
BASICS

Practicing in rhythms and accents

My father showed me how to practise in rhythms when I was 12. I can remember it clearly – not him telling me how to do it, particularly, but the feeling of playing the passage afterwards. I just couldn't believe how easy it felt. It was this passage from the Handel D major Sonata, Op. 6 no. 4:

Handel: Sonata no. 4 in D, op. 1 no. 13, mov. 2, b. 24



I began with this basic dotted pattern:



Then I played the pattern round the other way:



The whole process took perhaps five minutes, and then I played it normally again. My left hand and fingers felt light and effortless, and I could barely feel the fingers moving up and down. I watched in amazement, as if from a distance, as my fingers seemed to play the passage on their own.

After this I did not need any encouragement to practise in rhythms. It was more that you could not stop me. This was not because I was such a good student or so keen to practise – I was quite the opposite – but because it was such a quick and painless way to learn things and to ‘get them out of the way’.

Yet what has always puzzled me is the difficulty I have so often had in trying to get my students to practise in rhythms. Rather than seeing rhythm practice as a ‘power-tool’ that takes all the effort out of a task, like an electric saw does, they more often seem to think it will be too much hard work, and that there must be an easier, quicker way to get there. But this *is* one of the easiest, quickest ways.

Many explain that they do not have enough time to practise in rhythms and accents. But in that case they do not have time *not* to practise in rhythms and accents, since these methods of practice save much more time than they ever take to do.

A single session of rhythm practice can give quick results, and sometimes is enough; but several sessions of concentrated work in a variety of rhythms (and/or accents) yields fantastic results.

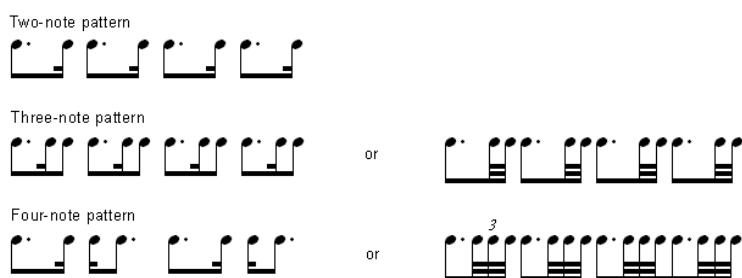
- Imagine that you are actually going to give a public performance of the passage in rhythms – as though that is how the passage should be played in the piece – and you want to practise each rhythm until it is completely polished.
- There are always four main goals to achieve. Each rhythm should be practised until the three elements of playing – pitch, sound and rhythm – are all good: every note in tune, every note clean and resonant, and the rhythms mathematically precise. The fourth goal is for all this to feel *easy*. Until each rhythm is in tune, clean, in time, and feeling easy, you haven't really mastered it yet.
- However, it is often a mistake to carry on working on each rhythm (or other practice technique) until it is ‘perfect’ before moving on to the next. Having made some progress with one rhythm – so that it is more in tune, cleaner, more in time, and feeling easier than it was five minutes ago – it is better to move on to the next rhythm. Solving some of the problems of playing the new rhythm will improve the former rhythm at the same time.

BASICS

Basic Rhythms

The great teacher Ivan Galamian, whose pupils include Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zuckerman and many other famous players, was a great advocate of practising in rhythms. Galamian would explain that any and every technical mistake in playing comes down to either a delay in a mental command being issued, or a delay in the physical action being carried out. The object of practising in rhythms or accents is to set the mind-muscle unit problems to solve – problems of timing and of co-ordination of the two hands, of string crossing, shifting, raising and dropping the fingers, and so on.

While there are obviously endless combinations and variations of rhythms you can use, for normal practice purposes it is rarely necessary to go beyond the following simple two-, three- and four-note dotted patterns.



Using just these rhythms you can cover every possibility if you begin on different notes of the phrase:

- Begin two-note patterns on the first and on the second note of the passage.
- Begin three-note patterns on the first, second and third note of the passage.
- Begin four-note patterns on the first, second, third and fourth notes of the passage.

Accent practice

Accent practice is the twin sister of rhythm practice, and everything that can be said about one applies equally to the other. Examples:



Sometimes it is helpful to go further than these basic patterns, and it is also powerfully effective to combine accent and rhythm practice.

Giving yourself problems

The whole point of rhythm or accent practice is to give yourself problems to solve. It is in the solving of the problems that you gain true knowledge and mastery of the passage.

Practising difficult fast passages, or long non-stop pieces such as the Bach E major Praeludium, you might put together groups of 3's and 4's to create dotted and accented patterns in groups of 7 notes – anything to try to create new and bigger problems to solve.

When you first play a particular rhythm, and find that it throws you so completely that you do not seem to be able to play it at all – and you immediately think: 'Oh no, this is so difficult, it is impossible, I wish I did not have to do this!' – instead this is the time to be pleased because by solving the problems you are going to improve your playing of the passage immeasurably.

If playing a rhythm was not tricky in some way there would be no point in doing it. The greater the difficulty, and the bigger the problems that you solve by learning how to play the rhythms cleanly, the easier it feels when you then play the passage normally.

Therefore, not only do you want problems, but if something is or becomes too easy you need to find a way of making it more difficult again.

- A simple way to 'raise the bar', like an athlete always wanting to jump higher, is to play rhythms with the metronome. Increase the speed of the click each time you satisfy the four conditions of pitch, sound, rhythm and ease.

Next month's Basics looks at when to leave fingers down on the string