Exploring rhythm

KS3

Jane Werry

Jane Werry is a Specialist Leader in Education, and Director of Music at Hayes School in Bromley. She is a Musical Futures Champion Teacher, and co-author of the award-winning *Being a Head of Music: A Survival Guide*.

Introduction

Rhythm is the ultimate in adaptable, go-anywhere musical elements – and, as such, it's perfect for exploring when circumstances dictate that access to resources is limited, or when you're teaching in non-music rooms. Perhaps because so much about human existence is rhythmic – our walking feet, our beating hearts – people find rhythm instantly appealing. As a teacher, it's easy to capitalise on that appeal.

This resource looks closely at rhythm from both ends – the aural, non-notated, knowledge-of-music end; and the notation-based, knowledge-about-music end. Ideas for unpicking rhythm including learning to feel pulse, metre, on- and off-beats, are here, together with links to further online resources and some composition plans. The link between rhythm and words is explored, and there's a plan for a complete rhythm notation project.

Depending on the prior experience and knowledge of your students, these ideas might be best suited to Year 7s, although rhythm is such a universal musical feature that the ideas could be adapted for students in higher or lower year groups, or built into genre-based topics.

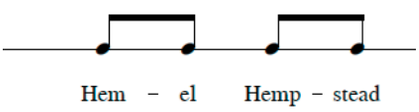
Exploring pulse and metre

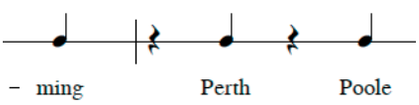
It's helpful to be clear about some rhythmic threshold concepts before planning a project on rhythm. Threshold concepts are those that act as a gateway to higher-level understanding – or, on the other hand, the absence of which can be a barrier to higher learning. The most basic rhythmical threshold concepts are these:

- Pulse is different from rhythm, and is something you don't necessarily hear – it's more something that you feel.
- Tempo and duration are two different things: note lengths can get shorter without tempo changing.
- A beat is a musical unit of time, but does not equate to any fixed length of 'real' time – it depends on the tempo.

You'll need to plan for the explicit teaching of these concepts. Like many aspects of rhythm, the best way to go about this is not to use words as your starting point: the terminology of rhythm makes very little sense unless you have direct experience of the temporal experience of dividing time up into rhythmical chunks. If you must share learning objectives with students at the start of each lesson, give these as little attention as possible before the practical activities begin: come back to terminology later, and hang the vocabulary on the musical experience.

Start by playing any piece of music with a strong sense of pulse, and a regular metre (4/4 is good). Get students tapping/clapping along. As soon as this is established, instruct students to 'find the 1' – you should not need to explain any more than this: if there really is confusion from everyone, try 'find the strong beat'. Before long, some students will do this correctly, and everyone will gravitate towards the first beat of the bar. Experiment with different numbers and combinations of numbers, perhaps with different sounds on different beats: clap on 1, click on 4 and so on. Try some other pieces of music, with different tempos and metres.





Internalising pulse activity

Here's a super-simple activity that has the intention of getting students to internalise a steady pulse.

Tap or clap a pulse at a steady tempo. While you do this, explain that when you stop clapping, the students should continue to feel the pulse, but should keep it inside themselves, without moving or making any sound. After a few beats, resume your clapping and ask them to consider if they were in time with you or not.

After practising this, propose that after a count-in of four beats, the class will continue the pulse with each student clapping one beat each, in turn. Their job is simply to do their one single clap at the right time – not early, or late. Nobody should make any other sounds or movements.

You'd think that this would be easy, but it's surprisingly hard to get round the whole class without somebody being early or late, or missing their turn. It can be a great activity to focus a class at the start of the lesson, and can highlight the importance of being able to 'feel' a steady pulse.

At this point, and only once a thorough exploration has been made of a few different pieces of music, bring in the terminology. Address explicitly the idea that pulse is felt and not necessarily heard: find a piece of music where the pulse is not played explicitly by any particular instrument – classical pieces are a good bet for this. Ask students to put the difference between rhythm and pulse into their own words, and their own demonstrations. Why is a pulse called a pulse? This can be a useful point to consider.

The point at which you take a diversion into notation, and translate the idea of metre into time signatures, is of course up to you, and depends on your stance on notation at KS3. I prefer to leave it until later, and explore things aurally and physically for a little longer before branching out into notation.

