

Essential Rhythmic Concepts For the Serious Musician

A guide to necessary, advanced, and often under-studied
rhythmic concepts from a world music perspective.



Written by
Jake Jamieson

Letter from the Author

This book was created to help all serious musicians achieve better rhythmic clarity and understanding. As an educator, I feel that there is a general lack of rhythmic education in K-12 public schools and university curriculum. We over-emphasize melodic ear training and deemphasize rhythmic ear training as if rhythm were secondary in status to melody. A serious musician will recognize that melody and rhythm are inherently intertwined and only through patient development of rhythmic concepts can your melodic understanding truly begin to blossom.

As a drummer and percussionist, these ideas are coming from my own experience studying world and popular music styles, including Ghanaian Agbekor, Indian Classical music, Cuban son and mambo, Afrobeat, Flamenco, Jazz, Funk, and Brazilian popular, samba, and folkloric styles. My aim for this book is not to teach these rhythms, but to draw ideas from these deep traditions that will apply to the approach of any musician. Therefore, I am not writing a book just for drummers, but am trying to harness the knowledge that I have gained as a percussionist and make these concepts applicable for all musicians. I have constructed simple exercises that build in complexity to help any instrumentalist to achieve better time, rhythmic creativity, phrase awareness, development of rhythmic ideas, and the freedom to play around the beat, moving fluidly through the measure.

I hope that these exercises are useful and that they challenge you to think in new and insightful ways. If you get stuck with any one exercise put the book down for ten minutes and do another activity and then come back to the exercise with a clean slate and calm mind. As you face each exercise, choose to see the challenge as a wall and instead of running full speed into the wall again and again, take a minute to step back and breathe. From a safe distance, you can then examine the wall and find a way around it, rather than straight through it. I wish you the best of luck in your efforts to break down all of your rhythmic walls and to become the best musician that you aim to be.

Jake Jamieson

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-Learn to make friends with your metronome so that good time becomes second nature. This chapter shows you unique ways to approach life and music with good time in mind.

Chapter 2: Feeling Extended Phrases

-Use this chapter to help you feel longer phrases of beats, while still feeling free to play your musical phrases with lengths of your choosing within those larger phrases.

Chapter 3: Shifting Gears

-In this chapter I explain the South Indian classical “Jati” system, which simplifies the counting of complex subdivisions. The Jati system is then utilized in exercises which force the musician to switch fluidly between eighth notes, triplets, sixteenth notes, quintuplets, and so on.

Chapter 4: Accented Pulses Over Subdivisions

-Here, I build off of the foundation established in Chapter 3 and explore various accent groupings in multiple subdivisions.

Chapter 5: Applying Groupings to Musical Situations

-In this chapter I have provided a series of etudes that utilize the skills learned in Chapter 4. This section allows the musician to understand how to musically and creatively apply these concepts in useful ways.

Chapter 6: Utilizing Various Note Groupings while Switching Subdivisions

-This chapter combines the ideas developed in Chapters 3 and 4 and takes them one step further so that the exercises now switch between subdivisions. Not only will you have to play various accent groupings, but also you will learn to do so while effortlessly switching between subdivisions.

Chapter 7: Deconstructing Our Accent Groupings

-In this chapter, the exercises build off of those in Chapter 6 and begin to take notes out of the subdivisions, forcing you to truly internalize the subdivisions and allowing you to move beyond playing all the notes to being able to play the spaces.

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-This chapter removes the crutch of constant subdivision and will force you to understand where specific partials of the subdivisions fall without the help of a constant downbeat pulse.

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-Using the rhythmic groupings established in Chapter 4, this chapter breaks down odd time signatures with a simple approach so that even the most complex time signature can be felt in an accessible fashion.

Chapter 11: Inverting Your Conception of Time

-This chapter will push the readers' mental capabilities as they are forced to manipulate how they think about metronomic time.

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-Here I discuss simple and complex mathematic formulas internalized by Indian musicians to help the reader expand their rhythmic concepts to a level of greater control and complexity.

Chapter 1: Stop looking at your watch!

Start Internalizing Time!

The steady beat of tempo is the most basic rhythm of any composition. Therefore, I wish to spend some time on the subject of internalizing time. Without a functioning amount of this skill, the chapters that follow will be of little use.

Hopefully you have been taught to practice with a metronome for the majority of your musical career. If not now is the perfect time to start.

For those wise musicians who have been continually practicing with a metronome, the purpose of this chapter is to help you internalize metronomic time so that you can free your self from thinking about the time and increase your ability to feel the time.

