

Lesson 2

Have You Ever Wondered What is Rhythm?

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LESSON 2:

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED . . . WHAT IS RHYTHM?

In Books 1 and 2 of this course, you learned to read music and play it with accurate timing. We kept the timing pretty simple as you were busy learning a good many new skills.

Now in Book 3 it is time to explore timing in much greater depth.

In studying all the different aspects of timing, we are knocking on the door of the vast subject of *rhythm*.

Reminder: *rhythm* is a pattern of sounds repeating over time.

Let's explore some aspects of rhythm, and the magic that rhythms can bring to music. I'll have you create various sounds so you can experience this for yourself.

Make some sounds that have no rhythm

I'm going to have you make some sounds.

First, make a sound by tapping once on your chair. Do that now.

That sound has no rhythm, since it does not repeat over time.

Reminder: rhythm is a pattern of sounds repeating over time.

Now tap your chair a number of times, keeping the taps regular like the ticking of a clock. The sound is now repeating over time. So is it a rhythm?

Well, not really. According to the definition of rhythm, there must be a *pattern of sounds* repeating over time. When you tap your chair over and over, you are repeating the tap. But a tap has no pattern of sounds – it's just a simple tap.

Reminder: rhythm is a pattern of sounds repeating over time.

Make some rhythms!

To create a rhythm, we must first **create a pattern of sounds** and then **repeat it**.

Let's do that now.

1. **Make a pattern of sounds.** As a very simple example, tap your chair twice rapidly. Do that now:
 - tap-tap
2. Now **repeat it** a few times:

- tap-tap
- tap-tap
- tap-tap

You just created a rhythm!

What can a rhythm be made of?

There are various ingredients you can use for creating a rhythm.

Long and short sounds

Find a way of making a sound that lasts for about a second. Perhaps you can scratch something with a fingernail.

Then scratch it again, but this time much shorter.

Good. Now you can create a pattern of loooooong and short sounds, such as:

- loooooong-short-short

And then you can repeat the pattern:

- loooooong-short-short
- loooooong-short-short
- loooooong-short-short

Or loooooong-short-loooooong

Or loooooong-short-short-loooooong

Make up a rhythm of your own using a mixture of loooooong and short sounds.

Sounds and silences

Make a sound such as by tapping something.

Then leave a moment's silence before making the next sound.

We can create a rhythm from a mixture of sounds and silences.

Your pattern could be, for example:

- sound-sound-silence-sound

Repeat it to create a rhythm:

- sound-sound-silence-sound
- sound-sound-silence-sound
- sound-sound-silence-sound

Strong and weak sounds

Find a way of making a **strong** (loud) sound and a *weak* (quiet) sound. Perhaps you can bang the table with your hand for the **strong** sound, and tap it lightly for the *weak* sound.

Now here's quite a sophisticated and interesting rhythm that you might hear in various types of music:

- **strong-weak-weak-strong-weak-weak-strong-weak**

Then repeat it:

- **strong-weak-weak-strong-weak-weak-strong-weak**
- **strong-weak-weak-strong-weak-weak-strong-weak**
- **strong-weak-weak-strong-weak-weak-strong-weak**

Tip: The strong and weak sounds are all the same duration.

Make up a rhythm of your own using a mixture of **strong** and weak sounds.

Different sounds

Make one sound, such as tapping a glass with a spoon.

Now make a second sound, such as saying 'pa'.

And a third sound, such as stamping on the floor.

Mix those sounds to create a pattern, such as:

- tap-'pa'-tap-stamp

Repeat that to create a rhythm:

- tap-'pa'-tap-stamp
- tap-'pa'-tap-stamp
- tap-'pa'-tap-stamp

Are you beginning to feel like the drummer in a rock band?

A rock drummer makes use of different sounds in creating rhythms. He can strike a drum with a stick, play a larger drum using a foot pedal, bang two metal cymbals together using another foot pedal, tap two drumsticks together, and so on. He has a rich collection of different sounds to use in creating rhythms suitable for each piece of music the band is performing.

Make up a rhythm of your own using various different sounds. There are so many you can choose from. You can make various sounds with your mouth and lips, clap your hands, stamp your feet, and look around for objects you can tap or bang together. Have fun being inventive!

Rhythms in life

Before we take up rhythms in music, let's listen to one that occurs in daily life.

Do you like trains? Imagine you're on a train ride across the Canadian Rocky Mountains.

Look online for sounds of train wheels. Or if you live near a train track listen closely for the rhythm of the sound of the wheel turning.

Try mimicking the rhythm by making a sound of your own, such as tapping on a table. See if you can match the sound of train wheels exactly, so your taps coincide with the wheels.

Rhythms in music

Did you find that fun?

Now let's turn to rhythms in music.

