

11 The Aesthetics of Timekeeping

Creative and Technical Aspects of Learning Drum Kit

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Introduction

In this chapter we examine how drummers are taught and learn to conceptualize and execute expressive variations of familiar drumming patterns, i.e. 'feel'-based aspects, and the enabling conditions that underlie them. We draw from multiple sources including analysis of sound recordings, theoretical models proposed by philosophers, psychologists, and educators, interviews with experienced drummers, and our own teaching and performing experiences and reflections. We explain the conditions under which these technical nuances develop in the early-stage drummers we have worked with, and despite the resistance of these nuances to straightforward or specifiable instruction, their indispensability to ensemble leadership and drumming success. We first begin by exploring some of the creative and interpersonal characteristics that are beneficial to drumming success, then analyse the teaching and learning of some of the techniques themselves. We then conclude with recommendations for teaching drum kit in music classrooms and private tuition studios.

Creative Framework

Curiosity, Creativity, and Musical Expression

While straightforward to isolate drumming skills and understandings facilitating discrimination between drummers of different ability levels, it is comparatively more challenging to account for how and why some drummers learn more quickly and achieve more than others. We have observed that some learners progress by demonstrating a natural affinity for the drum kit – historically conceptualized as *talent* in music education and psychology – while others rely more significantly on tenacious *effort*. An alternative perspective might consider what helps someone maximize one's talents or efforts, suggesting that *motivation* for high achievement is the critical attribute, in which case *curiosity* might well be the best explanation for effective learning. According to Jordan Litman, curiosity is a

desire to understand something that motivates exploratory behavior to acquire new information, which is pleasurable whether done for its own sake or to reduce uncertainty.¹ Curious individuals learn better and faster than those who are less curious. Curiosity is also a prerequisite condition of creativity, which in turn drives musical expression as well as many conceptions of intelligence. We will now take a closer view of intelligence, creativity, and musical expression as they pertain to drumming performance.

Robert Sternberg's multifaceted theory of *successful intelligence* is well-suited to explain the complex actions of drum kit playing.² According to Sternberg's theory, an intelligent person optimizes four types of skills: creative, analytical, practical, and wisdom-based. Drummers must be creative in order to extend their personality through their instrument – what allows one to recognize a drummer by listening to his or her playing. They must be analytical to understand what works best, and why, from the entire range of potentially useful ideas. They must be practical in order to convincingly unify ideation with muscular motion. They must be wise to marshal these skills in such a way that they favourably serve the interests and ensure the success of the ensemble.

The creative skill of drummers is mediated within the social matrix of an ensemble, with motivation commingling among intrinsic and extrinsic sources. At least since Teresa Amabile's study focusing on creative *situations* there is widespread acceptance that creativity is best achieved through intrinsic motivation, suggesting that drummers must negotiate their contributions in a resilient manner even while making themselves vulnerable to praise and criticism, neither of which are necessarily supportive of creative behaviour.³ Illustrating this point, the 1997 CD reissue of The Byrds' LP *The Notorious Byrd Brothers*, the final bonus track, entitled 'Universal Mind Decoder', contains an extended dialogue in the recording studio between guitarist and singer David Crosby and drummer Mike Clarke, in which Crosby attempts to inspire Clarke to improve his performance using various approaches, all unsuccessful.⁴ Sternberg and Lubart's *investment* theory of creativity is another applicable explanation of how drummers function creatively within ensembles – they often 'buy low, sell high', i.e. introduce ideas that are initially unfamiliar and unusual, persist and adjust until they are consensually accepted as part of the ensemble's 'sound', then begin the process anew.⁵ Thus, drummers must be prepared to fail whilst prospecting for successful pathways.

Creativity additionally provides the foundation for musical expression, defined by Roger Scruton as 'those elements of a musical performance that depend on personal response and which vary between different interpretations'.⁶ Introduced in Carl Seashore's pioneering work in the psychology

of music, musical expression comprises deviations from mechanical performances of time, pitch, loudness, and timbre.⁷ The feel-based constructs we review later fall neatly into these categories: using them promotes musical expression, which is essential for communicating one's personal understanding of the music. In the philosophical literature, John Dewey's *Art as Experience* provided a convincing explanation of how expression is at the core of creative reasoning, delineating expressive acts and objects as the processes and products of artistic self-definition.⁸ And in the psychological literature, Alf Gabrielsson's development of systematic variation of duration (SYVAR-D) revealed that deviations from mechanical regularity are rarely either random or the same: rather, they are undertaken to emphasize the perceived importance of structural features.⁹ Therefore, while drummers might enjoy the freedom to experiment with various rhythmic possibilities, they ultimately are bound by musical genres styles, and forms, and the skills and attitudes of other ensemble members.

