

MENTAL CUEING

Through pattern recognition, mental cueing can help you play complex parts, and learn them faster to boot. *By Norman Weinberg.*

FOR YEARS I'VE been looking for the secret – some sort of mental magic trick that will make playing percussion instruments easier. My students seem to want to find it too, and I've often wished I could tell them something like, "Just think about 'red feathers' during this difficult passage and the music will automatically play itself."

Well, believe it or not, I think I've found the answer, and while it's not quite as easy as just thinking about "red feathers," once you grasp the concept it's very easy and it *does* work. The secret was first pointed out to me several years ago during graduate school. There I was, sitting on the window ledge in the lobby, drilling flams on a practice pad, when a fellow student came up and gave me some advice. He told me to pay attention to the up strokes. He said that if I concentrated on getting the "up" strokes up, the down strokes would take care of themselves. I tried it . . . up, up, up . . . and to my surprise, the tempo of my flams increased about twenty percent instantly! This experience led me to believe that how you approach playing a certain passage *mentally* is just as important as how you play it *physically*. All I did differently was look at the performance of flams in another way.

You, too, know the secret. Maybe you've never given it much thought, but you use it all the time – when you learn a phone number, a locker combination, or your next door neighbor's name. Since the process doesn't really have a name, for our purposes let's just call it *cueing*.

Cueing is a word stolen directly from the world of drama. When actors learn their lines, they're still not quite ready for the performance – they must also learn the cues. For example, imagine an actor memorizing the line "Put all your money in this paper bag!" When does he actually say the line? How about after the bank teller says, "May I help you?" The sentence "May I help you?" is the cue for the actor to recite the rehearsed lines. No matter how well the lines are said, if they're said at the wrong time there's bound to be trouble.

Let's apply this same technique of cueing to a musical situation. Imagine you're playing with a band. You're in the verse now, but the chorus is coming up and you've been practicing a certain

fill that will lead the group from the verse to the chorus of the song perfectly. You know that the fill is exactly one measure long, and you've practiced it until you know just how you want to play it. How do you know exactly when to begin the fill? The secret is to cue on some musical factor within the song.

For example, if the song has lyrics, you might cue on a word which falls on the last beat before the fill and then begin the fill on the next beat. If you're aware of the structure of the song, you may decide that you're more comfortable counting the bars that make up the verse leading into the chorus, and begin playing the fill on the eighth one. Perhaps the bass player or guitarist plays a signature "lick" that catches your ear just before the fill. In this case, you would play until you heard your musical cue.

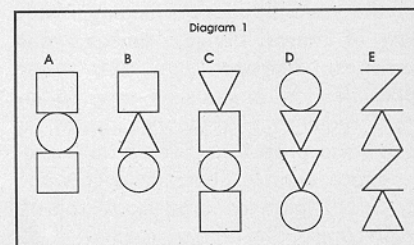
The cueing technique is something that all symphony percussionists are familiar with. It's not uncommon for them to have to sit through sixty or more measures of rest before an entrance. Rather than count all those bars of rest, most players only count during the first rehearsal. If they notice the clarinet entering at forty-three measures into the rest, they mark their parts in pencil to indicate that entrance. Then during the other rehearsals, they just sit back and wait for the clarinet. Once they hear it, they can begin counting from measure forty-three. But you don't have to be playing in a symphony to take advantage of this technique. No matter what the musical situation, cueing from other musical factors can help you realize where to play and where not to play.

Ok, so now you're going to use mental cueing to help you play a passage at the proper time. But how about using it to help you play the passage in the first place?

I've had students who falter and stagger over a measure, then (believe it or not) try playing the same measure again faster! It's a little like someone trying to exit a room by walking through the wall. When their nose bounces off the surface, they back up and tell themselves, "Oh, maybe if I go faster, I'll make it." After getting a running start, the wall is still stronger than they are, and their nose takes another beating. "Now I've got the solution! I'll get a running start, tighten up all my muscles, and make a funny face. Then I'll get through the

wall." Well, guess what's going to happen? How many times will they try to get out of the room by using the wall before they try another route? Perhaps a door might be a good idea. Maybe the room only has three walls and they could leave by taking another direction. If there's no door, perhaps they could crawl over a wall. There's always an easier way to get out of the room than beating your head against the wall.

Look at example #1. You might recognize this as pattern number 13 from page five of George Lawrence Stone's book, *Stick Control*.



