Tackling rhythm in 21st-century repertoire

Techniques and tips to help you rethink and simplify complicated passages in contemporary music

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Anyone who has played Rachmaninoff or Brahms will be familiar with the idea of three-against-two rhythms. Usually we can do these instinctively, without being too mathematical about it, but when it comes to more contemporary repertoire, sometimes rhythmic complexity can form a barrier. I've seen ensembles perform where a member of the ensemble will actually conduct for a certain part. That to my mind is extremely distracting for the audience and I think it should be a last resort. Instead I use a system that is very rational and that, with a bit of practice, can make life much easier.

I've been playing in Trio Fibonacci for a long time, and for about the first eight years we performed only new music. Over time we've learnt how phrasing translates into our overall body language, and we have developed a common sense of pulse – but if you haven't been playing with your colleagues as long and you're trying to coordinate one complex rhythmic part with other instruments, you really have to have a system. Playing more abstract contemporary music demands a different mind-set from other genres: it is often very intricate and requires a rigorous approach, in order for the music to make sense.

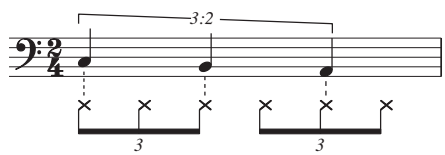
EXERCISES

Subdivision can help us to fit complicated rhythms together within a stable pulse. The idea of **exercises 1–5** is to make these rhythms approachable, and to help us play them more precisely than if we tried to play them just by ear.

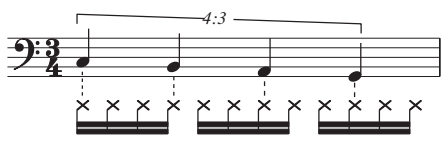
Below each bar I have written subdivisions grouped to fit the main overall pulse (for example, two groups of triplets to fit the 2/4 pulse of exercise 1). The dotted line indicates where within this subdivision each note of the rhythm should sound. Use a metronome at ♩= 56 to beat and subdivide the pulse, while you play or clap the rhythm over the top. Some online metronomes, for example www.flutetunes.com/metronome, will beat at any speed you like.

When I work on these exercises with a group of students, I ask one to beat the pulse, one to subdivide and one to play the rhythm; then they swap. They usually laugh hysterically as it gets more complicated! Once you are feeling more confident,

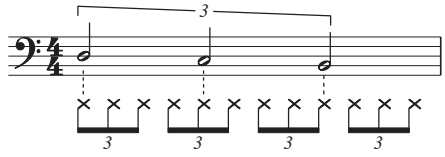
EXERCISE 1 Three against two



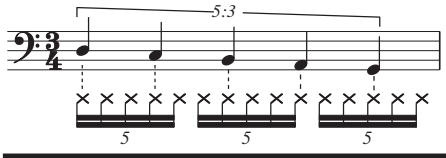
EXERCISE 2 Four against three



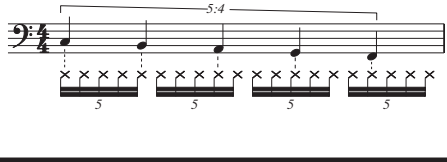
EXERCISE 3 Three against four



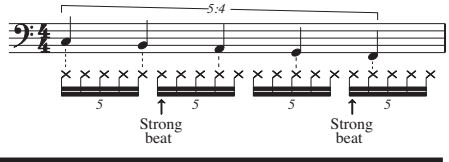
EXERCISE 4 Five against three



EXERCISE 5 Five against four



EXERCISE 6 When working at a faster pulse



you can make the subdivisions silently in your head while you play the rhythm, with the metronome beating only the main pulse. Now increase the speed to ♩ = 80. This is more difficult to subdivide, so think instead of where each note falls in relation to the strongest beats of the bar (**exercise 6**). Counting the subdivisions individually is just not realistic when the music gets too fast.

REPERTOIRE

As performers it falls to us to make our own 'editions' of pieces, so that we know exactly how our parts fit with others. We have to prepare in advance, to get into the sound world of each composer instead of assuming that we can access contemporary music as readily as the standard repertoire. This will reduce rehearsal time and make the experience more pleasurable and less frustrating.

SUBDIVISION AND SIMPLIFICATION

In **example 1**, cellists sometimes panic when they have to come in accurately on a crotchet triplet against the inflexible piano ostinato. Lock into the basic pulse (♩= 60) by subdividing into triplet quavers (♪). If you do this, the entry should be no problem at all.

Example 2a is all about dividing into seven. This piece is for solo cello, so there isn't the same pressure to be exact as there would be in an ensemble. Still, we have to aim for the same rigour or the rhythm won't come across to the listener. A subdivision system is not going to help here: dividing into septuplets it just not realistic! Instead, try writing your own practice version to simplify the rhythm into something more accessible (**example 2b**). With practice you'll be able to even out the notes so that they are of equal length within the bar.

