

Francesco Villa

Playing Rhythm

Advanced rhythmic exercises for all instruments

Playing Rhythm – Advanced rhythmic for all instruments - © 2015 Francesco Villa

Published on CreateSpace Platform

Original edition: Playing Rhythm – Ritmica avanzata per tutti gli strumenti - 2015

Translation by Hugh Ward Perkins

The unauthorized reproduction, even partial, carried out by any means, including photocopying, even for internal use or educational purposes, is forbidden.

Contents

Preface.....	5
1. Introduction: meter and rhythm.....	9
1.1 Meter and phrase structure.....	9
1.2 Rhythm, meter and construction of rhythmic forms.....	13
2. Rhythmic elasticity.....	17
2.1 Simple meters: the four rhythmic positions in a beat.....	17
2.2 Exercises in simple meter.....	25
2.3 Exercises in compound meter.....	38
3. The odd meters.....	47
3.1 Introduction.....	47
3.2 5/8.....	48
3.3 7/8.....	54
3.4 The odd 9/8.....	58
3.5 The meters with ten and more subdivisions.....	60
4. Polyrhythms.....	63
4.1 Introduction.....	63
4.2 Polyrhythms in simple meter.....	68
4.3 Polyrhythms in compound meter.....	79
4.4 African and Spanish suggestions.....	85
4.5 Polyrhythms on syncopation.....	90
4.6 Playing with known tunes.....	92
4.7 Shifting of long sequences.....	94
4.8 <i>Konnakol</i>	100
4.9 Polyrhythms in improvisation.....	104
5. Appendix: metric modulations.....	107

Preface

This book is the result of ten years' experience with students of the 1st-cycle (Bachelor's) degree in Jazz at the Music Conservatory of Brescia. When I was asked to do a workshop on polyrhythm (which later developed into a two-year course on the Rhythmics of Contemporary Music), I accepted with pleasure, because though no jazz musician myself, I have always been fascinated by the rhythmic forms of Western music of the last century and those of cultures different from our own.

I immediately found the students enthusiastic. A good sign was that whenever I left the classroom for a few minutes, on coming back I would still hear them playing the rhythms (and cursing them, if the pattern was difficult!). In short, I noticed a strong curiosity and hunger for rhythm.

At the same time, I immediately detected that a number of difficulties were shared by most of the students. Except for the drummers, who already had a relatively developed approach to rhythm or at least were used to tackling rhythmic complexity, the students generally had difficulty in handling the meter and the phrase as soon as the materials departed from the familiar. Given their lack of an analytical approach to rhythm and given their insufficient experience of combinatorial forms, they often had trouble dealing with new forms with any ease. They also displayed a certain rhythmic poverty in the solos, even those in the simplest meters. They tended to use just a few rhythmic stereotypes and seemed to be under the impression that the rhythmic dimension derived indirectly from the choice of pitches, instead of being truly integrated in the melodic thinking or playing a guiding role in the invention. Again, a lack of familiarity with all the note positions in the meter led them to limit themselves to just a few solutions. Typically the phrasing and musical breathing coincided systematically with the changes in phrase, whereas more interesting results would be obtained through musical *enjambement*, i.e. by placing the phraseological articulations asymmetrically to the phrase. This, however, can only be done if the player successfully sustains the phrase - and meter - structure, over which the rhythmic forms can be creatively distributed.

The materials collected here have therefore two main purposes. On the one hand they aim to expand the young musician's rhythmic repertoire through the memorization of complicated rhythmic exercises in which the sense of the meter and phrase must be maintained. On the other hand, they aim to generate a greater *compositional* awareness during the improvisations: the study of the odd (or irregular) meters and polyrhythms develops a kind of rhythmic relativism that permits one to manage many more possible combinations, even in the simplest meters and rhythms.

The exercises must be studied with the maximum rigor, with the same accuracy required to perform a piece in front of an audience. They are yes or no exercises, there is no middle ground. It's like a juggler who throws up into the air a series of little balls that must never fall on the ground, at the cost of repeating the exercise indefinitely.