When first looking at this exercise, you can quickly see that there's a pattern: play four strokes with your right hand and follow that by four strokes with your left hand. This is an easy pattern to see, an easy pattern to memorize, and therefore an easy pattern to perform. When playing this particular exercise, your speed of performance will not be limited by the music, but instead will be limited by your ability to play four successive strokes with each hand. When playing you won't be thinking of sixteen individual strokes, you'll be thinking of the pattern of four rights/four lefts.

In example #2, the pattern of RLLRLRLRLRLRL (number 11 from *Stick Control*) can be approached as a right hand on counts one and three. Count the syllables for eighth notes (1 "and" 2 "and" 3 "and" 4 "and"), put your right hand on counts one and three, and fill in all the holes with your left hand. Again, you're not playing sixteen notes, you're playing a single idea.

For a comparison, look at example #3 (number 24 from *Stick Control*). Is there a pattern in this exercise too? For some reason, almost every one of my students thinks that this

particular exercise is the most difficult one on the page. When I ask students to tell me what's going on, they usually tell me "right, right, left, left, right, left, etc." In other words, they're looking at this exercise as sixteen individual strokes. Bad idea, they've already hit the wall.

Just like examples #1 and #2, let's look and see if there might be an easier way. Can you turn these sixteen different strokes into just a couple of ideas? Looking at the first four notes of example #3, you see a set of doubles (RRLL) or "double, double." The next set of four notes (RLRR) happens to be one of the standard twenty-six rudiments, and is called the paradiddle. Ok, now try playing the first measure by thinking to yourself "double, double, paradiddle." While these three ideas may not be the most efficient way of looking at this pattern, it will be easier to perform than thinking about sixteen different strokes. For one thing, you won't have to worry about starting the first measure with your right hand and the second measure with your left hand because the paradiddle automatically reverses the leading hand. Try it – it works.

You've all heard the question: "Is the glass half full or half empty?" Both answers are correct. One answer is not better than the other; each is simply a different way of looking at the same thing. Let me make a visual example. Notice the pictures in diagram #1. When you look at the first one, do you see two squares with a circle in the middle, or a circle with a square on top and bottom? Both answers are correct – some people may see one thing while others see something different.

Even though both answers are correct, I'll tell you the wrong answer. I'll bet you don't see two plane figures consisting of four equal length sides and four 90 degree angles, between which sits another plane figure bounded by a single curved line every point of which is equally distant from the center (that's exactly what I saw, Norman . . . Ed.). These things aren't "plane figures," they're squares and circles!

It's been said that the human brain contains the best pattern recognition system in the world. Before you can recognize a pattern, however, you must have a certain amount of knowledge. This is where musical experience comes in handy. You can't cue off a paradiddle if you don't know what a paradiddle is. You can't find the door if you don't know what one looks like.

Example No. 1



Example No. 2



Example No. 3



Do you want to have some fun? Copy some of the other figures in the diagram, then show them to a few friends. Let them look at one of the figures for exactly one second, and then ask them to draw the same picture. Since these figures are fairly simple, they'll probably have no problem. Then, ask them how they memorized the picture so fast. Different people are going to see them in different ways.

Could there be another way to look at example #3 which would be just as valid as "double, double, paradiddle?" How about thinking that the two doubles (RRLL) are part of a five stroke roll? Now, instead of three ideas, you can perform this exercise by thinking about a five stroke roll connected to a paradiddle. "Double, double, paradiddle" now becomes "five, paradiddle." Try playing the example using this cue.

It's even possible to look at it in yet another

way. Consider that a paradiddle is nothing more than two single strokes and a double. Now, the entire example consists of double strokes except that counts "three" and "three and" are single strokes. Try playing only double strokes, and cue off count three for two consecutive single strokes. Again, you've broken down sixteen individual strokes into something that can be more easily handled. Which of these methods works the best for you?

So far we've talked about three different methods of cueing this example. We've cued off the types of strokes being played (double, double), the names of familiar patterns (paradiddle, five stroke roll), and we've cued off of a particular physical action on a particular count of the bar (the syllables "3" and "3 and" are single strokes). There is at least one more method of cueing: from the sound that is produced when you play.

Example No. 4 A



Example No. 4 B



Example No. 5



Example No. 6



Example #4A is another pattern from *Stick Control* (number 33). In order to get a feel for this style of cueing, play your right hand on the head of the drum and play your left hand on the rim. Notice the rhythm that is created by your right hand (example 4B). To play this example while cueing from a rhythm, simply play the cue rhythm with your right hand and fill in all the eighth note holes with your left hand. As you play the example, sing the right hand rhythm in your mind's ear. I'm sure that you'll find it's possible for you to sing the cue rhythm much faster than you have the chops to play it. Again, the limits of your ability are placed on your hands instead of your head.

