Music Composition
The Elements of Music; Rhythm and Meter

Rhythm

Rhythm refers to the duration of sounds and silences in music. Rhythms are generally measured in beats or pulses. Beats can be very obvious, as in dance music, or quite obscured.

Meter

Meter is the measuring of rhythms into beats with recurring accents, with the use of a time signature.

Rhythmic Intent

When writing your music, you have to decide how to use rhythm. Some of the questions to ask yourself are:

• Will the rhythms create momentum to drive the music forward?
• Will the beats be so subtle that we don’t feel a pulse?
• How can I use rhythm to emphasize important moments or the character of a piece?
• Is it important to me that the rhythm is steady, or am I trying to emphasize some other aspect of the music (such as the lyrics or a melody)?

It is important to write with intention when it comes to rhythm, or your piece may end up sounding arbitrary (unless arbitrary is what you want!)

Deciding on a Meter

1) Simple Time

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2  3  4  2  3  4
4  4  4  2  2  2
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In simple time signatures, each beat is typically divided into 2, or a multiple of 2. This gives these time signatures a feeling of solidity.
Listening examples - virtually every pop song is in common time (4/4 time), for example Queen “We Will Rock You”. Waltzes are in ¾ time, for example Strauss “The Blue Danube”. Marches are in 2/4 or 2/2 time, for example Della Cese “Inglesina March”

2) Compound Time

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In compound time signatures, each beat is represented by a dotted note, which is typically divided into 3, or a multiple of 3. This gives these time signatures a lilting or rolling feeling.

Listening examples - Irish traditional song “What Shall We Do With a Drunken Sailor?”, The Marcels “Blue Moon”, Louis Armstrong “What a Wonderful World”

3) Mixed Meters

Mixed meters are time signatures where both dotted and undotted beats occur within a single bar. They have an asymmetrical feeling.

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Listening examples: Puts “Charm” for concert band, Saucedo “Pulsation” for concert band, Holst “Mars, Bringer of War from The Planets”, “Theme to Mission Impossible”
Rhythmic Effects

**Accents**

Accents are created through articulation. Patterns of accents help to create the character of a piece and to give it momentum.

*Listening example: Mozart Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*

**Syncopation**

Syncopation occurs when accents happen in unexpected places – for example a beat, which is normally weak becomes strong, or an accent occurs between two beats.

*Listening example: Rolling Stones “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction”*

**Hemiola**

A musical figure in which, typically, two groups of three beats are replaced by three groups of two beats, giving the effect of a shift between triple and duple meter.

*Listening example: Bernstein “America from West Side Story”*

**Irregular rhythms (‘plets)**

It’s possible to put more notes within the space of a given beat (or beats) by using an irregular rhythm. To do this, you must write a number indicating how many notes the beat (or beats) contains.

*Listening examples: Ticheli “Amazing Grace”, Led Zeppelin “Stairway to Heaven”*
Rhythmic Effects Continued

Augmentation  Augmentation occurs when the note values of a melody are increased in length, giving the feeling that a melody is slower, even if the tempo stays the same.

Listening example Boysen “Kirkpatrick Fanfare”

Diminution  Diminution occurs when the note values of a melody are decreased in length, giving the feeling that a melody is faster, even if the tempo stays the same.

Cross Rhythm  This occurs when two different rhythmic feels happen at the same time, contrasting with each other. Typically 2 against 3 (simple against compound).

Polyrhythm  This occurs when two distinct grooves or feels happen simultaneously. This is common in African or Afro-Cuban music.

Rubato  A technique of slowing down or speeding up rhythms to enhance the expression.

Listening example: “Happy Birthday”

Free Time  This occurs when there is either no time signature, or there is a time signature and the music is marked “freely” or “free time”. It means that the performer can interpret the rhythms freely to enhance expression.

Listening example: Harry Belafonte “Day-O (The Banana Song)”

Ostinato  A rhythmic figure which is repeated as accompaniment to another part in the music

Listening example: Putz “Charm” (the clapping)
Swing Style  This is a style of playing where each beat has a triplet feel, rather than an “even” feel, with an accent on the last 1/3 of the beat. Eighth notes in swing feel are therefore interpreted like this: