

The “Wind Percussionist”

Giving wind and string players the same advanced subdivision skills as our percussionists.

I have been very fortunate to have opportunity to present my “No Fear” Rhythm Clinics to many young musicians around South Carolina and a few other states. One question that I always ask of the student participants is: “Which section in your school’s symphonic band has your best sight readers and strongest counters.” Without hesitation, the answer always given is, “our percussionists.” I then will ask a follow up question: “Why?” I now am confronted with silence, so, after a while, I will interject the suggestion: “Is it that your drummers are the most intelligent students in your band program?” That last question always solicits a wide variety of very interesting responses, but it gets the students thinking and sets up the direction the clinic will then be heading.

I will finally explain, that wind players are primarily taught to take notes of longer durations, and then break them down or subdivide longer note durations into smaller rhythmic elements. In contrast, most percussionists are taught to count starting with the smallest rhythmic elements, or shortest note durations, and then build them up. The percussionists’ use of this cumulative counting approach, or “time lines”, is in direct contrast to the traditional “division” approach learned by wind and string players. As a result of the previous questions, it is obvious which system seems to produce superior results, however, mastering both methods can be extremely beneficial to ALL! musicians. That is one of the key aspects offered in the “No Fear” Rhythm Clinic, comparing and contrasting alternate counting approaches.

Take, for example, a common percussion warm up used by many marching band and drum corp percussion sections around the country, “check patterns.” These exercises begin with the instructor or squad leader “clicking out”, first the pulse, and then the subdivision in 8ths or 16th notes. The ensemble locks into the velocity of the shortest rhythmic component, and from there, will perform a large variety of rhythmic patterns as part of the warm up. Internally the percussion section sets up a series of audio “time lines”, and then will use these to gradually expand their “whole language” rhythmic vocabulary. This past summer I was given the opportunity to attend a clinic presented by Thom Hannum at West Chester University. By the way, John Vilella and the staff of Vivace Productions run a fantastic camp for directors and students. Thom got me thinking about different approaches used in teaching students to count, and the concept of the “wind percussionist.” Perhaps earlier on, many drum lines may have learned their competition music by rote instruction, however, with the complexity of today’s marching shows and the necessity of the versatile percussionist, the ability to be able to read music is crucial. Thom discussed the use of “check pattern” warm ups and presented these rhythmic patterns written, not only in music notation, but also incorporated the concept of “right hand lead” and “slash notation.” These allow younger section members to “visualize” the performance of these patterns and in a sense “sound out” the notated rhythms. This concept combines all of the key elements fundamental to an accurate and effective counting system. We utilize the mathematical concept of “time lines” as defined by “R L R L “ sticking, the binary and phonetic format of “play” or “don’t play”, and visualization of rhythmic patterns using “strike the head” or “ghost sticking” applications. Breaking counting elements down into a series of such simple, basic concepts will certainly benefit wind and string players as well as percussionists, so why not use them?

Another aspect of using rhythm “time lines” or a “cumulative” counting approach, is that percussionists normally do not get hung up on “numbers” when counting. It may not seem like

much, but the slightest added element required for a student to apply his or her counting system, may result in the musician becoming “over processed” and unable to perform these rhythmic patterns correctly. Replacing “numbers” with the recognition of pulse locations on a “time line”, such as down arrows and foot tapping, may be all that is needed to make these challenging patterns accessible for accurate performance. Numbers should still certainly be used, when needed, but the fewer “processes” used to decode new and complex rhythms, the farther our musicians will be able travel into the “rhythmic universe” before they reach the limits of their individual “processing range.” The procedure needed to expand a student’s “processing” abilities will take us into a discussion of I.Q. and “music intelligence” which is a whole other topic in itself. However, anything you can do to “trim the fat”, or get rid of any part(s) of your counting procedures which are not really needed, the better.

Don’t get me wrong, for beginning and developing musicians, long tones are an essential part of their curriculum and should not be ignored. The establishment of skills in tone production, breath control, embouchure development, pitch center, and intonation listening skills, are stressed in all of our beginning band method books, AS THEY SHOULD BE! However, it certainly could not hurt the future progress of our programs, to simultaneously teach a rhythm curriculum using “check patterns”, “time lines”, or other “build-up” concepts. The exercises included with this article are samples of the flute part, and will only take two to three minutes to perform. The use of these “Check Pattern” exercises’ is a short investment of your class’s instructional time, that can be used for the benefit of review and/or to expand your student’s “whole language” rhythm vocabulary. Probably the biggest benefit to your students is learning to count rhythms from both directions, large to small as well as small to large.