Cueing can be applied to other musical situations in addition to the *Stick Control* book. Look at example #5. This is a little run from *Tambourin Chinois* by Fritz Kreisler, arranged for mallets by George Hamilton Green. Even though it's written in the key of two flats, this particular run has a load of sharps, which was giving one of my students a lot of trouble. She just couldn't seem to remember which notes were in the run - sometimes she'd play an A#, sometimes she'd leave out the D# and play a D natural in its place. When I asked her to tell me what was going on during these two bars, she said "F#, G#, A, G#, F#, etc." She just wasn't

seeing the pattern. Here comes the wall again!

I asked her to play two octaves of the E major scale, and because she had practiced all the scales, she played it flawlessly. I then asked her to play the same E major scale, but beginning on the F# instead (the second note of the scale), and again there was no problem. Then I asked her to play the same E major scale beginning on the F#, but also to leave out the last D# before the upper E. As before, making a minor change to something she could already do well was not difficult. Then, when I asked her to play those same two measures in the music, the light bulb flashed - she found the pattern. Her trick to remembering the notes of the run was to simply play the E major scale with two minor changes. She hasn't forgotten or missed this run since that lesson. Remembering the cue is easier than remembering all those individual notes.

Again, it takes a certain amount of musical knowledge to recognize and perform patterns. You can't cue from a paradiddle if you've never played one, and you can't cue off an E major scale if you've no idea what notes make up the scale in the first place. This is a good example of why learning the basics is important. I guess that's why they're called basics in the first place.

Perhaps a drummer needs to be a little paranoid in the sense of finding patterns that

may or may not be obvious. People who are paranoid seem to make everything that happens in their lives fit some sort of master plan or grand conspiracy. A good drummer should be able to take almost any musical passage and make it fit into something he/she can relate to. In music, patterns make the difference between understanding and chaos. Without patterns, there is nothing for your ear to grab, nothing for your mind to understand, and nothing for you to cue from. Patterns do exist in music, and the trick is finding them.

The pattern in example #1 is easy to see. Example #6 is a lot more difficult. This passage is from Lou Harrison's *Song of Quetzalcoatl*. (Just thought you'd like to know that Quetzalcoatl is a mythical god of the Aztecs and Toltecs, visually resembling a plumed serpent. - Ed.) In this percussion ensemble, player number four uses five tom toms (notated from the "C" space up to the "G" space in treble clef) and a bass drum (notated in the lowest space on the staff). Take a look at this example and see if you can find any patterns. Go ahead, take a few minutes, then come back and I'll tell you how I see it.

This is a little more difficult because we're dealing with patterns on two levels. There are the rhythmic patterns and also the orchestration patterns concerning which drums (or sounds) are played. Harrison makes it a little easier by using slur markings. The first two measures are made up of two patterns. So that we can talk about them, let's number the toms from one to five moving from the lowest drum to the highest. The first pattern consists of playing the outside and middle drums only (toms one, five, five, and three). The second pattern plays tom one and then jumps up to tom five. After playing the highest tom, simply move down the row of toms (5, 4, 3, 2, 1) in quarter notes. Now reach up and hit tom three between toms two and one. This will automatically give you the proper eighth note rhythm at the proper time. When this pattern is complete, go back and play the first pattern again (toms 1, 5, 5, and 3).

The third measure has a much more complex set of patterns, so let's look at the drum pattern first. After the note on tom one, the pattern is 321, 21; 321, 21; 321, 21; 321, 21. In other words, it's a five drum pattern which is repeated four times (look at the slur markings). The rhythmic pattern is much more difficult to locate because it's notated in the time signature of 6/4, even though the pattern itself is in 7/16. But here's what's going on. Every time you hit the lowest tom, you play an eighth note, every time you hit either of the other toms, you play sixteenths. The overall pattern repeats itself every seven sixteenth notes. When you finish playing this pattern four times, return to the first pattern (toms 1, 5, 5, and 3) and then the second (1, 5, 4, 3, 2, 3, 1). Now leave out the last stroke on tom one, and play the bass drum one count later.

If you think that these patterns are so complex that it's easier to just play the passage while reading the rhythms and proper drums, you might be right; but then you're reading forty-nine musical symbols. Is it easier to remember three patterns, no matter how complex, than forty-nine symbols? Tell you what, try reading this passage note by note, and practice it for three minutes. Then try practicing the patterns for three minutes. See which way is more successful for you, and make your own decision. ®