

# The Importance of Timing Exercises

BY PAUL RENNICK

The warm-up exercises used by contemporary marching ensembles can often be divided into different categories. Among the most valuable of these fall under the heading of “timing” exercises. No matter what level of players make up the ensemble, the challenge of playing together with a unified sense of pulse usually separates these groups into different levels of excellence. If rhythms are not lining up correctly, the strength of their chops and intricacies of the music will not be appreciated unless certain timing issues are addressed.

In general, the rhythms that players are expected to control are made up of sixteenth notes and triplets, or variations of the two. An effective exercise program dealing with timing should introduce as many combinations of these two rhythms as possible. In other words, the first time the players see a specific rhythmic pattern should not be in the music they are learning. Ideally, they should have already been exposed to similar patterns in their exercise program.

Timing exercises can be subdivided further by dealing with accent patterns within rhythms, application of certain rudiments within rhythmic patterns, tempo variations, metric modulations, and the negotiation of rests.

The days of constant playing are long gone, ever since marching percussion ensembles have taken into account and valued musical issues and idiomatic considerations. To get players to “feel the beat” means exactly that: to feel the beat without playing all the notes in the beat.

One thing I’ve found very useful is the application of natural stickings and the use of motion in time. The movement of the sticks can take up time with motion to make things feel and sound more natural. This is probably the reason an exercise like “eight on a hand” seems to come easily to even the youngest players. Other issues such as quality of sound, dynamics, intensity, and stick speed can be dealt with when stick heights are established to ensure that everyone is coming from the same attack point. This “level system” can be associated to distance, speed, dynamics, and timing.

It is crucial that players concentrate on the first note in each grouping. When rhythms are repeated, the player should take into consideration the motion and speed of the sticks so things remain smooth and even. Consistency of sound, height, and velocity are the keys to even rhythms and the starting point for establishing a solid rhythmic pulse throughout the group.

## TIMING EXERCISES

Here is an exercise I use with most of the groups I teach, regardless of age or talent level. In this exercise the players are expected to negotiate two sixteenth-note values of rest after a sixteenth-note check pattern. Mark Time should be applied with double-time and half-time variations.

### Exercise 1

Exercise 1 is a 4/4 timing exercise. The first staff contains four measures of music with stickings: R L R L, L R L R, R L R L, and R L R L. The second staff contains four measures with stickings: R L R L, R L, L R, R L, and R L.

The timing part of the exercise can be played backwards for variation.

### Exercise 2

Exercise 2 is a 4/4 timing exercise. The first staff contains four measures of music with stickings: R LR L, RL RL, LR LR, and RL RL. The second staff contains four measures with stickings: R L, RL, LR, and RL.

Both the preceding exercises should be played with right-hand and left-hand lead to disassociate the downbeats from the stronger hand. The result will, hopefully, be a more centered sense of time.

The following examples are based on the same principals applied to eighth-note triplets.

**Exercise 3**

Exercise 3 consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in 4/4 time and contains four measures of eighth-note triplets. The first measure has a right-hand lead (R L L R), the second has a left-hand lead (L R R L), and the last two measures have right-hand leads (R R L L). The bottom staff is in 2/4 time and contains four measures of eighth-note triplets. The first measure has a right-hand lead (R L R R), the second has a left-hand lead (R L R L), and the last two measures have left-hand leads (L L).

**Exercise 4**

Exercise 4 consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in 4/4 time and contains four measures of eighth-note triplets. The first measure has a right-hand lead (R R L L), the second has a left-hand lead (L R R L), and the last two measures have right-hand leads (R L L R). The bottom staff is in 2/4 time and contains four measures of eighth-note triplets. The first measure has a right-hand lead (R L L R), the second has a left-hand lead (R L R L), and the last two measures have left-hand leads (L R).

Probably the most fundamental rudiment used in marching percussion, other than the single stroke, is the double-stroke roll. Here are several exercises to not only develop strong fundamental double strokes, but also to help improve timing as it relates to this rudiment. Once again, consistent hand motion can be used to help with timing and the initiation of each double stroke.

**Exercise 5**

Exercise 5 consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in 4/4 time and contains four measures of double-stroke rolls. The first measure has a right-hand lead (R R L), the second has a left-hand lead (R L L), and the last two measures have right-hand leads (R R L). The bottom staff is in 2/4 time and contains four measures of double-stroke rolls.

This next exercise challenges the players to execute double strokes at a moderate tempo, forcing them to consider the “rhythm” of the sticking rather than simply playing a rudiment.

**Exercise 6**

Exercise 6 consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in 4/4 time and contains four measures of eighth-note triplets with accents. The first measure has a right-hand lead (R R L L R R L L R R L L), the second has a left-hand lead (R R L L R R L L R R L L), and the last two measures have right-hand leads (R R L L R R L L R R L L). The bottom staff is in 2/4 time and contains four measures of eighth-note triplets with accents. The first measure has a left-hand lead (L L R R), the second has a right-hand lead (R R L L), and the last two measures have left-hand leads (L L R R R R L L).

Here the double strokes are slightly faster in relation to the check pattern. Although the hand motion is eighth-note triplets, the rhythm of the double strokes should sound exactly like sixteenth-note triplets.

### Exercise 7

R R L L R R L L

After going through the building process of the preceding exercises and establishing the importance of timing as it relates to double strokes, the player is ready for these last two check-pattern oriented diddle exercises. These standard exercises should now be approached with more consideration for timing and will hopefully be performed with the highest rhythmic accuracy. Remember, stay relaxed, focus on the pulse, and play together as a group.

### Exercise 8

### Exercise 9

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