

## SWING AGAIN

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**I**N May 1936 I stated in this magazine that "swing music is a form of two-step in which the rhythm is expressed quantitatively by instruments of no fixed intonation, the melodic, harmonic, and purely percussive elements being liberated thereby to improvise in free polyphonic style."

That definition is pretty pompous, but I think it still holds. However, since quantitative rhythm is a term and a conception that a great many people do not understand, my definition has remained not only uncriticised and undisputed, but also unaccepted. I am therefore taking this occasion, which arose from an invitation to review Bennie Goodman's concert in Carnegie Hall (a quite uninteresting concert on the whole), to talk some more about quantitative rhythm and its function in swing-music, in the hope of further clarifying a little the bothersome question of what is swing-music anyway.

The melodic matter of swing, though frequently charming, I have never found to be especially novel or significant. The elaborate *fioritura* of the New Orleans school and the tighter contrapuntal texture of the Chicago school are equally mannerisms of style. They are not of the essence. They are only significant as indicating, by their presence at such a high degree of elaboration, that there must be some pretty solid underpinning somewhere in the structure to make such elaboration possible. The constant use of the air-and-variations form is of no significance either, the variation being the loosest of all musical forms and at its best only a shape, never a structural system. Similarly as regards the contrapuntal freedom, the harmonic and instrumental variety. That is all superstructure too. It certainly

astonishes no one who is acquainted with modern musical resources. The existence of such a practical superstructure makes it certain, however, that there is a method somewhere in the whole thing. The important place that improvisation has in swing-playing is conclusive. Nobody improvises publicly much without a method. Communal improvisation without it is a clear impossibility.



Now the sleuths, amateur and professional, who have looked for this basic method have mostly been taken in by the lingo. Let me remind them that *hot* does not mean passionate in expression. It means rhythmically free and it applies only, in consequence, to melody or to percussion. More important than that, that swing-music rarely has any literal swing in it. Certainly nothing like the Viennese waltz music has. At most it sort of quivers or oscillates rapidly like a French clock. At its best it has no motor effects at all. Good jam invariably sounds not unlike a Brandenburg Concerto, where every voice wiggles around as rapidly as you please, the rhythmic basis or center remaining completely static and without progression or development of any kind.

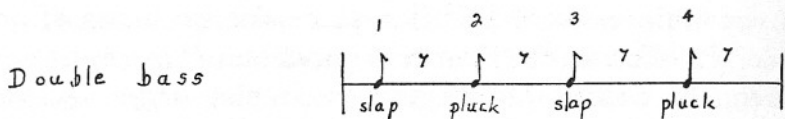
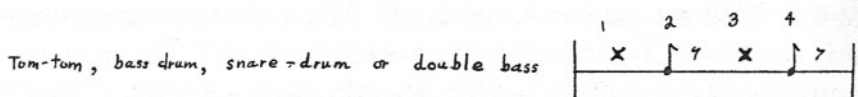
If dance-music doesn't swing, is it dance-music? Answer, no. Motor impulses in dance-music are of the essence. They are the *sine qua non*. But nobody dances to jam anyway. What kind of metrical routine then has replaced the rhythmic beat? That there is a metrical routine of some kind is obvious. Otherwise the rhythmically free (or non-metrical) "hot licks" would not be free. They would be just a vague melopoeia without tension. Their freedom is real and exciting only because it exists by contrast to a fixed measure of some kind. Also collective improvisation is not possible without a fixed metrical basis. There is only one answer, because there is only one other known form of metre besides the metre of beats. That is the metre of quantities.

Here is the root of the matter. Beat-music is accentual music. Its rhythmic measure-unit is a succession of blows of varying force. Its effect on the listener is muscular. It is the music of the march, the dance, the religious or secular orgy. Quantitative music has no accent. It is serene. Its rhythmic measure-unit is a unit of length. Its effect on the listener is likely to be hypnotic.

When practised with sufficient subtlety it becomes not only the lullaby, but also the ballad, the music of prose declamation, of high religious rite, of contemplation, of the imaginative intellect.

The pianoforte, the drums, all the stick-and-hammer family, are primarily accentual instruments, although the length, or vibrating-time of the tone produced is usually controllable. The bowed instruments are primarily quantitative, though they can play a fairly presentable accent too. The wind instruments, both brass and wood, are almost completely quantitative, their bravest attacks being always more vocal than percussive, and their diminuendos having always a very audible stopping-place. The organ (reed or pipe) is one hundred per cent quantitative, no accent of any kind being possible at any time, and all tones being completely sustainable. Likewise for the modern electrical instruments, though a fairly successful imitation of string pizzicati is often added to their organ-like range of sounds. The plucked instruments are equivocal. Banjo, guitar and harp are chiefly accentual. The lute less so. The harpsichord not at all, because it has no accents. Harpsichord music, therefore, is always quantitative, in spite of the non-sustaining tone of the instrument. It resembles organ-music far more than it resembles piano- or harp-music. I am now going to explain how in swing-music a similar phenomenon takes place, whereby the foundational underpinning, its basic rhythm, although purely quantitative in character, gets expressed by non-quantitative instruments, by drums, guitars, cymbals, pianos and hand-plucked double-basses.

The basic routines of the rhythm-section in a swing-band are as follows:



Cymbal (with hard stick)

x represents the stroke, o the damping.

Snare-drum (with sticks, brushes or dragging brush)

non cresc. non cresc.

