

Rhythm exercises: some suggestions on how to use them

This section consists of eighteen exercises in 4/4, and another fifteen in 6/8. The 4/4 exercises are preceded by a page showing various ways of dividing a quarter-note pulse, with each bar containing a specific division. It should be noted that there is often more than one way of transcribing a given rhythm, setting aside considerations of tempo and decay. In the 4/4 exercises themselves, references to “cells” indicates which divisions of the quarter-note, as delineated in the cover-page, are being used or emphasized. The same procedure is followed for the 6/8 material, where the “cell” number corresponds to the “bar” number.

The 4/4 and 6/8 materials are followed by a page of sundry claves and ostinati, then some Brazilian rhythms and a selection of exercises derived from Afro-Cuban music. Finally, there is a sample Indian tihai for recitation.

Musical practice should be a creative endeavour. It takes years of study to come to the realization that the quality of your practice is actually the central issue in your musical life, and not merely a means to an end (an exam, a recital, a beer). These little rhythm exercises can naturally be performed starting at bar one and going through to the end, like so many “compositions”, but that is only one way, and in fact the least imaginative one. Other possibilities include “looping” a couple of bars (adjacent or otherwise), clapping one of the ostinato or “clave” rhythms which I’ve added at the end while singing part or all of one of the 4/4 pages. Think depth, not just breadth.

On the subject of how to realize these exercises, it should be emphasized that everything which can be sung should be sung. Use a simple “ta-ka” articulation, with the stronger “ta” sound analogous to the “down bow” on a violin, the “down stroke” with a plectrum, etc. “Ta-ka-di-mi” also works well for four sixteenths in a beat. Triplets are articulated as TA-ka-ta. Many musicians, including wind players and guitarists, should be able to relate to this as a prescription for articulation, although keyboard players may have to think about it a bit more. In certain cases, whether to call a note a “ta” or a “ka” might be open to question, but the debate around this question can itself be rewarding.

Since most of these exercises, especially the 4/4 and 6/8 ones, were the product of one person’s imagination, they may perhaps say more about that single individual than about the wider musical world. The author’s interests and influences include Bach, the high Renaissance, and whatever rhythmic sensibility may have rubbed off in the course of playing Brazilian music for several years. Add to this mixture India, Indonesia and some media experience, and the end result is what you find here. Whatever else this collection may be, if you are using it at all imaginatively it should prove both challenging and very rewarding.