

Paths of Coordination

By John Mark Piper

Physical coordination is a key ingredient to playing music for most musicians. Managing the pathways from the brain to our extremities is a crucial part of that effort and is especially significant to percussionists. Anything that requires coordination, from learning a challenging beat on the drumset to working out contrapuntal lines on the marimba or from pedaling and damping on the vibraphone to patting your head and rubbing your tummy requires precise and direct communication between your brain and limbs. The more it is practiced and understood, the more intuitive this relationship becomes and the easier it is to advance and learn new music.

Often times, commands sent to the hands and feet at the same time get confused somewhere along the way. When we practice our instrument, a discipline is developed that routes and manages the brain's transmissions, thus setting up the "lines of communication."

An example of this is the beginning drumset student working out his or her first rock beat. Though the student may understand the beat, the information reaches the hands and feet in a mixed-up version, as if it were shuffled in a bingo cage somewhere along the way. The bass drum followed the snare, or the hi-hat completely quit on beat 2, or any number of other variations of mishaps. We've all seen and experienced it to varying degrees.

As a teacher and player, I find this extremely interesting and advantageous to my own teaching and personal growth because even at an "advanced" level, I find that I have the same issues but on harder problems.

All music students begin with relatively undeveloped lines of communication within their body to varying degrees and must learn to bridge the communication between their brain and their extremities and continue to strengthen those paths throughout their musical life. I have found that bringing this phenomenon to the surface helps tremendously when teaching.

At first, the brain seems to send out commands in an uncontrolled array of sparks and flashes that seem to be directed to anonymous limbs. We get frustrated when our limbs don't sort them out. Until we establish clear lines of highly evolved pathways from brain to limb, playing

anything organized is very difficult if not impossible. Once the routes are established, adding other expressive aspects to the music becomes feasible.

EXPOSING THE PATHS OF COMMUNICATION

Exercise 1 is a dynamics exercise for drumset players that many advanced students may find just as challenging as beginning students. The exercise is simple to understand but difficult to execute and clearly reveals the path and confusion that occurs during the path of travel.

The example has all limbs playing eighth notes together, but the dynamics change independently. This is not only an excellent exercise to help drummers become better real-time "mixers" of their overall sound, but it also demonstrates and helps to expose the paths that information must travel to get from imagination to instrument.

I've learned by watching students struggle to manage new coordination that this type of dexterity is very much about communication traveling through the body. The ideal conclusion is for the mind's ear to imagine a sound and our bodies to duplicate it instinctually on the instrument.

TECHNIQUES FOR FORGING NEW PATHS

For both teaching and learning, I have primarily used three techniques to help forge new paths of communication from brain to limb. I refer to them as *Auto Pilot*, *Climbing the Ladder*, and *Gear Time*. When using these techniques to teach others, it's important to note that different people respond differently to each. I usually try them all and use them in different combinations depending on the music and the student's own unique strengths and weaknesses.

AUTO-PILOT

This is where a segment of a drum beat has an ostinato part, such as "jazz time" on the ride cymbal with "2 and 2" on the hi-hat, "Latin time" with a bossa or samba bass drum and hi-hat ostinato, or "rock time" with the hands playing an ostinato rock pattern. These can all be assigned to "auto-pilot," and a new or unfamiliar part can be added over the top of

Ride
4/4
pp ff pp

Snare
4/4
pp ff pp

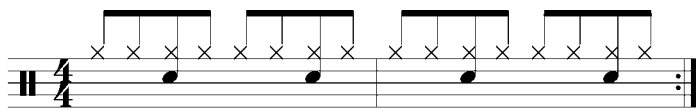
Bass drum
4/4
pp ff pp

Hi-hat
4/4
pp ff pp

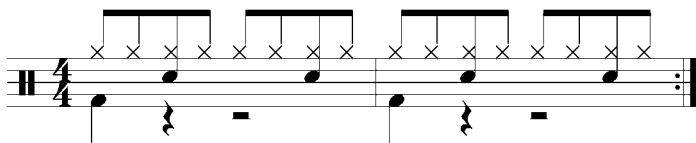
the auto-pilot portion. The trick to this is that if you are working alone, you will have to devote a portion of your awareness to the “auto-pilot” part in order to keep it in check.

A mirror is an excellent companion to this technique. *Watching* the physical movement of the ostinato part, while *listening* to the added part (or vice versa) helps to divide your attention prudently and obtain quicker results when relying on your own objectivity.

Example 2: Hi-hat and snare drum on auto-pilot.



Example 3: Add bass drum when ready.

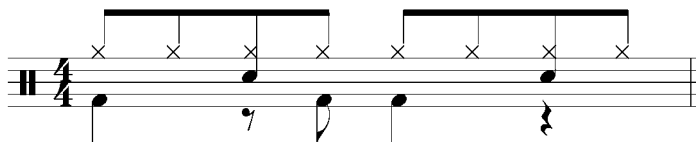


CLIMBING THE LADDER

This refers to taking one step of music at a time—slowly, patiently and methodically. I often use the phrase “slow down and you’ll go faster” when teaching this technique to my students. Climbing the ladder is a simple procedure that supports accomplishment and utilizes a sensible dose of learning by rote.