Leveraging the Roles of Drummers in Ensembles

If drummers do enjoy some creative autonomy in their ensemble as musicians, they also inherit some responsibility as a focal point of ensemble collaboration: drummers actively negotiate and enact adjustments that benefit group cohesion. In our extensive teaching novice rock band members, we note their perceptions that drummers are considered somewhat less suitable for singing duties. Their reasons include that drummers must listen to everyone more closely than other band members, that they carry the burden of executing structural cues, and that they are more physically involved, i.e. playing with both hands and feet, making singing too difficult. While these reasons may not be limiting of singing ability, they suggest how novice band members tend to view the roles of drummers and the demands of the drum kit.

In a performance by the group Three Friends of the song 'Prologue', drummer Malcom Mortimer counts off the tune, 'leading' the group in at a pace he immediately realizes is too fast, given the complex melodic figures played by the other five performers, thus he adjusts the tempo down, momentarily 'following' the group.¹⁰ One characteristic of a more advanced drummer is to make such adjustments without compromising personal, expressive technique. Honing and Bas de Haas studied the performances of experienced jazz drummers, finding the long-short subdivision of the beat commonly known as 'swing' is not related linearly to tempo, i.e. expressive timing is adapted to tempo variations.¹¹ Alternatively, John Churchville, a professional drummer, teacher, and recording artist, believes that while drummers might represent the 'swing' by first providing the beat on the ride cymbal, and round out appropriate

beat divisions with the other hand, the success of the effect is group-determined, i.e. 'swing' is not initiated, controlled, or achieved solely by the drummer: rather, all ensemble members mutually participate in the process, which is mediated primarily by the level of their listening skills.¹² The extent to which creativity is encouraged, required, or exercised by drummers is contingent upon the specific performance environments. Bill Bruford characterized different 'contexts' in which experts perform, which differ in the relationship of the drummer to a group leader, whether there is a leader in the first place, and the level of creative freedom available, either 'functional' or 'compositional'.¹³ It should be noted that even when drummers are performing for a leader who commands complete stylistic control over the music, there is still some room for creative thinking. Brazilian jazz drummer Airtó Moreira, describing the process of finding a percussion part whilst everyone else in the group is scrambling to occupy every available space in the musical texture, said 'you just have to find a place that no one else is using, even if it is an unusual space, and fill it up and keep playing there so no one can take it away from you'.¹⁴ Moreira further explained that performance situations which offer formative roles are attractive to drummers, since most ensembles 'need someone to help everyone else make sense of time'.¹⁵

The demands on drummers are varied and complex, and it requires manipulative skill, tenacity, and strong interpersonal skills to confront them. There is additionally the need for drummers to simultaneously conform to tradition while incorporating their trademark sound through selected techniques. Peter Abbs described a hypothetical aesthetic balance between tradition and innovation, which is achieved through instruction and reflection.¹⁶ It is therefore perhaps optimal that drummers be purposefully mindful of such aesthetic balance in their playing, and search for evidence of such balance in the playing of successful drummers. For example, the late drumming legend Jeff Porcaro was perhaps best known for his much imitated 'half-time shuffle' groove, a modified rendition of Bernard Purdie's earlier 'Purdie Shuffle', and already familiar to music listeners, thus likely related to the success of Porcaro's signature sound. He further combined this element with a kick-drum rhythm – the legendary 'Bo Diddley Beat', perhaps the best-known syncopated pattern in popular music. Porcaro's effort was a perfect example of combinational thinking – fusing established sounds to produce a captivating beat pattern. Despite the literature and recordings that highlight the independently creative roles of drummers, some performance tendencies have emerged in drummers' efforts to create unique musical grooves. Danielsen *et al.* asked ten expert drummers to play a rock pattern at three different tempi using three timing styles – 'laid-back', 'on-the-beat', and 'pushed' – and noted

systematic variances in intensity and timbre of snare drum strokes between tempi and styles.¹⁷ These findings suggest the gradual formation of normative sound cues which accompany a drummer's efforts to create groove.

