Making Sense of Asymmetric Meters

2023 Midwest Clinic
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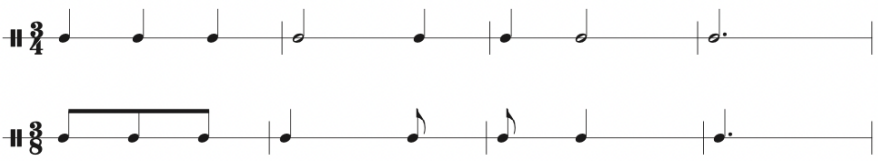
The purpose of this session is to provide a step-by-step approach to developing students' ability to read and perform asymmetric meters with understanding, accuracy, and fluency. The approach used is based on the follow big ideas:

- Rhythm vocabulary is created by applying *connection, silence,* and *division* to an underlying pulse.
- Kinesthetic and aural immersion are effective ways to engage students with the *sound* and *feel* of the rhythm vocabulary they are learning.
- The ***aural immersion*** process involves *echoing, labeling, translating,* and *improvising*.
- The ***reading development*** process can be scaffolded by presenting rhythms initially in *counts*, then in *notation with counts*, *standard notation*, and *enrhythmic notation*.
- Juxtaposing 3/4 and 3/8 meters can help students develop fluency in reading and performing compound meter vocabulary in both three beats and in one beat per measure.
- Large muscle movement can help students internalize how beats are grouped and divided in asymmetric meters.

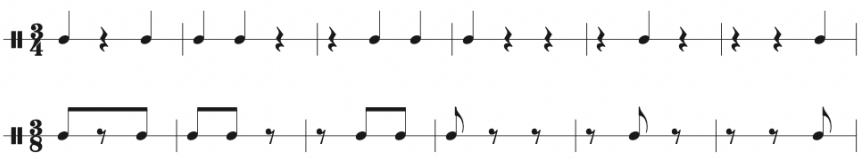
Part 1: Building Vocabulary

Shown below are groups of rhythm vocabulary generated by applying connection, silence, and division to the quarter note pulse in 3/4 and 3/8 meter.

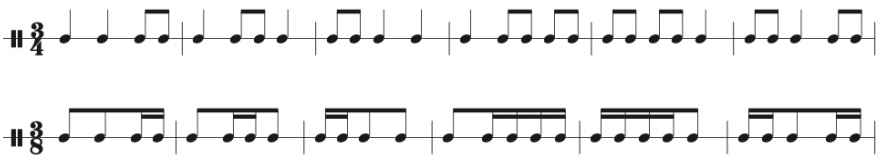
Beat + Connection



Beat + Silence



Beat + Division



4-Step Aural Immersion Process

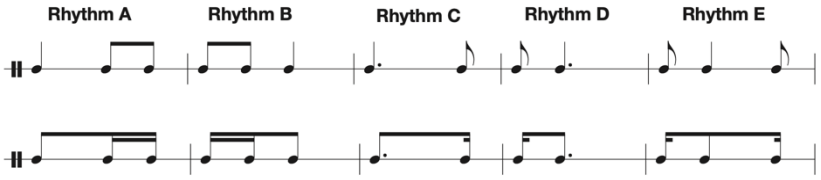
Echoing – The teacher chants rhythm patterns on a neutral syllable and participants chant the same pattern on the same neutral syllable. The focus of this step is to simply immerse learners in the sound of the rhythm vocabulary.

Labeling – The teacher chants rhythm patterns on counts and learners repeat the pattern using counts. The focus of this step is to build students' ability to label the rhythms they hear.

