

# Teaching Rhythm Reading

## Three Practical Processes

Amy Boyes

**A**s music teachers, we teach fundamental skills in manageable increments while covering concepts thoroughly enough that students are able to absorb and reproduce our processes independently.

Although successful teaching has many components, clear instructions, consistent learning routines and rewarding experiences are vital factors for effective learning.

*It doesn't matter what subject you teach, differences in students performance are affected by how much they engage in deliberate practice...Deliberate practice involves attention, rehearsal and repetition and leads to new knowledge or skills that can later be developed into more complex knowledge and skills (Brabeck et al.).*

Rhythm reading is a good example of a fundamental skill that is taught over many years of study. To perform notated music with precision and musicality, students must read and understand rhythmic notation. Teachers must teach rhythm reading with clear and consistent processes that support students throughout their musical development.

Rhythm reading has a rich pedagogy thanks to luminaries such as Orff, Kodaly and Suzuki, and a thorough survey requires much deeper study than this article provides. However, the following demonstrates how I teach rhythm reading using three practical processes.

### **From Beginner to Middle-Years**

Typically, early music lessons include “repeat after me” exercises or fun activities that link movement and rhythm. These activities lay the groundwork for future understanding of rhythm and meter and introduce the student to natural, physical gestures.

*Meter-related motion, such as foot tapping, body swaying, head nodding, and repetitive dance moves, are not only externalizations of a perceived meter but also the way in which we both learn and shape that meter during musical*

*experiences (Haugan, 41).*

Many approaches and methods books employ the principle of “sound before symbol” or “rote before note.” Then, as students begin to read musical notation, a narrow range of rhythmic patterns is introduced. A quarter pulse is the “measuring stick,” and students need only calculate how many quarters a note is “worth” in order to accurately perform the rhythms from their repertoire.

However, in the middle years, rhythmic patterns and notation become more complicated. Quarter pulses subdivide into various combinations of eighths, sixteenths and triplets. Compound meters with dotted note values and even more complicated subdivisions are introduced, and hybrid meters, mixed meters, swing rhythms, and elaborate ornaments appear in the repertoire. Suddenly, middle-years students find reading and confidently performing rhythmic notation very challenging.

At this point in a student’s development, performances can become unstable. Memory slips occur in areas of rushing. Tension builds in complicated moments. And teachers’ well-meaning, but simplistic, advice to count becomes largely ineffective.

To avoid these middle-years frustrations, teachers must introduce consistent rhythm reading processes from the earliest lessons.

### **Three Approaches**

#### **1. Physical iteration of the main pulse with metronome assistance.**

The stability of a steady pulse is fundamental at all stages of learning. Even repertoire that employs rubato must still be grounded by the performer’s keen sense of the pulse.

The pursuit of a steady pulse often leads teachers to the metronome. However, “practicing with the metronome” can be disparaged by those who have heard the worst results. Often, the metronome clicks unheeded and the student’s performance remains as unsteady as before. There can be many explanations for these unfortunate results: perhaps the tempo choice is unrealistic, the

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student finds the metronome's sound irritating, or the notes of a piece have not been learned well enough for the student to produce a steady pulse at any tempo choice, resulting in learned rhythmic errors.

*[Research] showed that imposing excessive relative speed demands on less skilled sight-readers [while using a metronome] resulted in an inability to sustain performance (Arthur, 71).*

A more efficient approach is for the student to learn the rhythmic patterns of new repertoire before attempting to play the piece. Students should absorb the feeling and sounds of the rhythmic patterns in order to confidently produce them. Whether by speaking, tapping or clapping, the act of performing rhythms before matching them with notes will establish a steady pulse from the onset of the learning process. The metronome can support this process, but it should never replace the student physically producing the rhythmic patterns themselves.

Sometimes a student feels that counting aloud while playing without the assistance of a metronome is sufficient to establish a steady pulse, but this practice often becomes erratic when difficult passages arise. For students who insist on this approach, I record them doing so and then ask them to clap a steady pulse during the recording playback. They quickly note the inconsistencies and embrace new methods.

Apps such as Speakbeat (iOS) and Iona (Android) are invaluable as “talking metronomes.” They can be set in any meter, including mixed meter, and can speak beats and their subdivisions (1 2 3 4, etc). These talking metronomes help a student understand the meter more efficiently than a traditional metronome with a ticking tone.

If a student is learning the “Musette in D” (attributed to J. S. Bach, Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook), I would give the following as a first-lesson, rhythm reading assignment:

“Set the Speakbeat app to 50 on the quarter with a 2/4 meter and a sixteenth note (1e&a 2e&a) subdivision. Clap the right hand only. Then play the right hand's rhythm on a repeating D while tapping the left hand on quarter notes on a D.”

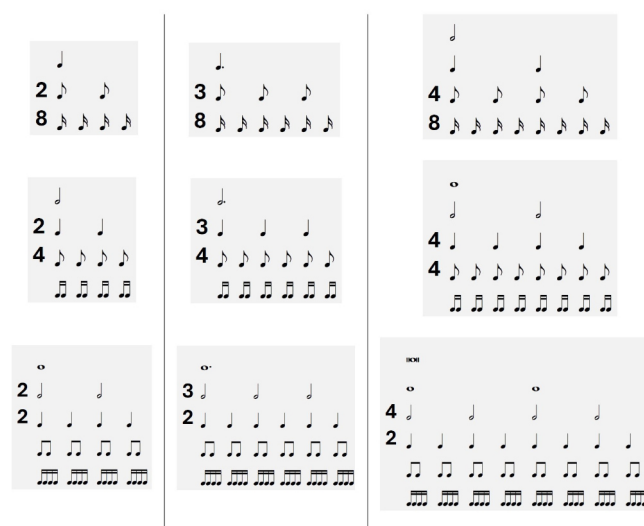
Once the student absorbs the rhythmic patterns, I then assign other tasks such as choosing articulation and fingering before finally learning the notes.

