READING RHYTHMS

Notational Oddities

Text and examples by Norman Weinberg.

TIME FOR A little change. In the past, this column has dealt primarily with the notation and performance of rhythm – you know...note values, counting systems, etc. This month, we're going to take a little detour to learn about one of the notational oddities that can occur in the *real* world of reading percussion music: rhythmic abbreviations.

In a way, these abbreviations are very similar to contractions or acronyms in the English language. Words like "can't," "I'm," or "she'll," are popular in contemporary language because they are quicker to say and write than their complete counterparts. Likewise, acronyms such as ASCAP or PASIC are springing up all over the place because it just takes too long to write or say American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers or Percussive Arts Society International Convention.

With rhythmic abbreviations, certain rhythms can be written quicker, but remember that no time is saved during a performance – each note still gets its full time value regardless of how abbreviated its script. Take a look at **Example 1**. Both measures in this example indicate the same rhythm. In the first measure, you see a series of sixteen 16th notes. The second measure shows one of the abbreviations that can be used in place of the sixteen different notes.

As you can see, writing all those 16th notes would take sixteen motions of your pencil or pen, the stems would add another sixteen strokes, and the beams would add eight more movements. The abbreviated version uses only two noteheads, two stems, and four slashes. Obviously, there can be no argument that eight movements are faster than forty!

Fair enough, you say. But why would two half notes with two slashes through their stems indicate a full measure of 16ths? Good Question. The slashes are the abbreviated symbols for note values with beams.

An analogy can be made between rhythmic abbreviations and penny candy. I remember riding my bike to a small drug store near my home. With twenty to thirty cents in my pocket, I could really put myself into a sugar coma. I'd tell the guy behind the counter that I wanted six cents worth of this, three cents worth of that, or ten cents worth of whatever.

The amount of candy that I could buy was related to two factors. First, the price of each type of candy, and second, the amount of money I wanted to spend on that particular flavor. If I bought ten cents worth of candy that sold for a penny a piece, then I ended up with ten pieces of candy. If I bought ten cents worth of candy that sold for two pennies each, I ended up with only five pieces of candy.

So, what does penny candy have to do with rhythmic abbreviations? Slashes through a note's stem are abbreviated beams. In the second measure of the first example, the two slashes indicate the type of note which has two beams (16ths). The fact that the slashes are through the half note's stem, means that the composer is asking for "a half note's worth of 16ths". And everyone knows that eight 16ths equal the value of a half note. Put two of these figures next to each other and presto – a full bar of 16ths!

In **Example 2**, the half note's stem has a single slash. Since each slash is an abbreviation for a beam, the composer is asking you to perform "a half note's worth of 8ths" (the note value that has one beam). Because 8th notes are longer than 16ths, there will be only four 8ths in the time of the half note (like more expensive candy).

The second measure of this example shows four quarter notes. The first two quarters have a single slash – indicating 8th notes, while the last two quarters have two slashes – indicating 16th notes. For the first two counts, each figure represents a quarter's worth of 8ths. The last two figures represent a quarter's worth of 16ths. If you're checking yourself for the proper interpretation, the first two measures of the example should sound exactly like the last two bars.

Generally speaking, abbreviations are easy to perform. You simply fill up the abbreviated note's amount of time with the rhythmic values specified by the number of slashes through the stem. But things can get a little more complicated if the abbreviated note is already beamed.

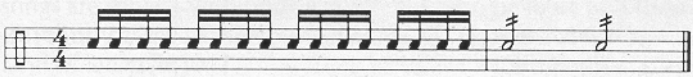
In **Example 3**, the very first figure has a single slash through the stem which should indicate 8th notes. But the abbreviated note is itself an 8th note! What gives? Earlier, I stated that slashes through a stem are abbreviated beams, but it would be a mistake to say that a single slash always means 8th notes. In the case of the first figure in the example, the 8th note already has one beam, so the slash serves as an abbreviation for a second beam – 16th notes. In other words, each 8th note with a slash should be interpreted as "an 8th note's worth of 16ths" (two 16ths). As before, you can check yourself by comparing the last two bars of the example with the first two bars. They are simply the same two measures written without the abbreviations.

