

You Can Count on It! Developing Artistic Counting

Dr. Dale Wheeler, NCTM
Red Deer College, Red Deer, AB, Canada
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“Rhythm is everything”

(Franz Liszt)

“In the beginning there was rhythm”

(Hans von Bülow)

“If you cannot deal with space in music you will never be able to deal with time”

(Edwin Gordon, *World Piano Pedagogy Conference*, Las Vegas, 2000)

Premise

The temporal element of music (encompassing beat, pulse, meter, and rhythm) is one of the foundational aspects of music. Yet it seems our instructions to students in this critical area often cease after they have completed the elementary levels and have successfully learned “to count.” There is actually a great deal more to counting than simply numbering beats. The end goal is to move from simply naming beats to developing an internalized sense of musical pulse, rhythmic subdivision and forward propulsion that will undergird the whole musical structure.

Caveat #1

- There will always be the necessity for basic counting: 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +
- The metrical divisions and subdivisions and the proportions of note values within a piece must be clearly understood from the beginning

Caveat #2

- Singers and wind players cannot count aloud while playing
- Violin and viola players find it awkward to count aloud while playing
- Whether counting aloud or counting silently, many of the basic principles of artistic counting are applicable to all musicians
- And at the end of the day, even silent counting involves audiation

Basic Terms

- 1) Beat: the marking of a musical event
- 2) Meter (Time): the (normally) regular grouping of beats
- 3) Tempo: the pace or speed of the beats
- 4) Rhythm: the subdivision of the beats

“You’re not counting” . . .

. . . means different things

- not playing “in time”
- not feeling the basic metrical structure
- not playing with a sense of rhythmic integrity and incisiveness

We can tell a lot about a student by how he/she counts – it is expressive or mechanical?

The goal is to match the counting to the music

- too often students match the music to their (often incorrect and unmusical) counting

“The students should tap each part with the corresponding hand The tapping will only be useful if the student taps musically, expressing appropriate *rubato*, dynamics, and articulation with their whole playing mechanism, not mechanically, using only the wrists.”

(Jeremy Siskind, “Starting at the core: Sophia Rosoff continues the Whiteside tradition,” *Clavier Companion*, Jan/Feb 2016, 29)

“Teaching someone to count may be a way to assist that person to feel rhythm. Yet, too frequently, teaching someone to count becomes the only teaching strategy used in helping a student develop a sense of rhythm and an understanding of the principles of rhythmic notation. Of course, no one can completely bypass the use of a counting system. Nonetheless, *what* one counts, or *that* one counts, is much less important than what one *is aware of* while counting and/or playing.”

(Marianne Uszler, et. al., *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, 109)

“The telltale test of weak underlying rhythmic perceptions is the absolute inability to count aloud and play the music. There is, in short, no conductor, and the result is that technical difficulties dictate tempo change and interpretive license has no elastic limits.

Conceptually the solution is simple. Learn to play the piece and count aloud. Since the counting should reflect all interpretive decisions, it should be planned and executed with the skill of a conductor.”

(Stewart Gordon, *Etudes for Piano Teachers*, 35)

1. Naming vs. Numbering Beats

- It is not about numbers, it is about the temporal events that the numbers represent
- “Naming notes is not reading”
(Richard Chronister, *Keyboard Arts*, May 1981)
- “Counting is not rhythm”
(Richard Chronister, *Keyboard Arts*, April 1981)
- Similarly then, beat numbering is not counting, at least in the musical sense

2. Musical Time vs. Clock Time

“A ‘psychological’ tempo is to be distinguished from the metronomic one: As an interpreter who follows the flow of the music as naturally as possible — and by ‘natural’ I refer of course here to the nature of the music, not to that of the player — will always give the ‘psychological’ listener the impression that he is ‘staying in tempo.’”

(Alfred Brendel, *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts*, 37)

- The metronome is the greatest boon but also can become the greatest bane
 - It does not allow for subtle variations in tempo
 - It does not allow for subtle adjustments of beat length
- The metronome is like an incompetent doctor
 - It can tell you what is wrong but it cannot provide the cure

“Many people think — incorrectly — that the musician who can play exactly in time to a metronomic pulse creates musical rhythm. But metronomic timing and rhythmic timing are not the same. . . . Rhythm compels an audience to listen and want more; mechanical timing causes an audience to feel bored.”
(Burton Kaplan, *Practicing for Artistic Success*, 19)

Meyerbeer accused Chopin of playing his *Mazurka* in C major, Op. 33, No. 3 in 2/4 meter
(score and audio example performed by Alfred Cortot)

Charles Hallé accused Chopin of generally playing his mazurkas in 4/4 meter
(score and audio example of *Mazurka*, Op. 7, No. 1 performed by Arthur Rubinstein)

