
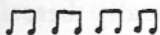
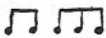



ON THE NOTATION OF RHYTHM

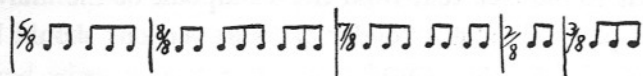
AARON COPLAND

IN a recent article in *MODERN MUSIC*, Marcelle de Manziarly demonstrated that there exist two different kinds of rhythm in music of a more sophisticated nature; namely, the rhythm one hears, and the rhythm one hears and sees. The ear alone, without the aid of the eye, can distinguish only elementary types, made up of strong and weak beats, evenly or unevenly grouped together, heard singly or in combinations. In a simple waltz or march the ear easily grasps what the mental eye sees. But just as the trained musician occasionally likes to follow from score – perhaps in order to more clearly extricate the inner voices from the general musical texture, so the eye helps to appreciate rhythmic subtleties that the ear cannot take in. This distinction needs more stress than it has been given.

It is a distinction that becomes crucial in the noting down of certain so-called modern rhythms – rhythms which present a technical problem both to the composer himself and to his executant.

Most of us were brought up in the rhythmic tradition of the nineteenth century, which took for granted the equal division of metrical units. Countless pupils were taught that four quarter notes:  indicated accents on beats one and three: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4; and that when these were subdivided, the smaller units would always be equal divisions, thus:  . Trouble began when composers became fascinated with the rhythmic possibilities resulting from the combination of unequal units of twos and threes:  or  . Basically, a large proportion of modern rhythms may be said to derive from that formula.

If you happen to be the type of composer who hears successions of two and three eighth-note groupings, you are likely to find yourself writing down combinations like this:



Here you have the by now familiar groups of unequal metrical units which strike terror in the hearts of performers, particularly conductors – who know in advance the struggles in store for them when these rhythmic complexes are brought to rehearsal.

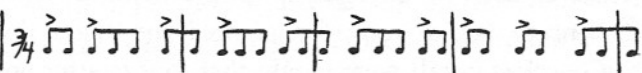
The harassed executant is quick to point out that in his opinion the composer was inventing unnecessary complications in the notating of his rhythms. The argument goes something like this: In writing down groupings of $5/8 - 8/8 - 7/8 - 2/8 - 3/8$, or any similar “odd” combination, you are proceeding on the assumption that all strong beats coincide with the first beat of each measure. In other words, you are making rhythm and meter synonymous, a practice in much nineteenth century music. Walter Piston put the case well for the executant when he wrote:

“The overemphasis on the musical significance of the barline and the attempt to make meter and rhythm synonymous should perhaps be laid to the influence of Stravinsky and Bartok. After the *Sacre* our young composers fell under a tyranny of the bar measure quite as strict as that which held sway during the nineteenth century, forgetting that the barline in music is only a convenience for keeping time and that it indicates rhythmic stress only by accident and coincidence.”

If that is true – if the barline is not to be taken as indicative of a strong beat – then our rhythm of:

(Version 1) 

might just as well be noted down as:

(Version 2) 

Theoretically, whichever way the rhythm is notated (always assuming that accents have been added), the effect on the ear should be the same.

That would seem to settle the question. But actually there are two schools of thought in this matter. The younger and more progressive type of interpreter will tell you that, despite its difficulty, he prefers version 1 to version 2. He insists that executants must be taught to play unequal rhythmic units with the same natural ease that they play a simple ternary rhythm. He claims further that the two versions do not in reality sound precisely the same to the listening ear. A subtle difference will be felt as between one version and the other.