I thank Corrado Guarino for his careful review of the text and his valuable suggestions and Balen Lopez De Munain who, with great patience, introduced me to flamenco rhythms. And finally, I thank the students I have worked with over the years, for their commitment and unfailing enthusiasm, without which I would have never been able to bring this work to completion.

FV, 2014 September

1. Introduction: meter and rhythm

1.1 Meter and phrase structure

A practical (and not just a theoretical) distinction-integration between meter and rhythm¹ is crucial if one wishes to master the rhythmic forms, from the simplest to the most complex.

Each meter has its own specific accentual structure, made up of strong and weak accents. It is over these accents, and with these accents, that the rhythmic forms (inter)act. For example in quadruple time there is a strong-weak articulation between the first and the second beats that is replicated on the third and fourth beat, in a weaker form:

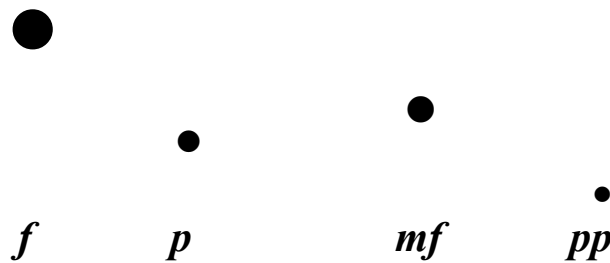


Figure 1 – Accents in quadruple meter

Repeated four times, this structure normally forms a phrase,² which presents four levels of accents, listed here from smallest to largest:

1. individual beats (to which we could also add an even lower level: that of the subdivisions;

¹ The term ‘rhythm’ is used here exclusively in the sense of ‘rhythmic form’, i.e. what is actually played. ‘Meter’, on the other hand, is synonymous with ‘time’ and is therefore for the structure that coordinates the rhythmic phenomena. As we shall see in the exercises of this section, rhythm replicates the metric structure and makes it explicit.

² The four-measure phrase is simply a point of reference and not a constant. When the meter is in triple or duple time, the phrase is generally eight measures long. Moreover, phrases can be also of very variable lengths where there are repetitions or elisions.

2. Rhythmic elasticity

2.1 Simple meters: the four rhythmic positions in a beat

The possibilities for rhythmic combinations are infinite. Each of us possesses a kind of internal ‘library’ based on our familiarity with certain metric and rhythmic styles. Coming into contact with unfamiliar rhythms means opening new doors, enriching our skills and expanding our experience of rhythm.

Let us ask ourselves this first question: are we fully equipped to read, memorize and execute all sixteen of the metric positions corresponding to the sixteenth notes in a measure of 4/4 time?

In the case of a rhythmic figuration like the following it isn’t hard to understand how it should sound. We can grasp it immediately and hence memorize it quickly.

Example 1



For some people the next example, however, may be more complicated. We may need to read it several times before mastering it and being able to play it from memory.

Example 2



Now let us look at the rhythmic combinations a bit more analytically. And let us define the possible note combinations on the four metric positions of a beat (six in the case of compound meters) as *rhythmic words*. The actual duration of the sounds is insignificant; the only significant detail is their initial metric position. Hence, for example, the following four two-note words are rhythmically equal:

Example 3



Within a quarter-note beat the rhythmic possibilities of placing the sixteenth notes give rise to fifteen rhythmic words.

