North Indian tabla performers have used a rhythmic device called tihai for several thousand years. Tihai are composed of three identical phrases. The final stroke of the third phase most commonly falls on the downbeat of the next measure. Typically, if used in 4/4 time, this device will create a polyrhythmic relationship of 3-against-2 or 3-against-4 between the three phrases of the tihai and the 4/4 pulse.

Since Indian tabla players use tihai at a resolution point in the music (not unlike the end of a verse in Western music), it seems natural for a drumset performer to use tihai for fills. The examples below do just that. To begin, Examples 1 through 3 represent basic tihai formula. Brackets on the notation indicate the three phrases in each tihai. Practice each example at a medium funk or rock tempo.

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

Once the formulas are comfortable to play, orchestrate them on the full kit. Each of the following examples are built on the corresponding numbered tihai formula and alternate the tihai with a measure of groove.

Example 1a

The next example uses the tihai as a groove variation instead of as a fill.

Example 1b

Now we’ll extend the basic concept to build a Chakradar tihai. This tihai is like a picture within a picture. The three-phrase pattern is repeated three times, and it concludes on the downbeat of the following measure. Example 4 is the formula for our Chakradar tihai. Example 4A uses the Chakradar tihai formula, but orchestrates it on the full kit.

North Indian musicians sometimes use the Chakradar tihai concept as a cue or chase sequence to end an extended tabla solo. The first time through the three-phrase pattern is the cue for other musicians to join in the second and third times. They all end in unison on the downbeat of the following measure (in Western notation), and it makes a nice segue into the next section of the composition.
Examples 5 through 8 apply the tihai concept to the jazz swing groove using “Chapin-style” coordinated independence. Two measures of tihai alternate with two measures of time.

Example 5

Example 6
To hear tihai and Chakradar tihai performed by master tabla players, listen to any of the duet recordings with Alla Raka and Zakahir Hussain. Keep in mind that Indian music does not use written notation, but is verbalized and counted on fingertips as a means of teaching. Some of the patterns would require odd time signatures if transcribed into Western notation.

Jon Belcher is an author, teacher, and clinician specializing in drumset. This article contains excerpts from his book: Drumset Workouts Book 2 [Advanced Concepts and Application], Copyright © Irrational Behavior Productions. Used by permission. For more information about Belcher’s books, visit www.drumsetworkouts.com. To play or download free samples of his work, visit: www.mp3.com/JonBelcherMomentum.
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