# Rhythm & Time

It’s common for most music teachers to teach their students to count meter while playing, either out loud or internally, as a way of establishing the rhythmic cadence of a piece of music. Theoretically, in this way the time signature of a piece and the note values contained are ingrained into the overall feeling of "time" as perceived by the student. A metronome or drum machine can be used at this point to establish tempo, and the speed at which a piece is played is typically left up to the student, within the boundaries of interpretive license. It is generally understood that the metronome is phased out over time as the student begins to establish an inner connection to the rhythmic flow of the piece. In this capacity it functions like "training wheels", allowing a student to develop a connection to the basic pulse that moves the music along. When that pulse has become internalized it is no longer needed and the "training wheels" come off. So runs the theory.

In practice, however, the "ideal" is almost never the case. In the twelve years I’ve taught I have encountered students of all varieties; those for whom the metronome became a substantial aid as well as those for whom it was a gigantic stumbling block. Sometimes these were one and the same. Some students seem gifted with an uncanny connection to rhythm that seems innate, not at all the result of training or sophistication while yet others are the exact opposite, seemingly incapable of establishing a basic flow or continuity. For the former, work with a metronome seems almost an addendum, or worse yet, it has a distinct tendency to mechanize a certain fluidity already present, sterilizing, as it were an organic quality already present in their playing. For the latter class of people, the metronome can become a relentless proselytizer, emphasizing without fail what they are already bad at and struggling with. Here also it has the effect of potentially transforming an extant weakness into a latent weakness; the problem of mechanical playing. I should emphasize that these two classes of people are extreme ends of a spectrum; most people fall somewhere between the two in terms of natural ability. It is not, however, as if one is "good" and the other simply "bad". Rather, I have found that they tend to balance each other out. What the "gifted" student possesses in terms of capability he often lacks in terms of self determination. Conversely, some of the most determined students I've had have often had to struggle mightily for each gain. As most teachers could tell you, in the art of music, it is passion, not aptitude that counts. More importantly, however, music is not a competition in which the goal is "being good". Rather it is a particular mode of expression in which uniqueness is (or should) be valued. It is only in the context of spending as much time as a teacher tends to do with the "gifted" that you begin to discern their hidden weakness and at the same time the hidden strength of the "less gifted" student.

There used to be a guitar teacher in a studio next to me who kept his metronome clicking along for the entire duration of each thirty minute lesson. Although there was an obvious annoyance factor, I was intrigued; even the more so because while he insisted that each student play to the metronome, from what I heard I could tell that his own rhythm lacked . . . rhythm. Now I need to clarify here, because I don't mean to say that he couldn't play "in time". But, as I hope to make clear, I don't think of "rhythm" and being "in time" as remotely the same thing. Anyone can be

"in time" (or "on time" as it were ). It's a very perfunctory concept that has little to do with rhythm as I've experienced it. Rhythm is a freight train that you grab hold of, a wind that moves through you; a "groove" that you slide into. We have colorful names for the qualities that certain rhythms evoke like "samba", "bossa", "swing", "shuffle" and "funk" to name just a few. The words "meter" (a measurement of length) and "time", however, are quantitative, not qualitative. They evoke numbers and spreadsheets not mood, color, or expression. Now I'm fully aware of the context within which the analytical method functions. I'm not saying that there isn't a time and a place for numbers. But numbers are symbolic; they represent by nature. Just as an inch is an abstract unit of measurement, so formal meter and time are communicative but abstract and symbolic. They work great until you mistake them for the thing itself. Arguably, however, symbolic confusion of this sort is built into the pedagogy of much music education today. In fact, it's built into Western education as a whole. Rhythm is change and continuity, and we create it by moving. As I tell my students, however, your thoughts have no moving parts. Your brain is notoriously bad at keeping rhythm precisely because the thing trying to keep the rhythm is the same thing moving the rhythm along. In other words the judge is the advocate. It can't work because it's impossible. This is why I suggest using a foot or some other physical motion to keep the rhythm "moving along". Even breath works. The head simply can't be trusted. Rhythm has to be "built into" the playing mechanism.

Delegating this important rhythmic connection to a robotic click track is simply outsourcing the mental problem. A click has no "roundness" to it and in my experience the digital "beep" is even worse. It also tends to interfere with the natural ebb and flow of the rhythm itself, continuous motion that creates cohesion.

The physical components of this rhythmic malady tend to manifest in a playing style that emphasizes what Abby Whiteside called "note-wise" playing. Music, like language, is made up of phrases. If you insert equal space between each spoken word and then remove all accentation, you will arrive at a form of speech very similar to the way that a student taught to play "note-wise" translates music. Rather than teaching a movement suitable to the rhythmic expression of a phrase, many students are taught that the most important facet of playing correctly is "getting the notes right" and playing "in time ". With such an extreme focus on the material aspect of playing (the quantitative) it is small wonder that most of the students I receive from other teachers have to be re-educated into understanding the "immaterial" (qualitative) aspect of playing. This includes such concepts as what to do when you're not playing (what Charlie Hunter called "playing the rests" and the importance of silence in molding the phrase), the use of the arm as opposed to the fingers in playing both the guitar and piano, singing the line, poise, relaxation, and breathing technique. Many of these ideas fly directly in the face of common wisdom regarding the instrument and I very often face significant resistance from students when trying to introduce them to new techniques. It is a playing style predicated upon finesse, not brute force, elegant as opposed to merely functional. It is not at all focused upon the gluttonous acquisition of new concepts but on the continued refinement of the playing technique such that musicality becomes integrated into an effortless playing mechanism.

In this context rhythm is sine qua non of musical technique. We encounter rhythm daily in the plethora of our experience. Learning to hear this rhythm is instrumental in establishing a connection to a musical rhythm. In turn this innate musical rhythm needs to be externalized, becoming a physical motion from which our sense of "time" is generated. The "groove" is a frequency that you learn to vibrate in time with; too much conscious awareness can tend to derail this primary process. For many of my students and for myself this understanding has been transformative, giving a context within which to understand physical and mental struggles with the art of music, one that as it were, requires no admission price other than humility and a willingness to "get with it".