

5-Note Phrases and Rhythmic Tension

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One of the fundamental concepts in any style of music is ‘tension and release’. Creating moments of musical conflict followed by resolution either through compositional or performance devices can be a very satisfying and interesting experience for both the listener and performer. Musical tension can be created in many ways, including using syncopated rhythms, changing volume, playing busier, creating dissonance and unexpected harmonies and chord progressions, etc. While soloing and comping, these concepts can provide the basis for some very advanced musical conversation between players.

For an instrumentalist playing an improvisational style of music, sometimes playing ‘to the barline’ or playing every ‘one’ (playing a continuous series of one or two measure phrases that begin and end with each, or every other barline) can make the playing sound predictable. One of the ways to avoid this and create interesting variations is to play phrases and rhythms that can take more than one or two measures to complete, and that may not begin or end on the first beat of every measure. A common method that great drummers like Ari Hoenig and Gavin Harrison have written about is metric illusion. This is the effect you achieve when playing certain rhythms and using phrasing and accents that can sound as if you’ve switched to playing in a different time signature, tempo, feel, or style. Even if you decide not to use these in performance situations, as they may not fit the style of the music or playing, they are valuable in developing a larger musical vocabulary, rhythmic control, and awareness of some new rhythmic frontiers.

In this article, I’m going to show some examples of playing 5-note phrases on top of a 16th note rhythmic base. In order to build fluency with these, we need to be able to hear the 5-note phrase - when it begins and ends. Below, is a four-measure pattern of continuous 16ths played using a specific sticking that allows us to hear the accents and the groupings a little easier than if we just played the exercise with alternating singles. To begin, just play the first 2 measures of paradiddles with accents on each quarter pulse and alternate this with 2 measures of the 5-note phrase reinforced with a different sticking and accent. For now, it’s important to play the foot pattern to help hear where the quarters and bar lines are.

a)

The notation consists of a single staff with a continuous sequence of 16th notes. Above the staff, the sticking patterns are indicated: 'RLRRLRL' for the first two measures and 'RLRLRLRL' for the last two measures. Accents are placed over specific notes in each measure to highlight the 5-note phrases. A foot pattern is shown below the staff to indicate the placement of quarter notes and bar lines.

Now we’ll play the 5-note phrase over 4 measures of 16ths. You can also alternate this 4 bar exercise with 4 measures of paradiddles with quarter pulse accents.

b)

RLRLLRLRLL

Now try playing the next pattern moving the bass drum to align with the start of each 5-note phrase while playing quarters on the high hat. Again, you may want to just work on the first two bars to develop some facility before working on the full 4-measure pattern.

c)

RLRLLRLRLL RLRL

We're going to break up the continuous 5-note groupings, playing just parts of the phrase. In the three examples below I've indicated the starting point of the 5-note phrase with an accent, although an accent need not be played.

Here are just the first 3 notes of each 5-note phrase repeated for 4 measures. Practice along playing quarters on the high hat with the foot.

d)

Here's a rhythm comprised of the 1st, 3rd, and 4th note of the five 16th-note phrase.

e)

And here's one showing notes #1 thru 4 of the phrase.

f)

Let's play 2 measures of a simple groove and then play the 2 measures of each of the above rhythms as a fill. You can develop flexibility with these by starting the fill in different places of the phrase. As you get comfortable with the rhythms try varying the stickings, sounds, and accents, and also incorporate the bass drum. Practicing this way may or may not be how you decide to use it in a playing situation, but it is an effective way to build the ability to hear the phrase over the bar line.

g)

The notation for exercise g) consists of two staves. The top staff is a high-hat line with a series of 'x' marks above it, indicating hits. The bottom staff is a drum line with quarter notes. The first two measures are a simple groove: quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter. The last two measures are a 5-note fill: eighth, eighth, quarter, eighth, eighth. Above the notes in the fill are 'V' marks, indicating accents. Red 'x' marks are placed below the notes in the first two measures, and black 'x' marks are placed below the notes in the last two measures.

Let's try another fill that includes the bass drum. Once you get comfortable with playing two measures of the phrase, you can move on to doing it for 4 measures creating even more tension and variety.

h)

The notation for exercise h) consists of two staves. The top staff is a high-hat line with a series of 'x' marks above it. The bottom staff is a drum line with quarter notes. The first two measures are a simple groove: quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter. The last two measures are a 5-note fill: eighth, eighth, quarter, eighth, eighth. Above the notes in the fill are 'V' marks, indicating accents. Red 'x' marks are placed below the notes in the first two measures, and black 'x' marks are placed below the notes in the last two measures.

We're now moving onto some 4-measure over-the-bar grooves, but let's first reinforce our ability to hear the starting points of each grouping of five 16th notes. We'll isolate the start point into a simple quarter-note pattern with each hit occurring five 16ths apart. Again, maybe just start with an easy quarter-note groove alternating with the first two measures of the 5-note phrase. Try playing the high hat with the foot on each quarter; this will help with accurate placement of the phrase and also develop the ability to hear the beginning points of the phrases.

i)

The notation for exercise i) consists of two staves. The top staff is a high-hat line with a series of 'x' marks above it. The bottom staff is a drum line with quarter notes. The first two measures are a simple groove: quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter. The last two measures are a 5-note fill: eighth, eighth, quarter, eighth, eighth. Above the notes in the fill are 'V' marks, indicating accents. Red 'x' marks are placed below the notes in the first two measures, and black 'x' marks are placed below the notes in the last two measures.