Example 4 carries this process a little further by adding a slash to 16th notes. Again, since the slash is an abbreviation for a beam, and 16ths already have two beams, the composer is asking for "a 16th note's worth of 32nds".

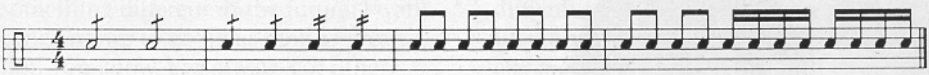
One last possibility for confusion: standard percussion notation uses abbreviated 32nd notes to indicate a roll. If you run into something like **Example 5**, you need to decide if the composer is asking for a roll that lasts the value of a half note or a half note's value of 32nds. Since the title of this column is *Reading Rhythms* and not *Reading Rolls*, assume abbreviations for now.

Next month, the grand finalé and conclusion of this column. Study up, get down, and get prepared. Until then, enjoy. ®

Example 1.



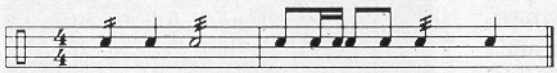
Example 2.



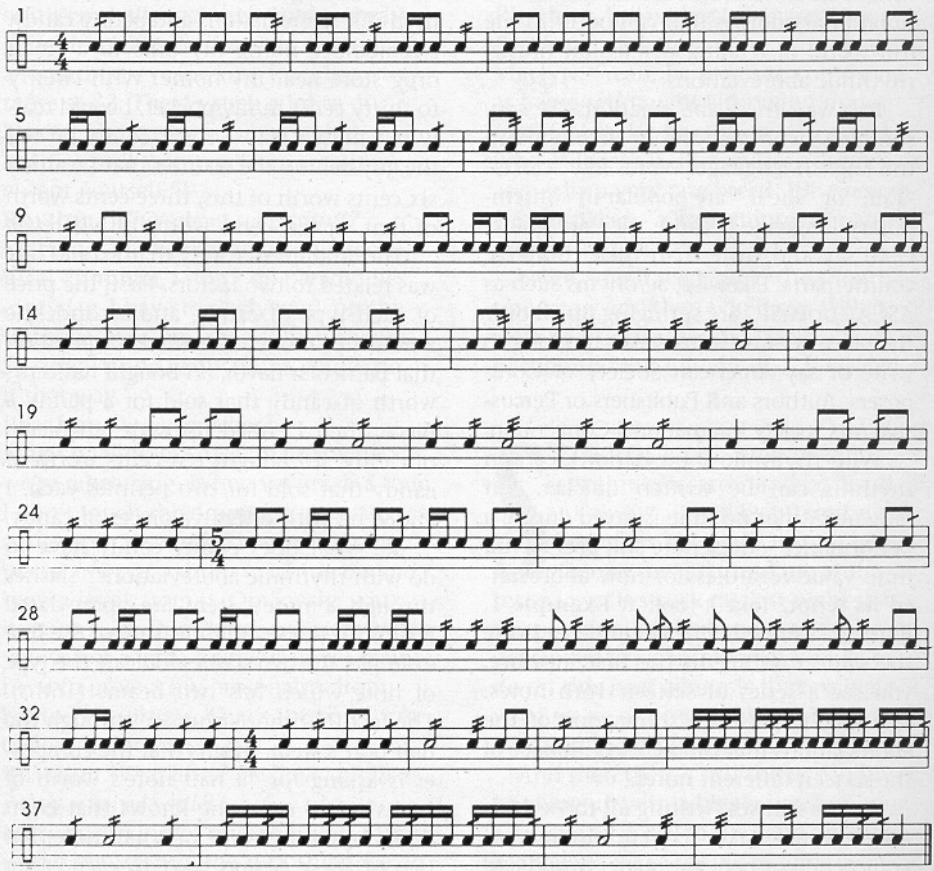
Example 3.

Example 4.

Example 5.



Composite Exercise.



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