We want to get to the point where steady time becomes effortless. These exercises are designed to get you thinking and acting outside of the box, so please put your ego aside and be open to a new approach.

1. To get started, go find your metronome, set it in front of you, and let it run at 100 beats per minute while you finish reading this paragraph. Don't focus on the metronome, but let the pulsing sink into your ears.

Every time you play your instrument, the time should feel just as comfortable as when you are reading this sentence. The comfort resides in your ability to feel the time, yet play whatever you choose. We divide the beats into even pulses, because it is mathematically easy to comprehend, it facilitates the process of playing with others, and it is easy to notate.

What I hope that you achieve is the freedom to break away from these mathematical subdivisions. This book is structured to help you feel grounded in your metronomic time and your comprehension of mathematical rhythms, but in its construction, the thoroughness of this book is geared to free you from metronomic time to feel as though you can play whatever you choose and still be acutely aware of the pulse and the your place in the form of the music.

2. Leaving the metronome on, begin to count aloud in 4/4 time (i.e. “one, two, three, four”). Go get a glass of water and continue to count along. If you need to get the glass and water in a different room, take the metronome along with you and continue to count.

Drink the water and count in your head as you do so. After, come and proceed to number three.

3. This time, continue counting aloud, but leave the metronome in this room and go into a different room where you cannot hear the metronome. In that other room, count out a four-bar phrase (i.e. “one, two, three, four” repeated four times)

Come back into the room with the metronome and see if you are still in time with it. Through this process, you are slowly training yourself to internalize the time by pulling away from it.

4. Now, we are going to keep the metronome at 100 beats per minute, but now control the volume (complex metronomes can program in this pattern) so that you only hear every other beat. Do not watch the metronome if it has a moving arm on its screen, continue to count aloud, and see how well you can stay in time.

5. Building off of the idea started in number four, we can now control the metronome in a variety of ways that will strengthen our time. Start with the metronome only producing sound on the first beat of the measure, then only the first beat of the four-bar phrase. Another great exercise is to have it produce sound for four beats and then be silent for four beats.

6. While you cook your next meal, turn the metronome on in the kitchen to 80 beats per minute. Let your body move naturally first and just let the pulses fill the kitchen. Most likely, your movements will fall into time with the metronome. Challenge yourself and try cooking an entire meal where all of your movements are in time with the metronome.

7. The next time you pick up your mp3 player to listen to music on the run, pick up your metronome instead.

I find that if I leave a metronome on while I am doing an activity unrelated to music, like cooking, walking, or exercising, musical ideas will inevitably pour into my head in large part because of the steady pulse of the metronome.

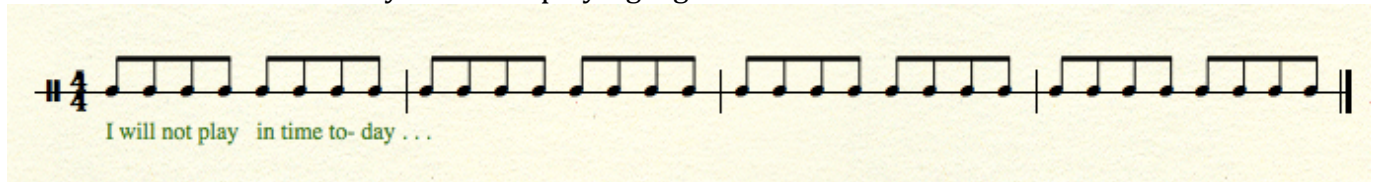
Freeing Yourself from Time

1. Turn the metronome on to 100 beats per minute. Say aloud, "I will not play in time today."

How many beats did it take you to say that? If you have no clue, go back and say it aloud again while counting the beats.