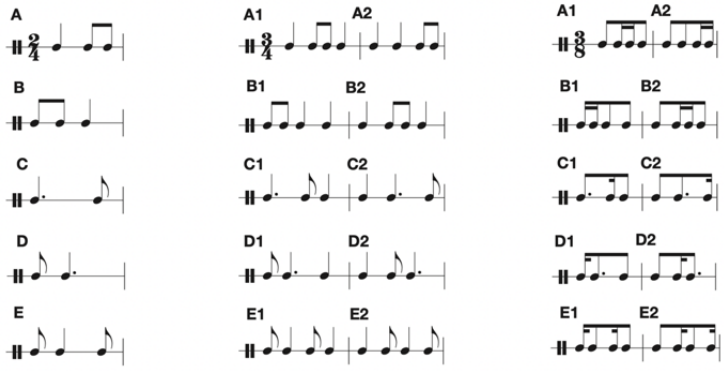
Translating – The teacher chants rhythm patterns on a neutral syllable and learners translate the patterns into counts. The focus at this step is to develop students' ability to recognize and label familiar rhythms.

Improvising – The teacher chants rhythm patterns on a neutral syllable and learners improvise a *different* pattern using the same set of vocabulary. The focus of this step is to develop students' ability to use the rhythm vocabulary fluently and to immerse them in the *flow* of the meter.

Students should be adept at reading these rhythms in simple meter as preparation for learning related vocabulary in compound meter.



These rhythms can be transferred into 3/4 and 3/8 and can occur on either beat one or beat two, yielding two versions of each rhythm as shown below.



4-Step Reading Development Process

Counts – Rhythms are presented in counts using symbols to indicate counts that are connected, silent, or divided.

Notation + Counts – Rhythms are presented in notation with the counts provided below the notes.

Standard Notation – Rhythms are presented in standard notation without counts.

Enrhythmic Notation – The same rhythms are presented in a different meter. For this session, rhythms will initially be presented in 3/4 and the enrhythmic notation will be in 3/8.

This process enables differentiation by making it possible for students to learn the same vocabulary while reading different forms of notation.

Part 2: Grouping Beats and Divisions

- Play a metronome at 200 bpm and ask students whether they are perceiving the pulses without grouping, in groups of two, or in groups of three, then invite them to switch the way they are mentally grouping the pulses back and forth between groups of two and three.

- Student volunteers can compose 4-beat patterns incorporating combinations of groups of two and groups of three for the class to perform.

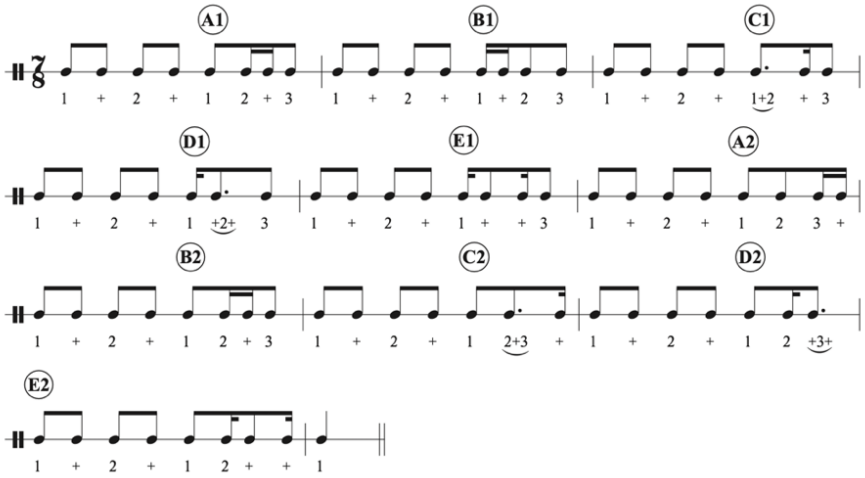
- Grouping and Dividing Beats
    - Students can conduct to group beats into groups of two, three, and four in a count-up/count-down format (two bars of 2, two bars of 3, two bars of 4, two bars of 3, two bars of 2).
    - Participants perform this again while chanting divisions of the beat first in simple, then in compound meter.

- Asymmetric Groupings
    - Conduct the count-up/count-down format in simple meter while making the last beat of each measure a compound beat.
    - Conduct the count-up/count-down format in compound meter while making the last beat of each measure a simple beat.

