

Rhythm as Shape and Perspective

Non-quantized rhythms in a quantized world

By Randy Gloss

Decades ago, as a grad student facing overwhelming frustration from studying too many subjects in percussion, I felt more like a juggler spinning plates, working endlessly just to keep everything from crashing to the ground. My mentor, John Bergamo, gave me some great advice I still embrace to this day. He told me to not be just “a student of the drum” but instead be “a student of rhythm.” What I thought were vastly different things were more closely related than I realized. That is, embracing music and drumming as one subject (after all, it’s all rhythm), the convergences (and thusly the divergences) would thread together a much bigger picture, and that it’s all being processed through me (again one thing).

While the world of rhythm is endlessly vast, it is also more connected than not, and rhythm as a whole has many universal properties that transcend. It’s not about Western rhythmic ideas, or African rhythmic ideas, or Indian, etc., but more of a case of “rhythm is rhythm is rhythm”: one thing. However, by examining this one thing from multiple perspectives, it allows for a bigger picture to evolve.

My plan for PASIC is to spend the 50-minute session shining light on facets of the inexhaustible subject of rhythm,

with the larger talking points being: “rhythm as shape,” “rhythm as perspective,” and “quantized vs non-quantized.”

Before diving in, there are a few preliminary questions worth asking: What is rhythm? What is pulse? What’s the difference?

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines rhythm as “an ordered recurrent alternation of strong and weak elements in the flow of sound and silence,”¹ and the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* states,

“In its primary sense, the whole feeling of movement in music, with a strong implication of both regularity and differentiation.”² Essentially, rhythm encompasses musical events over time. Discerningly though, there will be the presence of strong and weak beats, the idea of long and short or often more specifically in terms of threes and twos, making rhythm largely a binary language. However, “pulse is a series of uniformly spaced beats – either audible or



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implied, that sets the tempo and is the scaffolding for the rhythm. By contrast, rhythm is always audible and can depart from the pulse.³ So, while pulse is steady, uniform and consistent, rhythm presents contrast.

RHYTHM AS SHAPE

Rhythms have shape (as distinguished from pulse) whether in terms of phrases of strong and weak (emphasis and de-emphasis), or as groupings built of twos and threes, or even conceptually as literal geometric shapes (semi-circles, triangles, squares, etc.). All rhythms have shapes and characteristics that define them more than just being a sequence of notes. While this is not revolutionary or groundbreaking, much of how we process and think of rhythm as “Western musicians” tends to be through a visual approach, which can often perceive rhythm as (or through) pulse.

For example, in making a groove in five, Western training steers us to count five evenly counted pulses: 1 2 3 4 5. However, a rhythm would likely not be five even pulses like the counting implies, but instead based on groupings of 2+3 or 3+2. If instead of quarter notes it were eighth-note based, we would count: 1+2+3+4+5+, still emphasizing the pulse, but now also subdividing for the eighth notes. While there can surely be phrases of 2+2+2+2+2 (as the counting implies), it's also possible that those ten eighth notes could just as easily be phrased as 2+2+3+3, 3+3+2+2, 2+3+2+3, 3+2+3+2, 3+2+2+3, or 2+3+3+2. Feeling rhythms as groupings or shapes can be advantageous in exposing the actual rhythm and seeing combinations and permutations.

Anecdotally, one of my long-time teachers, tabla maestro Pandit Swapan Chaudhuri, does not count. Instead, he en-

courages learning to “feel” the rhythm or *tala* as a guide. When asked about it, he'll say, “Each rhythm, each beat, has its own character, just like recognizing people: ‘Oh there's Randy; Oh there's Swapan.’” He'll then ask, “In a *tala* (Indian rhythm cycle) such as Tintal (16 beats divided 4+4+4+4), is beat five a heavy or weak beat? (It's a strong or heavy beat.) However, in Jhaptaal (a 10-beat cycle divided 2+3+2+3) that same beat five, is it strong or weak?” (It's a weak beat.) So rather than counting uniform pulses (while, of course, still important to be aware of), or even using numbers at all (instead using descriptive vocal syllables and their corresponding language and grammar to speak or sing rhythmic ideas), it is better to focus on the rhythm and strong and weak beats of the cycle to be the guide.

While there's no argument that Western notation is a paramount system for transmitting maximum details from composer to performer (even and especially in the composer's absence), it is also not without issues or shortcomings, as no system in that way is complete or perfect. Beyond this idea regarding counting, notational devices such as measure lines, ties, and dots can further obscure shapes, particularly making longer phrases difficult to “see.” It's an entirely different approach (from the learning process, to retention, to replication) when it comes to visual learning in contrast to aural/oral traditions — not better or worse, just different, and one can help the other.

The differences in approaches and pedagogy may be helpful for filling in blanks or offering new possibilities. For instance, by evolutionary design, western notation is structured and taught primarily in duple (whole note, half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, sixteenth notes; 1, 2, 4, 8, 16 respectively), then later we go back

to learn about triplets and dotted notes, perhaps not even making the connection they are both threes. Then, what about 5, 7, 9, etc.? This comes much later, and with some inconsistencies in counting and notation along the way — again, all with the utmost respect and less about criticism for any one system, but more as motivation to seek answers beyond one approach.

