Awakening Rhythmic Intuition And Flow

In The Developing Pianist

By Jessica Johnson, NCTM

One of the most distinctive, recognizable features of consummate musical artistry is imaginative pacing and rhythmic flow. Yet, playing with a sense of the larger musical beat is not reserved for artists or even advanced and gifted students. Students at any level can learn to recognize and respond to musical phrasing at the micro and macro levels, thereby achieving a more convincing and musical performance. Rhythmic flow gives music its energy and vitality, making it fun to play and experience. In *Indispensables of Piano Playing,* Abby Whiteside defines the power of an "all-encompassing rhythm": "Rhythm is the most potent of all the forces which influence listening habits. Rhythm channels the emotional surge which the music creates if the piano is beautifully played."[1]

Developing and awakening a sense of rhythmic intuition and flow is a sacred process of letting go and learning to trust one's own musical instincts. Honoring each student's individual process includes nurturing an authentic response to music and guiding the discovery of the artist within.

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Rhythmic Flow And The Elementary Student

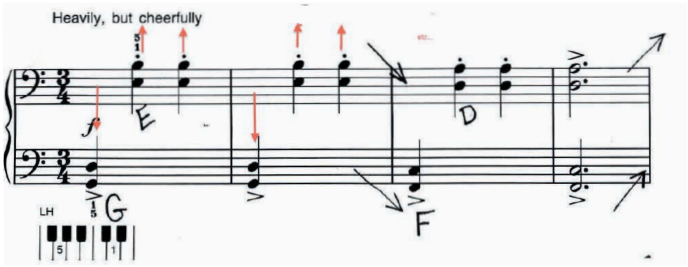
Musical Embodiment

Since all musical sounds begin with a physical gesture, embodied experience should be a primary focus of musical instruction, especially at the elementary level. Young students need to experience rhythm via singing, movement, conducting, listening, playing…by *doing*. Musical embodiment helps students feel the music in their bones, as well as discover fundamental aspects of rhythm such as, beat, tempo, duration, phrasing, flow, energy and weight without requiring an understanding of musical notation or theoretical concepts. Students can imitate the tone and inflection of a teacher's demonstration following clapbacks, singing and playing. This, in turn, will help them develop an internal sense of pulse, meter and long-line phrasing.

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze used the terms *anacrusis, crusis* and *metacrusis* to denote the preparation, occurrence and follow-through of a musical gesture. In *Expressive Singing: Dalcroze Eurhythmics for Voice*, Timothy Caldwell suggests holding an imaginary baseball bat, swinging and paying attention to how you prepare to hit the ball and how you follow-through with the swing or the release of energy.[2] In terms of music making, becoming aware of how the anacrusis relates to the musical result is critical in achieving rhythmic flow. Ultimately, the student can transfer this internalized, whole-body movement to the piano, organically discovering the musical gesture that best leads to the desired sound.

There are infinite ways for a student to experience rhythm. Early on the chief aim is to develop an internal sense of pulse that serves as the foundation for becoming aware of and responding to changes that occur at the primary beat level or metric level. Clapping rhythms, rhythm cards, patsching, listening to music, and rhythmic dictation (shorts/longs) are all ways to help students develop a sense of pulse and learn to recognize rhythmic patterns and groupings. In *The Art of Movement: Creative Activities for Teaching and Learning Music*, Mary Gae George, Ewa Mekwinski and Courtney Conova outline basic Dalcrozian principles that can be applied to early music study.[3] They emphasize the importance of musical embodiment in identifying and responding to basic metric patterns through walking, marching and conducting.

In "Clog Dance" by Elvira Truman Pearce, the elementary student can experience the lilting quality of triple meter before touching the keyboard. After the sense of pulse is established, the student can try improvising the basic pattern on the keyboard (by rote) and experiment with feeling the flow to each subsequent bass fifth to establish the hierarchy of the longer phrase structure.



Deep knee bends on "downs"

Example 1: "Clog Dance" from *Solo Flight* by Elvina Truman Pearce (The New School for Music Study Press). Used by permission.

