READING RHYTHMS

Text and examples by Norman Weinberg.

THE WESTERN MUSICAL notation system has developed over a period of several hundred years. While this system works pretty well most of the time, it's heavily biased towards rhythms that increase or decrease in duration by a power of two. The idea that two 32nds equal a 16th, two 16ths equal an 8th, two 8ths equal a quarter, two quarters equal a half, and two half notes equal a whole is one of the basic building blocks and fundamental rules of our music (see **Example 1** for the notational value chart that accompanied this column in the first issue of RHYTHM).

With everything neatly working in "two's," it only seems logical that the system runs into some notational problems whenever a composer wants to divide a given amount of time into three, five, six, seven, or nine divisions. Don't let these problems scare you off! You already know how to deal with a few of the most common obstacles. During the last several months we've covered triplets (dividing a durational value into three equal parts) and duplets (used to divide a beat into two equal parts in compound meter).

One of the most notable features of duplets and triplets is the additional number that is required above (or sometimes below) the notes. These numbers tell the performer something like: "I know there aren't three 8th notes in the value of a quarter, but let's just pretend that there are, OK?" The number is an addition to the "normal" notation, and for that reason, duplets, triplets, and other similar notes are sometimes called "false notation." The performer is being asked to play a division that is "false" to our basic notational system. This month, we'll be taking a look at the "false" values of quintuplets (five divisions), septuplets (seven divisions), and nine divisions (a committee).

The Rules

The trick to performing these rhythms comes in two parts. The first is to know the rules which determine how many "false" values equal a "true" value. Take a look at **Example 2** and we'll discuss how this chart works. Let's say that you're playing a piece of music in common time and you see five 16th notes, all beamed together with the number "5" above them. How many counts will those five notes take up? Simple...according to the chart, "five equals four." To say this another way, five 16ths are going to take the same amount of time as four 16ths – the value of a quarter note or the same as one full count.

What would happen if the five notes in the false grouping weren't 16ths, but 8ths instead? Well, the formula in the chart would still apply, but now five 8ths will take up the same amount of time as four 8ths – the value of a half note or the same as two full counts.

The asterisks in the chart show the note values that are used only when dealing with music in compound time. Since it's easy to divide any value into four equal parts without false notation (quarters to 16ths, 8ths to 32nds, etc.) you won't ever see these numbers above a group of notes unless the music is written in a compound meter. As an example, you might run across a false grouping of eight 8th notes during a measure of 9/8 time.

Now for the second and most important part of the trick: Dividing a certain amount of time into five, seven, or nine equal parts is not verifiably more difficult than dividing that same amount of time into two or four divisions. From the time you heard your first nursery rhyme, you've been hearing music that is conceived on even durational divisions (perhaps because this is the way our notation works?). From the time you started playing your first backbeat, you've been playing music that operated on this same basic premise. Playing even divisions is definitely more traditional and comfortable, more familiar and everyday, but not easier than quintuplets or septuplets. You just need to get your ears and hands used to them.

Example 3 is one of the most valuable exercises that you can practice as a contemporary drummer. Notice that the meter in this example is 1/4. The meter isn't really critical, but the idea that each notational grouping takes the same amount of time is.

Set your metronome to a quarter note equals 60bpm and repeat the first figure (a single quarter note) until you get comfortable with it. Then move on to the two 8th notes, 8th triplets, 16ths, quintuplets, etc. Remember to stay on each figure until it feels relaxed and you get a firm handle on the timing.

Once you can play each of the figures easily, start combining the figures into phrases of two or three units. A good way to begin working these combinations is by increasing the number of attacks per beat. In other words, play the patterns of 4, 5, 6 or 5, 6, 7 before trying patterns like 4, 9, 5 or 3, 7, 5. If you want to have some fun, try playing your social security number, your phone number, random numbers generated by the Rand Corporation, or anything else that you can think of.

Once you're "home free" with these rhythms, set your metronome to a quarter equals 120bpm and play each measure in the time of two metronome clicks. You will notice that you're playing the same speed as before, but now the metronome is playing twice as fast – you're relating the quintuplets (for instance) against two beats instead of one.

Broken Rhythms

Before getting into this month's exercise, it might be a good idea to take a look at some "broken" rhythms. Broken rhythms occur whenever these figures are broken up between notes of different values.

In **Example 4**, the first measure consists of a grouping of quintuplet 8th notes. Of these five 8ths, the second and fourth are divided into two 16ths each. Because there are always "five in the time of four", this figure takes up two full counts. The second group of quintuplets is made up of 16th notes. How can you tell? Well, this figure can't be a group of quintuplet 8ths, because it doesn't have the value of five 8th notes. It does, however, have the value of five 16ths. Again, since there are always five in the time of four, this broken figure takes up one full count.