Artur Schnabel varied the tempo markings in his edition of the Beethoven Sonatas
(score and audio example of Sonata, Op. 31, No. 3, 1st movement, performed by Artur Schnabel)

3. Avoid the Tyranny of the Downbeat

- in theory the downbeat is the strong beat
- in practice the downbeat is not always the strong beat
- “Treat the beat as a magnet”
(Ed Gates, University of Oklahoma)
- A beat occupies space; it is not just a momentary event
- A beat has both a “before” and an “after” aspect

“An unconditional even pulse is an abstract ideal which must be acknowledged, even sought, but can never be realized except as illusion. Yet the illusion of a gentle or pounding pulse is an essential constituent of the dramatic interplay, and producing it requires a canny appreciation of its precise character in relation to the whole. Nevertheless, the concept (and prospect) of absolute rhythmic equivalence is inherently undermined by the permanent “tragedy” of metric organization. For there always is a downbeat, and there always is a weak beat; never shall these twain find a perfectly stable equilibrium.

The tendency of the strong beat to impose its will and the reciprocal desire of the weak beat to resist that will create an uneasy truce which can never be reduced to a comfortable hierarchical formula. The internal tension always retains the potential for uncertainty and rebellion. The weak beats demand status, conspiring and threatening to unseat the dictatorial downbeat. This unavoidable restlessness only echoes a certain ambiguity, even treachery, native to linear time, which would guarantee continuity as it yet reminds of infirmity and transience.”

(Russell Sherman, *Piano Pieces*, 163–64)

Brahms: *Waltz*, Op. 39, No. 12

- count 3 | 1 2 or 1 | 2 3?
(score and three audio examples: two random YouTube versions and one by Emanuel Ax and Anna Polonsky)

Schumann: *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15, No. 7 “*Träumerei*”

(score and audio example performed by Vladimir Horowitz)

- note how beat 1 is almost always negated – the anacrusis is instead emphasized

4. Think in Meta-Measures

- music rarely moves in individual one-measure units
- “I can hear your barlines” is the worst condemnation we can level against a student
 - sometimes students need to (intentionally!) ignore the barline

Chopin: *Scherzo* in B flat minor, Op. 31

- count 1-to-the-measure in four-measure groups
 - this helps to make sense of the syncopation and rests in mm. 22-24

Petzold (attr. Bach): Minuet in G, BWV Anh. 114

- count in two-measure units (1 2 3 | 4 5 6)

Beethoven: Sonata in E major, Op. 14, No. 1 (2nd movt.)

- count in two-measure groups (1 2 3 | 4 5 6)
- count 1-to-the-measure in eight-measure groups

5. Count Like a Dancer

- count the gesture or grouping rather than the beat
- breathing and counting
 - helps to organize the beats and the groups
 - on rests say “breathe” or “rest” or “wait”
 -

Brahms: *Intermezzo*, Op. 118, No. 2, mm. 102-end

- count the slur groups rather than the beats
 - varies between 1 2, 1 2 3, 1 2 3 4
 (score and audio example performed by H el ene Grimaud)

Mozart: Viennese Sonatina No. 1, K439b, (1st movt.)

- count 2-to-the-measure, as if in cut-time
 - 1 2 | 3 breathe and-a | 1 and-a 2 and-a | 3 and breathe
- say “breathe” on the rest rather than just a beat number

6. Tempo and Counting

- the speed and complexity of the work determines how something should be counted
- a student should be able to count any subdivision or grouping

Common time, but felt in cut time . . . or?

- Chopin: *Pr elude*, Op. 28, No. 4
(score and audio example performed by Alfred Cortot)
 - Notice the contra-metric rubato between the hands

Cut time

- Beethoven: Sonata, Op. 27/2, 1st movt.

Subdivisions

- Beethoven: Sonata, Op. 13, 1st movt.
 - Subdivide the counting as fine as necessary, even down to the 16th level, until precision is achieved

7. Counting and the Mind/Body Connection

- The more you bring a memory back to mind, the stronger it becomes.
- If you want to remember something new, link it to something you already know.
- Memories with emotional resonance last longer and are stronger than other memories
- Novel events tend to be more memorable.
(Wendy Suzuki, *Health Brain, Happy Life*, 75)

Athletes and those engaged in fitness workouts often vocalize as part of their routine

- Remember Richard Simmons and his “Sweat & Shout” and “Sweatin’ to the Oldies” videos?

Physiological benefits of vocalization

- Endurance (Chen, et. al., “Effect of yelling . . .” 2015)
- Healing power
 - (d’Angelo, *The Healing Power of the Human Voice*, 2005)

Psychological benefits of vocalization

- Self-affirmation
- Mood enhancement (via dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, etc.)

8. Count Apart From Playing

- count while listening to a recording
- count while listening and conducting
- count while teacher plays
- count through a phrase without playing it — let the counting be the instrument, and infuse it with the same nuances as if playing

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