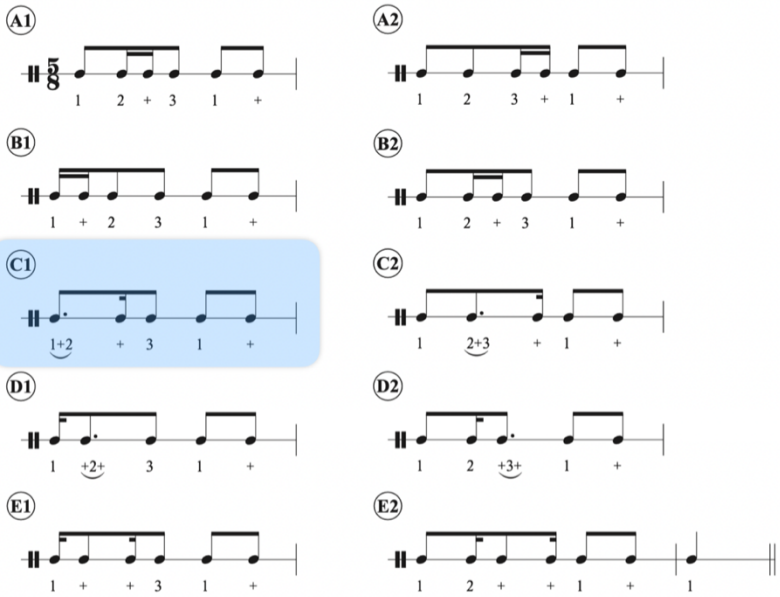
- Adding Vocabulary – Once participants are adept at conducting the count-up/count-down format in asymmetric meters, they can choose vocabulary from the above lists to plug into the simple and compound beats.

Part 3: Reading and Performing in Asymmetric Meters

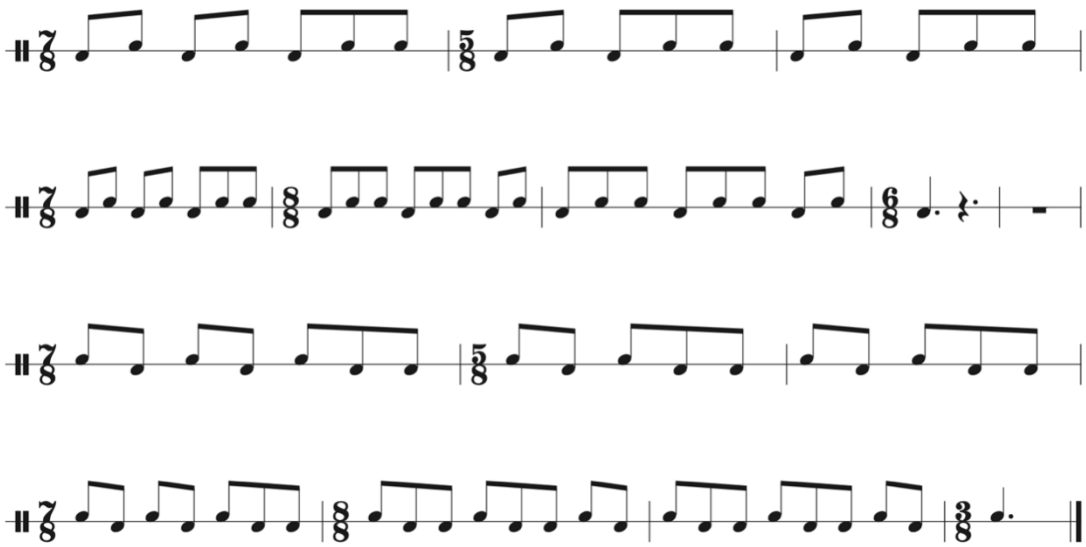
- Students can begin this process by reading vocabulary in *familiar order*.