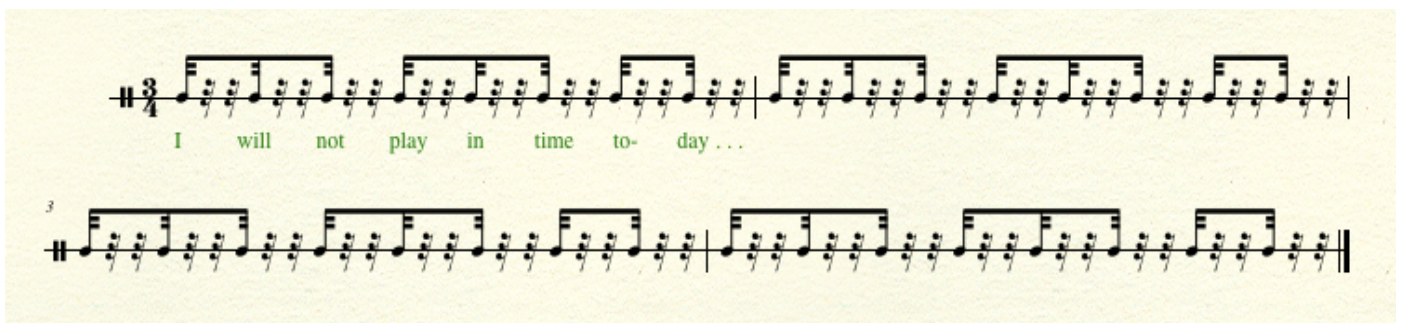
2. Say the sentence again, but now make it fit into four beats.

You'll notice that there are eighth syllables, so if you evenly space them out you will be playing eighth notes.

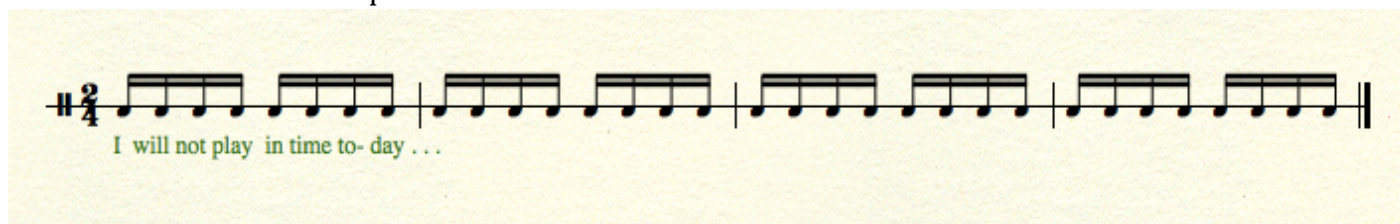


3. Repeat the sentence so that it falls evenly into three beats and say it four times in a row. Worry less about how it exactly falls and instead just focus on repeating the sentence so it flows evenly from your mouth.

Below is a mathematical representation of how to evenly spread the phrase over three beats, if you are interested. I put this here only for the curious musicians. If you are having trouble with the concept of spreading the phrase over three beats, do not focus on this graphic representation. Instead, focus on evenly distributing your words, but not stressing about saying it precisely in time.



4. Repeat the sentence aloud so that it falls into two beats.



5. Now repeat the sentence in 7 beats, 9 beats, 11 beats, and 33 beats.

Focus on even spacing of the words so that they fall evenly and spread out over the entire duration of the notes being counted.

The key is that you are so comfortable saying the sentence that you can keep track of any number of beats while saying the phrase and still come back to the downbeat of your choice.

6. Pick up your instrument, pick an eight-note melody, and repeat steps one through five using the melody in place of the sentence.

7. Now allow yourself to stray from the melody you have created, but still have your focus be primarily on the metronomic pulse. Make sure you are counting in your head, but flow over the beat and experiment with elongating and shortening your phrases so as to manipulate around the time.

The purpose of this sequence of exercises is to free yourself from needing to feel locked into the time, but still maintaining a confident awareness of where the time is.

Chapter 6: Utilizing Various Note Groupings while Switching Subdivisions

Goal: To experiment with phrases which move fluidly over the beat and change in rhythm.

In this chapter you will need to connect your ability to shift gears from Chapter 3 and your ability to play various accent groupings from Chapter 4. Take each etude slowly and break down individual phrases that give you trouble.

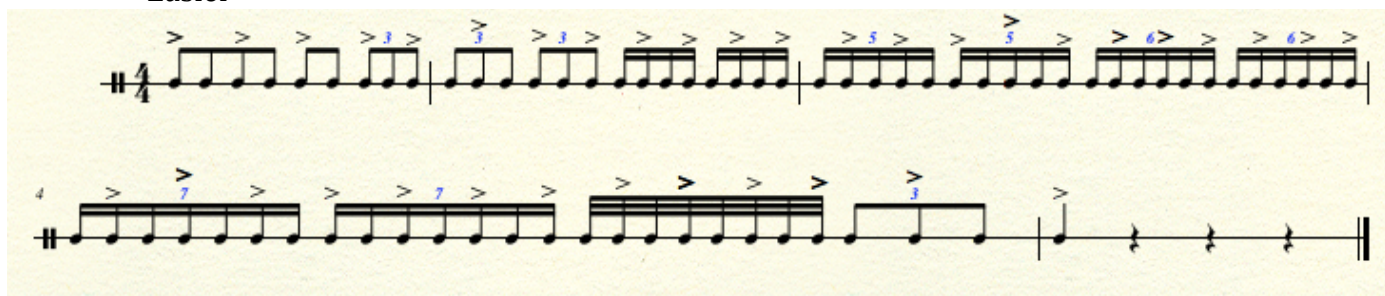
Utilize our strategy of first play the rhythm on all one pitch, then on the notes of the scale, then on any pitches that you choose.

