

Rhythmic Reading

Mastery Through Ownership, Critical Thinking and Creative Application

BY JASON LEE BRUNS

For percussion students, developing a thorough ownership over basic rhythmic reading skills in a short amount of time is not an easy task. Often times, method books are too large and possess an overwhelming amount of information for the eager student. Some books move too quickly while others move too slowly. Some methods for rhythmic reading are composed of exercises that progress through several pages and sections, advancing from quarter notes to eighth notes to combinations of the two, and so forth, right up the ranks before getting to more sophisticated rhythms. This can be inefficient for the beginner, and it may take weeks to get to dotted-eighth/sixteenths. On the other hand, the non-beginner may only need to review dotted-eighth/sixteenths, and certain books may offer this grouping only on beat four every one to four measures. Even if a student found the perfect book, chances are the text would not induce a sense of ownership or critical thinking, and the skills learned would soon be forgotten.

The following is a method I developed for rhythmic reading based on many years of teaching, learning, and participating in diverse musical settings. It is an integration of various concepts to make one simple and unified concept. It enables students to advance their reading skills at a very fast pace, whether they are at the beginning, intermediate, or advanced level. It also offers professional players a quick, thorough review and warm-up.

RHYTHMIC MOTIVES

The first part of the method involves defining every basic rhythmic motive or cell. Example 1 shows the systematic categorization of each rhythm divided into the basic and common combinations possible on a single beat. These are divided into one-, two-, and three-note combinations. With the students' input have them guide you through making a rhythmic motive chart identical to this one. This will enable students to discover all the combinations themselves and to have ownership over their learning.

The chart shows students all of the basic combinations of each beat in a birds-eye view and helps them organize the information in their mind. Once this is completed, assist the students in writing in the counts for each motive using the standard "1 e & a" syllables. This chart will be referenced throughout the article and will be the basis for all other exercises.

MUSCLE MEMORY

The second part of the method involves muscle memory. By assigning the same sticking to each rhythmic motive, a muscle relationship to the motive will be developed and continuously strengthened. This will make each motive unique and therefore easier to learn and master.

I recommend using "natural" sticking because it is the most logical, and it enables students to figure out stickings on their own as they develop a fluid style of playing. So, for sixteenth notes all

downbeats and "&'s" will be with the right hand and all "e's" and "a's" will be with the left hand (see Example 1). Natural sticking is nothing new and has been taught in the drum corps pedagogy for years. In a practical setting the player performs a particular rhythmic motive using the same sticking every time no matter which motive came on the previous beat. Have the student assist you in writing the natural sticking for each motive in the previously completed motive chart.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Now that the chart of rhythmic motives is complete with counts and stickings, it is time to start developing a rhythmic vocabulary. Begin by having students learn one motive at a time by repeating it over and over until it is smooth and effortless. Continue in this manner until each motive has been conquered. Once this has been achieved, have students play from one motive to the next without stopping, until eventually they are able to play the whole chart without stopping. As always, count out loud and use a metronome.

Example 1: Motives 1-Note Combinations

2-Note Combinations

7. (1) & a (2) & a (3) & a (4) & a
 R L R L R L R L

8. 1 a 2 a 3 a 4 a
 R L R L R L R L

9. 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
 R R R R R R R R

10. (1) e a (2) e a (3) e a (4) e a
 L L L L L L L L

3-Note Combinations

11. 1 e & 2 e & 3 e & 4 e &
 R L R R L R R L R R L R

12. 1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a
 R R L R R L R R L R R L

13. 1 e a 2 e a 3 e a 4 e a
 R L L R L L R L L R L L

14. (1) e & a (2) e & a (3) e & a (4) e & a
 L R L L R L L R L L R L

CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISES

Now that the basic rhythmic vocabulary has been solidified, let's give it the old "litmus test."

Exercise 1: Composing

Compose one-bar phrases using the motive chart as a template for possible rhythms and stickings. For example, let's take beat 1 from motive 3, beat 2 from motive 10, beat 3 from motive 5, and beat 4 from motive 14. Here is the resulting one-bar rhythmic phrase:

Example 2

(1) & (2) e a 3 e (4) e & a
 R L L R L L R L

Next, have students perform their compositions while counting aloud. Have students compose as many phrases as it takes to make certain that they have grasped the concept fully. If they are having trouble, limit the options to only a few motives. If they continue to have trouble, have them go back to practicing the motive chart.

Exercise 2: Negative Space

Play the rests as notes and the notes as rests using the motive chart. The negative of motive 6 is shown in the following example.

Example 3

1 a 2 a 3 a 4 a
 R L R L R L R L

Once a student is comfortable with playing the negatives/rests, then play the chart as a duet. Have the student play the negatives/rests as you play the positives/notes, and vice-versa. This will provide the student with a deeper understanding of the rhythmic motives.

Exercise 3: Accent/Tap

Using the motive chart, play all of the rests as sixteenth-note taps (softer articulations), and play the written motives as accents (louder articulations) within the sixteenth notes. This can be written out at first, but the ultimate goal is to visualize the resultant composite rhythm (see Example 4). This will help students develop a sense of groove and the accurate placement of each rhythmic motive.

Example 4

1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a
 R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

Exercise 4: Rolling

Have students who have studied the double-stroke roll add diddles to all of the taps of Exercise 3. Point out any resultant rudiments that occur; e.g., motive 4 creates a seven-stroke roll.

Example 5

1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a

RR LL RR L RR LL RR L RR LL RR L RR LL RR L

7-STROKE ROLL

Showing these possibilities will open more doors of creativity for students. It also puts another perspective on each rhythm that helps to keep the practicing of the motives fresh.

Exercise 5: Solo

Integrate all of the previous exercises by having students write a short, four-measure solo/fill using a combination of accents, taps, and rolls. This will give students a chance to put their skills to the test and offer yet another perspective and application of the rhythmic motives. This exercise gives students even more of a sense of ownership and will result in more confident and skilled readers. See if your students can figure out which combinations of exercises and motives were utilized in Example 6.

Example 6

1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e &

R L R L RR LL RR L R L R L R L R

1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 & a

RR LL RR L R L R L RR LL RR L R R L

(1) e a 2 & 3 e a (4) & a

L L R R R L R R L

1 e & a (2) e & 3 & a (4) e

RR LL RR L L R R R L L

After going through this method, students will possess a heightened confidence in their reading ability and skills. The concepts described in this method could and should be adapted to triplets as well as different meters. I hope you will find this useful in your teaching and in your own playing as well.

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