

UNDERSTANDING RHYTHM

By Terry Dwyer

PART 3 SHORT NOTES, TUPLETS AND CROSS-RHYTHMS

Introduction

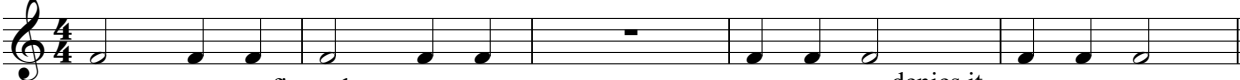
In Part 2 I dealt with accents and the establishment of meter (not to mention its contradictions). Now I would like a short look at smaller rhythms within the bar, before going on to consider the larger aspects of phrasing.

Agogic rules OK!

Just as longer notes within a bar create a relative accent wherever they are placed, the same holds true for subdivisions of the beat. And just as anacrusic rhythms create forward flow and crusic rhythms suggest four-squareness, even halting; so do the miniature versions of these patterns.


To illustrate:

Just as whilst



confirms the metre denies it

This rhythm whilst this



confirms the beat wants to move it

And just as this anacrusic beginning and this doesn't:




provides a forward-moving feeling

These well-placed quavers confirm the metric accents whilst these upset it.



Four semiquavers will obviously be weaker than a crotchet or even two quavers, so



has the accents right to start with, but moves them in bars 3 and 4

So a way to accent a note could be a run of shorter notes immediately before it:

Mozart, *G minor symphony*

$\text{♩} = 120$
Allegro assai



p *f*


Although the 5 anacrusic notes look like beats, the tempo is so fast they sound as half-beats (anyway the time signature is 2:2).

The use of even shorter notes is all the more effective in producing an accent on the following note:

Mozart, *Jupiter Symphony*

Allegro vivace

A cadential trill has similar effect:



f *tr*

Short notes are often used in an upward rushing scale in order to arrive at a big accent (notice how Brahms has deliberately shifted his barlines):

Brahms, 3rd symphony

Allegro con brio ♩=180

Don't overlook the value of the multiple anacrusis in percussion:

Side drum

Timpani

Even the rapid "spread" has a strengthening effect. Compare these three: the first highlights two notes (highest of each staff); the second highlights the top note; the third the bottom note.

And on the principle that the longer, the more accented, therefore the shorter the less accented, A gives a more powerful thrust to the main chord than B.

Cross-rhythms and triplets

Cross-rhythms using simple ingredients are common enough, one example should suffice:

Sibelius, Violin concerto

Allegro, ma non tanto

Timpani

The much more subtle example below appears to be 3 against 2 but when you examine the piano part, motivic accents appear, creating a different situation, a "9:8" instead of a "18:8" (This is easier to understand when you hear it; I agree it's ambiguous):

Rachmaninov, Piano Concerto No. 2

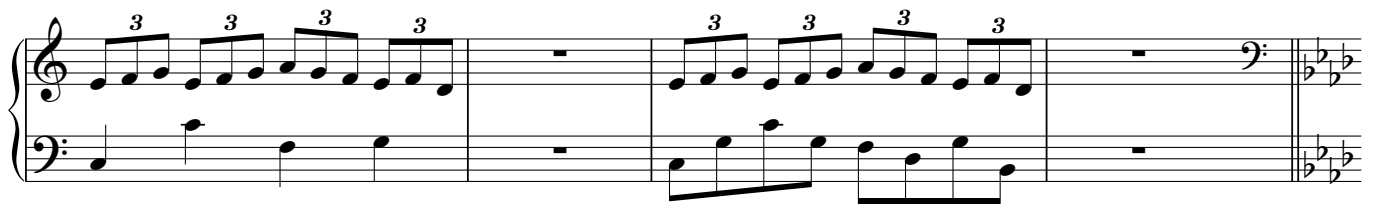
Adagio sostenuto

Clar.

Piano

“**Tuplets**” is a term first dreamed up, as far as I know, by the authors of the notation program Sibelius, to cover triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets and all the rest.