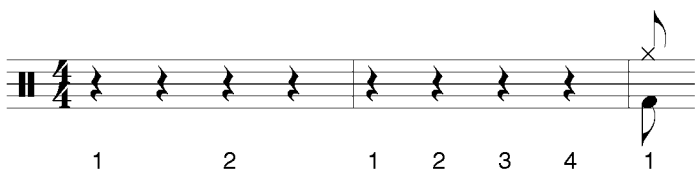
The following is an example of how to apply Climbing the Ladder to a beginning drumset student learning a simple rock beat. It can easily be applied to any instrument from beginner to advanced.

Objective: To be able to play the following rock beat with ease.



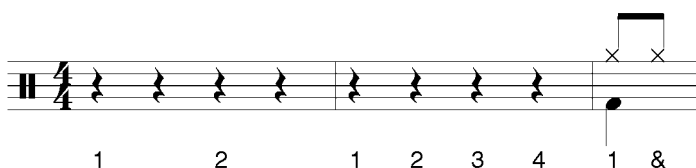
Step One: Establish a solid, precise tempo with a two-measure count-in.

Step Two: Play and say everything on count “1” and STOP!



Stop, take a breath, relax, and repeat until it becomes easy.

Step Three: Play and say everything up to the “& of 1.”



Stop, take a breath, relax, and repeat until it becomes easy.

Step Four: Play and say everything up to beat “2.”

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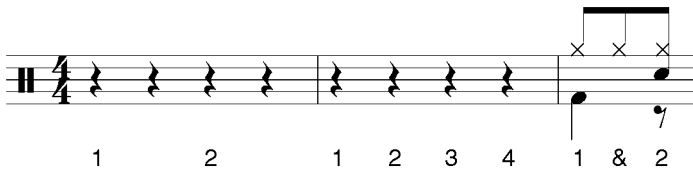
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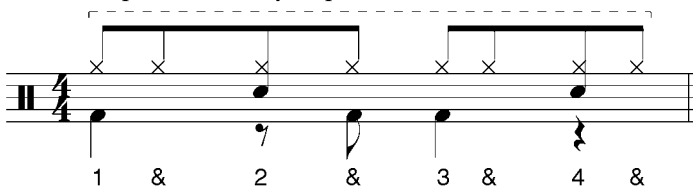
Stop, take a breath, relax, and repeat until it becomes easy. Continue climbing the ladder until you can play the complete beat.

GEAR TIME

This is the most complex method, but it often works better for many students when other methods failed. The objective is to isolate challenges by eliminating the physical coordination difficulties caused by strict time requirements in music. This allows the student to organize counting with the pathways without being under pressure to stay with a groove or tempo.

I begin by telling my students that they are now the “Master of the Universe and Controller of Time.” They have the power and authority to slow time down, speed time up, or stop time completely as needed. The only thing they cannot do (since they are the “Master of the Universe”) is make a mistake. If they do, the entire universe implodes and all things as we know them end.

Adjust the timing as needed depending on the space necessary to plan the next attack.



I call it “Gear Time” because the counting represents the teeth around the “gears of time,” which can be slowed, stopped, or sped up at will, but they *must* match up with the actions of playing, which symbolize the gears of physical reality. If these two elements of the cosmos don’t match up, then the “Master of the Universe/Controller of Time” has made a mistake (oops). This forces the student to think before playing and take time to route the information to the correct limb on the correct count methodically and thoughtfully.

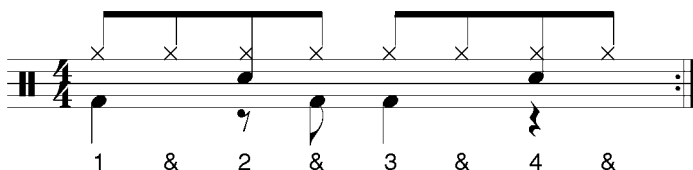
Step one: The student begins by saying and playing the first count and attack. There is no established tempo in Gear Time so there also is no count-in. Remember, the numbers of the counts are the teeth of time, and the actions of the playing are the teeth of “reality”; the two must always match up. There are no mistakes allowed, so students should take their time and think about what they are about to do before they do it. Using the same simple rock beat from “Climbing the Ladder,” the student should have played the bass drum, the hi-hat, and said “1.”

Step two: The student continues by saying and playing “&,” which will generate the playing of the hi-hat only.

Step three: Play and say to the count of “2” (snare drum and hi-hat).

Step four: Play and say “&” (of 2) and play the hi-hat and bass drum together.

Continue this through until you reach the end. Then do it again and again until it is easy. Then play it in tempo with a groove.



Auto Pilot, Climbing the Ladder, and Gear Time all advance toward the same goal but with different methods of reaching it. They each specialize in dividing the focus of musical responsibility between different degrees of the mental and physical process. I’ve found that when one doesn’t work, another will. On especially difficult cases, it may take two or even three or more attempts at the different approaches to accomplish a given challenge.

John Mark Piper is a vibraphonist teaching in the Dallas, Texas area. His current focus is providing lessons, solo vibraphone arrangements, and recordings at www.JohnMarkPiper.com. PN

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