

**Volume Independence and Musicality:  
More about the How than the What  
Part 1 of 2  
by  
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Drummers are familiar with many different concepts and methods for understanding, learning, and playing *Independence*. For countless hours we've practiced independence in the traditional way - playing one rhythm with one hand (for example, jazz time) and another rhythm with the other hand (say, quarter note triplets). We've also read some great articles in MD explaining more advanced ways of thinking about independence and coordination. Like how *Independence* might more accurately be called *Inter-dependence*, since the hands and feet are really just playing different, but related, parts of a connected rhythm. For example, if we were to play hand-to-hand 16<sup>th</sup> notes (R L R L, etc.), the hands are playing separate parts of a connected rhythm, and we hear the result of what the hands are doing together. This way of hearing and learning is very useful in playing many contemporary styles and grooves.

In addition to these ways of thinking about Independence, there's another kind - *Volume Independence*. It's not new; David Garibaldi (in his book "Future Sounds") and others have talked about this concept for years. The more I've thought about it and worked with my students, the more I realize how important volume independence is, and how much it's linked to musicality and good feel. Great drummers in every style of music and drumming use it all the time. Volume Independence and feel are less about **What** we play, and more about **How** we play.

Although defining musicality and groove, or pocket, may be difficult, it's pretty easy to hear when something is not musical or doesn't have a good feel.

Many times we'll listen to someone playing something that sounds great, and focus on **What** is being played. Then, when we try to play the same thing, it might not sound the same - something's missing. Sometimes, that something is the ability to separately control the volume and the accent patterns between limbs and rhythms - Volume Independence.

The problem could be that the volume of one sound, say playing 8<sup>th</sup> notes on the high hat, is flat (all the notes are being played at the same volume), or the volumes between all the sounds (high hat, snare and bass drum) are out of balance (one is too loud or soft in comparison to the others for the style being played).

Volume Independence and control are what helps David Garibaldi's, Steve Gadd's, and Ahmir Questlove's grooves sound so deep; Roy Haynes', Jeff Hamilton's, and Mel Lewis' jazz time sound so identifiable and swing so hard; and J.R. Robinson and Paul Leim's parts sound so musical and blend so perfectly with the other players.

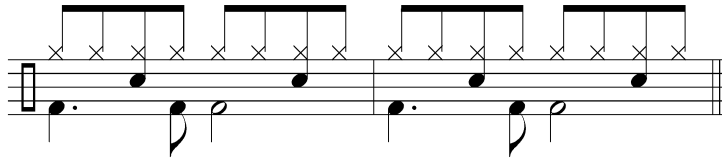
When you look at a drum pattern in a book or a transcription, you may see some accents or ghost notes, but most times there are no indications of the volume differences or relationships that are required to make these patterns sound like music and not just an exercise. As musicians, we want to make sure we're developing our ears and ability to hear these concepts, just as we work on the ability of our hands and feet to execute them.

Let's take a closer look, and do some playing so we can begin to hear the differences. We'll break it down into two areas: 1) hearing and playing volume differences on each sound or limb separately (accents), and 2) hearing and playing accents and differences in volume between sounds and limbs (relative volume).

Most drumming and playing styles have their own unique depth of accents and balance between sounds. The correct balance between a ride cymbal, snare, and bass drum in a traditional be-bop jazz style is very different than the balance between those sounds in a rock style.

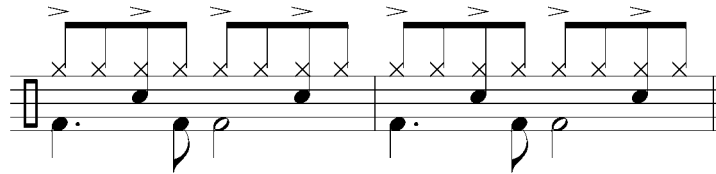
OK, let's take the first concept and look at volume differences with each limb/sound. The following example (#1) is a simple 8<sup>th</sup> note pattern as you often see it written – with no indication of which sounds to play louder, and by how much, or where some accents occur naturally. Try playing this exactly as written, using hi hat, snare, and bass drum, with no accents on the high hat and with each of the three sounds at the same volume.

