Understanding Triplets

Now that we have a basic understanding of how to read and understand rhythm let’s take a more in-depth look at triplets. You will find triplet rhythms in almost every exercise in the Rhythm Primer book. It is important that you understand how to play these rhythms. If you are a beginner at music I would suggest you skip over the measures with triplets to begin with, and concentrate on mastering easier rhythms. You may find that listening to the midifiles found on the muse-eek.com website will help you to hear how the triplet rhythms sound.

The next pages deal with how to count and understand triplets. Make sure to listen to each example, because when you hear these triplets you will often find that the rhythm looks a lot harder than it really is.

Triplets divide a beat into three equal parts. In example 1, each beat has been subdivided into three equal parts. These three note groups are commonly called triplets and usually have a bracket and a number three placed above the grouping. Therefore you would play three notes for each beat equally dividing that beat into three parts. To play this example tap your right hand three times for each tap of your foot. Your right hand is playing the triplets and your foot is counting out the 4 beats of a 4/4 measure of music.

Example 1

Although I don't recommend it as a long term habit, a beginner often needs a method for counting each beat and subdivision. Over time you should develop the ability to recognize any rhythm and know what it sounds like. But again, if you are a beginner or you are having a problem with a rhythm, counting is a way to work it through. Example 2 gives the counting method I recommend.

Example 2
Triplets can also be found stretching over more than one beat. This can be very difficult for a beginning student to feel, especially when the tempo is slow. In example 3 we have two quarter note triplet patterns. Each quarter note triplet occupies two beats of the measure. These two beats are divided equally into three equal parts.

Example 3

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{quarter note triplet} & \quad 3 \\
\text{quarter note triplet} & \quad 3
\end{align*}
\]

Sometimes it helps a beginning student to subdivide each beat in a measure in order to hear quarter note triplets. Example 4 is the same rhythm as example 3. The only difference is we have tied the notes of the triplet together in order to make it easier to see the rhythm. Many times writing a pattern in this manner helps a student to see exactly which notes are being played in the quarter note triplet. Notice the following aspects:

a. The 1st note of the triplet in beat one is tied to the second,
b. The 3rd note of the first triplet is tied to the 1st note of the triplet of beat 2

This process repeats itself for beats 3 and 4.

Example 4

\[
\begin{align*}
a. & \quad 3 \\
b. & \quad 3 \\
c. & \quad 3 \\
a. & \quad 3 \\
b. & \quad 3 \\
c.
\end{align*}
\]
Example 5 shows you again the relationship between these two ways of writing quarter note triplets.

Example 5

\[
\begin{align*}
&\quad 3 \\
&\quad \quad 3 \\
&\quad \quad \quad 3 \\
&\quad \quad \quad \quad 3 \\
\end{align*}
\]

Playing this rhythm is a four step process.

1. Tap your foot on every beat
2. Tap your foot on each beat and say out loud each triplet as shown in example 2.
3. Tap the triplets with your right hand while continuing to do step one and two
4. Tap only the 1st and 3rd parts of the triplet in beat one and the 2nd part of the triplet in beat two while continuing to do step one and two.

You are now tapping quarter note triplets with your right hand. Continue this process so you can tap the quarter note triplets for beats 3 and 4 too. It will take some time before this is ingrained. I recommend doing this for 5 to 10 minutes a day for a couple of weeks and you should find that you are feeling quarter note triplets naturally.

Half note triplets are another rhythm commonly found in music. Half note triplets divide a 4/4 measure into 3 equal parts. Example 6 shows you a half note triplet.

Example 6

\[
\begin{align*}
&\quad 3 \\
&\quad \quad 3 \\
&\quad \quad \quad 3 \\
\end{align*}
\]