

THE RHYTHM METHOD

Sorry about the title, but no-one would be interested in something called 'Subdivision of Beats'. However that is what this is all about. It's not a boring topic and it's a very practical way of trying out new rhythmic ideas for the purposes of improvisation or writing music.

It is often said that *rhythm* is the most important aspect of music. Mind you, it's nearly always drummers who say that in order to get gigs. Nevertheless, we can't ignore the fundamental importance of rhythm or feel embarrassed by it, as many classical music conductors have been in the past. So let's get down to the point.

If you take the number of beats in a certain number of bars/measures, you can subdivide the total into smaller units. In a bar of 4/4, for example, you could think of it as 1 and 3, 2 and 2, 3 and 1 or the entire 4. You could also choose to think of a bar of 4/4 as being comprised of 8 quavers/eighth-notes and subdivide them, etc. etc. You could also think of a bar of 4/4 (12/8) as being made up of 12 quavers/eighth-notes, and so on. To make things easier, however, I will restrict what comes next to crotchets/whole-notes and leave you to experiment with other subdivisions. So,

In 4/4, starting on the first beat of the bar, we could have:

3 3 2, or 2 3 3, or 3 2 3 = 8 beats (2 bars/measures)

3 3 3 3, or 3 2 3 2 2 = 12 (3 bars)

4 3 3 3 3, or 3 3 3 3 4 = 16 (4 bars)

(note that in the first example immediately above, you start with a whole bar and in the second you end with a whole bar)

3 2 3 2 3 3, or 3 3 3 2 3 2, or 3 2 3 2 2 4 = 16 (4 bars)

3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2, or 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 2 = 20 (5 bars)

3 3 3 3 4 4 = 20 (5 bars)

3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 4, or 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 = 24 (6 bars)

4 4 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3, or 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 4 4 = 32 (8 bars)

3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 4 4 4 (or any other variation on this) = 32 (8 bars)

In 4/4 starting on beat 2

(1) 3 2 2 , etc = 8 (2 bars)

(1) 3 2 3 2 3 2 = 16 (4 bars)

(1) 3 3 3 3 3 = 16 (4 bars)

In 4/4 starting on beat 3

(2) 3 3 = 8 (2 bars)

(2) 3 2 3 2 = 12 (3 bars)

(2) 3 3 3 3 3 3 = 20 (5 bars) (6 lots of 3)

(2) 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 = 32 (8 bars) (6 lots of 3 2)

In 4/4 starting on beat 4

(3) 2 3, or (3) 3 2 = 8 (2 bars)

(3) 3 3 3 = 12 (3 bars)

(3) 3 3 3 4, or (3) 4 3 3 3 = 16 (4 bars)

In 3/4 starting on the first beat

2 2 2 = 6 (2 bars)

2 2 2 3 = 9 (3 bars)

2 2 2 2 2 2 = 12 (4 bars) (6 lots of 2)

3 2 3 2 3 2 = 15 (5 bars)

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 = 18 (6 bars) (9 lots of 2)

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 3 = 21 (7 bars) (9 lots of 2)
(or start with the 3)

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 3 3 = 24 (8 bars) (9 lots of 2)
(or start with the two 3's)

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 = 24 (8 bars) (4 lots of 2 2 2)

Combinations can also be worked out starting on the other beats as in the 4/4 examples.

In 5/4 starting on the first beat

2 2 2 2 2 = 10 (2 bars)

3 3 2 2, or 2 2 3 3, or 2 3 2 3, or 3 2 3 2, or 2 3 3 2, or 3 2 2 3 = 10 (2 bars)

2 2 2 3 3 3, or 3 3 3 2 2 2 = 15 (3 bars)

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 = 20 (4 bars) (10 lots of 2)

4 4 4 4 4 = 20 (4 bars)

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2, or 2 2 2 2 3 3 3 3 = 20 (4 bars)

etc, etc

This is not an exhaustive list although it may exhaust you trying to play them.

Having worked out how you want to subdivide the total beats in a section, you then have to work out how to cope with it, ie. what to play. This can be very difficult when everyone else in the band is playing straight 4/4, 3/4 or what-have-you. But being confident about what you are doing helps.

It might also help to know which beats in the straight time correspond with the overlaying pattern you are playing. For example, if you were dividing up 2 bars of 4/4 into a 3 3 2 subdivision, the second 3 will occur on the 4th beat of the first bar in straight time and the last 2 will occur on the 3rd beat of the 2nd bar in straight time.

It follows from this that the type of sequence is very important. It is much easier to attempt the above example where the same chord lasts for 2 whole bars. Therefore, choose appropriate sequences which fit what you are trying to do. Tunes like *So What* may be an obvious choice, but if you get lost...boy, do you get lost!

If you have never tried this sort of thing before, you may want to practice first. Using a metronome, especially one which emphasises the first beat of the bar is helpful. Even more helpful is playing along to backing-tracks or getting together with an obliging pianist/guitarist/bass-player. Also, work out some rhythms in 3/4, for example, that you can fall back on. Have fun!