Now we can play the entire 4-measure phrase alternating with a straight quarter pattern.

j)

The notation for exercise j) consists of two staves. The top staff is a high-hat line with a series of 'x' marks above it. The bottom staff is a drum line with quarter notes. The first two measures are a simple groove: quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter. The last two measures are a 5-note fill: eighth, eighth, quarter, eighth, eighth. Above the notes in the fill are 'V' marks, indicating accents. Red 'x' marks are placed below the notes in the first two measures, and black 'x' marks are placed below the notes in the last two measures.

Play each of the rhythms we've covered up to this point as often as possible in order to establish your ability to hear how the 5-note grouping lays over the quarter pulse as well as the bar line. And if you're new to these concepts try working on playing the patterns for just 2 measures at first and work towards being able to hear and play them over 4 measures or longer.

OK, now for some more challenging and fun-to-play patterns based on these ideas. Some of these patterns feature the bass and snare pattern repeating over five 8th notes, and some repeat every five 16th notes; however the high hat/ride pattern repeats every five 16ths. Remember to alternate each 4-measure pattern with a more traditional groove for 4 measures. Also, it often helps to play quarters with the foot on the high hat in order to center the rhythmic placement of the highly syncopated pattern. Your goal is to develop the ability to 'hear' the quarter pulse without always having to play it.

k)

Exercise k) consists of two staves of music. The top staff contains a sequence of rhythmic patterns: a quarter note followed by a dotted quarter note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a quarter note followed by an eighth note. The bottom staff contains a sequence of rhythmic patterns: a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a quarter note followed by an eighth note. Red 'x' marks are placed below the notes in both staves to indicate specific rhythmic points.

l)

Exercise l) consists of two staves of music. The top staff contains a sequence of rhythmic patterns: a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a quarter note followed by an eighth note. The bottom staff contains a sequence of rhythmic patterns: a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a quarter note followed by an eighth note.

m)

Exercise m) consists of two staves of music. The top staff contains a sequence of rhythmic patterns: a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a quarter note followed by an eighth note. The bottom staff contains a sequence of rhythmic patterns: a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, a quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a quarter note followed by an eighth note.

n)

Exercise n) consists of two staves. The top staff features a sequence of eighth notes with beamed pairs, each marked with an 'x' above it. The bottom staff features a sequence of eighth notes with beamed pairs, each marked with an 'x' below it. Both staves include repeat signs and end with a double bar line.

o)

Exercise o) consists of two staves. The top staff features a sequence of eighth notes with beamed pairs, each marked with an 'x' above it. The bottom staff features a sequence of eighth notes with beamed pairs, each marked with an 'x' below it. Both staves include repeat signs and end with a double bar line.

p)

Exercise p) consists of two staves. The top staff features a sequence of eighth notes with beamed pairs, each marked with an 'x' above it. The bottom staff features a sequence of eighth notes with beamed pairs, each marked with an 'x' below it. Both staves include repeat signs and end with a double bar line.

q)

Exercise q) consists of two staves. The top staff features a sequence of eighth notes with beamed pairs, each marked with an 'x' above it. The bottom staff features a sequence of eighth notes with beamed pairs, each marked with an 'x' below it. Both staves include repeat signs and end with a double bar line.

r)

Exercise r) consists of two staves of music. Above the first staff is the sequence of letters: R L L R R L R R L L R L L R R L R R L L R L L R R L L R L. Above the second staff is the sequence: L R R L R R L L R L L R R L R R L L R R L L R R L L. The notation shows quarter notes on a staff with 'x' marks above them, indicating high hat placement. The first staff has a double bar line after the fourth measure, and the second staff has a double bar line after the eighth measure.

Here are just a couple more moving where the high hat is being played. Instead of playing steady quarter notes to help us place the other parts of the rhythm accurately, we now incorporate the hat into the 5-note phrase. Although this really enhances the metric illusion and tension, it's much more challenging because in order to play it accurately you need to hear/feel where the quarter note pulse is. (* [Click here to hear recorded examples of these patterns on my website.](#))

s)

Exercise s) is a single staff of music showing a 5-note 8th-note triplet rhythm. The notation includes quarter notes and eighth notes with 'x' marks above them, indicating high hat placement. The staff ends with a double bar line.

t)

Exercise t) consists of two staves of music. The notation shows a 5-note 8th-note triplet rhythm with quarter notes and eighth notes, and 'x' marks above them indicating high hat placement. The first staff has a double bar line after the fourth measure, and the second staff has a double bar line after the eighth measure.

You can create hundreds of your own variations in patterns and fills using 8ths or 16th notes or 8th note triplets in any time signature in any tempo and style. Here's just one such example using the jazz ride pattern while playing a 5-note 8th-note triplet rhythm between the snare and bass drum.

u)

Exercise u) consists of two staves of music. The notation shows a 5-note 8th-note triplet rhythm with quarter notes and eighth notes, and 'x' marks above them indicating high hat placement. Blue brackets with the number '3' are placed above each triplet. The first staff has a double bar line after the fourth measure, and the second staff has a double bar line after the eighth measure.

These patterns can create some very interesting but complex rhythmic possibilities that will expand your sense of rhythm and your facility in hearing and playing over the bar line, when the musical situation calls for it. As always, be sure to use discretion when playing them in a performance situation with other musicians. Have fun!

I invite your comments and questions...mdicciani@uarts.edu...www.dicciani.com.

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