For now, you'll get just a quick taste of a few rhythms. By the time you complete this book of the course (Book 3), you will be very familiar with all of these rhythms and more, and you'll be able to read them from printed music and play them accurately at speed.

These rhythms are more intricate than any we've had up till now in Books 1 and 2.

A gentle rhythm

Listen to a few minutes of Scarborough Fair.

This is 'Scarborough Fair', a traditional English song from centuries ago, made popular in modern times by Simon and Garfunkel.

Do you find it has a gentle swinging quality?

As you listen, tap the rhythm along with the music. Try to get your taps to coincide exactly with the notes of the music.

A faster rhythm

Now you are going to listen to a rhythm that is very different to the one above. Find and listen to a recording of Jack and Jill, the traditional English nursery rhyme. Notice the quality of the rhythm. Notice the difference.

So if this rhythm is not gentle, how would you describe it?

This is the traditional English nursery rhyme 'Jack and Jill'.

Listen to it again, and this time tap the rhythm along with the music. Try to get your taps to coincide exactly with the notes of the music.

A jerky rhythm

This jerky rhythm is much used in Scottish dance music.

It's also used in classical music, and this tune "The Water Goblin" by Czech composer Antonin Dvorak consists almost entirely of this one rhythm repeated over and over. Listen and notice the jerky rhythm of the song.

Play it again, and this time tap the rhythm along with the music. Try to get your taps to coincide exactly with the notes of the music.

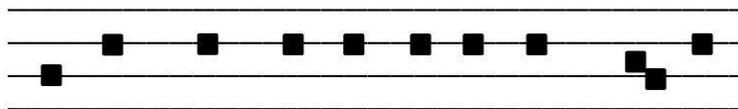
A (very!) brief history of rhythm

The system of music you're learning on this course is the system that evolved in Europe, as distinct from the music of other cultures such as India, China and Africa. So European music is what I'll cover in this brief history.

Thousands of years ago

Music has existed for thousands of years. For most of that period, the exact rhythms used in music are unknown as they were not recorded. **1000 AD**

Our modern system of printed music has its roots in Europe 1,000 years ago. An Italian monk, Guido d'Arezzo, observed that singers had trouble remembering the music. To solve this, he invented a system for writing down music. Here is what it looked like:



Quia cum Unigenitus tuus

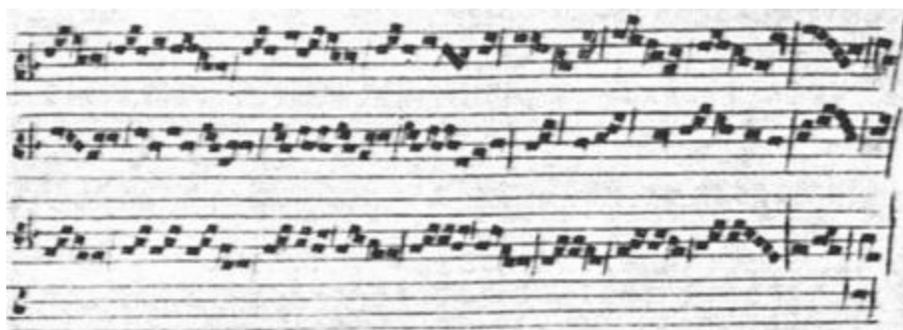
(The words under the music are in Latin, the language of the church at that time.)

The printed music tells us little about timing. The singers would get an idea of the timing from the Latin words they were chanting. The result was that music had a smooth, flowing quality, without any of the distinctive rhythms we know today.

Find and listen to some Monk music from 1000 AD. Notice the difference in rhythm quality and almost a lack of rhythm resulting in a smooth flowing quality which is very beautiful in its own special way.

1200 AD

By the year 1200, music was being written down by composers. One famous composer of that period was Perotin, believed to be French. Here is the sheet music of one of his compositions:



Perotin made extensive use of the rhythm that I called the ‘jerky rhythm’ a few pages back. Find and listen to some Perotin music “Viderunt Omnes”, is recommended. Can you hear the wavy pattern of the rhythm? Now listen to Dvorak’s Symphony No. 1

Music of Perotin 1200 AD	Music of Dvorak 1900 AD
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Do you hear the similarity?

1600 AD

As we just saw, in the year 1200 Perotin took one rhythm and repeated it over and over. Dramatic, but rather simple.

By the year 1600, composers were much more sophisticated in their use of rhythm. A composition would be crafted from many different rhythms, carefully woven to create a tapestry of sound. In addition, a piece played by several instruments or voices could have them playing or singing different rhythms at the same time. Quite a complex scene!

This complexity is shown in the following example of English music from around the year 1600.

