



# ORCHESTRA

## Finding the Groove

by Wes Myers

Being able to play with a steady beat is a vital skill when playing in a large ensemble, a quartet, or with an accompanist. Many students, especially beginners, struggle with this skill. They need to develop their ability to play with others just like any other aspect of music making. Once students can keep a steady beat with others, the work is still not done. Great music making requires a steady beat when rhythms are syncopated or hemiola is present in the parts. Beyond that, I think musicians should feel the beat and be able to “groove” together. A variety of strategies exist for all levels of beat-keeping or grooving.

### Isolate the Issue

The first strategy centers around isolating the issue. Having students set their instrument aside can be a nice change of pace, but it also removes variables that could be exacerbating the issue. Students should demonstrate a steady beat while clapping, patting, or vocalizing. Even simply clapping quarter notes may be a difficult challenge for young students. Elementary level students tend to rush, but even older students may struggle with this basic task. This problem can be seen clearly when a group of kids tries to clap-clap-stomp the *We Will Rock You* rhythm.

Clapping can be used to demonstrate a steady beat, but it can also be used to focus on tricky rhythms at all levels. In the larger ensemble, it is good practice to set the instruments aside, remove the variables of pitch and technique, and focus on those difficult rhythms. As with all rehearsal strategies, they work best when used often. The first time you ask them to clap students may balk at the request. However, after many rehearsals, students will eventually understand and appreciate the activity. If you teach multiple orchestra levels, starting early is advised.

If there’s a tough rhythmic passage in the violin part, I suggest providing it for all students to practice together. Having everyone work on the rhythm in unison assures that they all get a chance to learn. Just because the challenge lies in one part doesn’t mean every student can’t learn the rhythm. Additionally, if all sections can perform the challenging rhythm, it will aid them in playing their own part as well. Tough rhythms can also prove challenging to combine with the rest of the music, and this should help.

When the challenge is related to how the parts work together, relatively simple parts can be difficult to line up. Young students especially may struggle with the way varied musical lines work together. Clapping those parts simultaneously and then going back to playing instruments can be productive even in small amounts. I especially like doing this with sustained passages since clapping inherently lacks sustain. Rhythmic issues can be hidden behind a wall of half and whole notes.

### Using a Metronome

While it’s usually suggested as an individual practice aid, a metronome can be very helpful in an ensemble setting. I’ve used a

metronome many times for slowing down tricky passages in the music and then gradually working up to full tempo. However, the metronome can be more than that. It provides certainty by providing the correct tempo that is guaranteed to be steady. Last year, my high school group performed an arrangement of *Brandenburg Concerto #5* and we worked quite a bit on not rushing. The detached quarter notes tend to scoot forward if students aren’t careful. We used a metronome to great success to solve the issue.

You can get quite creative with metronome use. While the standard is to put the metronome on all the beats, it’s useful to change things up. Having the click on just beat one leaves more room for error which makes it a good intermediary step from all beats to no metronome. My metronome has a variety of sounds and students love to hear the varieties of sounds we can use. The drumbeat setting is their favorite. You can sometimes even see students “jamming out” in their seats; a telltale sign that they are feeling the groove rather than just keeping time.

### Feeling the Groove

My last set of strategies involves bringing students from a basic ability to keep a steady beat to actually “feeling the groove.” As already noted, using an electronic drumbeat can encourage students to feel the beat more. This works for rock songs, but really any piece can benefit from some drum backing. I try to get my older students to move from counting to feeling by replicating a drum set themselves. Breaking the group up into the varied rhythms that constitute a drumming pattern works on their section independence skills. You can start very simply with quarter notes and eighth notes. Playing as an ostinato gives students time to get into the groove and stay there for a while.

I also believe that more complicated musical rhythms need to be felt rather than just counted. Syncopation needs to “lock in” where the off-beat entrances feel artfully placed. Students certainly need to count their rhythms correctly, but there needs to be a bit of accent to syncopated entrances. I like to have students play the full measure of eighth notes and then place an accent on the entrance beat. This activity also serves as an audible subdivision which is a vital counting skill. Once you can really hear a strong accent they can go back to the passage and apply it to the music directly. For some real fun, you can have multiple parts at one time playing the stream of eighth notes with different accents simultaneously.



A similar strategy can be used when working on hemiola. This can be a very difficult thing for students to perform successfully. I also believe students need to feel the groove that happens with

properly performed hemiola. I've personally noticed the difference playing the last movement of the *St. Paul's Suite* as a young student and then more recently as an adult. When those parts start grooving together it's much more enjoyable to play. I like to have all the students play one part of the hemiola as an ostinato. They should play for a while until it feels like it won't fall apart then I join in solo on violin or piano playing the other part. You can have the students switch to the other part, repeat and then, finally have the students split into the two parts and see how things go.

There are lots of ways to help students develop their sense of pulse and rhythmic skill. I've shared a few that I've used in the past, but there are sure to be more good ideas out there. Most likely, I'll even think of some after sending this article in! The most important thing is to acknowledge that it can be an issue and dedicate time to

developing the skills. It's easy to get frustrated and feel like this is something students should already know and be able to do. However, for some that isn't the case. It is worth the time investment to go back and solidify these skills. Having an ensemble that plays together is the bedrock for a lot of musical opportunities and the time investment is well worth it.

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