It seems to me true that from the standpoint of the individual performer who plays without a conductor, both versions should be equally

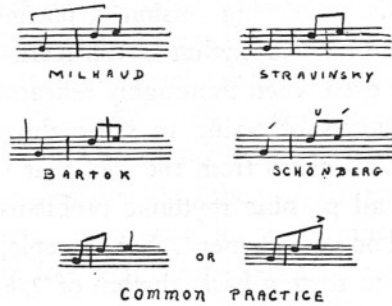
assimilable. The considerable advantage of version 1 is that it looks the way it sounds. But for ensemble playing under the baton of a leader, experience has taught me that version 2 is preferred by the majority of instrumentalists and conductors. It is not always technically easy to ignore the barline, as one must in playing version 2, placing the accents where they are indicated. But once the rhythm is well learned it is easy to reproduce; while version 1, even when thoroughly rehearsed, is easy to forget.

One of the difficulties of trying to settle this matter of rhythmic notation once and for all arises from the fact that no one example can be made to stand for all possible rhythmic problems. Each separate instance must be decided on its own merit. For example, speaking generally, it would seem foolish to force a basic rhythm of $7/8$, which consistently remains $7/8$ throughout a piece or section of a piece, into a straitjacket of $3/4$ or $4/4$ merely for the sake of a more conventional regularity. There are other instances where the addition of an extra eighth or sixteenth note to an otherwise regular rhythmic scheme will cause notational upsets. These are sometimes unavoidable, and can only be accounted for by the interpolation of an occasional uneven measure. Common sense dictates the use of the metrically regular barline whenever the actual rhythms are persistently irregular. These are the rhythms that have to be simplified, at least for the present, until executants catch up with the complex rhythmic imagination of the present-day composer.

Mademoiselle de Manziarly goes so far as to suggest that some of the contemporary works in the standard repertory might well be renovated along these simplified lines. She adds: "I wonder if this would have been possible at the time they were written. The new world of rhythm they represented was unfamiliar; it needed to be firmly underlined by placing the beginning of each segment of phrase on the strong beat, regardless of the asymmetric succession of unequal measures." Whatever men like Bartok and Stravinsky might say to this re-barring proposal, it is evident that their recent works usually show a more normal notation. Works which are polyrhythmic by nature almost force this solution, since the presence of independent strong beats in different voices cannot possibly be adequately represented by a single barline.

Let us grant then, the case of the performing artist who prefers a regular metric division in music, provided the sense of the non-coinciding rhythm is clear. But is it invariably crystal-clear? Do we always know when the barline is there merely for convenience (that is, to be disregarded) and when it is there as an indication of rhythmic stress (to be

taken into account)? In theory, the musical sense of the line should tell us what the real rhythm is. But in practice, we find composers inventing little subterfuges for keeping the strong beat clear of the barline. Here are a few examples of solutions adopted by some well-known composers:



This would seem to show that the use of accents, placed to indicate qualitative rhythm, is insufficient. It is common knowledge that an accent, taken by itself, is an unsubtle sign. Notes have light, strong, and medium accents. There are accents on upbeats as well as downbeats. There are accents which even allow the barline to be "felt." All these are now symbolized by the simple sign $>$. (Sheer desperation must have mothered the addition of the *sforzato* sign for very strong accents.) It is obvious that we badly need an enlarged system of musical symbols to serve our greater rhythmic complexities.

It seems unlikely, however, that a scientifically exact scheme of rhythmic notation will ever be devised. Much of the delicate rhythmic variety we are accustomed to hearing in first-rate performances is simply not written down by the composer – could not be written down in our present system of notation. A certain rhythmic freedom seems to be an integral part of our western musical tradition. Nevertheless, without attempting the impossible, it certainly appears highly desirable that some more satisfactory method than our present one be devised to account for rhythmic subtleties that don't "get across" to the interpreter in our old-fashioned notational system.

In my opinion, composers would do well to notate their music so that, as far as possible, it looks the way it sounds. If the work is written for solo performer there is usually no need for tampering further with the rhythm. If, however, more than one player is involved, and especially in the case of orchestral works, a rearrangement of rhythmic barring may be necessary.* The more rhythmically sophisticated conductors will not think so, but performances are more likely to materialize.

*For the student of rhythm it may be interesting to compare the two different barrings of my *El Salon Mexico* as they appear in the published versions for orchestra and for solo piano.