## 2. Theoretical instruction and visual analysis.

It is inefficient to practice repertoire without understanding how the music is constructed, be it the chord progressions, phrase structures, melodic patterns, or simply the notes. Imagine a student faltering to play a passage that is a simple arpeggio with an additional non-chord tone. Once this pattern is shown to them, their fingers fly! Understanding the pattern removed the “guesswork” from their reading.

Likewise, rhythmic reading must be grounded in an understanding of how meter and rhythmic notation function to avoid “guesswork.”

I assign my students music theory workbooks (covering a variety of topics, including rhythm reading) and “grid work” to help them visualize how meters and rhythms work. I supply students with reference pages of simple and compound meters and worksheets of the most commonly used meters.



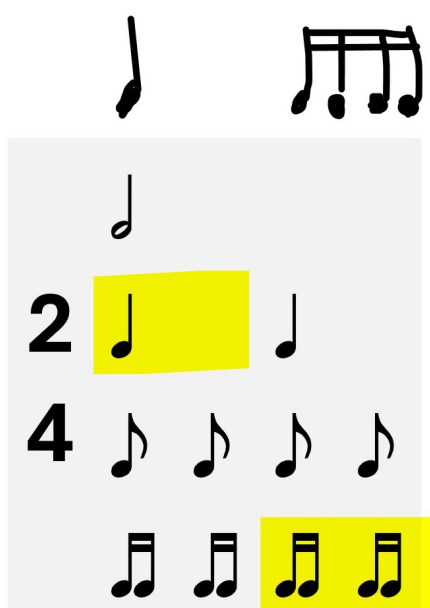
**Fig. 1 - Simple Meters**

When a complicated rhythmic pattern arises in their repertoire, students copy the pattern onto a worksheet and then mark the length of notes with highlighters.

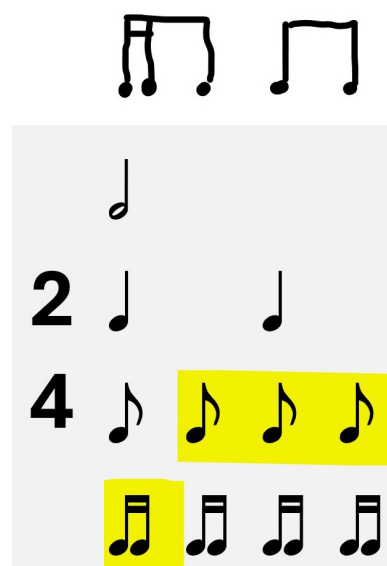
Returning to the “Musette in D” for a simple example, the right-hand rhythm from measures 1, 2, 5, and 6 is shown in the first box; measures 3 and 7, in the second.



**Fig. 2 - 2/4 Meter Worksheet**



**Fig. 3 - "Musette" measures 1-2, 5-6**



**Fig. 4 - "Musette", measures 3 & 7**

"Grid work" helps students visualize the lengths of notes and how they fit into the meter. From the first lesson that repertoire is assigned, students understand and perform rhythms correctly, even if only by tapping and applying the notes later. With this process, theoretical understanding becomes integral to the learning process.

### 3. Weekly rhythm drills.

Regular practice of rhythmic patterns is vital for consistent improvement. I have created ten booklets of rhythmic patterns for my students. Each booklet is ten pages long with approximately ten lines of rhythm per page. Students tap a steady pulse in the left hand and tap the written rhythms in the right hand. Students are assigned a page a week to practice, and then I listen to a sample of their work in their next lesson.

Students track their progress on a chart, and as they finish each booklet, they pick a prize from the studio "treat basket." By celebrating their efforts, we bring joy and enthusiasm to a process that might have otherwise felt tedious.

*Students are more motivated if they believe that intelligence and ability can be improved through hard work. Teachers can contribute to students' beliefs about their ability ...by praising productive student effort and strategies (and other processes under student control) rather than their ability (Deans for Impact, 7).*

In these booklets, first-year musicians are introduced to quarter, half and whole notes/rests in the first booklet, but by the time they complete the final booklet, they have experienced simple and compound meters, subdivisions down to the sixteenth, irregular groupings, and syncopated patterns.

By “laddering” the difficulty of rhythmic drills and “spacing” these exercises over many weeks, months and years, I can ensure that students’ rhythm reading skills are being developed progressively.

If a student, for example, works on a series of tasks and the teacher adapts the support responsively to the understanding of the student, the teacher is teaching contingently. If the student gains understanding, the teacher can fade the support over time. While fading the support, the teacher can also transfer the responsibility to the student so that the learner will take more and more control over his/her learning (Van de Pol et al., 275).

## Conclusion

A clear integration between studying and performing rhythmic notation is important for consistent development. It’s not enough to study how rhythms are notated in a theory textbook without also analyzing or performing rhythm patterns from repertoire. Through multiple practical approaches, students learn how to both read and perform rhythm patterns with confidence.

Surface learning means we memorise key facts and principles. Deeper learning allows us to connect factual knowledge with real-world experiences and really grasp their implications (Zosh et al., 11).

I desire that my students become assured, independent learners so that when their years of formal study are behind them, they will have the necessary skills to be successful performers, however music-making fits into their adult lives.

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