READING RHYTHMS

Syncopation

Text and examples by Norman Weinberg.

SYNCOPATION. TED REED wrote a book about it, Fred Astaire made a fortune dancing it, and Howard Cosell developed his style speaking it. But what is syncopation? In its most basic form, syncopation is a process whereby a normally unstressed portion of a measure is stressed.

The number counts in any measure are automatically stressed, so one measure of common (4/4) time would have four stressed beats. If you play a note on all four number counts, however, you're not syncopated. If instead of playing a stroke on each number you play a stroke on each "and" syllable, again there will be four attacks, but since each attack is on a weak portion of the bar, the end result would be a syncopated rhythm.

All popular music, including rock, jazz, reggae, heavy metal, and even country and western, is syncopated. Up until the age of ragtime music, a measure of 4/4 time commonly had its strongest pulses on beats one and three. Today's popular music stresses beats two and four, the backbeats. Again, the normally unstressed portion of the measure is being stressed. Since popular music has become so widespread, we tend to hear the stresses on beats two and four as the ones that are normally stressed – they no longer seem syncopated. If you want to be syncopated in popular music, you've got to stress the "and" syllables of the bar.

There are several different ways of making a note sound stressed. The first and most common method is by accenting. Play a rhythm of constant eighth notes. Now accent the "and" syllable of one of the counts. Since you've stressed one of the normally weaker portions of the bar, you've just played a syncopated rhythm. Simple.

Another technique of stressing certain parts of a bar is to play longer rhythmic values. We do this all the time when talking. By saying certain words slower than others (forcing them to take up more time) we stress the importance of that particular word within the sentence. Try saying these sentences and slow down on the words in bold type. I **hope** that you understand syncopation. I hope that **you** understand syncopation. I hope **that** you understand syncopation. The third sentence sounds more syncopated because the stress is on a normally unstressed portion of the sentence.

The first measure of example shows a rhythmic figure that is the basis of all syncopation. Let's rip it apart and see why. The first eighth note must be played on count one because it's the first note in the measure. Since it has the value of an eighth, it lasts until the "and" syllable of the first count. The following quarter note must be attacked on the "and" of count one because the previous eighth note's value is completed at that time. We know that quarter notes have the value of one full count in 4/4 time, but usually we've seen quarter notes falling on one number count and lasting until the next number count. In this figure, the quarter note begins on the "and" of a count and lasts until the next "and".

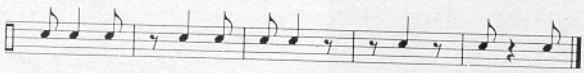
The last eighth in the figure begins on the "and" syllable of the second count, because the quarter's value is complete at that point. The figure of eighth-quarter-eighth places the longest note on the "and" syllable of the first count. Notice how the quarter note is longer than the notes around it. When playing music that is syncopated, you'll recognize this particular figure often. In fact, you might find this figure (along with a few variations) in almost every measure.

The other figures in example 1 are variations of the first. Any note in the eighth-quarter-eighth figure can be replaced with its complementary rest. The second figure in the example uses an eighth rest in place of the first eighth note, the third figure uses an eighth rest in place of the last eighth note, etc. Example 2 demonstrates a few additional variations on the same basic figure created by dividing one or more of the eighth notes into two sixteenth notes.

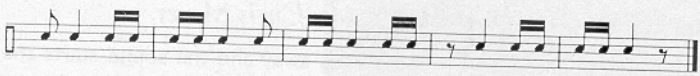
But wait – in the first measure of this month's exercise, you won't see the familiar figure of eighth-quarter-eighth. Instead, there is the figure of eighth-two quarters-eighth. Does this have any relation to the original syncopated figure? Take a look at example 3 and you'll see where this measure comes from. In the first bar, two eighth notes have been tied together. In the second measure, the two tied eighths have been replaced by a quarter. Both bars will sound exactly the same, but they look a little different. Example 4 is another variation on the eighth-quarter-eighth figure. In this example, the two tied eighth notes are again replaced by a single quarter note. While the second measure may not look like the eighth-quarter-eighth figure, you can now see the relationship between them.

When practicing this month's exercise on syncopation, look for the eighth-quarter-eighth figures and try to recognize them as a single visual picture instead of three individual notes. Also look for variations on the figure and strive to recognize them as well. You'll find that slow, careful practice will yield the fastest results. After you've made a good deal of progress on the exercise, increase the tempo. Remember to play everything relaxed and controlled – and above all, have fun. ®

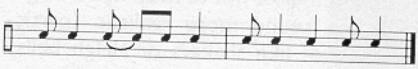
Example #1



Example #2



Example #3



Example #4