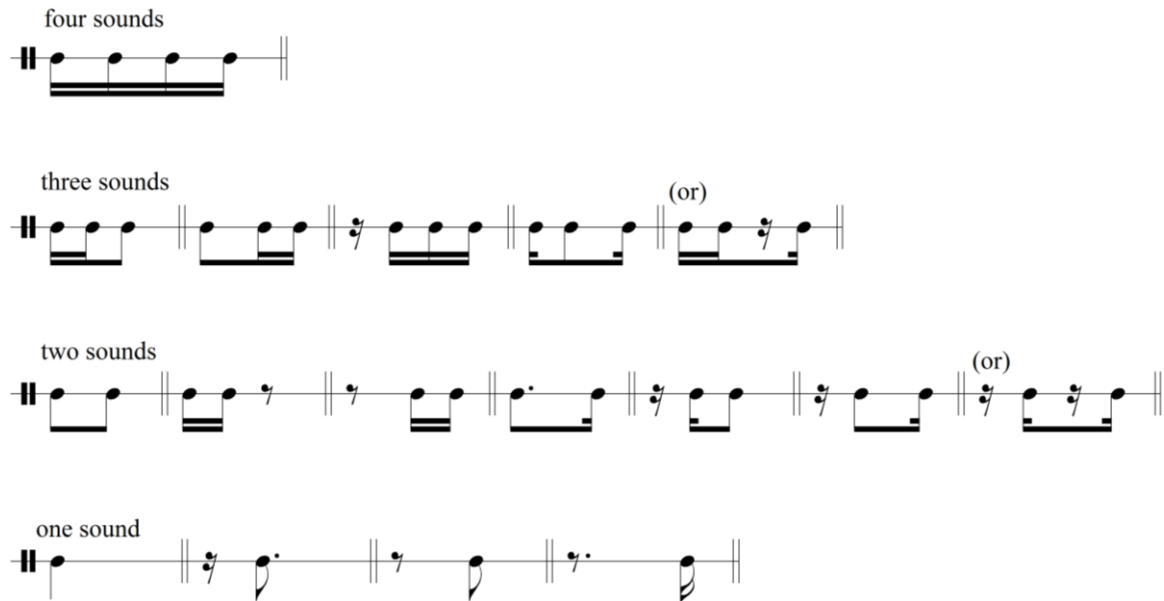


Figure 2 – The fifteen rhythmic words in a simple beat

In a quarter-note beat there are four points for beginning the sound, corresponding to the four sixteenth notes: *downbeat*, *postponement*, *upbeat* and *anticipation*. The postponement is to be understood as the sixteenth note immediately following the beat, while the anticipation is when the sound starts a sixteenth note before the next beat. To represent the four positions we can use initials or arrows.

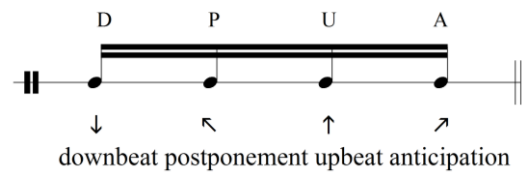
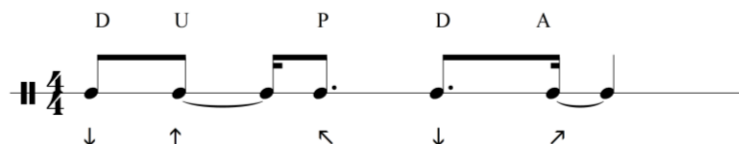


Figure 3 – DPUA

Using the four positions (DPUA) can greatly help us to decode and memorize the more complex figures.

Example 4



Exercises in style

All the rhythmic exercises that follow can be adapted to different styles. Depending on one's instrument and preferred style, each sequence may be associated with pitches and/or percussive registers and tailored to a specific musical context. Including pitches in the following rhythmic sequences also helps the process of memorization. Below we present some possible variations of Ex. 23.

Example 5 – Original pattern



for melodic instruments (major scale)

