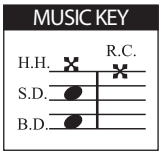
Relative Tempo

Click-Shifting Exercises to Improve Your Sense of Time

by Steve Fidyk



Wind instrumentalists work on relative pitch by listening to intervals (the distance between two notes) over and over again, in an effort to develop the ability to play with good intonation. In my college wind ensemble, when the intonation within the group was not very good, the conductor would say, "Pitch is a place, not an area." This adage holds true when discussing the tempo for a piece of music. In order for the music to groove, the rhythms need to be consistent and flowing, and the more you practice with a metronome, the easier it will be for you to identify the ideal tempo for the ensemble.

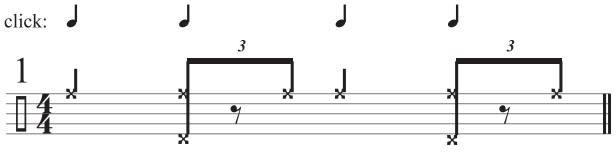
Take, for example, a big band chart. If the tempo of the drum part is marked at 138 bpm and you count in the band at 80 bpm, it will be very difficult for the lead trumpet player to sustain the notes and perform the phrases correctly. A drummer with a good sense of tempo can count in an ensemble and be within four beats per minute of the suggested speed.

In addition to practicing with a metronome to develop tempo, you can also relate tempo markings to the pace of a song you're very familiar with. For instance, if the piece is marked at 120 bpm, you can hum a few bars of "Stars and Stripes Forever" to find the tempo. For a ballad at 60 bpm, look down at your watch and follow the second hand.

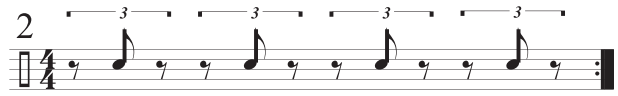
Click Shifting

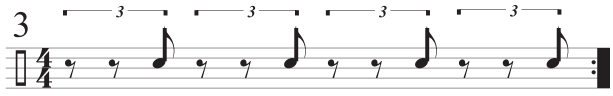
In order to help my placement of each note value, I count 16th notes when performing funk or rock grooves, and I count 8th-note triplets when playing swing music. The following exercise can help you develop your timing of subdivisions from beat to beat as you shift the position of the quarter-note click.

For a beat that's subdivided into 8th-note triplets, the click track or metronome is generally practiced in this position.

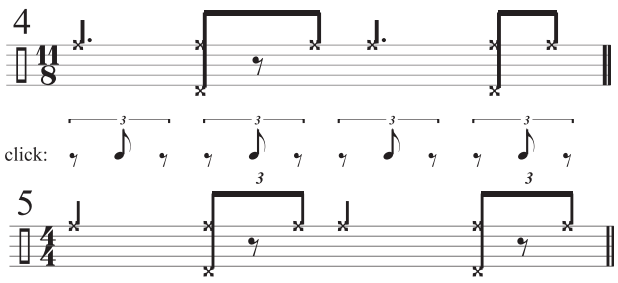


In an 8th-note-triplet grouping there are two additional possibilities for the placement of the click.

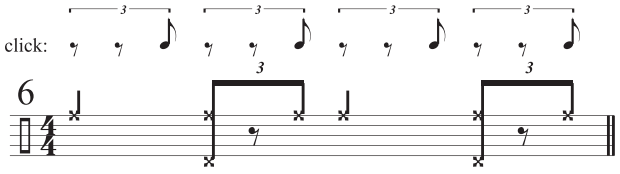




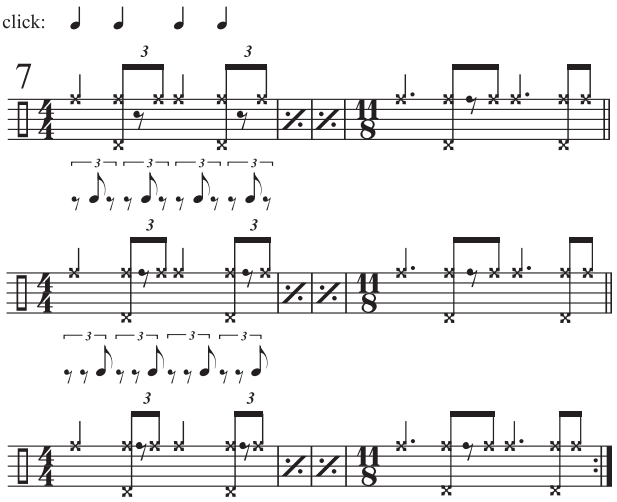
When you insert this 11/8 measure, the click track position shifts to the second 8th note within the triplet grouping.