Explore metre some more by making some cycles. Try three, four and five beats. Divide your class into three groups. One will do a cycle of three beats, with a distinctive sound – which could be as simple as a clap or a click, or something more imaginative – on 1. The other beats can have a quieter 'marking' sound such as a two-finger clap or a lap-pat. The other groups do cycles of four and five respectively, with different sounds on their 1s. Get each group going in turn until they are all performing together. The challenge is to keep your count going and not rush! Enjoy the effect of the different metres going in and out of phase. See how many beats it takes for the 1s to come back into alignment (answer: 60). This is a very simple challenge, but one that involves maintaining a part against other parts, so is definitely worthwhile.

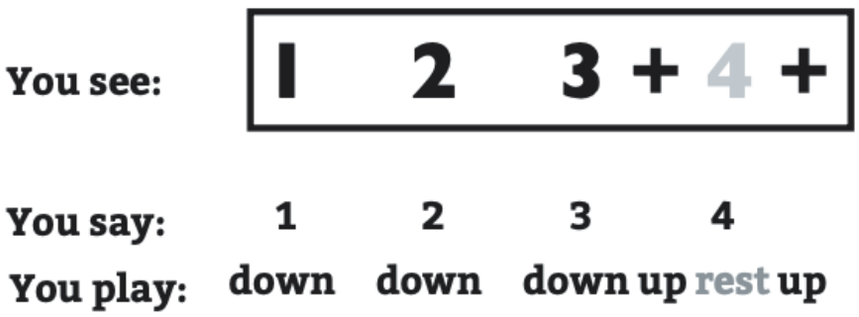
Subdividing the beat

Having considered whole beats, and groups of whole beats, we can then consider dividing beats up into smaller units. A good way to do this is to maintain a 'samba walk' – a simple left-right walk on the spot – to mark the beat. This leaves hands free to clap other rhythms over the top, but you can use the synchronicity of hands and feet to make on- and off-beats easy to understand. It also reinforces the conceptual difference between pulse and rhythm. Start by clapping simple crotchet and quaver rhythms, and then throw in some off-beats, increasing these until all the claps fall in between the beats.

Some iconic notation can add an interesting visual dimension to this, once the sound and feel of beat subdivisions and offbeats have been established. This shows very clearly which beats are to be played on:

The teacher manual from Little Kids Rock is available as a free 488-page download here (**https://mkojamzonelittlgp1k9.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/TeacherManualv42_Sept2020.pdf**). It features an intro to using this kind of notation on page 48, and further application of it with reference to guitars and ukuleles on page 64.

It can be extremely effective to combine this rhythm work with basic guitar and/or ukulele skills at this point, as you can start from the principle that the beats should be played with down-strums, and the half beats with up-strums:



This can be a rich learning experience, in that it covers a range of musical skills all at once: the physical coordination required by the instrument, keeping with a pulse, responding to visual cues, and thinking about the rhythms. You can combine it with learning basic chords, and introduce chord changes as you go along.

Body percussion and chair drumming

Further exploration of rhythm can be done with body percussion. The ultimate do-anywhere, no-resources-required activity, body percussion can be as simple or as complex as you want to make it. The leading UK expert on body percussion is Ollie Tunmer of Beat Goes On. His website (**www.beatgoeson.co.uk/free-resources/**) features a number of resources that you can download for free. His YouTube channel (**https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-iOnF1dIM8eagPOo5SMnRQ**) also has a wealth of useful material, and his book *Body Beats* has still more.

All of these have a strong emphasis on world music rhythms, and Ollie uses verbal phrases that he calls rhythmonics to help make complex syncopation memorable and accurate. It is possible to set up complex polyrhythms in this way, and it can also be a springboard for composition.

A very simple class composition could go like this. Once students have mastered a few body percussion sounds, ask each student to devise a four-beat pattern. Keeping a pulse (using a backing track or perhaps using a cowbell), bring these in one at a time, telling students to loop their patterns until asked to stop. This will build up a very thick polyrhythm. You can then manipulate texture, with solos, call-and-response sections, half the class at a time, and changes in dynamics. You could even teach a pattern that everyone can do together, to create a unison 'head' section. If you have agreed visual symbols for each section, you can make up the structure of the piece as you go along, or ask a student to direct the performance.

Chair drumming is another almost-anywhere rhythmic activity that sharpens students' coordination and rhythm awareness. All the skills learnt are easily transferable to a real drumkit later. You will need a standard classroom chair for each student, and a pair of sticks. These need not be proper drumsticks: a quick online search for 'craft dowels' will reveal bulk packs of suitable 6mm bamboo dowels that are cheap and will do the job perfectly (and slightly more quietly than drumsticks). They are also easy to wash with washing-up liquid.

