

Solving Your Student's Time Problems

BY JOHN MARK PIPER

While teaching an improv class, I noticed the drummer slowing down incrementally to the point that I estimated his time for coming to a complete stop was just less than two minutes away. When I brought this to his attention I could see that it went completely unnoticed by him.

Thinking back to my own struggles with time, I remember trying everything to keep it steady. The members of my band could hear me gradually speeding up even though I was oblivious to it. I remember thinking that maybe time is subjective (which it is not) or that maybe it was just their opinion that I was speeding up. In other words, maybe they were *wrong*.

A simple recording cleared that illusion right up. It seemed that I just couldn't keep the music from gradually speeding up. I remember subdividing the beat and concentrating on the time to the point that I was ready to be institutionalized. It also seemed that the harder I worked on it, the more confused I became and the worse my time got. So, I took to the practice room with my metronome and scrutinized my playing until I found a solution—almost by accident.

I realized that good timing comprises a few simple elements that depend on each other in order to be steady and accurate. Some people do it naturally, or perhaps fall into a good habit accidentally, while others have to develop good time through long practice and coaching. After a lot of hard work, I solved my timing problems by acknowledging three basic elements: 1. the inner dance feel, 2. subdivisions, and 3. intellectual comprehension.

THE INNER DANCE FEEL

Steady timing begins with the inner dance feel. This part of the rhythm is the division of time within a piece of music that you would most likely tap your foot to—usually a quarter-note or half-note pulse. In more subtle music, where the “toe tapping” isn't as obvious, it may be necessary for the musician to create a

broader-pulse relationship within the music that is less obvious but equally relevant to developing steady time.

The inner dance must be “felt” and its existence must be allowed to express itself. It needs to be strong enough to survive being divided up into smaller, more complicated rhythms existing within its space. The fact that the inner dance feel is comprised of larger pulse components, and are spaced further apart from one another, makes variations in tempo more abrupt and easier to spot. Therefore, it is this inner dance feature of time that one should focus on when struggling with or trying to improve one's consistency with steady meter.

I have found that when students are unintentionally speeding up or slowing down it is often because they have lost touch with, or have not yet developed, their inner dance feel. Many times it's even a simple matter of a restrained musician who is reluctant to express the “inner dance feeling” through the music. As a result they suppress their acceptance of the time and the expression that feeling creates.

RHYTHMIC SUBDIVISIONS

Being able to switch from eighths, sixteenths, triplets, or other divisions accurately within the confines of the beat requires good skills in subdividing. This can best be accomplished by literally handing over control of the tempo to the “inner dance feel” and making the subdivisions secondary in power but equal in importance. Students learning to subdivide can become overly preoccupied with the process and lose touch with their inner dance feel as a result. This can lead to dysfunctional time in music.

In my own teaching I've observed that when students' attention becomes so focused on the subdivisions that the connection with their inner dance feel is lost, the music gradually changes speed without their detection. This is because the space between subdivisions is so small that the pulse can surreptitiously change

and the difference goes undetected until it's too late. The inner dance feel however, (not to be confused with the actual physical motion that can result from the inner dance feel), is comprised of larger increments and therefore inconsistencies in tempo are more noticeable.

INTELLECTUAL COMPREHENSION

By adding intellectual understanding to our intuitive beginnings, we can pinpoint problems and correct them more efficiently. For most players, the intuitive part is only a rough beginning that usually goes through a lot of fine tuning in practice. Understanding and realizing what we are doing rhythmically begins with counting. After years of practice, counting also becomes intuitive, but in the beginning it is a skill that students need to practice with the same commitment they would apply to independence exercises, stickings, or general technique.

For example, the simple figure of a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note is found in just about every piece of music. I've found that many musicians play it not realizing that they have played it inaccurately. This figure is one of the most misplayed rhythmic figures of all time. It has one attack on the beat and one on the off-beat. When new intermediate-level students sign on for lessons with me, I often ask them to play eight bars of this figure at a medium to medium-fast tempo. In a very short time I will have a firm understanding of how developed their timing skills are.

Though they have been playing this figure for almost as long as they've been playing music, they've probably not examined it closely. By intellectualizing it, they may discover that the off-beat portion caused a large part of their timing problems and the rest of their playing fell like dominos.

Further intellectual processing can reveal more specific problems such as not preparing enough in advance of the attack, not acknowledging their inner dance feel for tempo, or not subdividing

for accuracy. Musicians can go many years and possibly a lifetime not ever realizing that their constant “off the mark” results could have been cleared up in a couple of practices if they had only known what to focus on. For this reason, I consider “intellectual comprehension” an equally important part of the process for developing good rhythmic time.

In summation, to a teacher, a timing problem sticks out like a sore thumb, but a solution is not always as clear. After determining students’ strengths and weaknesses, try to guide them through the above three elements toward a better understanding of recognizing and sharpening their concept of time.

For instance, if you have some strong musical students whose intellectual comprehension is limited, you can spend extra time and energy on learning to count and enforcing that issue with them. I would choose pieces that will challenge their intuitive ability so that they are forced to spend more time using their intellect to figure out the parts. Once they have a clear grasp on the intellectual aspects of how the piece is put together, they can then apply their intuitive cre-

ativeness more efficiently without losing the beat.

If a student has a high intellect but relatively medium musical talent you can spend more time nurturing the “inner dance feel” with tunes that range from Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way,” which clearly forces your foot to tap and your insides to dance, to a Keith Jarrett tune that requires concentration just to keep up. When they lose the “feeling,” start over and look for detailed clues that reveal where and why they lost the pulse.

When applying this method I’ve found that the first step is to determine the “inner dance feel” of the piece of music you are working on. Is it a quarter-note pulse, half note, or something else? Then make a mental note to respect that force and not allow it to be whittled away as you begin subdividing for rhythmic accuracy. Next, identify the smallest common subdivision that is pertinent to the overall rhythmic feel of the song. Make sure you have a useable method for counting, or at least acknowledging the necessary subdivisions both intellectually (mathematically) and intuitively. When a mistake occurs, make a mental note of it and

practice it in an isolated exercise until you can do it with ease.

John Mark Piper is a professional vibraphonist, drummer, composer, and teacher residing in the Dallas, Texas area. **PN**

SUBMITTING PROGRAMS ONLINE

PAS members are invited to submit formal percussion solo and ensemble programs for inclusion in program listings. Please include:

Venue (i.e., the name of the school)
Date of Performance
State . Country
Name of Performer or Ensemble
(including director
& any guest artists)
Composition Title
Composer’s First and Last Name
Arranger Name

**WWW.PAS.ORG/
PUBLICATIONS/PROGRAMS**