Section 1: Constant Accent Pulses with Shifting Subdivisions

If we apply the mini-melodies created in Chapter 4 to these exercises, we can really start to have some fun. Hopefully those mini-melodies are familiar enough now to be able to play them without my thought, making the shifting of time the primary concern. If not, take some time to review them or simplify them (you can always just stay on one pitch until the exercises become more comfortable).

A1. Two-note Groupings:

Easier-



More Difficult-



A2. Three-note Groupings:

Easier-



More Difficult-



A3. Four-note Groupings:

Easier-



More Difficult-



Easier-

The second system of the exercise continues the rhythmic pattern. It begins with a measure of eighth notes, followed by a measure of eighth notes with a blue '7' above them. This is followed by a measure of eighth notes with a blue '7' above them, and then a measure of eighth notes with a blue '7' above them. The system concludes with a measure of a whole note and three measures of rests, each marked with a downward-pointing stem.

More Difficult-

A5. Six-note Groupings:

Easier-

The second system of the exercise continues the rhythmic pattern. It begins with a double bar line and a 4/4 time signature. The first measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The second measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The third measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The fourth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The fifth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The sixth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The seventh measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The eighth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The ninth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The tenth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The eleventh measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The twelfth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The thirteenth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The fourteenth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The fifteenth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The sixteenth measure contains a quarter note with an accent (>) and a slur. The system ends with a double bar line.

More Difficult-

[illegible]

A6. Seven-note Groupings:

Easier-



More Difficult-



Section 2: Mixed Accented Pulses and Subdivisions

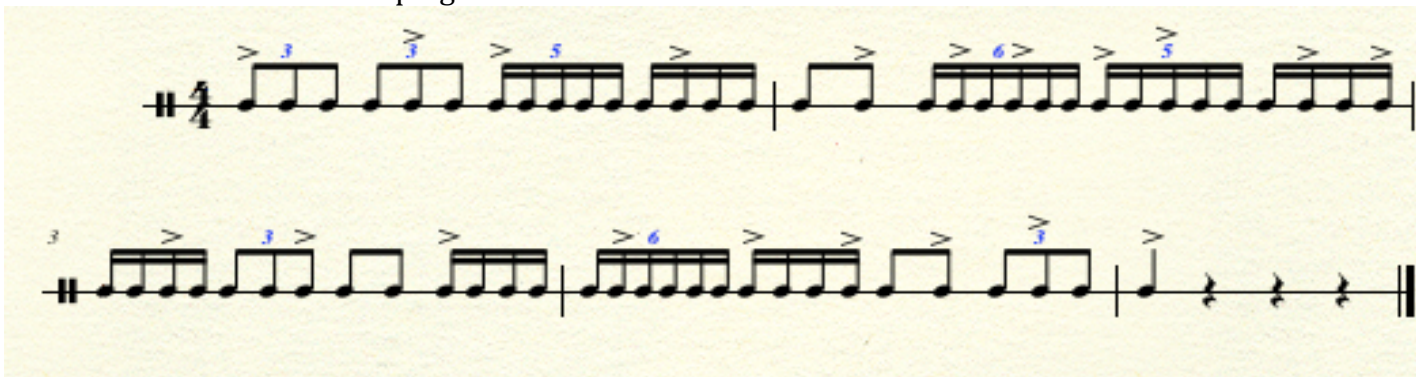
A. Two-note, Three-note, and Four-note Accent Groupings:



B. Five-note, Six-note, and Seven-note Accent Groupings:



C. All Note Groupings:



About the Author



Jake Jamieson is an educator and performer on drum set, percussion, and tabla. He received his B.A. and M.A. from UCLA in Ethnomusicology, World Music, in June of 2010. He is based in Los Angeles where he teaches and performs regularly in a variety of music styles and venues.

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