Counting Aloud

Another way of externalizing the rhythmic pulse is counting aloud. Determing how to count, whether by means of unit (1 1 1–2, and so on), syllabic ("tah," "du," and the like) or metrical counting, is understandably a primary concern in elementary method books. Zoltán Kodály advocated syllabic counting as a means to experience rhythmic flow and transcend awkward metrical counting. Bruce Dalby, a proponent of Edwin Gordon's Music Learning Theory approach to teaching rhythm, emphasizes the need for a rhythm-syllable system to be based on how the rhythm sounds (audiation), rather than how it is notated.[4] Both Kodály's and Gordon's methods facilitate musical flow through careful consideration of metrical context and the ability to move easily from simple to complex meters. In Example 2, note how the syllable "du" always occurs on the beat, organizing patterns into micro-beats that correspond with the metrical hierarchy.

Meter Name	Beat Divisions (microbeats)	Possible Time Signatures	Rhythm Syllables[a]	Movement[b]
Duple	Duple	2/4, 4/4, 2/2	du–de, du–de	p–p, p–p
Triple	Triple	6/8	du–da–di, du–da–di (eighths)	p–p–p, p–p–p
		3/4[c]	du–da–di (quarters)	p–p–p
		9/8[c]	du–da–di (dotted quarters)	p–p–p

[a] Each syllable represents a microbeat. Commas separate macrobeats.

[b] p = patsch (palms on thighs)

[c] Each measure is considered one macrobeat of a macrobeat pair.

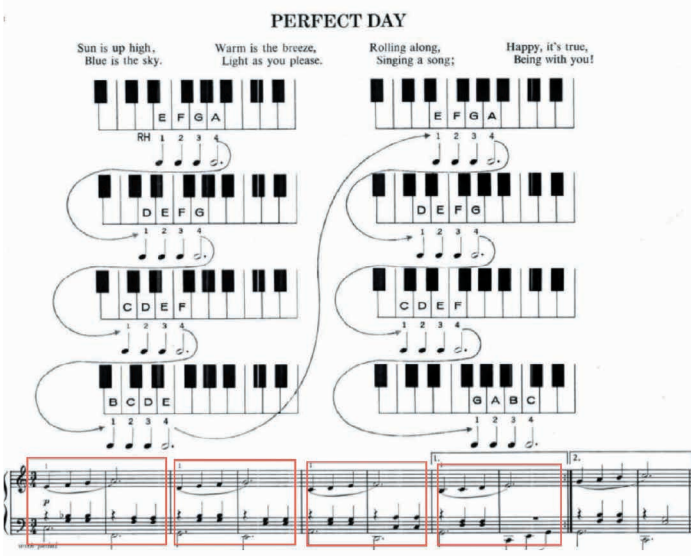
Table 1. Gordon's Usual Meter Classifications and Associated Rhythm Syllables

Example 2: From "Toward an Effective Pedagogy for Teaching Rhythm: Gordon and Beyond." (*Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 92, No. 1./Sept., 2005, pp. 56–57.

Singing

Students will naturally respond to the vocal inflection and speech rhythms of the text when singing. Most elementary method books feature pieces with carefully crafted musical texts that serve as an avenue for understanding phrasing. Singing the lyrics with corresponding physical movements away from the keyboard helps the student feel the rhythmic flow at the macro-beat level intuitively. Students who jump right into note-reading without embodying the music via singing and movement are more likely to play "unmusically," giving each beat equal emphasis. Music needs rhythmic direction, movement and flow. While it's tempting to save time by going straight to the keyboard, bypassing this essential musical process can lead to disconnection from the rhythmic groove.

In *Perfect Day* by Lynn Freeman Olson, students can experiment with chanting the text with varying inflections, moods and dynamics to get a sense of the overall rhythmic flow. Singing with a movement that organizes the 2-bar unit hypermetric pulse helps the student feel the larger phrase units that correspond with the text. By the time students go to the piano, they will have an aural image of how the music sounds and flows.

