

Exploring Meter in a Drum Circle

By Robert J. Damm

Dancing and drumming universally go together. Meter in music relates to meter in poetry and dance. Most music around the world features a steady beat, which is typically organized into regularly recurring patterns known as meter. You can invigorate your drum circle with a series of jams based on different meters, starting with 1/4 meter and sequentially adding a beat up to 9/4 meter (or beyond). Each of these meters corresponds to traditional dances and rhythms that could be referenced to inspire and inform your drum jams. These are effectively shared through speech rhythms or familiar tunes.

The idea for exploring different meters in a drum circle came from a student in my university drum circle class who asked if we could play a groove in 7. At our next class, we played in-the-moment percussion jams in which each piece was in a different meter (including one in 7). The students were able to groove and improvise in all of the different meters. I later used this same approach for an Earth Day drum circle held in a local park. The participants from the general public were also able to groove in these meters. In other words, there is no reason to be afraid of

“odd meters” in a drum circle, as long as you have a foundational ostinato maintained by the bass drums and you introduce the groove with a catchy phrase or tune. Following is a suggested program.

1/4 The Shoot or The Pogo

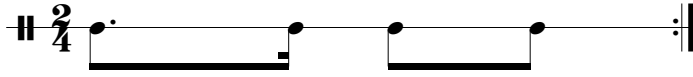
A one-legged dance (e.g., “the shoot”; you hop on one foot and kick with the other) or pogo dance (you jump up and down, resembling the use of a pogo stick). If every jump is “1,” that could be perceived as being in a meter of one beat per measure. This meter of 1/4 is theoretically possible, but actually very uncommon in music.

2/4 Ayub, Zar, Tresillo, Bamboula, or Samba

Middle Eastern ritual dances (e.g., ayub and zar) and the Caribbean tresillo rhythm found in the bamboula dance in Congo Square in New Orleans have a feeling of two beats per measure. Brazilian samba, with a syncopated emphasis on the second beat, is generally notated in 2/4. The motion of moving from left foot to right foot is perhaps the most universal dance.



Ayub

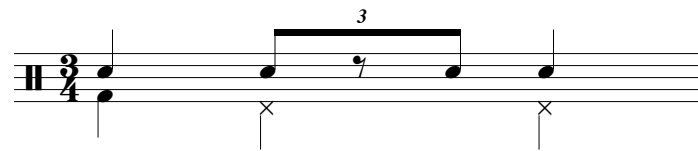


Tresillo



3/4 Waltz

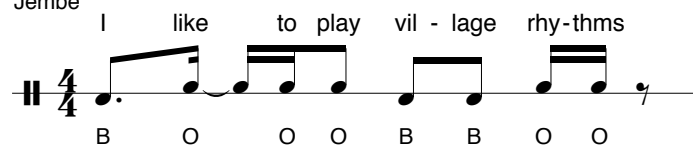
The waltz, first popular in German and Austrian high society in the 18th century, is a well-known dance in 3/4 time. The bass drum usually plays the downbeat.



4/4 Fanga or Kuku

There are many options for dances in 4/4 such as the kuku dance of welcome from the Ivory Coast. The fanga, the dance of welcome popularized by Pearl Primus and Babatunde Olatunji, also works well as a drum circle jam. This speech rhythm is courtesy of Jeff Holland.

Jembe

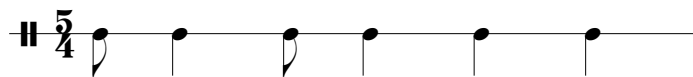


B = Bass; O = Open tone

5/4 "Take Five" or "Mission Impossible"

I usually lead the 5/4 jam based on well-known tunes rather than a traditional dance rhythm. "Take Five" is a jazz standard composed by Paul Desmond and recorded by the Dave Brubeck Quartet.

"Take Five" rhythm



television series and spy films, which the composer jokingly explained as being "for people who have five legs." The foundation for this theme is the Morse Code for M.I. which is "dash dash dot

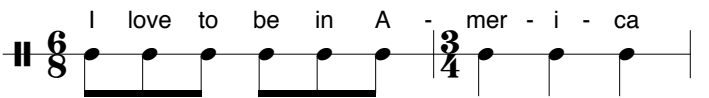
dot," interpreted musically by having the dash equal one and a half beats while the dot equals one beat.