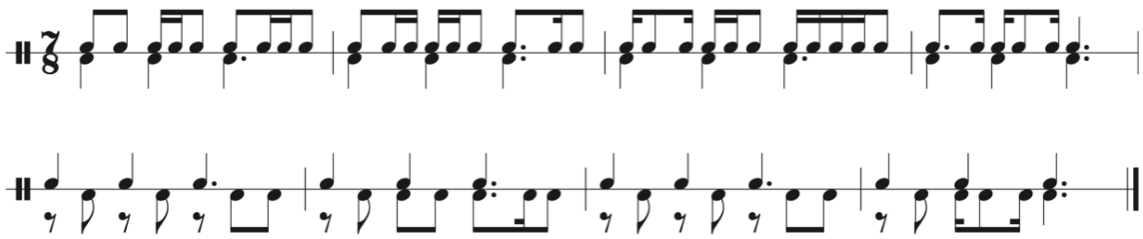
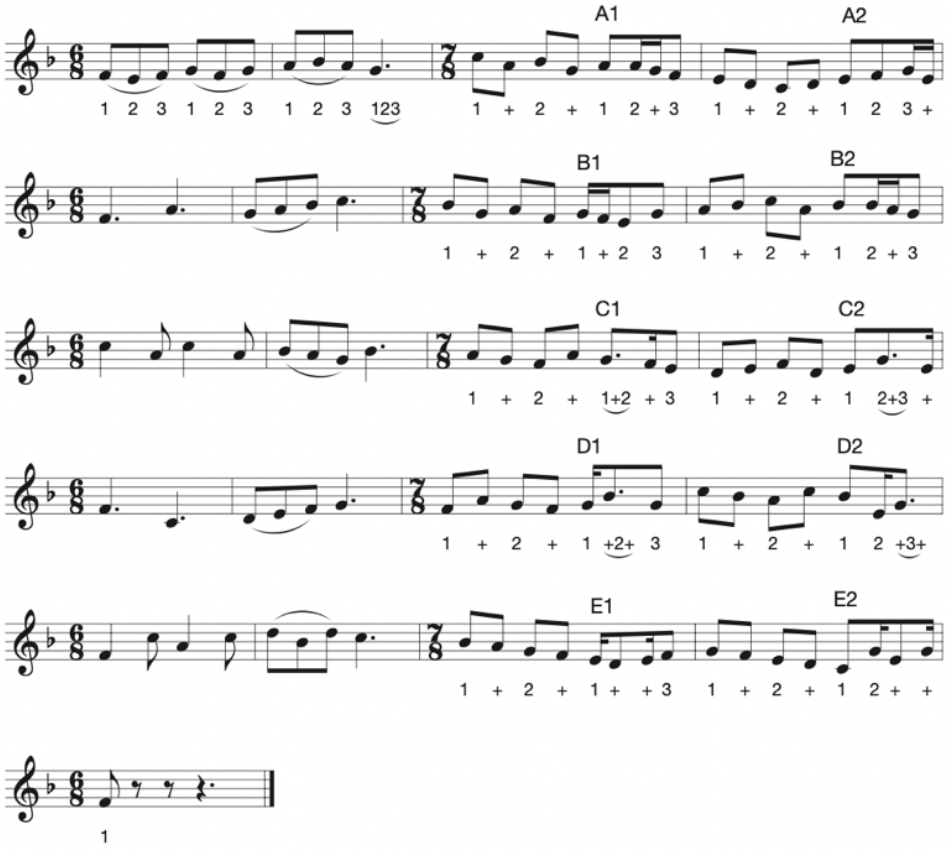
- Students can build on this by reading vocabulary in different combinations using a ping-pong format. In the example shown below, rhythm C1 will be connected to each of the rhythms in the second column in sequence.



- This exercise helps reinforce the concept that asymmetric meters are simply combinations of groups of two pulses (counted 1-and; felt as oom-pah as in John Denver's *Thank God I'm a Country Boy*) and three pulses (counted 1-2-3; felt as oom-pah-pah as in Over the Waves). This exercise provides the opportunity for students to read, perform, and feel these combinations of underlying pulses.



- The next step recalls the movement exercises from the beginning of the session to engage students in performing using both their hands and feet.



- Finally, students can read an etude that incorporates the rhythm vocabulary developed throughout the session.