The other thing you will need is a projector with decent speakers, and a chair drumming playalong video. Christopher Davies' YouTube channel (**www.youtube.com/channel/UCb6CbXcNChr8oOEPSC6oozA**) has some excellent ones, although you'll need to teach the basics first. Musical Futures has two excellent resources which start right at the beginning, and are only £4.99 each (**www.musicalfutures.org/resource-type/chair-drumming**). You're bound to get many plays out of them both, as students will need practice to master the coordination required. They will also be practising following visual cues, and keeping with a pulse.

Rhythm notation: performing and composing

This section approaches rhythm from the other end – that is, from notation. The good thing about conventional rhythm notation is that it's possible to reach a basic level of fluency of reading quite quickly, and it's accessible to students of all abilities. The trick with this is not to start by saying, 'This is a crotchet and it has one beat', but instead to go straight in with making associations between the symbols and their sound.

Start by acquiring or creating some flashcards showing simple four-beat rhythms. These can be physical cards (they should be bigger than A4 if possible, so that the whole class can see them), or on a PowerPoint. The first ones should comprise only crotchets, pairs of quavers, minims, and crotchet rests. Later on, you can include triplet quavers, a quaver rest followed by a quaver, and a set of four semiquavers. You will need to decide on vocal sounds for each note value or group of notes. I use these:

- Crotchet = doo
- Minim = dooooo
- Pair of quavers = doodah
- Triplet quavers = doppity
- Crotchet rest = (sniff)
- Quaver rest followed by quaver = (sniff)-dah
- Four semiquavers = caterpillar

You could, of course, use anything that fits. I have seen food names (burger, chips, tea) used very effectively. Put on a rhythmic backing track at a moderate tempo, get students patting the pulse on their laps, and use your flashcards, going through these stages:

1. You say the rhythm and students copy.
2. Give one bar's thinking time by saying something such as 'Ready, now, look and say', and then students say the rhythm together.
3. Take out the thinking time, and change to the next card on the last beat of the previous bar, so they flow seamlessly.

For the first session, use only the crotchet, minim, quaver pair and crotchet rest cards. In a ten-minute stretch you should be able to get to stage three of the process. The following lesson you can introduce the slightly more complex rhythms.

