



Musical Musings: Practicing with the Metronome Part I

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The metronome is useful for more than keeping a steady beat. There are many creative ways to use the metronome to practice music for both students and professionals.

THE METRONOME AS A RHYTHMIC TUTOR

Metronome Techniques by Frederick Franz (self published, 1947) gives the following advice on page 22:

The following procedure is generally employed, with only slight modifications, in learning complicated and tricky rhythms. a) Find the shortest note in the passage... b) Assign one metronome beat to it. c) Figure how many such beats should be given to all the other notes and rests. d) Start the metronome at about 60 or 92 with one beat = shortest note. A slow enough tempo should be chosen to permit accurate playing of the rhythm yet fast enough to reveal the rhythmic pattern. [e] Increase the metronome speed] f) Now further increase the speed by assignment one metronome beat to two [or three] and then four of the shortest notes. During this process, while acquiring the skill of muscular sequence response, pay particular attention to conform rigidly to the metronome beats. g) When performance tempo can be achieved with accuracy of rhythm, introduce the desired shadings and nuances, if they are required in the passage. [text added by Ewell]

Let's illustrate Franz's principles by applying them to Julius Weissenborn's 23rd study in Opus 8. Weissenborn provides an ossia passage in the middle of the study:



Many students are confused by this passage and a careful explanation of the rhythm is necessary. I Start by setting the metronome to a subdivision of 16ths at about mm.=120 or a bit faster. This means that there are four metronome clicks for each quarter-note. We carefully work through these measures with the metronome and emphasize rhythmic accuracy. When the student has mastered one metronome setting we increase the speed until the tempo is 164. At that point I set the metronome to 82 = an eighth-note. The student may have some difficulty with the transition from 16th notes to 8th notes so sometimes we switch back and forth between the two tempos (164 and 82). From the tempo of 82 we then increase the metronome setting to the desired speed. At that point we reset the metronome to give one click for every quarter-note.

Learning to play different speeds of notes accurately is an important skill that a musician has to master. For instance, here are the rhythmic values of notes in the opening of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* without fermatas or grace notes:



Not only is the passage difficult to perform because of the difficulty of upper register notes, but the passage is rhythmically complicated as well. For our purposes here we will just concentrate on the rhythmic difficulties.

I suggest practicing the transitions from 2 to 3, 3 to 4, and 2 to 5 divisions of a beat in two different ways. First, set the metronome at a comfortable speed that will indicate eighth-notes. Next pick a stable note on which to tongue the rhythm. You might want to also practice the rhythms apart from the instrument by tapping a pencil on a music stand. Also you could practice the rhythms in a slurred scale. Work on a pair of different note speeds first. For instance, divisions of 2 to 3 and back again: 2 2 3 3 2 2 3 3. Divisions of 5 to 2: 2 2 5 5 2 2 5 5; or 4 to 3: 4 4 3 3 4 4 3 3. With the metronome set to eighth-notes you will be able to quickly ascertain your accuracy of the duple division or quadruple division of the beat. Next set the metronome to indicate quarter-notes, that is, at half the speed. Repeat your practice of different pairings. When you have mastered these then practice the rhythmic patterns as given above. Of course this is only the foundation for now adding the fermatas and grace notes to the opening of *Rite of Spring* but you will have mastered the rhythmic complexity of the passage.

To be continued....