

Understanding World Rhythms in Music in a Simpler Way

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Often, I compose world rhythms that seem easy but, when notated on the page, look difficult. Why is this? There are many reasons, but a recent experience I had sheds light on this issue.

While working on a film score, I brought in a few of the most respected percussionists in the business—from the bands of Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel, and Sting. I had written a four-bar rhythm groove for six players. After handing it to each player, I counted off four beats, and just before I finished the count-off bar, a wonderful gentleman from Senegal, Babakar, raised his hand and said: “Mr. Jim, we cannot possibly play this music. It is difficult to read. I know we will have a hard time with it.” I didn’t know what to do!

Another percussionist, from Turkey, asked me to sing the rhythm groove “all the parts at the same time.” I thought for a moment, took a breath, and proceeded to do my best singing all the parts simultaneously. After I sang the four-bar pattern twice, Babakar asked me to stop. He counted off a bar, and there it was—a perfectly executed groove. Not one of those extraordinary musicians was reading the notated music.

The lesson I learned that day? World rhythms, no matter how precisely written, do not always clearly divide into what we can accurately read on the page—and perform.

A perfect example of this is what is generally known as the swing feel. We see triplets written, but what works best is simply writing eighth notes with the words swing feel above the notation. The pattern is not truly a triplet. It can’t be written down. It’s a feel.

I find that choirs love to sing new rhythms and new “feels,” so I try to work with percussionists from various cultures as much as possible and incorporate a fusion of world rhythms into my music.

It is a special joy to work with young singers from other cultures around the world. They have an intuitive feel for patterns in music. Most have never seen music notation on a page. It’s meaningless to them. The greatest success with these groups of children comes because they feel a groove very rapidly. In my experience of exploring and combining rhythms from other cultures, I come up with rhythms I can play, but I have a hard

time notating them!

If a classical pianist looks at one of my rhythms, he or she most often will approach it like a classical work—divide the beat; play it slowly; see how it fits into the overall score. If I sit with that person and sing the rhythm, he/she gets it quickly.

From these types of experiences, I began to wonder how I could help choir directors and their singers using the same approach. I’m in the process of creating teaching videos which I will put on my website. They will include vocal, piano and percussion parts.

A choir can feel a groove only if its conductor can feel it and translate it for the performers. Often we use our Western classical training as a foundation, but we must go beyond that level by taking our eyes off the page and learning the feel of the groove.

Choir directors and pianists, then, must internalize the feel of a given rhythm. If a rhythm is taught as a mathematical-analytical exercise, the groove will be elusive. It is my hope that the videos on my website will help choral directors and pianists not only with my music, but also music from many other world cultures.

Suggestions for teaching world or contemporary rhythms to a choir

- Listen to the groove; learn the groove; feel the groove.
- Make sure the pianist does the same.
- Look at the written music on the page after the groove is internalized.
- Learn the connection between the rhythm that is felt and what it looks like on the page.

Resources

- Papoulis, Jim, *The Groove in New Choral Compositions: Fusing the Traditional with the Contemporary (Vocal I/S)*
- Website: www.jimpapoulis.com