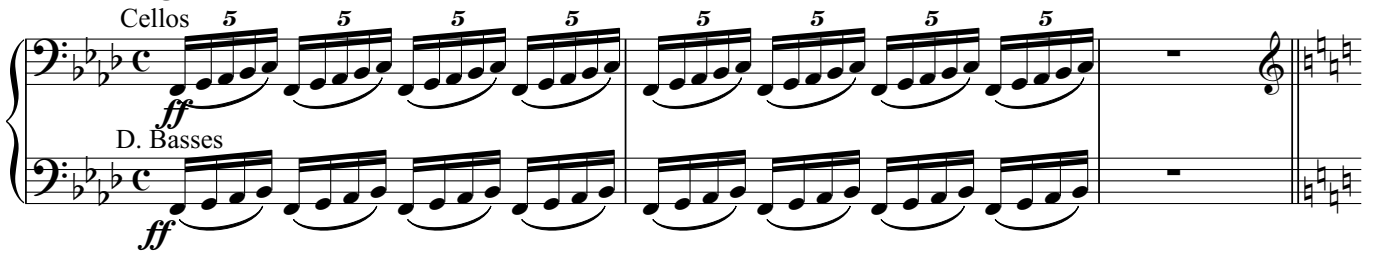
When a triplet is played against a single note, the spiciness is quite mild, but much more interesting when another part has duplets:



Mixing tuplets of different kinds tends to blur the sub-rhythm completely. The composer's aim here was to get an indistinct rumbling:

Beethoven, Pastoral Symphony

Allegro

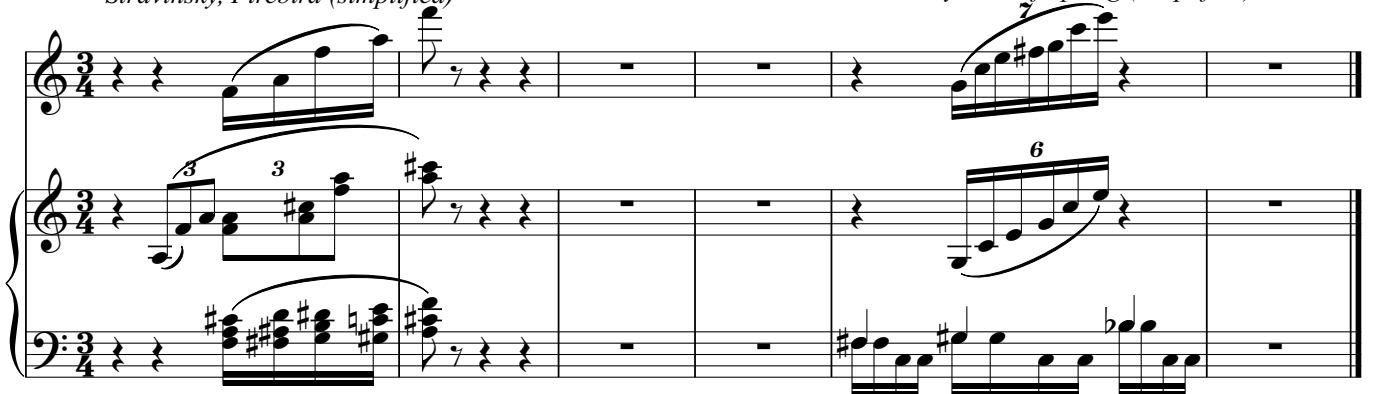


Another common use is to make a vague anacrusic run-up to an accent. It only takes two different tuplets, perhaps plus a glissando, to make the required muddle.

There need not even be a target accent:

Stravinsky, Firebird (simplified)

Stravinsky, Rite of Spring (simplified)



Compare the first example with the Brahms above. We have two totally different effects, one which wishes the run-up to be in time with the music, one which prefers a faceless blur. Both have their uses: the first way assimilates the run-up as part of the theme, the second disregards it thematically and uses it merely as a way of accenting what follows.

Summary

Don't overlook the divisions inside the beat as a means of securing a firm or loose sub-metre, as desired.

Part 4 of this series will deal with phrase construction.

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