We now turn our attention to the practice routines and techniques associated with drum kit instruction, intending to link them to the aforementioned personal habits and challenges of successful drumming. Specifically, we identify skills associated with effective drum kit playing, map the cognitive understandings required for their execution, consider the dynamics of ensemble playing and their influence on drumming technique, and invoke the advice of expert teachers as to the optimal ways to educate young drummers. We also reintroduce the idea of aesthetics and how it may relate to the concept of timekeeping.

Technical Framework

Background

Before discussing drum kit method book literature, we first look briefly to some psychology research,¹⁸ as well as computer modeling of neurological processes to establish some aspects of conceptual modeling for rhythm in the human mind.¹⁹ Human beings undergo a process of informal musical learning as they grow up in a cultural setting; this includes implicit understanding of how tonal and rhythmic aspects of music 'work'. Rhythmic aspects of this framework include beat induction, meter induction, and architectonic relationships between multilayered timescales. Conceptual modeling of rhythm is significant for the teaching and learning of drum kit from multiple angles. On the one hand, recorded and live performance of drum kit playing is rooted in performers' conceptual modeling of rhythm; conversely, the ensemble members with whom they perform, as well as listeners, map the experienced music onto their own conceptual models and frameworks.

Procedural Aspects from Method Books

Method books have addressed the role of the drummer in musical settings. These books have focused on challenges facing drummers as well as recommendations for how developing drummers can work towards meeting those challenges. Jazz drumming expert John Riley addressed the need for a drummer's playing to appeal to a bandleader, stating that, 'The bottom line is, people hire drummers who make them sound good – period'.²⁰ Ron Spagnardi described how big band drummers cannot depend on written notation in a drum chart to tell them all details about what or how to play. 'With just a basic sketch to go by, you need to depend

on your musical instinct and creativity to decide what to play, how to phrase, where to fill, and how to accompany the soloists'.²¹ Daniel 'Zoro' Donnelly and Daniel Glass described common challenges facing developing drummers in the rhythm and blues idiom, citing, 'poor understanding of swung eighth notes ... improper sound balance ... misdirected motion ... lack of understanding'.²² These challenges address the necessity of creativity, identity, and effectively fulfilling a timekeeping role with a rhythm section.

Additionally, method books have used language as an analogy to describe drummers' abilities to function authentically in diverse stylistic contexts. Towards the development of properly grooving within R&B, soul, funk, and hip-hop styles, Mike Adamo stated, 'breakbeat drumming has its own vocabulary, just as any language does'.²³ In discussing grooves particular to Afro-Cuban drumming, Ed Uribe wrote, 'your final goal in the study of a musical style should be ... strive to play this music as if you had learned it in its purest, handed-down, oral tradition ... There is a big difference between playing a beat and playing a style ... You are, in essence, learning a language'.²⁴ Riley emphasized the importance of listening to examples from musical styles in order to develop idiomatic understanding. 'To be fluent in any style of music, you must know the "dialect" ... All the great players we know have studied hundreds of recordings and have listened to and probably own a thousand or more jazz recordings'.²⁵

Method books have also offered suggestions for how developing drummers ought to meet these challenges. Donnelly and Glass insisted on the importance of understanding historical context. 'In order to reign and rule over the groove (of rhythm and blues) and play it convincingly, you must first understand how it got there in the first place and how it evolved into what it is today'.²⁶ One stylistic example that they cited towards effectively grooving in early R&B idioms was the shuffle: 'When it comes to early R&B, there are three important tools that a drummer can't live without: a good shuffle, a good shuffle, and a good shuffle! ... If you start simple, focusing on sound and balance (as opposed to technique), you can develop a basic shuffle that will get you through just about any musical challenge that comes your way'.²⁷ Towards drummers' development of groove, individual creativity and musicianship, and effective ensemble performance, Riley's suggestions included, 'open your ears to the other players. Play together ... think like a musician. Make the other players sound good ... play your own time, not your idol's ... think consistent spacing and volume. Hypnotize with your groove ... when there are problems (with ensemble cohesion), play strong but become more supple, not more rigid'.²⁸ Adamo's suggestion for drummers' development of groove and

pocket was 'playing along with recorded songs . . . playing along with a metronome/click track . . . feeling an underlying half-note or whole-note pulse as you practice/play various grooves'.²⁹