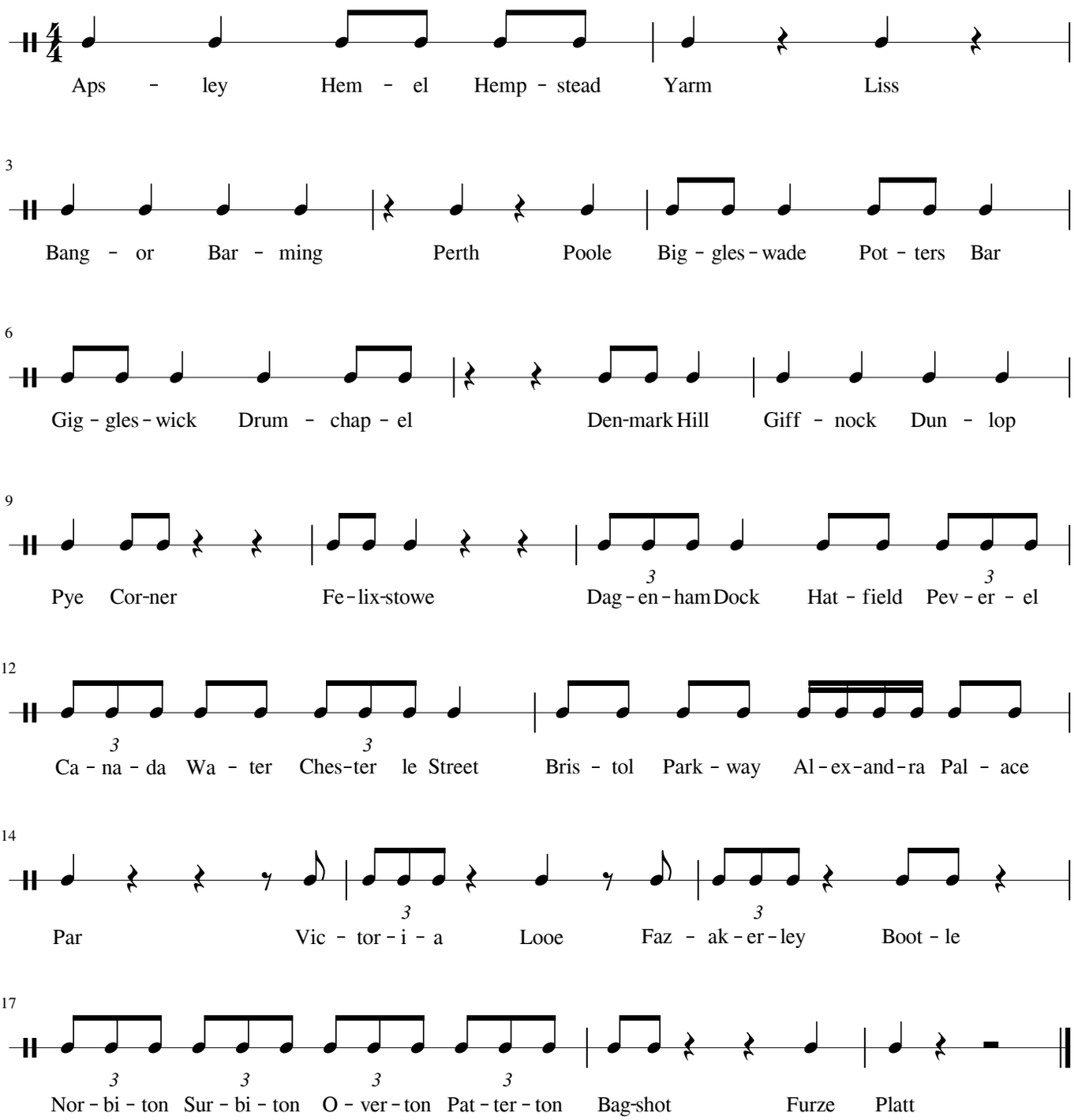
The performing and composing project that follows is based on an idea that was originally published in *Music File* in 1989. It is a project called *Underground Music* by Graham Hamlett that makes use of a piece by John Paynter entitled *And All Stations To...*. I have used this project every year of my teaching career, and it's always a great success, although now there are not many teachers who remember it. I love teaching it, so would like to give it a new lease of life for a new generation of teachers by sharing my evolution of it here.

The project starts off by performing a rhythmic vocal piece. In the original project, this was Paynter's *And All Stations To...*, which is a list of stations called at by an imaginary train. My homage to Paynter takes the same idea – these are all real stations in the UK – but adds in a couple of more complex rhythms as the piece goes on.

The Next Train Will Be Calling At...

A homage to John Paynter's 'And All Stations To...'

Jane Werry



Again, use a rhythmic backing track at a moderate tempo to keep everything in time. Have the notation on the board, or on sheets that students can have in front of them (if going for the board option, have a few individual copies ready for any students with poor eyesight). Having learnt how to read rhythms using the flashcards, the first step is to get to grips with the piece without its lyrics, performing it using just your doos, doodahs and doppities. There are a few danger points: these are mostly around multiple rests, which students are likely to skip over, for example in bar 14. Another danger is where you have a string of more complex rhythms, for example from Dagenham Dock to Par.

Once the rhythms are secure, add in the station names, ensuring that the rhythms are still accurate. I have tried to choose stations that have interesting names and are easy to pronounce. If your class copes with this well, you can up the level of challenge by splitting them into two groups and getting them to perform it as a round at two bars' distance, so the second group starts when the first group starts bar 3. Keep a check on the triplets – sometimes these have a tendency to become uneven, and morph into two semiquavers followed by a quaver.

This performance then forms the starting point for a composition along the same lines. I use the London Underground as my bank of station names (as in the original project), because my school is in Greater London, but you could use the area local to your school if preferred. Equally, you could abandon the station/place name idea and go with football teams, favourite foods, musical artists, the names of the students in the class – it really doesn't matter, as long as the words you have to choose from are varied in length.