**Ex. #1**



You've probably noticed that if you play this way it doesn't sound particularly good. So, we'll start by adding some accents on one sound – the hi hat. Play the same rhythmic pattern, but add the accents as indicated in the example below (#2), and notice the difference.

Ex. #2

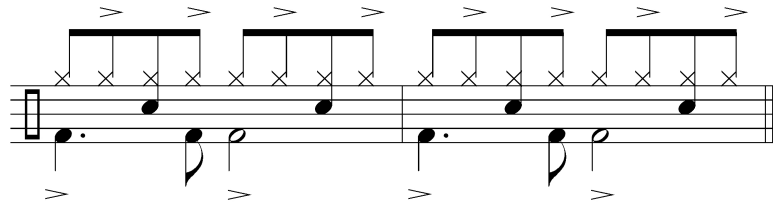


Experiment with the accent volumes and the sounds you use. How hard you play those accents, and how soft you play the non-accents, is up to you, based on the musical and rhythmic effect you want to achieve. Also, try playing the accented notes a little, or a lot, harder, OR play the non-accented notes a little, or a lot, softer. These accents can be played with the neck of the stick across the edge of the top hat cymbal, or with the tip of the stick in the center of the hat, and try varying how tightly you keep the cymbals closed.

For now, you should experiment with a complete range of accent and non-accent levels. Once you feel comfortable with this, try moving the accents around to different notes of the hi hat rhythm to hear how much this can affect the feel.

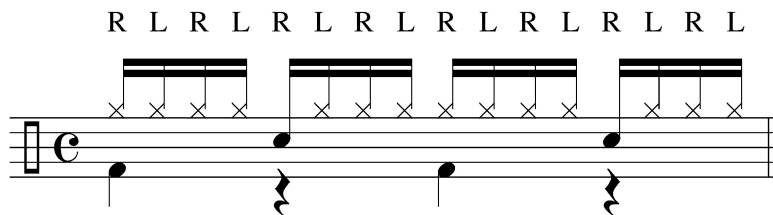
In this next example (#3), I've added a bass drum accent on beats 1 and 3 of each measure and changed the hi hat accents to occur on the up-beat of each quarter. This one will be a bit more challenging to play due to the way we're all 'wired' neurologically. (It's a little easier for the right hand and right foot to 'mirror' each other, or play the same accents and rhythm. Once you start to separate the volumes between them, as we've done in this example, it becomes challenging to control them separately, hence *Volume Independence*). Again, try different accent and non-accent levels, as well as sounds to find the ones that seem best to you.

Ex. #3



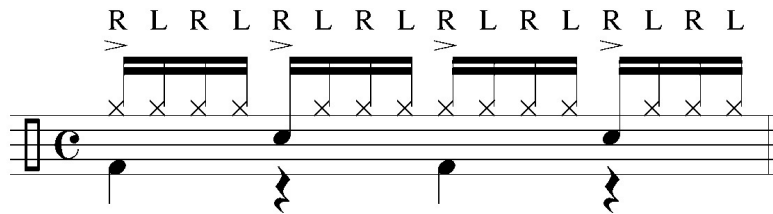
Let's now move on to a 16<sup>th</sup> note pattern. Try playing #4 with no accents on the high hat - each note at the exact same level, and with the bass, snare, and hat at the same volume. Play it slowly at first.