When you insert the 11/8 measure a second time, the click shifts to the third part of the triplet.

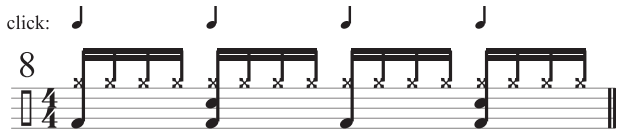


Practice shifting to all three positions by playing three measures of time at each one and then inserting the 11/8 measure.

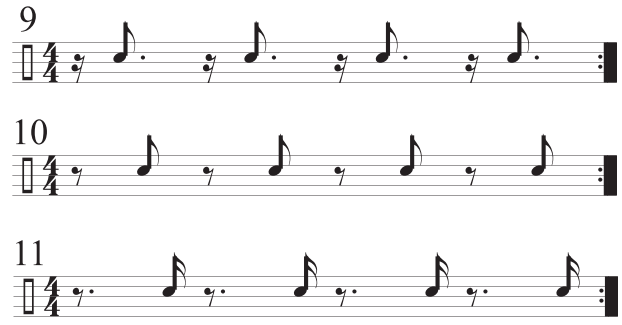


You can also apply this click-shifting approach to beats that use straight 8ths and 16ths. For a beat that's subdivided

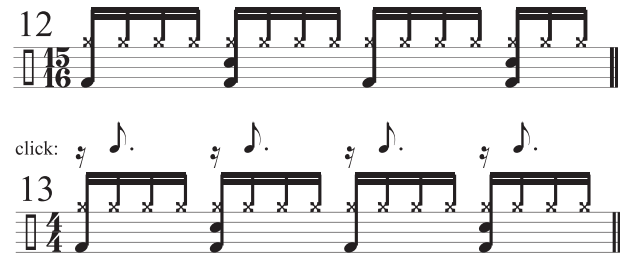
into 16th notes, the click track or metronome is normally practiced in this position.



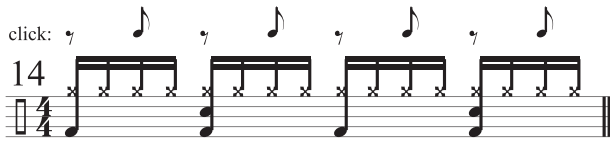
For one grouping of four 16th notes, there are three additional possibilities for the placement of the click.



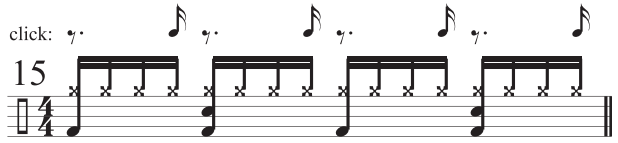
When you insert this 15/16 measure, the click track position shifts to the second 16th note within the grouping.



When you insert the 15/16 measure a second time, the click shifts once again.



When you insert the 15/16 measure a third time, the click shifts to the final position.



Practice these four 16th-note click positions using the same procedure as in Example 7, playing each position three times followed by the 15/16 measure.

As you practice these exercises, listen critically to the sound you're producing. Direct your focus toward your upper and lower appendages, and be sure that they're balanced dynamically. As you become more comfortable and confident with what we've included here, try applying the click-shifting process to a variety of different beats and grooves. Just be patient and count carefully.

I've created audio examples of the triplet and 16th-note cycles for you to check out. They are posted on the Education page at moderndrummer.com.

Steve Fidyk is the drummer with the Army Blues Big Band from Washington, D.C., and a member of the jazz faculty at Temple University in Philadelphia. Fidyk is also the author of the critically acclaimed book *Inside the Big Band Drum Chart*, which is published by Mel Bay.