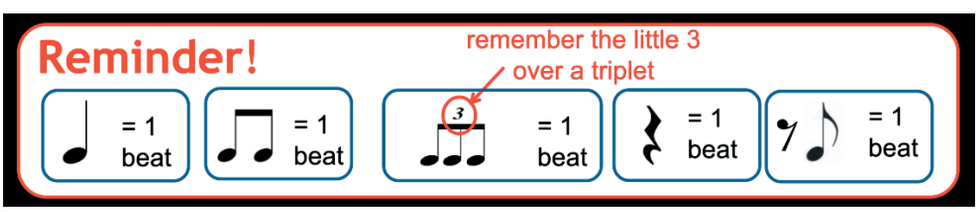
Ask students to pick 15 to 20 words or names from the list or map you provide for them. They need to put these on a sheet showing how many syllables they have. You could divide it up like this:

One syllable	**Two syllables**	**Three syllables**	**Four syllables**
(leave this box free for writing notation examples: make sure it is big enough)			
Bank (note that this is the only London Underground station with a one-syllable name: challenge students to find it)	Oval Stockwell Temple Balham Knightsbridge Bond Street	Charing Cross Embankment London Bridge Tooting Bec White City Marble Arch Colindale	Tooting Broadway South Kensington Hyde Park Corner
More than four syllables			
Heathrow Terminals 123 Piccadilly Circus Cutty Sark for Maritime Greenwich			

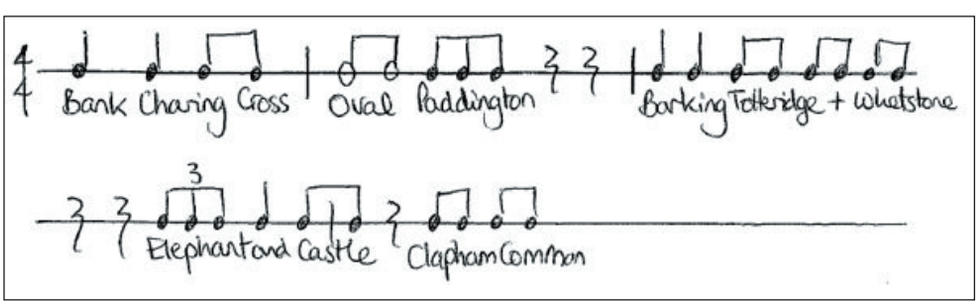
Once they've distributed their names or words into the correct columns, the next task is to think about the rhythms that could conceivably be used for each. Three-syllable names, in particular, need careful thought to determine where the stress falls, and therefore how the rhythm should be notated. Ask students to write the possible rhythms in the box at the top of each column. Referring back to the original piece is useful here. For example, Charing Cross, London Bridge and Tooting Bec all work with a 'doodah-doo' rhythm, just like the one used for Denmark Hill. White City is different, though, and fits with a 'doo-doodah' pattern, as Pye Corner does. Colindale needs a 'doppity' triplet, like Norbiton. Embankment is really tricky, though, as it has the stress on the second syllable, and there is no direct equivalent in *The Next Train*. Challenge your students to find the solution. The answer, of course, is to adapt the Fazakerley rhythm so it ends with a pair of quavers rather than a trio of triplets.

Four-syllable names are easier, although students will need to separate the straightforward 'doodah-doodah' ones from the more complex examples such as South Kensington. You will also need to model how to work out the longer names, showing how to break them down into short, manageable chunks. There will also be some that are open to interpretation and debate – we always end up talking about whether Arsenal has two or three syllables.

It's now time to start assembling the composition itself. Students can put their stations in whatever order they like, but need to ensure that they fill each bar with four beats. Make sure they know the difference between four beats and four notes. It can be helpful to show them a reminder like this:



It may help them to write '1, 2, 3, 4' above the beats of the bar. It can also be helpful to do some mistake-spotting, using an example with lots of errors, such as this:



Ask students to find the mistakes, and offer corrections.

Once they've drafted their compositions, and have had some feedback on things that need to be corrected, you'll be able to focus on performing the pieces. The danger point here is that what they perform does not match what they've written, so you'll need to emphasise that this needs real care. Advise them to practise their piece in the same way that they learned *The Next Train* – start by taking out the lyrics, and practising the rhythms using only doos, doodahs and doppities, then put the lyrics back in once this is secure.

Another danger point is that their performance will lack a sense of pulse. The best way to fix this is to add some sort of accompaniment. This could be the simplest possible body percussion beat, or something more elaborate if students are working in groups, or can put something together using music software. A pitched percussion ostinato can work really well. If using unpitched percussion, advise students to avoid simply mirroring the spoken rhythms with what they play.

More sophistication can be added with some consideration of structure. There could be some sort of intro and outro, or a repeating chorus. Something appropriate to the theme of the piece would be great: with a London Underground piece, it could be 'Stand clear of the closing doors' or 'Mind the gap.' A football-themed piece could even feature snatches of football songs.