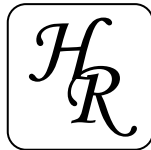


THE RHYTHM BOOK

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❖ On studying rhythm — Notes for students and teachers

Music is sometimes defined as “sound organized in time.” A large part of the temporal or “time” element of music is what we commonly call rhythm. I should be clear from the beginning that what we are really studying is for the most part “Western tonal rhythm” the rhythm that developed along with Western tonal music. Western tonal music refers to music derived from the art music and to some extent the folk music of western Europe over the last 400 years or so. Tonality, the organization around a focal pitch we call “tonic,” is the most distinctive feature of this music. It is so pervasive in European-American culture that we often take it for granted. The rhythm of tonal music is also distinctive, and very different from the rhythm of music that is not tonal or music from other parts of the world. How these musical traditions are different is not terribly important right now, but we should acknowledge that the kind of rhythm we are studying is the kind found in Western tonal music.

Using this book will help you learn to read and understand tonal rhythm, and perform it accurately and confidently. Don’t rush too quickly through the early, seemingly easy exercises. From the outset work carefully to build good habits, to master the conducting beat patterns, and to learn to pay attention to tempo, dynamics, and articulation markings. It is fine to perform the exercises in ways other than those specified—with other tempos or articulations—but they should never be done in a thoughtless and unmusical way.

Always perform musically. Listen for the phrases and gestures that move the music along. The idea that music has a sense of forward motion is very much a characteristic of tonal music. Don’t neglect the motion just because you are working primarily with rhythm. If an exercise begins with a pick-up, subsequent phrases are likely also to begin with a pick-up. Breathe at the phrases breaks (notated or not) and not after the first note of two of the new phrase. Never perform the exercises in a boring monotone. Use your voice to show the direction of the line, the high and low points, and cadences.

There are six types of exercises in the book.

Single parts These exercises are the most common, and are usually designed to address specific issues or introduce new material. Even on a simple, single-line exercise, always perform musically, interpreting the phrases and gestures in a way that shows you understand the musical structure.

Ensembles (duets and trios) These are intended for more than one performer. Always learn all the parts, and switch parts often in performance.

Speak and clap These are intended for a single performer to speak one part and clap the other. Typically you should speak the top line and clap the lower, but occasionally switching parts is good practice.

Layering These exercises combine repeated patterns or ostinatos in various ways. You can repeat each pattern an agreed upon number of times, or allow the performers to determine how and how often the parts are to be repeated. Occasionally ostinatos are provided for other single line exercises. You may layer these in a variety of creative ways as well. Layering patterns and ostinato rhythms in this way is more akin to certain African and East Asian styles of music.

Improvise in the blanks These exercises have blank measures in which you should improvise rhythm. Try to use rhythms that relate to the exercise. Always pay attention to the music that comes before and after, and make sure your improvised material fits.

Real music These exercises are written on a staff to give practice reading rhythm in a more familiar musical setting. Although these are still primarily rhythm exercises, use the cues of contour and phrasing to give a musical performance.

In addition to the rhythm exercises, there are both pre-notational and written exercises. Do these exercises as they occur, and use them as models to create your own supplemental exercise.

Other suggestions for practice

Echo rhythm. Speak or clap rhythms to a study partner, and have the partner respond on Takadimi syllables. This is a very effective way to learn rhythm, and should come before reading and writing with notation.

Experiment. Include the element of pitch. Singing rhythm on one repeated pitch puts strain on your voice and is not recommended. But singing on a scale or even improvising a melody is great practice and strongly encouraged. When singing scales sometimes it is easier and more sensible to change pitches with each beat or even each measure.

Be creative. Use the exercises in the book as a basis for creating your own exercises. For example you might add ostinatos or improvised clapping parts where none is given, or consider the given exercise the first phrase of a two phrase period, and improvise a subsequent phrase. There are many ways to expand on the framework given in the text. Through play is a natural way to learn new skills. Think of all you learned as a child just by playing. Find creative ways to “play” with rhythm. It will make learning fun and effective.

Multi-task. It is fine to work just on the rhythm when learning a new concept or working out a challenging pattern, but it is important to add other elements to your performance as

you become more proficient. Once you have overcome the technical challenges of an exercise, always conduct, clap, sing pitches, or do something else to expand your performance. Rarely in real music do we focus solely on rhythm. Even in percussion music, performers are thinking about timbre, style, and musical expression, even when playing a single rhythmic line.

Special thanks

Special thanks are owed to Nashville composer and percussionist David Madeira. David worked with me especially on the later chapters in the book to write examples that were challenging and reflecting current musical trends.

Takadimi

Takadimi is the system of rhythmic solfege used throughout the book. It does for rhythm what “*do re mi*” solfege does for pitch. It gives us a way to label the parts of a rhythm and can make it easier both to understand and to perform. Takadimi is beat oriented; that is, it assigns syllables based on the position of the note within the beat. It is also pattern based. Reading rhythm with Takadimi helps you learn to recognize rhythmic patterns and see groupings of notes, not simply read note to note. Reading rhythm this way is similar to the way we read groups of letters as words and not one letter at a time. The word “takadimi” is similar to a pattern used in the complex system of chanted sounds used to learn Indian drumming. Indian music is not metric in the way tonal rhythm is, and so its use in that system is entirely different from the way we use it here.

The Takadimi system as described in this book was developed in the early 1990s by several members of the theory faculty at Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York. The article that introduced the system was co-authored by Richard Hoffman, William Pelto, and John W. White, and titled “Takadimi: A Beat-Oriented system of Rhythmic Solfege,” and published in the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* (1994). The article thoroughly explains the system and shows its relation to other similar systems of learning rhythm.

I must thank my co-authors, Bill Pelto and John White, as well as the others who worked with us from the early stages of Takadimi, especially: John Benoit, Craig Cummings, and Timothy Nord. I must also thank the many teachers in schools across the country who have successfully used Takadimi, and in so doing have continued to add to its pedagogical value. Thanks are owed my colleagues at Belmont University who have used Takadimi and this book, especially Kris Elsberry, Deen Entsminger, Todd Kemp, Brent Gerlach, David Madeira, Caleb Weeks, and Margie Yankeelov. Their insight and skillful application in the classroom have been both an inspiration and a very practical help. Finally, I must thank the many students who have learned rhythm with Takadimi and showed us what worked and what didn't, and most of all, inspired us to keep trying.