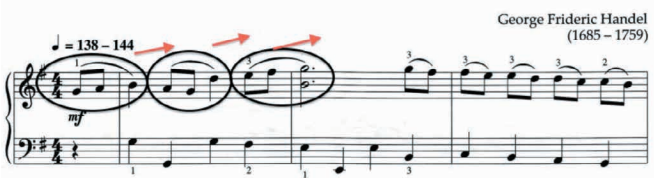


2-bar hypermetric units

Example 3: "Perfect Day" from *Music Pathways Piano Solos A* by Bianchi, Blickenstaff and Olson. (Carl Fischer). Used by permission.

Rhythmic Motives/Groupings

At the elementary level, it is essential that students become aware of the rhythmic motives or groupings that often serve as primary building blocks for larger phrases. As students understand small or micro-beat groupings, they are ready to investigate how smaller ideas combine to form larger rhythmic units or macro-beats as the foundation of musical architecture. American composer, Walter Piston, said, "The sense of motion forward to the next downbeat, imparted by the anacrusis, seems to be continually present in melodies possessing unmistakable vitality, such as those of J.S.Bach. It is as though each downbeat serves in turn as a springboard for the start of another anacrusis, ever renewing the life of the melody."[5] In Handel's *Gavotte in G Major*, experiment with using the basic rhythmic motive as a basis for improvisation. Link motives together sequentially to feel the intense pull to the subsequent downbeat.

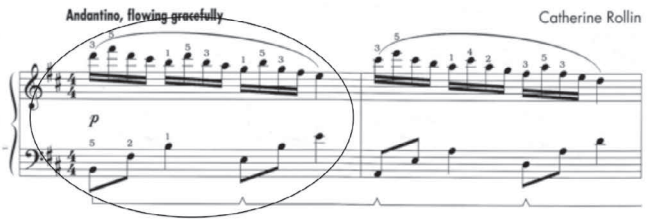


Example 4: "Gavotte in G Major," HWV 491 by Handel from *Celebration Series: Piano Repertoire*, Vol. 3. (Frederick Harris Music Co.). Used by permission.

Rhythmic Flow And The Intermediate Student

When encountering the advancing musical and technical demands at the intermediate level, students need to realize that not all downbeats are created equal. Emphasizing every downbeat leads to mechanical, vertical playing that doesn't quite get off the ground. Downbeats of differing intensity lend flexibility and life to the music and create rhythmic flow. Using speech rhythms, breathing, movement, and what I refer to as "con-dancing" (my own special blending of conducting and dance) are the key to understanding the architectural hierarchy in larger forms.

Unfortunately, with the emphasis on playing more notes per measure and learning increasingly complex scores, intermediate and advancing students can get bogged down with the notes and never really experience rhythmic flow. Spending time away from the piano, listening and moving to music of all types, can help students get back into their bodies. Improvisation is also a wonderful tool for getting "off the page," without worrying about accuracy. For awakening rhythmic intution, choose a repeating musical gesture and loop it to tap into an effortless groove.



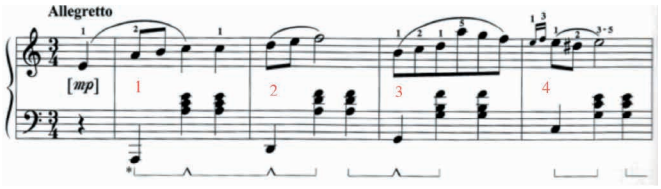
Loop measure to feel rhythmic flow.

Example 5: "Prelude No. 6 in B Minor" from *Preludes for Piano, Book One* by Catherine Rollin (Alfred Music) Used by permission.

Metrical Organization Beyond the Barlines

One of the limits of musical notation is that barlines, used to aid fluency in reading, cannot possibly convey rhythmic flow. In fact, developing musicians often interpret them as impediments (I refer to them as "musical speed-bumps"), failing to feel the musical surge over the barline toward the next arrival point. Although I cannot recall when I first heard the phrase "and then to there…," I have used it in my own teaching and heard it used by countless artist teachers to convey the principle of short notes leading to longer ones. Movement-based experiences can assist in feeling the music flow over barlines.