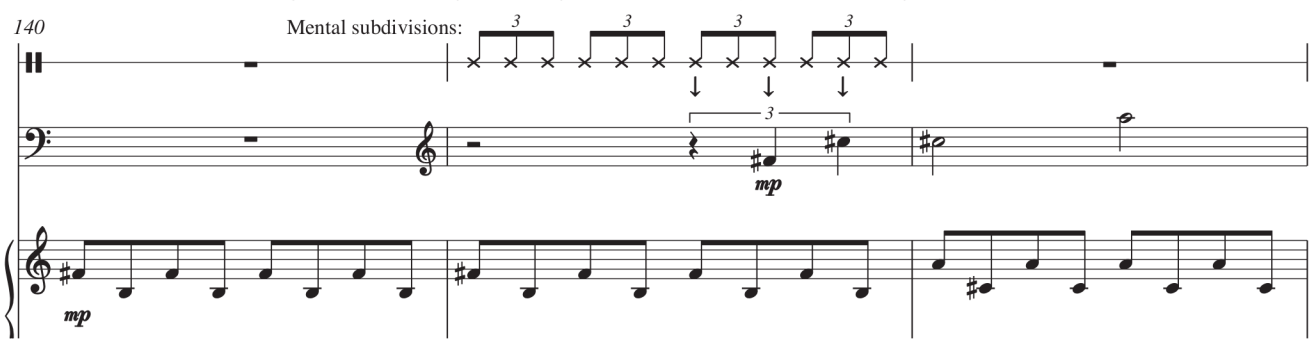
CHANGING METRE

I was interested to see that in *Music Notation in the Twentieth Century: A Practical Guidebook*, Kurt Stone compares two versions of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, with metres changed from quavers (♪) to crotchets (♩); and note beams across bar lines removed (**examples 3a** and **3b**). To the ear this makes no difference, but it is much easier to read. In **examples 4** and **5**, I've used the same idea. This should be played at ♩=160 – pretty fast if you're subdividing the quavers – and it is accompanied by CD, so there's no space to play around with the time. In example 4, I've turned the two 6/8 bars into 3/4 bars, because it is easier to count more slowly and it makes the transition into 3/4 in bar 120 feel more natural. In example 5 I've turned the 5/8s into 5/4s. Changing metre is not always musically desirable, but as long as you keep the original sense of a down beat and make sure the outcome is the same, it can make passages such as these far easier to count.

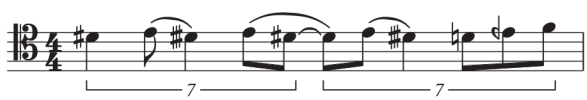
USE OF CUES AND THE SCORE

When we play standard repertoire, we don't always play from the score or write cues into our parts, but it is extremely useful to do this when tackling rhythmically difficult music. In performance ▹

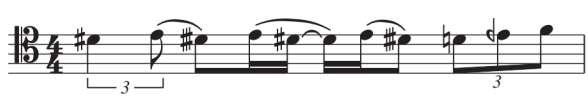
EXAMPLE 1 Use subdivision to help with the cello entry in Gavin Bryars's *The North Shore* (1995, arr. cello and piano 2005)



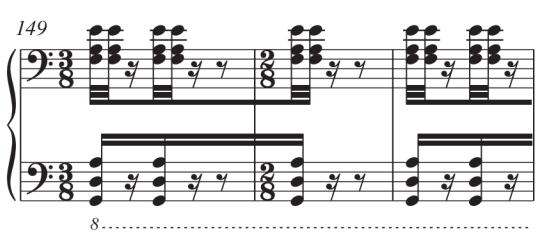
EXAMPLE 2A Divide into seven for Enno Poppe's solo cello work, *Herz* (2002)



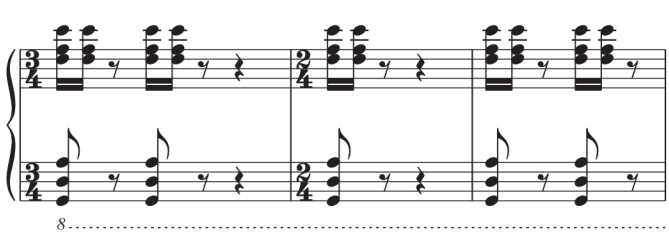
EXAMPLE 2B Practice version of example 2a



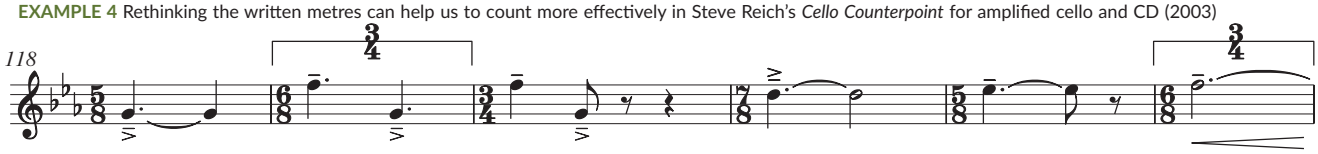
EXAMPLE 3A Stravinsky's original 1913 metres for *The Rite of Spring*