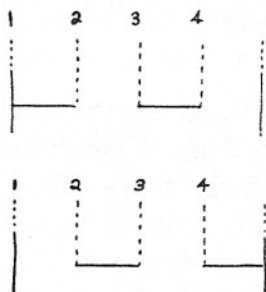
There are some variations on the above, such as the double cymbal-stroke on counts 2 and 4 (with damping on 1 and 3) and the double brush-tap on the snare drum (also used on counts 2 and 4). Also the combinations of all these. The hot drum-solo is not a basic routine but a cadenza. It is made to sound as different as possible from the basic routines by the use of *sfz* stresses in unexpected places and the temporary introduction of new patterns, sometimes in a variant metre and sometimes in free prose. It is only cadenza, however, a little spurt of very exciting freedom in the midst of the grind.

Notice in the routine exposed above the consistent placing of what looks like a strong accent on counts 2 and 4. This cannot be what it looks like, because a musical structure of any length cannot be made on a routine of strong off-beats, since the tendency of any regular strong beat is to become itself the down-beat of the measure. Robert Schumann was fond of playing around with off-beats and frequently got his interpreters into a lot of trouble on their account. No. 1 of the *Phantasiestücke* is a celebrated example, a clear rendition of its rhythmic content (as written down by the composer) being one of the more difficult feats in piano-playing.

By what agency is the tonic measure-accent expressed then in swing-music if not by the rhythm-section of the band? Certainly not by the melody-instruments, the saxes, trumpets, clarinets, etc. These play with the greatest rhythmic freedom, varying continually both their accents and their quantities to exploit the

rich fancy of the arranger and the tonal resources of the instruments. The harmony-section, that is, piano, guitar and the like, seems to string its chords on a rhythmic routine not unlike that of the rhythm-section itself. I repeat that there is no tonic measure-accent, that the measure-unit in swing-music is a measure of quantities and not of accents at all.

Let me represent the quantities in a measure of four-four time by the following pictures. I presume an instrument of unvarying pitch.



The numbers represent the four counts of the measure. They are theoretically of equal length. In musical performance, number 4 is usually a shade longer than the others. This imperceptible hold (familiar to all organists and harpsichordists) serves to define the measure's limit and to produce a tiny semblance of down-beat at the beginning of the following measure. The horizontal lines represent the duration of the unvarying sound, the blanks between them its absence. There are no stresses. You could play it all perfectly on an electric buzzer. These two patterns are for theoretical purposes identical, because, unless there is in any measure of repeating-pattern, a tonic accent on 1 and 3, there is no tonic accent at all (or any measure either, except of two counts) and nobody can ever know which came first, the sound or the silence.

Now superpose on these theoretical, quantitative designs the formulae given above for basic swing-rhythm and you will see what happens in a swing band. Remember that the instrumental strokes cannot be considered as marking tonic measure-accents, because they are all off-beat strokes. Yet they must mark something, or they wouldn't be there. They must therefore mark the quantities. The taps and plucks do coincide, as a matter of fact, with the beginning and ending of the units of the quantitative

pattern. The cymbal and the snare-drum roll, having a sound of some duration, can actually express these quantities. More often than not, however, in good swing-playing, the continuing, or exactly quantitative sounds are dispensed with on account of their insistent character, the taps and plucks being left to play the perverse role of indicating and defining a kind of rhythmic pattern that they are by nature incapable of stating in all its plenitude.

Now the two quantitative measure-patterns drawn above, although identical when expressed in pure quantitative sound, are not identical when expressed by dry taps. Such taps, if placed on counts one and three, would create a tonic measure-beat. Consequently they are placed on two and four in order to make it clear that there is no tonic measure-beat. The cymbal and snare-drum occasionally add their precise statement of quantitative pattern no. 2 to reinforce the same point.

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The result of all this elaborate procedure is an amplification of the expressive range. The listener, like the improvising player, is not whiffed back and forth by any muscular reactions to regular beats. So marked, in fact, is the absence of regular beats that most players are obliged to keep themselves aware of musical time by rapid foot-patting. Neither is the listener lulled to sleep by an expressed quantitative routine (which can be very monotonous indeed). The pluck-and-tap rhythm is equal and delicate. It never becomes a beat. But it reminds one at all times of the underlying measure of length which is the structural unit of the whole music, reminds one so gently but so continuously that both the invention and the comprehension of complex musical structures is greatly facilitated.

Notice the high degree of intellectual and nervous excitement present in any swing-audience. The listeners do not close their eyes and sink into emotional or subjective states. They sit up straight, their eyes flash, they applaud the licks. They occasionally jerk on the absent down-beat, but on the whole they seem to be enjoying one of those states of nervous and muscular equilibrium that render possible rapid intellection.

Quantitative rhythm in music has long been known to have special characteristics, not the least noticeable being a tendency



to develop complex textures for non-emotional purposes, the organ-works of Sebastian Bach and his predecessors being pretty spectacular in that way. Beat-music, on the other hand, is always emotional and tends to hide rather than parade its complexities. The whole matter, however, has been very little discussed theoretically. Even the term quantitative rhythm is unknown to many musicians, although the musical notation we all use is as strictly a quantitative conception as though accents didn't exist. Musicians all know there is something rather special about the pipe-organ, but they mostly consider the unvarying nature of an organ tone to be a defect rather than a special characteristic of that instrument. I don't want to go into all that any further just now. But I do want to note that quantitative music is having under our very noses a renaissance and that the plucked or tapped instruments are occupying an important place in that renaissance, a place not unlike that occupied by the harpsichord in the equally quantitative music of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.