

Rhythm 1

Music Fundamentals

14-119-T

Music is the most abstract art form. This is because music happens in real-time, and thus, we do not have anything physical and tangible to grasp. In other art forms, there is generally a physical presence. For example, in visual art, we have sculpture. We see textures, colors, lines, and space when viewing a work of art. We can touch the sculpture, which means we can touch the textures and lines. In other words, the physical is being given to us. Of course music also can have visual elements. Synchronized bow movement in a violin section comes to mind. One can argue that the “space” in music is not that unlike the “space” in sculpture or painting. Finally, we also have texture in music. If you were to play one note on the piano, we could say the musical texture not very dense. If you take your fists and start pounding on the piano rapidly, then we find that the musical texture is much more dense than the when we only played one note. However, the main difference is in the term, “real-time.” Once a note is played on the piano, and the key is released, the sound stops. The moment is over. Once we hear a great melody, the moment is over. Visual art sustains the moment, while music progresses like our lives progress. That is, once it’s over, we can’t genuinely recapture that moment exactly.

Music is based on time, and it is no surprise that we will spend time discussing how we communicate, through notation, musical time. Notation of time in music is almost as efficient as the notation of pitch, although this has not always been the case. Today, we still aren’t certain exactly how to perform Gregorian Chant. This music, written over 1000 years ago, notates pitch very well. When singing Gregorian Chant from original manuscript, we know exactly what pitch we are supposed to sing. However, we’re not certain how long to hold the pitch! It wasn’t until much later that a system was devised that helped standardize the length of notes.

Rhythm:

Rhythm is simply the division of real-time. When you speak, you are dividing time with words. Although you may not be able to tap your foot to it, saying, “Dr. McFerron, I want to learn to play the musical saw,” has rhythm. Say it a couple of times differently. Notice that the words are taking the place of the small silences around you. Rhythm is the relationship between sound and silence, or the disturbances in silence.

The birds chirping in the trees, the rain falling and hitting the pavement, and the train passing by all disrupt silence. Everything has rhythm, even things that don’t make sound. For instance, if one plays a chess game where moves come swift, the game is said to have a quick *tempo*.

Tempo:

Tempo is also a division of time, but it is the steady or equal division of time.

Sing the first few lines of *Yankee-Doodle-Andy*. Tap your foot or snap your fingers to the “beat.” I’m confident you know what the “beat” is in music. In case you’re confused, the beat is the accents in music that we are physically drawn to. For *Yankee-Doodle*, how fast are you snapping or tapping? The number of times you snap or tap within a given time frame is called the *tempo*. As you can see, *Tempo* is a term used to describe, further how we are to divide time.

Prior to Beethoven (died 1826), composers used other terms to indicate the speed of the beat. Some common tempo indications are:

Presto = very fast

Allegro = fast

Allegretto = a little slower than allegro

Moderato = moderately

Adagio = slow

Lento = very slow

As you can see, these terms are very subjective. Additionally, they generally refer to the style of how something is played as much as the speed in which they are played. Today, we indicate *tempo* using a very precise measurement. For example, we say, “there are 60 beats per minute,” or one a second. Note that these 60 beats are steady, just like the “beat” in *Yankee-Doodle*.

In musical scores, tempo indications are placed above the score. In older music, tempo indications like *allegro* and *adagio* are used. Later music, however, employs the more precise measurement of tempo, discussed above, in the form of a metronome marking [see figure1]. This simply says how many notes of a certain type will happen per minute. In figure 1, we know that there will be 60 quarter-notes per minute. Generally, the note type is what the beat is for the music. It’s not important at this time for you to know what a quarter-note is – only that there will be 60 of them in one minutes time, or one beat every second.

In our next lesson, we will discuss the different types of note values such as the quarter-note, half-note, and whole-note.