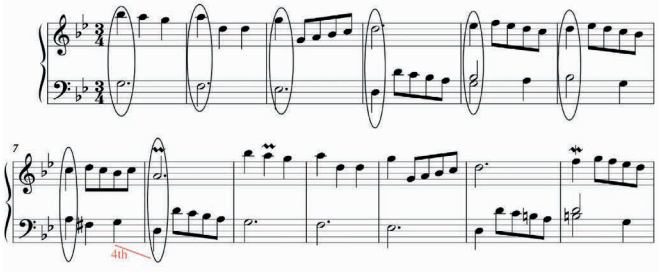
In Chopin's *Waltz in A Minor,* the student can discover the harmonic rhythm by blocking the chords. It is easy to hear how the sub-phrases map out: 2+2+2+2 (4+4). "Con-dancing" through the overall harmonic rhythm intuitively reveals the hypermetric groupings where each measure can serve as a "beat." Feeling the connection over the barlines to each new bass note creates a cohesive musical phrase.



Example 6: *Waltz in A Minor,* Op. posth. by Chopin, edited by Randall Faber (FJH Publishing). Used by permission.

Outlining

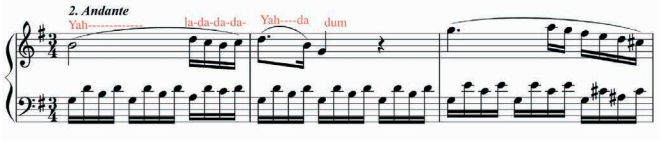
Outlining the contrapuntal skeleton is an excellent way to perceive the forward momentum of music and understand how the smaller phrases combine to form larger sections. In *Minuet in G* by Petzold, try playing only the downbeats of each measure, noting the predominant stepwise motion. Awareness of how the leap of a 4th signals the cadence reveals how harmonic and rhythmic voice-leading interrelate and influence interpretation and flow.



Example 7: "Minuet in G Minor" by Christian Petzold from *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach* (J.S. Bach). Public Domain.

Songs

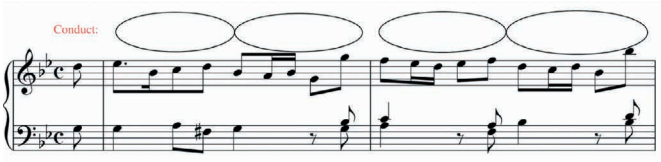
One of most difficult things to achieve on the piano is a cantabile, vocal legato. To have a chance, students should take the advice of C.P.E. Bach and "Above all, lose no opportunity to hear artistic singing."[6] Mozart's *Andante* from K. 545 is an operatic aria. Listening to his operatic works and how the vocal inflection influences rhythmic flow will greatly enhance the ability to breathe in a natural and musical way. I encourage my students to use "classical scatting," where they do not sing actual words but syllables (preferably imitating the language of the composer) that correspond with the interplay of strong and weak gestures. Doing this while conducting or "bowing" greatly enhances the effect. Students can assign punctuation marks (commas, semicolons, periods, question marks and the like) to understand how phrases are linked in sections. Responding to large leaps (where no worthy singer would rush!), registral shifts and changes in rhythmic momentum guide the interpretive process in realizing the dramatic, musical narrative.



Example 8: "Andante" from Sonata in C Major, K. 545 by Mozart. Public domain.

Dance Rhythms

Stylized dances abound in the keyboard literature and are a wonderful opportunity to experience different types of rhythmic flow. From the *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach,* the Allemande in G Minor presents the characteristic upbeat, duple meter and dignified character. Movement away from the keyboard that frames the ups and downs of the larger half-note pulse (such as conducting a figure 8 per bar) facilitates perception of the possible corresponding dance steps. Outlining the essential harmonic skeleton can also establish the framework for feeling how phrases move through temporal space.