Haec Dies (Latin for 'This Day')

by William Byrd

The image shows a musical score for three voices in 4/4 time. The score is written on three staves, labeled Voice 1, Voice 2, and Voice 3. Voice 1 is in the treble clef, Voice 2 is in the treble clef, and Voice 3 is in the bass clef. The music consists of seven measures. Voice 1 starts with a whole note G4, followed by a half note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a half note G4, a quarter note F4, a quarter note E4, and a whole note D4. Voice 2 starts with a whole rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a half note A4, a quarter note G4, a quarter note F4, a quarter note E4, and a whole note D4. Voice 3 starts with a whole rest, followed by a whole rest, a whole rest, a whole note G3, a half note A3, a quarter note B3, a quarter note A3, and a whole note G3.

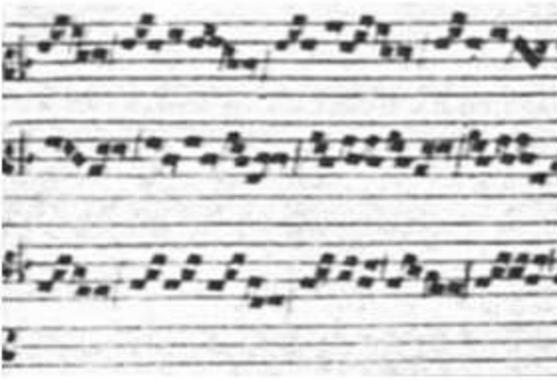
Tip: If you're reading these course materials on a tablet computer such as iPad or similar, the music may be bigger and clearer if you hold the iPad in the landscape position, so the screen is wider than it is tall.

This piece is written for three musicians singing or playing three instruments. Whether it is sung or played, each line of music is referred to as a 'voice'. Notice that the voices start at different times, and then they play different rhythms at the same time. Quite a changed scene from the simplicity of 1200 AD.

The image shows a musical score for three voices in 4/4 time. The top staff (Voice 1) is in red, the middle staff (Voice 2) is in green, and the bottom staff (Voice 3) is in blue. Voice 1 starts with a half note on G4 in the first measure. Voice 2 enters in the second measure with a half note on G4. Voice 3 enters in the third measure with a half note on G3. An orange box highlights the final two measures, showing all three voices playing different rhythmic patterns simultaneously. Annotations include: 'Voice 1 starts first' (red arrow), 'Voice 2 joins in after 2 beats' (green arrow), 'Voice 3 joins in after 3 measures' (blue arrow), and 'An example of the 3 voices all singing different rhythms' (orange box).

Find and listen to William Byrd's "Haec Dies". Hear the different rhythms and complexities throughout the song.

As you can see, between 1200 and 1600 AD the system of music notation evolved considerably:



1200 AD

Rather vague.
Shows pitch accurately,
but no indication of timing.



1600 AD

System for writing music
that shows precise pitches
and precise timing.

The evolution of music notation.

In fact, after 1600 AD music notation remained virtually unchanged to the present day. Isn't that amazing? It stopped changing because it had come to satisfy all the requirements of musicians, including precisely capturing intricate rhythms and timing.

Past 100 years

As we move into modern times, styles of music evolved that depend on strong rhythms unimaginable in earlier times. Styles such as ragtime, blues, rock, rap, reggae. Now we are going to listen to an example of Ragtime.

Find and listen to 'The Entertainer', the best-known composition by the 'King of Ragtime', Scott Joplin. This tune soared to fame when it was used as the theme tune for the 1973 film 'The Sting'.

How important is rhythm in music?

Listen to 'The Water is Wide' a traditional version without a guitar.

Now find and listen to "The Water is Wide" and hear how that tune sounds when it's played in a more modern style with guitar, with the proper rhythms.

Until you have the rhythm, there's something missing. Rhythm adds an emotional connection with the music. It sparks the imagination. That was the song 'The Water is Wide', which originated in Scotland hundreds of years ago and is still going strong.

Now for a livelier example. Here it is with the rhythms removed:

Find and listen to 'What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor' and notice how lively the rhythm and speed is.

The rhythm gets us involved. Don't you feel like clapping or dancing? That was the song 'What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?' It is perhaps the best-known 'sea chanty', a song sung by a team of sailors on a large ship to accompany work tasks, such as hauling a rope.

Rhythms can even transport us around the world. One rhythm can make us feel like we're in Russia, while another rhythm transports us to Spain or Scotland.

Chat with David

What's ahead

This lesson has given us a brief taste of just a few of the rhythms you'll become familiar with as you work your way through Book 3.

By the time you complete Book 3, you'll be able to read these rhythms and many more from printed music, and play them accurately at speed.

A bold promise? Yes, but with a bit of work (and of course some fun along the way), you will make it come true. ■