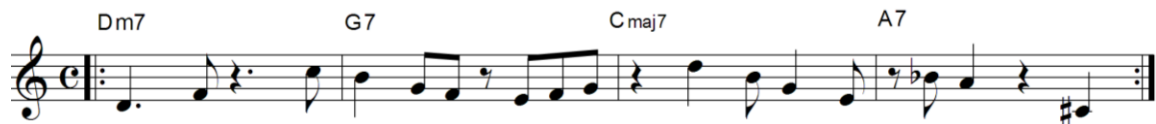


A. blues scale



B. swing

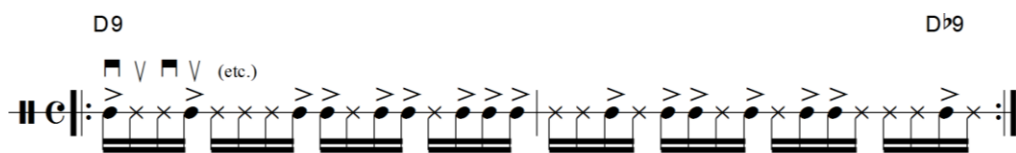
Swing



C. piano accompaniment for *salsa*



D. rhythm and blues accompaniment with guitar



E. percussion in two registers



F. percussion in three registers



G. pattern for snare drum in swing



2.2 Exercises in simple meter

Rhythmic exercises for one part

All the exercises in this chapter must be studied until they can be played from memory.³



³ Except for Exs. 45 and 46, which are intended for sight-reading.

3. The odd meters

3.1 Introduction

The odd meters are made up of combinations of accents every two or three subdivisions.⁴ For example, 5/8 is composed of 3/8 + 2/8 (♩.♩) or 2/8 + 3/8. 7/8 is composed of two groups of 2/8 and one 3/8, in three possible combinations: 2+2+3, 3+2+2, 2+3+2.

Jazz students who study odd meters try to become familiar with them not only because many pieces are in such meters, but also to build up a kind of rhythmic relativism and to increase their sense of rhythm in general, thus with a positive impact also on the regular meters.

The aim of this book is to broaden the reader's repertoire and develop rhythmic elasticity, certainly not just to browse through the various rhythmic forms found in different musical cultures. The boundless variety existing in the world's musical expressions is such that if we ever tried to invent a new meter, there is a good chance that it already exists. In the course of the twentieth century many experiments have been made, and are continuing to be made, on rhythm, and on odd meters and polyrhythms in particular, in both the classical and jazz traditions. As for the *Aksak* rhythms⁵ used in the Balkan regions, they are often played at such high speed that our perception tends to hear 'shorter' or 'longer' sounds rather than accents every two or every three sounds. In this chapter we will present some pieces that use these rhythms.

As for the notation, the time signatures are chosen mainly according to the speed. For example, 5/4, 5/8 and 5/16 are conceptually the same thing. Hence the signature generally depends on the speed of performance: 5/4 is used normally for slower speeds, 5/16 only for the very fast, while 5/8 can be used in all situations.

⁴ In music theory different terms are used to indicate these types of meter: as well as 'odd', we also find 'irregular', 'asymmetrical' and 'composite'. This last term is often used above all when the time signature explicitly expresses the combination of two meters, normally a simple meter and a compound meter, that make up each bar. For example, 4/4 + 3/8 (corresponding to 11/8 accented as 2+2+2+2+3).

⁵ Literally meaning 'limping rhythms', *Aksak* is a word of Ottoman origin. The area of provenance indicated in the few examples here should be taken with a certain caution, since in certain cases the cultural paternity is still today the object of research and discussion.

3.2 5/8

As already mentioned, 5/8 can be articulated as either 3+2 or 2+3 but the two types can also be combined in various ways during the same piece. We begin with three simple exercises for both hands, the first in 3+2, the second in 2+3 and the third using both combinations. Practice first playing each measure twice, then playing without repeats. Also, try to play in swing.

115 right hand
left hand

The next exercises are in 3+2.

118

4. Polyrhythms

4.1 Introduction

The meaning of the term polyrhythm used here is one in which a rhythmic form conveys a sensation that conflicts with the normal accentuation of the meter and creates a kind of cohabitation of two different meters or even gives the impression of a change of meter.⁶ In the next section we will offer a survey of the types of polyrhythm.

