

CODE TALKERS - Approaches to Improve Rhythmic Reading Skills

by Anthony Susi, SusiMusic@sbcglobal.net

RHYTHM = Sound with a Pulse. You feel it. Notation is an Abstract Representation to Decipher.

Based on my 35 years of teaching music, “one size does not fit all” when teaching students how to interpret rhythmic notation. Factors such as performers age, level of the music and rehearsal situation are important considerations in choosing your approach.

WORD ASSOCIATION SYSTEM

PROS:

1. Familiar foods OR “Star Wars”/syllables for introducing 1/4, 8th and 16th note combinations to young students as well as 8th note triplets.

(*Bun* = 1/4 note; *Hotdog* = pair 8th notes; *Watermelon* = four 16th notes; Combos = *Lemonade* and *Cheeseburger*; *Chocolate* = 8th note triplets; *Pickles* = 16th & Dotted 8th)

(*Luke* = 1/4 note; *Yoda* = pair 8th notes; *R2D2* = four 16th notes; Combos = *Boba Fett* and *Han Solo*; *Lei-a* = 8th & Dotted 16th; *Jar-jar* = 16th & Dotted 8th; *Obi-Wan* = 8th note triplets; Anakin = Dotted 8th triplet, Kalrissian = 8th-16th-8th triplet)

2. Students can sing their rhythmic part with these syllables.

3. Spoken words simulate “sound/ratio” of desired rhythm.

CONS:

1. No consistent syllable designated for distinguishing down or up beats.

2. Doesn't accommodate syncopation, all dotted and complex rhythmic combinations.

3. All of the words do not transfer to articulating rhythm on wind mouthpieces.

KODALY RHYTHM SYLLABLES

PROS:

1. Least complicated system comparatively for introducing 1/4, 8th and 16th note combinations to young students.

(*Ta* = 1/4 note; *Ti* = 8th note; *Tiri* = pair of 16th notes; combos = *Ti-Tiri* and *Tiri-Ti*)

2. Can easily apply these syllables to basic syncopation (8th-Qtr-8th = *Ti-Ta-Ti*).

3. Includes syllables for dotted 8th & 16th note combinations (*Tim-ri* and *Ri-tim*).

3. Students can easily sing their rhythmic part with these syllables.

4. Spoken rhythm syllables simulate “sound/ratio” of desired rhythm.

CONS:

1. Syllable for downbeat isn't always *Ta*.

(can be *Ti* for 8th note, *Ri* for 16th or *Tri* for 8th triplet = “Tri-o-la”)

2. Syllable for upbeat is the same as downbeat with consecutive 8th or 16th notes.

3. 16th note subdivision syllables are the same for the upbeat and downbeat.

4. Syllables for 8th note triplets same as 1/4 note triplets. (Tri-o-la)

5. The *Ri* 16th syllable does not lend itself to articulating the rhythm on a wind instr.
6. Cannot also adapt to swing rhythms or articulation syllables.
7. Easy to loose track of how many repeated 8th or 16th notes they played.

GORDAN RHYTHM SYLLABLES

PROS:

1. Consistent syllables used for all down beats & upbeats in both duple and triple meter.
(*Du*=Downbeat, *De*=Upbeat)
2. Distinguishes sixteenth note subdivision of downbeats versus upbeats (*Duta-De* vs. *Du-Deta*).
3. Can accomodate syncopated and dotted rhythmic figures.
4. Syllables for 8th note triplets coincide with 1/4 note triplets.
(8th triplets = *Dudadi*; 1/4 triplets = *Du-di-da*)
5. Students can easily sing their rhythmic part with these syllables.
6. Spoken rhythm syllables simulate “sound/ratio” of desired rhythm
7. Lends itself nicely to natural articulation of rhythm pattern on wind mouthpieces.
8. Can easily be modified to adapt to articulation markings as well as swing rhythms.
(*Du-De* becomes *Du-Ba* for swinging 8ths
Du = tenuto downbeat; *Dit* = staccato downbeat; *Dot* = marcato downbeat
Ba = tenuto upbeat; *Bit* = staccato upbeat; *Bot* = marcato upbeat)

CONS:

1. Doesn't keep track of which beat within a measure a rhythmic figure occurs.
2. Pronunciation of vowels can be tricky to get used to (*De* => “Day”; *Da* => “Dah”; *Di* => “Dee”).

TRADITIONAL COUNTING SYSTEM

PROS:

1. Consistent syllables used for all down beats & upbeats in both duple and triple meter.
(*beat#* = Downbeat, *&* =Upbeat)
2. Distinguishes sixteenth note subdivision of downbeats versus upbeats (*1e&-* vs. *1-&a*).
3. Can accomodate syncopated and dotted rhythmic figures.
4. Keeps track of which down or up beat within a measure a rhythmic figure occurs while maintaining a count of how many consecutive 8th or 16th notes they played.
5. Can be adapted to swinging 8th notes (*1 & 2 &* => *1 a 2 a*).

CONS:

1. Not as easy to sing rhythmic passages with counting syllables.
2. Counting Syllables do not transfer to articulating rhythm on wind mouthpieces.

3. Syllable for 8th note triplets do not coincide with 1/4 note triplets.

*Avoid using 1&a 2&a for 8th triplets as this is reserved for 8th & 16th note combination.
(1 triplet 2 triplet vs. ?)

4. Students saying counting syllables outloud often does not produce the correct “sound/ratio” of desired rhythmic pattern.

RHYTHM PRACTICE STRATEGIES

1. When clapping and saying rhythm patterns aloud, gesture hands apart for rests and hold hands together for sustained/tied beats while keeping hands in a forward motion.

2. After reviewing individual Rhythm Flash Card patterns, challenge the students to maintain a steady beat and rhythmic accuracy as you continually switch to the next card as soon as they begin the downbeat of the previous one. This exercise trains them to be reading ahead of the present beat.

3. Rhythmic Dictation helps the students begin to visualize the notation for the sounds they hear. I recommend starting with 1 measure patterns using this 3 step sequence:

a. While everyone taps the macro beat in their toe or heel, play a rhythm pattern and have the students immediately say it back on a neutral syllable to “record” it in their mind. They should then attempt to just draw the vertical stems without note heads for the number of notes they heard.

b. While still tapping an audible beat, play the rhythm pattern again and have the students echo it once more on the same neutral syllable to confirm “receipt”. They should now attempt to beam together any vertical stems they think belong to the same beat.

c. Repeat the process once more and this time ask the students to write the rhythm syllables/counting they think they heard under the stems and make any final adjustments.

*If you want to work with manipulatives, have students do steps a. & b. with popsicle sticks and then ask for a volunteer to say rather than write the correct syllables.

4. Another form of rhythm dictation that does not involve writing is “Musical Rhythmic Chairs”. Separate the class in teams and arrange 4 sets of 4 chairs to represent a full measure of 4/4 subdivided OR 4 sets of 3 chairs to represent two measures of 6/8 subdivided for each team. Play the desired rhythm pattern and the first team that correctly sits in the correct chairs to physically represent the noteheads wins that round.

5. During rehearsal warm-ups, challenge the students to play an ascending or descending scale while adding or taking away one eighth note with each repetition. This will get them to focus on “playing the rests” and internalizing the pulse together.

Anthony Susi is an active CT music educator, solo performer and published composer of numerous works for Concert Band, Jazz Band, Marching Band, and String Orchestra, available through J.W. Pepper.