

DOWN FOR THE COUNT

Counting vs. Beat Placement

by Eric Solberg

“Four quarters make a buck”—ancient bass proverb.

Place four pencils (or quarters) on a desk in front of you. Now, count them. And count them again. And a third time, and... You will notice that once you've accepted the idea that there are, in fact, four things on your desk, your brain wants to skip the counting part all together. It's hardwired in our DNA to skip the stage of gathering information and to signal that set of neurons in one flash of activity, rather than waste the energy to do it again.

This is literally what we are asking our students to do when we ask them to “count” in music. However, we mean to get them to do something entirely different.

Take those same pencils, pick them up, and place them, one at a time, precisely where you want them to be on your desk. You will discover that two things are going on. First, you are in control of your brain throughout the entire process. Secondly, you can choose where to put the objects.

This is what we want our students, and ourselves, to do when playing. Not to count the beats, but to place them, to be in control of the pulse, and the rhythm, and the tempo.

“I am exactly where I need to be”—Buddhist meditation

How do we get our students to be active beat placers, rather than simply counters? The first thing to think about is recognizing that they have control of the pulse, and where each beat must land. It's not a train you get on and off; it's a bike that you pedal from place to place. The second concept they need to learn immediately is that the conductor is in charge of keeping them controlling the pulse together (we can wave our arms as big as we like, but they still control the pulse).

To practice beat placement, use a metronome—not to keep the beat—but to keep the students honest.

In simple time, start it at each beat, for example, 120 per quarter. If they can handle that, it goes to 60 per half, then 30 per bar. Then it gets interesting. At the bar mark, start with the click on beat one, then move it to two, then three, then four. Students hate this, and it will crash and burn at first, but bitter medicine often does the best good. If they get it, and the final tempo is above 120, put it to 160 (80,40). Compound time is similar, but start with eighth note and move to dotted quarter, then bar, then 2 bars.

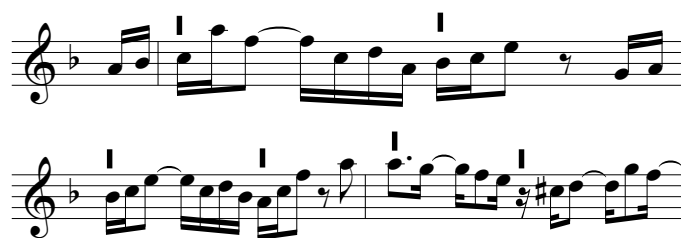
“To subdivide or superdivide”—that is the question

I also teach superdivision, when the passage contains anything smaller than the beat, instead of subdividing, they place their small

notes in relation to the larger pulse, subdividing during a run of sixteenth notes is a recipe for tension, and all the problems that go with it. The same goes with dotted rhythms, the small note leads to the larger beat.



And when it comes to syncopation, the bigger the beat the beater, I mean, better.



The music is stemmed and barred that way, so why not feel it that way?

Subdividing takes place on long notes. If your bass players are keeping things grounded on half notes, they better be subdividing, and placing those subdivisions sympathetically with the other parts, to get those half-notes exactly where they need to be.

Beat placement is also crucial for those times when the pulse should change for musical merit, or pretty much all the time. When musicians realize that they control the placement of each note, each beat, it opens up a whole new idea of what expression really is. I certainly wouldn't play the opening line of the 2nd movement of the Koussevitzky concerto like a metronome, or, for that matter, the opening of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. Experimenting with the placement of each beat is a crucial element to music making that is often ignored by younger players.

These are a few things that I have discovered to help my own playing and my students playing. I hope you can use some of them. Feel free to send me any ideas as well: eric.solberg@gmail.com.

Aaaaand if you really want to get in-depth about perfect time, I recommend Mac Santiago's book *Beyond the Metronome*, available at Mager's and Quinn or online at Ellis Drum Shop and Amazon.

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