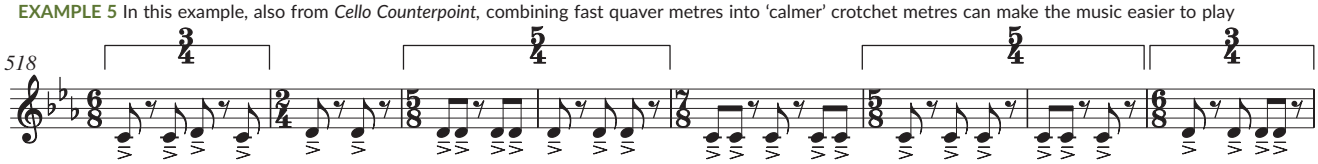
EXAMPLE 3B Stravinsky's 1943 revision of the passage shown in example 3a



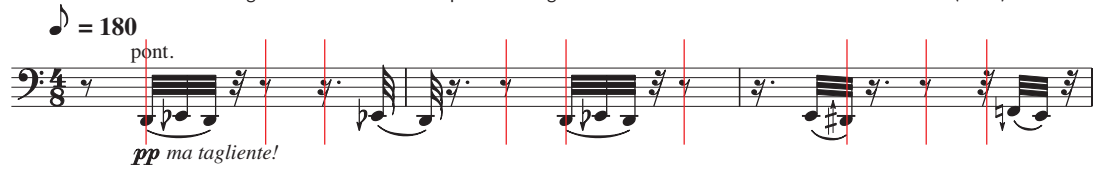
EXAMPLE 4 Rethinking the written metres can help us to count more effectively in Steve Reich's *Cello Counterpoint* for amplified cello and CD (2003)



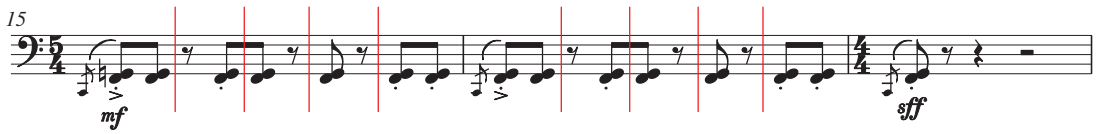
EXAMPLE 5 In this example, also from *Cello Counterpoint*, combining fast quaver metres into 'calmer' crotchet metres can make the music easier to play



EXAMPLE 6 Mark the strong beats in each bar to help with timing in Ivan Fedele's *Preludio e Ciaccona* for solo cello (2010)



EXAMPLE 7 Barred beats make it far simpler to interpret this excerpt from *In Mary's Eye* for solo cello, by Irish composer Anne-Marie O'Farrell (2015)



there can be fluctuations: a player might accentuate notes or take more time in a way that they wouldn't normally do. To give you more security, write rhythms or key moments from the other parts on to your own music, to help you keep your place – like a skeleton version of the score. Give yourself as much information as you can, to save yourself time in rehearsals and stress in performance.

BARRING BEATS

It can be difficult to read music when there are lots of rests and there is nothing happening on the down beats. In examples 6 and 7 I've barred the main beats, to divide up the notes within each bar in a way that is easier to read. With the lines drawn in, it's possible to sight read these parts; without them, it is extremely difficult.

IN YOUR PRACTICE

Break fast and rhythmic music into parts and build it up slowly, recording yourself and asking for feedback from colleagues. It shouldn't be necessary to write new metres in more than a few places in a score, but every now and then it can be useful. Work with the composer if you can: even famous composers are usually delighted to know that young people are interested in their music.

When you are playing an ensemble part, ask colleagues to practise with you without accommodating you rhythmically. They could also make a recording of the other parts for you, to help you practise fitting your part into the rest of the piece. Finally, use a metronome: it can be tempting to be free with some rhythms, but you have to start from a place of stability.

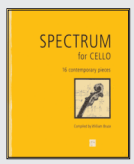
TIPS FOR TEACHERS

I've been dancing Tango for ten years and I'm always surprised at how rarely I meet other classical musicians when I go out dancing. Perhaps it is because many of them spend so much time thinking about what's going on in their heads, without feeling the music in their bodies. I would recommend that any student struggling with rhythm start some kind of dance class, to help them to connect with the music in a more physical way.

INTERVIEW BY PAULINE HARDING

NEXT MONTH Tracy Silverman on jazz violin

STUDIES



Spectrum for Cello with CD: 16 contemporary pieces (ABRSM 2004) is a wonderful introduction to new music for young cellists (Grades 1 to 8). It is invaluable for students and teachers alike.

Bernd Alois Zimmermann's ***Four Short Studies for Solo Cello*** (Breitkopf & Härtel 1970) are brief but ingenious studies that prepare us for some of the typical cello writing of the late twentieth century.