a quarter, but let’s make believe that they do.”

All types of triplets follow a simple rule: three in the time of two – even triplets that use different note values. If you apply this formula, three eighth note triplets will have to be played in the same amount of time as two ‘normal’ eighth notes (one full count). The difficult part in playing triplets is to make absolutely certain that all three notes are the same duration. We’ve

previously discussed the figure of two sixteenths and an eighth, and the figure of an eighth followed by two sixteenths. In each of those figures, there are three strokes in a full count, but they are not of equal length.

Let’s have some fun and perform a ‘Mr. Wizard’ science experiment. Look at the face of an analog clock (the ones with numbers in a circular pattern). As you watch the sweep second hand make its circular journey around the face, you are going to snap your fingers when the second hand reaches particular numbers. Here’s the first experiment: Snap your fingers at the numbers 12, 3, 6, and 12. You’ve just played the figure of two sixteenths and an eighth (along with the downbeat of the second count). For the second experiment, snap at the numbers 12, 6, 9, and 12. This time, you’ve played the rhythm of an eighth and two sixteenths. I’m sure that you’ve noticed that the amount of time between each of the snaps was not the same. Now for the last experiment, snap on numbers 12, 4, 8, and 12. Presto! You have just performed a slow (but rhythmically correct) triplet.

I know that it may seem like I’m beating a dead horse, but many musicians do not play triplets that are rhythmically correct. There is something that you can do to help insure that all triplets you play will be accurate. Count!

As shown in **Example #2** there are several different counting systems that are used when counting triplet figures. Feel free to use the system you prefer, as long as you are consistent and say the same set of syllables every time you encounter triplets. I like the syllables “One-and-ah” or “One-la-le”, because they give you an indication of where you are within the measure (count one or count three, for instance). If you use “One-and-ah”, notice that you will say the same syllables for both triplets and the figures of an eighth and two sixteenths. Other teachers prefer the syllables “One-tuh-tuh, two-tuh-tuh, etc” (in fact, you’ll see that in this very magazine a lot).

Triplets offer a wide variety of musical

expression to both the composer and the performer. Their main purpose is to briefly throw a rhythm that is in simple meter into a compound meter phrasing. As you take a look at **Example #3** notice that both measures will sound exactly the same as long as the speed of the beat remains constant from the first measure to the second (not the speed of the counts). In both measures, the first and third beats are divided into three equal parts. But, because the second measure is written in a compound meter, the eighth notes are not triplets.

Before getting into the exercise for this month, I’ve included a little ‘pre-exercise’ that may come in handy. Set your metronome to a quarter note equals sixty beats per minute. Now practice playing quarters, regular eighths, eighth note triplets, and sixteenth notes in various combinations. Start with a measure or two of each figure before going on to the next. When this gets comfortable, try only two counts of each figure, then one count. Next, mix and match the four different figures so that you can smoothly and easily flow from one division to another. Be sure to stay with the metronome, count out loud, and try to keep all the figures rhythmically accurate. When you reach the point where you can switch between all four figures in any order at any time, you’re ready to begin the exercise.

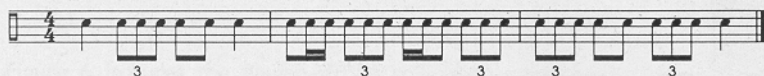
If you’ve been trying to follow the ‘right hand lead’ ideas that were presented in the August ‘88 issue, you may notice a slight problem with triplets. Since triplets contain an odd number of strokes, playing a single triplet will reverse your leading hand. If you begin playing a set of eighth note triplets on count one with your right hand, your left hand will land on the second count. This is okay. It’s better to simply switch leads for a few counts than to try and play triplet figures with anything other than alternate sticking.

Practice the exercise slowly at first, then bring the tempo up little by little. Next month, we’ll cover two other types of triplet figures. Until then, have fun and happy reading!

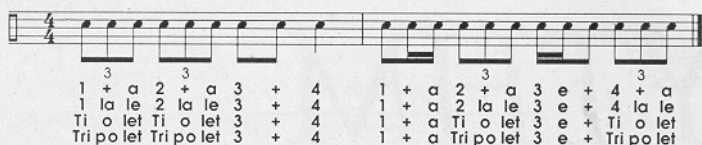
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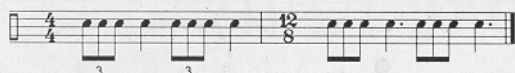
Example #1



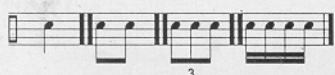
Example #2



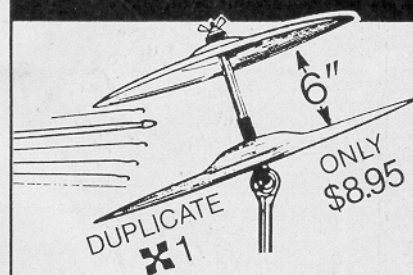
Example #3



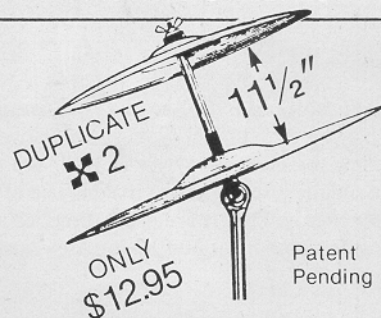
Pre-exercise



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