Towards an Aesthetic of Timekeeping

If we propose there is an 'aesthetics of timekeeping' in the first place, it must be predicated on, yet transcend, requisite skills and techniques. What renders the timekeeping 'aesthetic' is a transformation from purely functional actions and executions to apprehend the expressive qualities of the activity, to engage the communicative potential of music. Drum teachers spend a lot of time, informed by method book authors, teaching students how to strike the drum, count, play four-way coordination, read charts, listen to music for dialectic fluency, balance the various instruments of the drum set, and function appropriately in music ensemble settings. Drum teachers teach these techniques and skills, hoping that creativity emerges from students' practice as they work to attain them. Our position is that these techniques and skills emerge in confluence with students' developing creativity. The most effective teaching and learning of drumming maintains focus on the aforementioned techniques and skills, executed using strategies that additionally help students develop the dispositions that are associated with creative reasoning and action. These include embracing the centrality of listening as the key to learning and ensemble performance, awareness of rhythm framework, improving negotiation of the social dynamics of being a drummer, and a personal creative style that balances tradition and innovation while continually testing new ideas amidst various enabling and inhibiting conditions.

We therefore recommend a practice repertoire of actual musical examples to supplement method book use, in which teachers saliently indicate the history and innovations of drummers from prior eras.³⁰ Two examples of such practice repertoire include listening and playing along to jazz standards and break beats. These two bodies of repertoire represent much of the relevant drumming idiom in the twenty-first century. Jazz drummers from the early to mid-twentieth century influenced drummers across many styles of popular music from the latter half of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first century.³¹ Sampling and recreation (through performance or programming) of R&B and soul break beats has been prevalent in popular music of the past forty years. In addition to assimilating a repertoire of relevant beats and songs, study of this repertoire might well refine developing drummers' conceptual modelling for rhythm towards an increasingly detailed template for groove and pocket that includes swing, centeredness on the beat, and elasticity of time.

Given the aural tradition of the drum kit, and that ideas about swing and pocket differ among various musical styles, we recommend use of listening and play-along to help drummers develop intuitions towards idiomatic performance of musical styles. In this regard, developing a sense of pocket is akin to achieving a colloquial and conversational fluency in various musical genres and styles. Developing drummers should assimilate repertoire aurally, only using notation when necessary to achieve optimal comprehension. Learning break beats and songs by ear will engage the developing drummer in a process of disequilibrium and reconciliation, interacting as directly as possible with the music.³² While notational skills are important in professionalizing drummers, superb aural skills are foundational in virtually every aspect of drumming, thus need not be tied to note-reading. The practice of reading musical notation should focus on norms of reading charts as musical 'road maps' with important clues about how to engage with and lead the ensemble: the details of musical interpretation should be left largely to drummers' intuitions, developed through listening and play-along repertoire. As John Churchville reports, early-stage drummers tend to be consumed with striking drums and making as much sound as possible through intense exertion, and only once they realize how this practice interferes with increasing demands on their listening, their technique can become more efficient and varied. The late drumming educator John Bergamo, one of Churchville's teachers, encouraged improved technique through examining the natural mechanics of the body (the basic 'throwing' motion), making better use of gravity, and incorporating various parts of the striking surfaces for expanded timbral range.

Indeed, developing drummers are typically preoccupied with the physical act of playing drums. Consequently, one of the challenges for a drum kit teacher is to help channel this preoccupation towards a more developed musicality and musicianship. Two groups developing drummers must learn how to please are other musicians with whom they perform, and audience members. Groove and pocket are particularly important in both instances: fellow rhythm section members judge drummers' ability to groove in a group setting (based on cognitive conceptual models of groove), and listeners' experiences of popular music include groove and pocket as well, though perhaps based on more generalized conceptual models.

Developing drummers are also listeners, however. When they commence systematic study of the drum kit, they do not do so in a musico-technical vacuum. Therefore, much of what we emphasize in teaching developing drummers about groove and pocket may be a process of making salient, thereby more consciously present, the conceptual models

they bring to the studio setting as advanced listeners. This supports a student-centred model of teaching and learning, whereby we encourage students to bring their whole selves into the classroom setting. We meet them where they are as learners, developing their understanding that listening is key, guiding them towards a professional level of fluency within popular music dialects.