The “Check Pattern” exercises are also designed to utilize an instructional technique normally ignored by most published materials for our young music students. That is the use of “multi-level tasking.” These exercises can be performed at several different levels, allowing your students to progress gradually, each at his or her own pace. The exercises begin with tactile recognition and reinforcement of the correct “time line.” Then, they move on to “phonetic analysis” or “sounding out rhythms” in real time. The verbalization of the written “pictograph” is an optional step, which allows the director to “confirm comprehension“ of any new rhythms, and its application allows students to accurately perform these rhythms at faster tempos. Finally, of course, is the performance of these patterns, as a soloist or in groups, on the students’ instruments. The director monitors individual student progress as they work their way up the ladder. Pay close attention to where and when your students reach their individual “processing limits” and advise them at which particular level you want them to participate in the performance of the warm up. Use level advancement as a reward for a “job well done”, which keeps the students motivated to always do their best. “Showcase” your advanced students by making a big deal about them being selected as “student soloist” for the day, and they then play the warm up as your class leader. As you promote more and more students to the instrument performance level, those that are not yet ready can still participate by reinforcing basic “time line” concepts, and continue developing necessary binary skills until, they too, are ready to move on.

For students who have difficulty decoding music notation or those where the musical staff is an abstract concept, increased physical involvement and the use of “tactile reinforcers” may help significantly. The use of the “Down Clap” and “Down, touch, Up, touch” tactile drills in the “Check Patterns” exercises will help keep them “in the game” until processing skills develop allowing these students to move on. Tactile Reinforcers” also help keep down the number of needed “processing skills” being binary in nature, as well as utilizing 50 to 70% body involvement

in its student application. This incorporates the sense of touch as a way to keep track of specific positions on the appropriate “time line” as well as the way each rhythm pattern “feels” to the student counting. I also like the use of drum sticks as an additional visual aide, which also allows you to incorporate “right hand lead” and “ghost sticking.” This is the reason I wrote the percussion line as part of all of the “Check Pattern” exercise sheets. I suggest using drum sticks on books, or even make pairs of sticks out of tightly wrapped paper, just as long as your students have something to hold that they can visually see. In instrumental classes where you have no percussionists, you might randomly select one of the students to play the percussion part on a snare drum. In this heightened role of “student leader”, there is no hiding. It also can dramatically increase his or her focus and concentration, and give the instructor a chance to assess individual comprehension up to any particular rhythmic level.

The “Check Patterns” in this article focus only on “duple” meter and its two basic time lines: 8th & 16th notes. They are set up into various stages, including:

<u>Ex. No.</u>	<u>Time Line Featured</u>	<u>Description</u>
1	Sub Level A notes & rests.	Only 8 th
2a	“ ” A dotted quarter notes & rests.	Expansion to quarter and
2b	“ ” A expanded fingerings.	Same as above, with
3a	Sub Level B note and rest rhythmic patterns.	Basic 8 th & 16 th
3b	“ ” B with expanded fingerings.	Same as above,
4a	“ ” B 16 th note and rest patterns.	Less common 8 th &
4b	“ ” B with expanded fingerings.	Same as above,

“Check Pattern” Variations: These exercises use the same rhythmic patterns, already learned at each level, randomly mixed for review and to help assess individual and ensemble comprehension.

Mixed “Check Patterns”: These exercises combine the different time lines allowing your students to practice, what I call, “gear shifting” skills. They are harmonized, so you can play each exercise separately, or, two or more simultaneously.

Even at the most advanced levels, I have elected to keep the note ranges very moderate and the clarinets below the break. In this way, our young musicians’ rhythm vocabulary can expand at an independent rate and not tied in with learning new notes or physical instrumental range limitations. On the other hand, students that are ready to add the challenge of additional fingerings, or the range of a full octave, can do so. This adds another dimension or option to your students “multi-level” tasking opportunities.

Also included in the “Check Patterns” sheets is an area where band or string directors can write in whatever counting system they presently use with their students. In total, this gives directors and students a final choice of five different approaches and technique levels, which can

be used to count rhythms. These “multi-level tasking” opportunities also allow music educators to accommodate a large variety of different student learning rates and styles. In performing these exercises, help your students “shop around” to find which counting system best fits each student’s individual needs. I do want to emphasize the importance of establishing some kind of “phonetic” component in whatever system you eventually decide to use. When a student can no longer “verbalize” rhythms out loud, that is where his or her “whole language” rhythm vocabulary ends. The only way he or she can figure out or confirm the accurate performance of any additional rhythmic patterns, is to have some way to “sound them out.” “Pictographs” can be very helpful here, where, “what you see is what you say”, or even some form of “slash notation” allowing students to “feel” how new rhythms lie on the appropriate “time line.”

I’m sure educators will find many additional effective uses for the “Check Patterns” series of warm ups and instructional etudes. Several key ingredients’ that contribute to their successful use are: to keep things simple; do not move your students to additional “processing level” requirements until they are ready; and expand your students’ “whole language” rhythm vocabulary incrementally using a minimal amount of class instructional time. Samples of each of the “Check Patterns” sheets will be included for you to look over. The transpositions for all string and wind instruments can be attained through “Bandworld” magazine, or directly off my web site at www.rhythmmasters.org. Take care and the very best of the new year to all.