The second measure of the example uses a base rhythm of nine 8ths in the time of eight 8ths (the entire measure). The third measure is created from two broken groupings of seven 8ths in the time of four.

Before getting involved in this month's exercise, spend some time on Example 3. If you're not comfortable with placing these rhythms over one or two beat's time, you're never going to get through the exercise. Remember, this really isn't difficult, it's just not as familiar to you as simple quarters and 8ths. It's going to take a good deal of practice until you feel at home with these rhythms. But, as they say – "No pain, no gain". Have fun! ®

Figure 1.

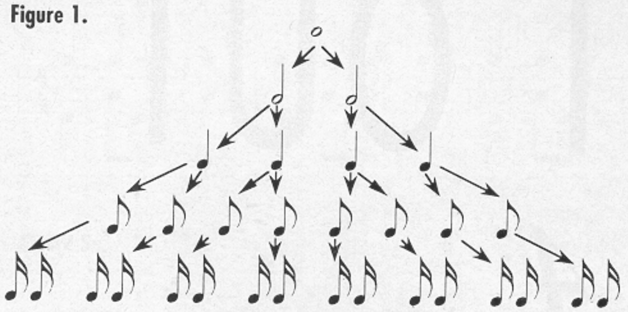


Figure 2.

*2 = 3
3 = 2
*4 = 3
5 = 4
6 = 4
7 = 4
*8 = 9
9 = 8
10 = 8

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

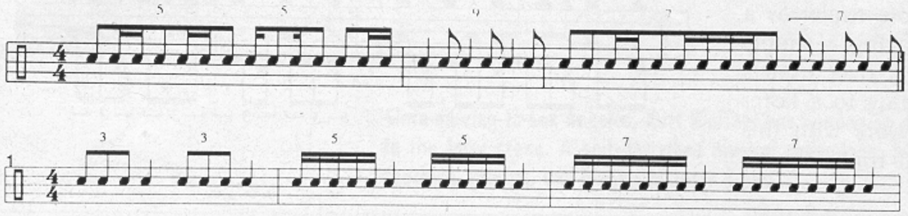
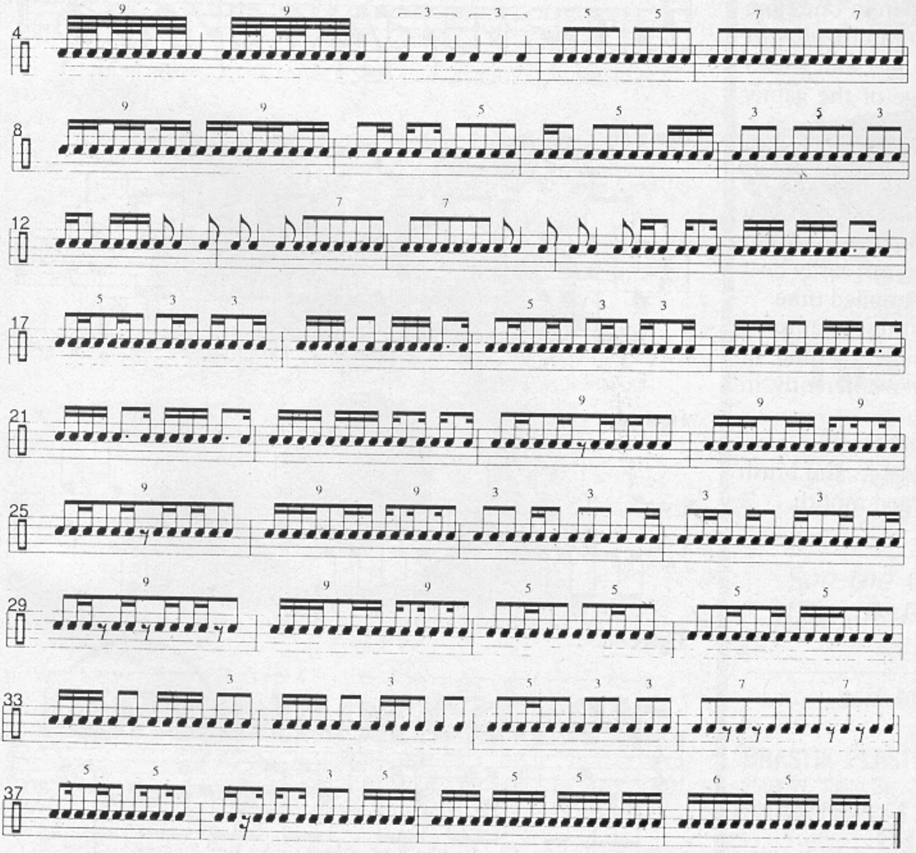


Figure 5.



All examples in this column were produced using Finale, courtesy of Coda Software.