Feel-Based Drumming Constructs

For drummers to develop awareness of rhythmic framework, they should develop fluency within the overlapping, abstract, feel-based constructs of swing, groove, and pocket. These constructs break down into several aspects, such as beat subdivision, centredness on the beat, elasticity in interpretation of time, and dynamic balance among voices on the drum kit. Beat subdivision is also sometimes referred to as 'depth of swing'. Usually, a drummer is described as playing 'in the pocket' in relation to one or more other players, often other rhythm section players. A groove that is pocketed in one context may be completely out of the pocket in another. In this regard, pocket is an agreement among several players, often the rhythm section, as to how hard the music will swing. While there is widespread acceptance for these constructs in the Western music world and in some parts of Asia,³³ the practices themselves are familiar even when the constructs are not, as in the case of 'groove' in England.³⁴

Centredness on the beat refers to how 'on top' of the beat the drummer plays, versus how far ahead or behind, meanwhile not rushing or dragging to the point of tearing from the pocket. A drummer simultaneously must match the beat-centredness of the rest of the rhythm section, but also inherits a greater responsibility than other rhythm section players in determining the beat-centredness of the entire rhythm section. Such considerations concerning micro timing signal the influence of popular music genres in modern rhythmic discourse and analysis.³⁵

Elasticity refers to the dynamic pushing and pulling of time: sometimes when entering or exiting phrases, playing fills, set-ups, or ensemble hits, the time seems to organically stretch to aesthetic effect.³⁶ Skilled drummers strike a balance between strict adherence to metronomic time and related time scales or subdivisions versus allowing the time to 'breathe' to enhance the feel of the shared pocket. Sometimes these adjustments are significant enough to be considered displacements or grouping 'dissonances' in the meter.³⁷

The dynamic balance among voices on the drum kit contributes to the pocket of the groove. Sometimes, for example, a groove may go from un-pocketed to pocketed by adjusting the balance of timekeeping in the hi-hat in relation to the kick and snare drum. By properly 'mixing', the entire

drum kit part can ‘sit better’ in the groove. The ability to create and adjust such balance is acquired through a combination of experimentation and performance experience.³⁸

These aspects occur in the social context of ensemble music making. However, in addition to the drummer’s ability to creatively utilize them towards aesthetic effect, the drummer’s social role in the band also impacts how freely the role of time steward is fulfilled. If the time is off, the rest of the band first blames the drummer, as the drummer is perceived as a *de facto* conductor who controls tempo and other time-related parameters. A drummer who is a new addition to a rhythm section may subordinate his or her timekeeping intuitions to another, more senior member of the rhythm section, usually the bass player. Indeed, drummers are commonly advised to follow the bass player during a group audition, a practice that demonstrates the physiological tendency to allow lower-sounding ensemble instruments to establish the temporal foundation of music.³⁹ These and other considerations are abundantly clear in drummers’ verbal reports of their ensemble experiences.

Looking Forward in Teaching and Learning Drum Kit

Throughout this chapter, we have attempted to synthesize ideas from philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, and applied literature, as well as our own professional experience as musicians and educators. We have interrogated established norms for teaching and learning of the drums, and suggest a comprehensive and productive model of teaching and learning based on these norms while informed by the conceptual lens of creativity. In summary, we have substantiated the following points:

1. Curiosity, creativity, and musical expression are necessary attributes for pursuing a personal drum kit style, and they function interdependently and actively in a drummer’s interactions with other ensemble members.
2. Theories of curiosity, creativity, and musical expression are relevant to the ongoing work of drum kit learning, experimentation, and ensemble performance and recording.
3. Philosophical and psychological writings support the complex work of articulating a personal style of drum kit playing while conforming to well-known styles and genres, i.e. of striking an imperceptible balance between tradition and innovation, which comprises an important aesthetic dimension of musical experience.
4. Negotiating one’s individuality as a drummer is mediated by the belief systems of other group members regarding the traditional roles of drummers in groups.

Given these findings, the most effective drum kit instruction, while continuing to emphasize performance techniques and skills, should also

incorporate expanded focus on creativity. We believe this can occur in the following ways:

1. Feel-based aspects of drumming technique should remain central to the instructional process.
2. Mentoring relationships between early and later-career drummers, which naturally includes transmission of generational knowledge in aural traditions, is essential.
3. Strategies helping students explore and develop the personality traits relevant to creative reasoning and execution are central to a comprehensive didactic approach to the drum kit.

The challenge of achieving a balance between tradition and innovation by drummers in ensemble practice and performance provides an opportunity for them to assimilate a repertoire that spans multiple decades of popular music history, and which recurs in contemporary popular music.⁴⁰ We believe music philosophy, having evolved through the post-modern era, can still be quite useful to developing musicians, as they seek a meaningful core for guiding their aesthetic judgements in drum kit playing.

Notes

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