**Ex. #4**

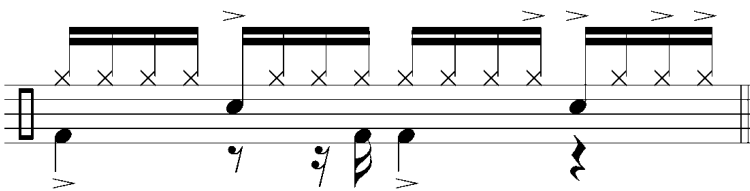


It probably sounds a little stiff, right? OK, now we'll add a simple high hat accent pattern (#5), and then one with a few variations (#6). Listen how much more momentum and 'life' the accents add to the groove. Notice that I've also added an accent on the bass drum part in Ex. #6.

**Ex. #5**



**Ex. #6**

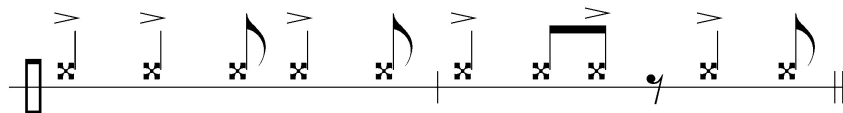


Here's a version in Afro-Cuban style with the cascara rhythm (in 2-3 clave) in the right hand (Ex. #7). You can play this on the shell or rim of the floor tom, or a cow bell. This first pattern has no accents; the second (Ex. #8) includes a typical accent pattern in this style. Hear how much more musical the accented version sounds and how a 'groove' is already beginning to be established.

**Ex. #7**



**Ex. #8**

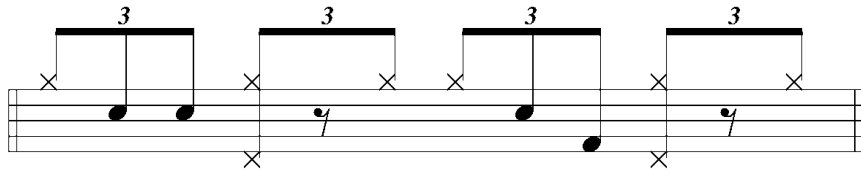


Now, we can move onto the second part of Volume Independence, and begin to play around with shifting the volumes of the sounds and limbs as they relate to each other. We've already started to work on this in some of the patterns in this article; let's take a closer look.

Go back to Example #1 above, and as a starting point, play the overall level of the high hat 'under' (softer than) the volume of the snare and bass, and play both the snare and bass at a volume louder than the hi hat. After you've done that, try shifting the volumes a little at a time between all three sounds to achieve the balance that sounds best to you. Try experimenting with this idea of volume balance with some of the other examples in this article, and then move onto some of your own.

Here's a different example - a triplet-based rhythmic independence exercise - a pattern that can be played in a jazz style (play the top line on a ride cymbal). As before, you want to experiment with the two parts of Volume Independence: 1) which notes are accented in each sound/limb and by how much, and 2) what is the volume of the ride cymbal, snare, bass drum, and even the hi hat as they relate to each other.

**Ex. #9**



As you work with these concepts, remember that how much Volume Independence you use in a given situation depend on many factors. These include the style, the context, and your personal taste. There is not one correct way to use this; everyone in every situation will use it differently. The important thing is that you think about this, and develop the ability to hear and control the accents and volumes of sounds independent of each other.

Now that you're more aware of *Volume Independence*, make sure to check out some of your favorite recordings and listen closely to **HOW** the drummers are playing – how they use accents and balance between sounds to improve the sound and feel of the music. Then, try as many different variations of these accents and volumes as you can think of, record yourself playing them, and then compare that to what you hear on the recordings.

Complete *Volume Independence* – the ability to play rhythms with each hand and foot at different volumes with different accent patterns, is a very valuable skill to have in the studio, on stage, or in a club. Remember, the challenge in playing any instrument musically is not just a physical one (technique), it's also an aural one (good ears). Your ability to hear musically is at the root of being able to play musically, so make sure you listen to all styles as much as possible so you have a aural target to practice towards.

I hope this article is helpful to you as an introduction; more advanced concepts and exercises will be coming in Part 2.

Have fun!

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