

Creatively Developing Timing and Rhythmic Feel

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The music educator of today is constantly forced to reinvent teaching strategies for some of the most basic elements of music. Years ago the study of music in itself was an entertaining adventure for any student. Today with the ever greater expansion of multi-media entertainment, music along with other areas of study, is simply not as fascinating as an interactive computer program or television show.

Students are now looking for new alternatives that will keep their interest in the same way as their favorite television show or computer program. So the question then arises, "How does a music educator regain the interest of his/her students?"

The simplest way to answer this intriguing question would be the following: "A teacher who understands the conditions that make people want to learn, want to read, to write, and do sums is in a position to turn these activities into flow experiences. When the experience becomes intrinsically rewarding, students' motivation is engaged, and they are on their way to a lifetime of self-propelled acquisition of knowledge." (Csikszentmihalyi)

Music, as is with any other art form, is a creative adventure. The development of phrasing, compositional style and improvisatory aspects of this medium is the essence of what music is about. The problem is the areas that do not necessarily relate to this creative process. For example: the study of notation, rhythmic pulse and timing, proper pitch, quality of tone and length of duration; all of which are necessary and vital aspects of musical study. All of which can be quite boring for the music student of today. Therefore the

music educator is left to design new and creative ways of learning these mundane, yet vital aspects of musical study.

Purpose/Objective

One of the most tedious elements of studying music are those areas concentrating on proper rhythm and timing. Many students find it much more rewarding to play a simple melody than to keep steady time with a metronome. Let alone correctly determining rhythmic structure and differences between an eighth note in common time as opposed to cut time.

As is with everyone who first studies music, their interest lies not in the theoretical but in what their ears perceive. Therefore those who decide to study music are at times disenchanted with the necessary repetition of technical study and theory. The happy medium would be to correlate what a student envisions to hear when they embark upon their studies, while truly digesting the pertinent information that is often viewed as mundane.

"Most musicians probably expend the majority of their musical time and effort on rehearsal. The nature and quantity of rehearsal carried out is, therefore, likely to be the most important determinant of performing skill." (Sloboda, pg. 90) It is then imperative for the music educator to develop a method of study that prolongs the student's interest to practice, but more importantly to focus on those areas necessary for technical development.

Metronome

The use of a metronome is the tool all musicians use to develop good timing. In order to develop good timing, one must have a solid foundation in reading and

performing rhythm properly. When good timing and proper rhythm is obtained the performer can then explore various phrasings that best suit the rhythmic pulse and structure of a given work.

The down side to this process is that it takes a great deal of time and patience to develop. This process becomes even more difficult when trying to develop an understanding of a machine that simply clicks at various tempos.

Problematic to this method of study, is that it does not engage the student to relate this process to musical forms. Basically, a student can become frustrated and bored by this process since they are not playing music, but are simply practicing a technique. Therefore, "it is indeed a necessary precursor of musical awareness that a student should be able to notice differences in crucial dimensions of sound. For instance he will be unable to notice the defining features of a particular melody if he cannot detect differences in pitch or time." (Sloboda, pg. 198)

The objective then is for the student to be able to relate this technique to a musical context. "The principal characteristic of music is that sounds stand in significant relation to one another, not in isolation. For music perception to get off the ground listeners must start to notice relationships and identify significant groupings." (Sloboda, pg. 154)

Procedure

As indicated above, it is common for a teacher to recommend the use of a metronome. The metronome will hopefully instill the student with a better sense of timing. Regardless of instrument or level of competency, the use of a metronome can give the student false hope. For exam-

ple: students who are working on a particular ensemble piece, may find no problem working alone with a metronome. But when this student is then to perform with the entire ensemble, his ears are now accustomed to the constant click of the metronome. In turn, the student is not developing his ears to proper ensemble performance technique, nor is he truly understanding the rhythmic feel of a given work.

The instructor is now faced with developing a method that not only requires the student to develop innate timing, but can also relate this technique to performing with an ensemble. Dependent upon the literature being studied, the use of a recording is quite common. Students not only develop an understanding of the piece's harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structure, but also become accustomed to playing with an ensemble. The problem though, is for the student who does not have access to a recording.

For example: all method books contain solo etudes. These etudes consist of varying difficulty, dependent upon rhythmic complexity, meter etc. Unfortunately many of these works do not have recordings, nor do they necessarily require students to develop rhythmic feel or timing. Thus the use of the metronome is called into play. Hopefully an instructor will specify the importance of subdivision of rhythms, counting aloud, and or clapping out rhythms as part of their practice regimen. But the ultimate goal is not to only have the student obtain proper timing with a metronome, but to also develop rhythmic feel. This is where the metronome falls short, and where the instructor must take over.

Methodology

The following method can be designed to correlate with any level of study or instrument type. One will need access to a MIDI Keyboard or Sampler and a Tape Recorder. This method can be coordinated for a classroom setting or with applied students.

Instead of referring students to the use of a metronome or recording, one can use a MIDI Sampler to create metronome like compositions. For instance: if a student is working on a piece that contains

rhythms as complex as sixteenth notes, and is to be played at a marching tempo, the instructor can create a rhythmic composition utilizing a MIDI Sampler and record it for his students. The student can then listen to this recording, which utilizes various percussive sounds that coincide with the rhythmic structure of the given composition.

If a recording is designed with a particular melodic or harmonic structure, It does not permit students who are playing compositions in different keys to use this method. Thus a tape for every key would have to be made; as well as numerous melodies and harmonies that coincide with various etudes or works. By strictly using a rhythmic base, the instructor can utilize this recording for any work and instrument that correlates with the rhythmic feel of a given composition. Students can explore and experiment with this recording either by developing their own improvisations, or phrasings for the given work. Students are also forced to listen to other sounds while performing; opening their minds and ears to ensemble playing.

"The cumulative outcomes of free and guided exploration, cast as they are in experiential molds, result in heightened sensitivity and receptivity to aural and other sensory stimuli. The extensive creative interaction with one another and with numerous sound producing materials leads to new levels of awareness and insight. In short, these encounters enable one to perceive the data of musical experience more clearly." (Pogonowski, pg. 8)

The above describes one small way this method can be incorporated. For classroom settings or applied lessons, the instructor can develop numerous recordings at various tempos and rhythmic structures. Students along with the instructor can listen and play along as a class to the recording; either with their given band parts, or utilizing the recording to accentuate improvisatory thought with the student's given instrument, or to simply have the class clap out various rhythms that coincide with the structure of the recording.

"The principal goal of interaction is the experience itself, the involvement of the student as a creative, active musician. Experience provides for the student a fun-

damental way of learning and knowing. The student learns by taking part in diverse encounters; he is not taught, he learns by his own experience." (Pogonowski, pg. 9)

This method engages the student to develop an understanding for rhythm and how it affects the make-up of any composition. Unlike the metronome, the student is surrounded by various sounds pulsating within a rhythmic framework, that not only incorporates good timing, but invites the student to experiment with the sounds of his or her instrument. Most importantly, this method develops the student's creativity while covering the mundane techniques of timing and rhythmic feel, "showing that students can assimilate translative skills easily when the musical concepts and the reason for translation are established." (Pogonowski, pg. 10)

Closing

Developing creative solutions for technical exercises is a challenging and time consuming process for the music educator. This process, though it is laborious, is vital for music students of all levels and ages. Unlike years ago, such concepts as improvisation and composition can no longer be saved for the advanced student, but must be presented and worked on by all. Thus mundane activities must be presented in a new and creative light; keeping the student's interest in music alive.

Bibliography

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