Accents and counterpulse

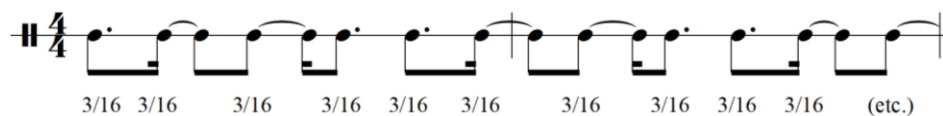
They are sequences of regular accents or sounds that conflict with the metric structure. Take for example a cycle of accents every three sixteenth notes in 4/4 time:

Example 6 – One accent every three sixteenth notes in 4/4



As you can see, the position of the accent shifts through the meter. If you pick out the accents of the previous example, you get what we call a *counterpulse*,⁷ in this case, again every three sixteenth notes.

Example 7 – Sounds every 3/16 in 4/4



⁶ So it would be more correct to use the term polymeter, instead of polyrhythm.

⁷ The neologism 'counterpulse' is derived from 'counterpoint'.

The regular accents and the counterpulse can have two main practical outcomes:

- It can be used in a percussion or in an improvisation; in the latter case we can select the pitches in various ways, and it is often the melodic configuration itself that creates the polyrhythms. For example:

Example 8 - Pattern of three sixteenth notes on a Cmaj7 chord



Example 9 – Arpeggios of three notes



- It can be used to build further polyrhythms, which we could call meta-polyrhythms, given by a melodic pattern - or a timbral pattern in the case of percussion - based on counterpulses. In the next example the meta-polyrhythm has a cycle of 9/16:

Example 10 - Meta-polyrhythm of 9/16 on counterpulse every 3/16



Shifting of small patterns

Polyrhythmic patterns can vary in length. Their length is not attributable to the length of the measure in which they are placed, so they 'slide' against the metric context (shifting). Let us begin with a very short pattern derived from a counterpulse of 3/16. It is a pattern of an eighth note plus a sixteenth note:

Example 11 – Cycles of 2+1/16



4.2 African and Spanish suggestions

202

voice

hands

left foot
right foot

(etc.)

The musical score for exercise 202 is written in 12/8 time. The voice part (treble clef) begins with a repeat sign and contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The hands part (percussion clef) has a steady eighth-note pattern. The left and right foot parts (percussion clef) have a dotted eighth-note pattern. The exercise concludes with a repeat sign.

203

voice

hands

left foot
right foot

(etc.)

The musical score for exercise 203 is written in 12/8 time. The voice part (treble clef) begins with a repeat sign and contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The hands part (percussion clef) has a steady eighth-note pattern. The left and right foot parts (percussion clef) have a dotted eighth-note pattern. The exercise concludes with a repeat sign.

All the polyrhythmic exercises seen so far can come together in the context of improvisation by varying and mixing. Obviously, unless the musical work actually has a polyrhythmic structure, in one's solos it is advisable to introduce polyrhythms that are not too long and to vary them. Here we will give only two simple examples based on a harmonic progression of fourths. In the next exercise, the first pattern is 7/8 (3+3+1), the second is in five (4 + rest).

Swing

243

5. Appendix: metric modulations

Metric modulations are changes in the meter and/or speed of the beat. The transition from one metric situation to another may be more or less complex. The simplest modulations are those in which the sounds have the same duration or those in which the speed of the tactus is common to the two meters.

Same duration of the sounds

It is typically represented by the indication ♩=♩. In this first type of modulation the meter changes but the sounds have the same duration. When the indication is absent it is taken as implied.

246

The exercise consists of four staves of music in treble clef. Above the first staff is the instruction ♩=♩. The notation shows a sequence of metric changes where the duration of each note remains constant. The first staff contains measures with time signatures 2/4, 3/8, 2/4, and 3/8. The second staff contains measures with 3/8, 5/16, 7/16, and 2/4. The third staff contains measures with 2/4, 7/16, 9/16, and 3/4. The fourth staff contains measures with 3/4, 5/16, and 2/4, ending with a double bar line.

The next exercise is based on an alternation of 2/4 and 7/16. It could therefore have alternative key signatures: 2/4 + 7/16 or 15/16.