RHYTHM AS PERSPECTIVE

It can be as simple as studying from different, varying, or multiple approaches. Whether it's studying music from around the world to gain a broader understanding, or a more myopic approach of studying one subject with different teachers to gain a deeper, specialized, or more rounded understanding, multiple perspectives and approaches can be beneficial. Studying the differences, and therefore the similarities, of more universal properties (even if they are applied in different and disparate ways) can lead to a greater understanding of the subject.

More specifically, regarding this idea of “perspective,” music and rhythm are matters of perspective. Rhythm is shape, form, structure, and architecture. If this were instead an art class and I asked everyone to “draw my hand,” in holding my hand up as the subject, I could show it from many angles or perspectives, each time creating a completely different picture without ever even changing the shape of my hand. Rhythm is like this.

Reading music intentionally imposes a specific perspective. This can be both positive and negative. Positive in that it offers the perspective of how the composer wants you to feel and phrase the music. For example, let's take a hypothetical phrase of six eighth notes in length. This can be a measure of 6/8, a measure of 3/4, a measure of 2/4 (as eighth-note triplets),

etc., and so it's the notation that gives the performer the appropriate perspective. However, inversely it can obscure seeing/hearing/feeling/connecting/exploring those other possibilities, which is the true multi-dimensional nature of rhythm. It's not that these ideas aren't present when reading Western notation, but connections are not always made, taught, or developed. Whereas, say in West African music and dance (and diasporic music as well), the music fundamentally embraces and explores this polyrhythmic and poly-metric nature, bringing this foundational idea to the forefront.

QUANTIZED VS NON QUANTIZED

Another important facet regarding the visual nature of notation, grids, click tracks, metronomes, sequencers, etc. is perhaps an overt emphasis on quantized exactness, and anything less than this exactness is often considered sloppy or wrong. However, there's a veritable universe between the notes worth exploring. Keep in mind that so much of the world's music has developed from and/or through language (chanting, singing), and movement (dance), which are not exactly quantized. Each "language" or music culture often presents structures, rhythms, grooves and approaches that are unique or colloquial and don't always translate (although there are definitely pathways, connections, and convergences). Through hearing a certain feel, we can sometimes easily identify the music genre and/or culture (the way Brazilian samba can swing is different than how bebop swings, but undeniably they both swing). However, the language for each of these musics is quite different, albeit both having African roots.

Even in pursuit of exactness or excellence, there's still so much more to explore in the space between the notes; e.g., halfway between "3 to the beat" (triplets) and "4 to the beat" (sixteenths), is "3½ to the beat" (or 7:2). Likewise, halfway between "2 to the beat" (eighths) and "3 to the beat" (triplets), is "2½ to the beat" (5:2).

In a more organic sense, consider when you hear closely related rhythms that by "pushing a little this way" or "pulling a little that way" fall into different pockets. Who hasn't considered or been challenged by the nuance of playing behind the beat vs on top of the beat, vs ahead of the beat, and the overwhelming immense effect that has on the feel? This concept is not unique for drum set players, as there are so many types of music, rhythms, and grooves that either lean back, lean forward, or sit straight up-and-down in their approach and overall feel. For me personally, Persian music remains a challenge and an excellent example of this — a different approach to how things move in a quantized vs non-quantized way, with strong connections in phrasing to language and breath, ornamentation and grace notes, dictating the rhythm, feel, and even form.

IN CONCLUSION

During my PASIC session, through demonstration, participation, listening, and notated examples, I hope to impart and share some ideas highlighting rhythm as shape, perspective, and rhythmic ideas that find their way, less through quantization but more through language, movement, leaning, pushing, pulling, breathing, etc. and how we can use these different approaches to rhythm when working in quantized situations. We can de-compartmentalize and synthesize our own information, connecting the dots in our own pictures.

RESOURCES

Here are some musical examples that might help tie together the multiple prongs of my point: rhythm as shape, perspective, non-quantized vs quantized).

This first example is a video of some playing examples demonstrating how the "universal rhythm" or "mother rhythm" (typically thought of 3+3+2) can actually be in just about any meter. This rhythm is truly universal (as it is found just about everywhere in the world) and is a "parent rhythm" from which so many other ideas

and rhythms developed. <https://youtu.be/wQvIi32g3s0>.

The next example is from a frame drum piece ("Kaleidoscope") from my most recent solo album. The universal rhythm of 3+3+2 is maintained (and recorded with a click); however, the solo modulates from 2/4 to 5/8 to 6/8 to 7/8, resolving in 8/8, all while staying connected to that universal rhythm. <https://youtu.be/LexIRO-SUors>.

The next one is a dholak (Indian folk drum) solo from the same album. I intentionally used an old-school drum machine to play obnoxious quarter note clapping throughout, but at a certain point I use these ideas to give the overall feeling of bending the drum machine to 7/8, even though the drum machine is unwavering. This goes right to the idea of quantized vs non-quantized in creating this illusion. <https://youtu.be/9wBzckLTWQ>.

The final example is a conga solo over a bell cycle of 15 (5:3 or 3:5). Subject-wise in this solo, I try to connect the bell to being in 8, 7, and 6, as well as 5, again using the "universal rhythm" idea. <https://youtu.be/oIFwhwsa3QY>.

ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhythm>
2. *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, Second Edition, Eighth Printing, Harvard University Press, 1974.
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulse_\(music\)#cite_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulse_(music)#cite_note-1); Fitch, W. Tecumseh and Rosenfeld, Andrew J., "Perception and Production of Syncopated Rhythms," 2007.

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