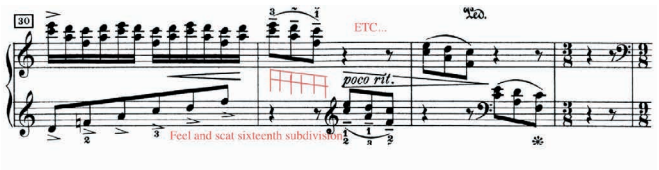
Example 9: *Allemande*, BWV 836 by J.S. Bach. Public Domain.

Rhythmic Flexibility/Rubato

Intuition is an important guide for experimenting with rhythmic flexibility and rubato. Without intuition, music can lack the spontaneity and authenticity that comes from one's own breath and belly button. As Eloise Ristad eloquently put it, "Keep the pulse, and instead of thinking about it, just feel the quality of the ritard in your own center—your dance space inside…"[7] While young students can play with rhythmic freedom, they often do so naturally, imitating singing, demonstrations or recordings. As students advance, understanding how harmony, meter and expressive features interrelate can lead to stylistic interpretations that consider related performance practice.

Inner Pulse (Subdivision)

Organic ritardandos are proportionate, accounting for subdivisions while gradually slowing. Thinking like a conductor while verbalizing or scatting internal subdivisions will not only create a natural ritardando, but will assist with diagnosing one that happens too abruptly or takes too long to unfold (picture conducing a huge circle that is completely unrelated to the previous measure).



Example 10: *Notturno,* Op. 54, No. 4 by Edvard Grieg (Edition Peters). Used by permission.

Tempo Rubato

Chopin was renowned for his mesmerizing use of rubato. According to his student Karol Mikuli, Chopin's rubato reflected his love for Italian opera: "While the singing hand, either irresolutely lingering or as in passionate speech eagerly anticipating with a certain impatient vehemence, freed the truth of the musical expression from all rhythmical fetters, the other, the accompanying hand, continued to play strictly in time."[8] Similarly, Liszt described Chopin's unparalleled sense of rubato, "Look at these trees! The wind plays in the leaves, stirs up life among them, the tree remains the same, that is Chopinesque rubato."[9] Usually, anchoring on a larger unit of pulse will allow for rhythmic flexibility without interrupting the overall flow.

The difficulty in "teaching" rubato, however, is that it really does have to come from an inner place. It cannot be preprogrammed. Spontaneity in performance that creates a living, breathing, dynamic musical result is open to magic that can happen in the moment. This is especially relevant in the improvisatory works of Chopin and Liszt.

As a younger teacher, I often over coached my students in matters of musical pacing. They would sound polished, yet, unwittingly, I was imposing limitations on the very experimentation that could lead to their own musical expression. Now I deliberately encourage students to find their own way, even if it means that the tacky rubato they are using in Chopin sounds more like Grieg. While I do demonstrate, brainstorm and compare performances alongside them, I never force them to imitate my ideal version of the work. I believe it is more important for them to feel connected, enjoy the process of discovery and to love the musical experiment as they develop. Eventually, as they study and listen to more works, continue to "con-dance" and sing, great composers will lead them to a musical truth that is personal, yet informed by our rich musical legacy.

Notes

1. Abby Whiteside, *Indispensables of Piano Playing* (New York: C. Scribner & Sons, 1983), 127.
2. Timothy J. Caldwell, *Expressive Singing: Dalcroze Eurhythmics for Voice* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 17.
3. Mary Gae George, Ewa Mekwinski, and Courtney Canova, *The Art of Movement: Creative Activities for Teaching and Learning Music* (Miami: Belwin Mills, 1992), 4.
4. Bruce Dalby, "Toward an Effective Pedagogy for Teaching Rhythm: Gordon and Beyond," *Music Educators Journal* (Vol. 92, No. 1./Sept., 2005), 56–57.
5. Walter Piston, *Counterpoint* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1947), 34.
6. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and William J. Mitchell, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (New York: Norton, 2000), 151.
7. Eloise Ristad, *A Soprano on Her Head: Right-Side-Up Reflections on Life and Other Performances* (Moab, UT: Real People Press, 2002), 33.
8. Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Naomi Shohet, Krystal Osostowicz, and Roy Howat, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 49.
9. Ibid, 51.

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