"Mission Impossible" rhythm



6/4 Sesquialtera

The sesquialtera pattern is traditionally found in Spanish flamenco and was prominently featured in "America" from the musical *West Side Story* composed by Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein. This repeating cycle could be counted as 1 - & - 2 - & - 3 - & - 4 - 5 - 6 or expressed with the lyrics "I love to be in America."

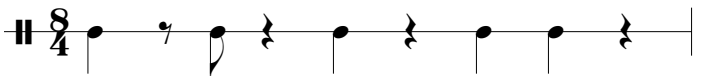


7/4 Rachenitsa (2 + 2 + 3 = 7)

The distinctive feature of Balkan folk music is the asymmetrical meter, built up around various combinations of "quick" and "slow" beats. The Bulgaria meter may be thought of in terms of 2's and 3's or as a series of short and long notes. A measure of 7/8 could be counted as "1-2, 1-2, 1-2-3" or "short, short, long" or "quick, quick, slow."

8/4 Baladi or Son Clave

Baladi is a rhythm played for folk dance in Egypt, Turkey, and the Middle East. On a dombek or frame drum, the rhythm can be spoken and played as "doum-doum, tek-a-tek, doum-tek-a, tek - tek-a," which could be counted as "1 2 3&4 5 6&7 8&." "Doum" represents the bass tone from striking the drum the middle, and "tek" and "tek-a" are open, high pitched sounds produced by striking near the edge of the drum. Another rhythm that could be counted in 8 beats is the 3:2 son clave, the rhythmic foundation of many Latin styles, which is used for dances such as son, mambo, and cha-cha.



It is true that dance rhythms such as baladi or the son clave may be counted as two measures of 4 beats (4+ 4 = 8) or even as one measure of 4 beats. It is somewhat artificial to count these patterns in 8, but it works for the sake of this particular lesson. If you use this lesson for a music class, you may wish to go into greater detail about time signatures, compound meter, cut-time, and polymeter. For my purposes, the goal was to introduce four-

dational patterns that could quickly provide a basis for interactively grooving and improvising on drums and percussion.

9/4 Karslima (2+2+2+3 = 9)

Karslima is a 9-count Turkish rhythm popularly used for belly dance. The rhythm may be spoken and played as “doum, tek, doum, tek-tek-tek,” which corresponds to the count of “1 - 3 - 5 - 7 8 9.”

0/4 No Meter

What about music with no meter? This could be a good time to break out the ocean drum, rain stick, and thunder tubes and create a soundscape inspired by nature. The intention here is to play softer sounds—perhaps close your eyes, relax, or meditate. Engage in a freestyle exploration of tone colors and textures with no beat and no meter.

4/4 Common Time Revisited

The final jam is a return to 4/4 for a grounding finale. One option is the Nyabinghi “heartbeat rhythm,” a Rastafari tradition that promotes unity and sounds like “Do good (rest) Do good (rest)” similar to the drum beat for “We Will Rock You.”

If you jam on each of these patterns for 5 or 6 minutes you will

have a program of approximately one hour in duration, which I found to be ideal for a drum circle. Although this program is at least partially based in music theory and mathematics, it provides a variety of different grooves that can be played and enjoyed by the general public. The participants benefit from the focus on beat and meter, which are important concepts for all musicians to learn and understand. This program also fosters the positive aspects of interactive drumming and still allows for any extra-musical intentions, such as community building, that you may wish to emphasize.

Robert J. Damm is Professor of Music and Director of Music Education Partnerships at Mississippi State University, where he teaches world music, world drumming, music of Africa, music of Latin America, African American music, and drum circle class. He has studied music and culture in Cuba, Ghana, and Mali. He is a certified Orff-Schulwerk teacher and a Smithsonian Folkways certified teacher of world music. He is the director of Jembe Den, an African percussion ensemble comprised of his students, who play for cultural and educational programs throughout Mississippi. He is co-chair of the PAS Interactive Drumming Committee and has served as president of the Mississippi PAS Chapter. **PN**

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