READING RHYTHMS

The Final Exam

Text and examples by Norman Weinberg.

WELL, AS THE saying goes: "You've come a long way, baby!" Back when this column began in June 1988, we started with quarter notes and eighth notes. This month, the final exam covers just about any type of reading situation you're likely to encounter. But, there is still one aspect to reading percussion music that we've yet to examine: Dynamics.

The term "dynamics" includes all of the different types of musical symbols that describe performance volume. In addition to indicating rhythms, our notational system includes several symbols that tell you how loud a certain passage should be played.

Most dynamics are written as abbreviations, and, unfortunately for us, dynamics make use of Italian words and phrases (this isn't a problem if you speak Italian). Italian composers were one of the first group of musicians to incorporate the ideas of dynamics into written music, and their terms have become standard throughout the musical world. So, just what are these abbreviations and their meanings?

p – The letter ***p*** stands for *piano* (pronounced just like the instrument with keys). In the true Italian, it means "weak." To most Americans, the concept of "soft" will work fine.

f – The letter ***f*** stands for *forte*. As the opposite of weak, it actually means "strong." Again, in musical terms, you can think of *forte* as meaning "loud."

m – The letter ***m*** stands for *mezzo* and is an adjective meaning "moderately" or "medium." The ***m*** is never seen alone. Instead, it's used along with *piano* or *forte* to temper their meaning somewhat. The dynamics marking ***mp*** means moderately soft (not quite as soft as *piano*), while the marking ***mf*** would be interpreted as moderately loud (not quite as loud as *forte*).

In addition to these markings, their comparatives are also possible. In English, we have three different levels of softness. We can say that something is soft, softer, and softest; or loud, louder, and loudest. The Italian language has a similar construction. One level softer than *piano* is *pianissimo* – written in music as the abbreviation ***pp***. The softest indication is *pianississimo* and is written as ***ppp***. When working with *forte*, the next level up is *fortissimo* or ***ff***, and the loudest level is *fortississimo* or ***fff***.

For those of you trying to keep all of this straight in your mind, the first example shows how the dynamic markings would progress from the softest level to the loudest. At times, you may run into dynamic markings that use four ***p***'s (or four ***f***'s). This dynamic really doesn't have a particular name – after all, if ***ppp*** tells you to play at your softest level, where can you go from there? In such cases, the composer is just trying to make a statement that the music at this point should be *really* soft or *really* loud.

Dynamics operate much like speed limit signs and time signatures. If a *piano* dynamic is indicated, then the soft volume is in effect until you see a different dynamic. For example, at the beginning of this month's exercise, you see a marking of *forte*. The first two measures (and part of the third) continue along in this dynamic. When you reach the sixth count of the third measure, you would begin playing *piano*.

Another common dynamic indication is an accent. The accent looks like a small arrowhead (>) and applies only to a single note. An accent is an indication that this particular note should be played stronger than the non-accented notes around it. Keep in mind that an accented note that is played in the dynamic of *piano* will be softer than an accent played in *fortissimo*.

While we're speaking of volume levels, just how loud is *forte*? Well, there is no firm answer. A harmonica played *forte* will be softer than a snare drum played at the same dynamic. These indications are nothing more than general suggestions by the composer. The exact volume played would depend on several different, yet related aspects. For a few examples: *forte* in a small chamber orchestra playing Mozart would be softer than *forte* in a Strauss tone poem calling for over 100 musicians. Likewise, a *piano* marking for a snare drum passage behind a few woodwinds would be softer than a cowbell played at *piano* with a Salsa band. For a musical interpretation of dynamics, always let your ears and your common sense be your guide.

Two last dynamic features: A *crescendo* is an indication to gradually get louder over a period of time. A *decrescendo* (also called a *diminuendo*) is an indication to gradually get softer over a period of time. These symbols are pretty easy to remember due to their graphic representations (see **Example 2**). They are usually written below the notes that they will affect. For example, the crescendo under measure nine asks the performer to gradually change from *mezzo-piano* (the starting dynamic) to *fortissimo* (the ending dynamic). The *decrescendo* at measure 13 works in a similar fashion, except that the music will become gradually softer rather than louder. Sometimes, *crescendi* (plural) or *diminuendi* (ditto) occur over a long period of time. Instead of having a graphic symbol spread over several measures, a composer or copyist may choose to use the abbreviations of *"cresc.,"* *"dim.,"* or *"decresc."* to indicate the gradual rise or fall of volume.

In the very first installment of this column, it was said that reading music can increase your musical knowledge, just as reading English can increase your general knowledge. Now that you can read the rhythms presented in this series, you will be able to read over 99% of all the music that's out there. And believe me, there's a lot of music out there.

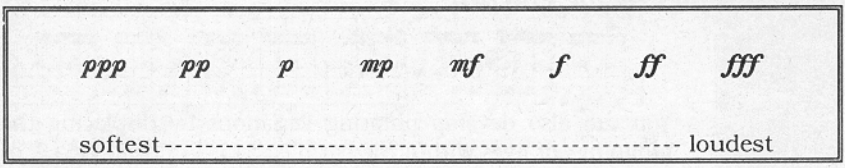
There are music books that contain transcriptions of the parts from your favorite drummer's hit recordings, books that give information on how to apply Latin and African rhythms to the drumkit, describe contemporary drumming concepts such as linear playing, give away the secrets to interpreting big band charts... The list could go on for days. With this knowledge, you can investigate the rhythms of any culture; from American Indians to Zulu warriors. In short, you've got the reading tools to go in any direction that you wish. I'm glad to have been able to help.

In case you might want to review one of the rhythmic ideas presented in this series, this list will point you to the issue you need:

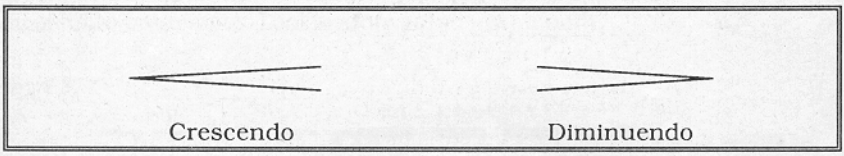
June '88	Quarters, Quarter Rests, Groups of Two Eighths
July '88	Sixteenths, Eighth Rests
August '88	Sixteenth Rests
September '88	Dots and Ties
October '88	Odd Meters with a Quarter Note Base
November '88	Odd Meters with an Eighth Note Base
December '88	Eighth Note Triplets
January '89	Quarter Note Triplets
February '89	Syncopation
March '89	Sixteenth Note Triplets

April '89	Cut Time	*October '89*	Mixed Meters
May '89	Thirty-Second Notes	*November '89*	Mixed and Changing Meters
June '89	Booklet Exercises	*December '89*	"False" Notation
July '89	Triplets in Compound Meters	*January '90*	Abbreviations
August '89	Duplets in Compound Meters	*February '90*	Final Exam

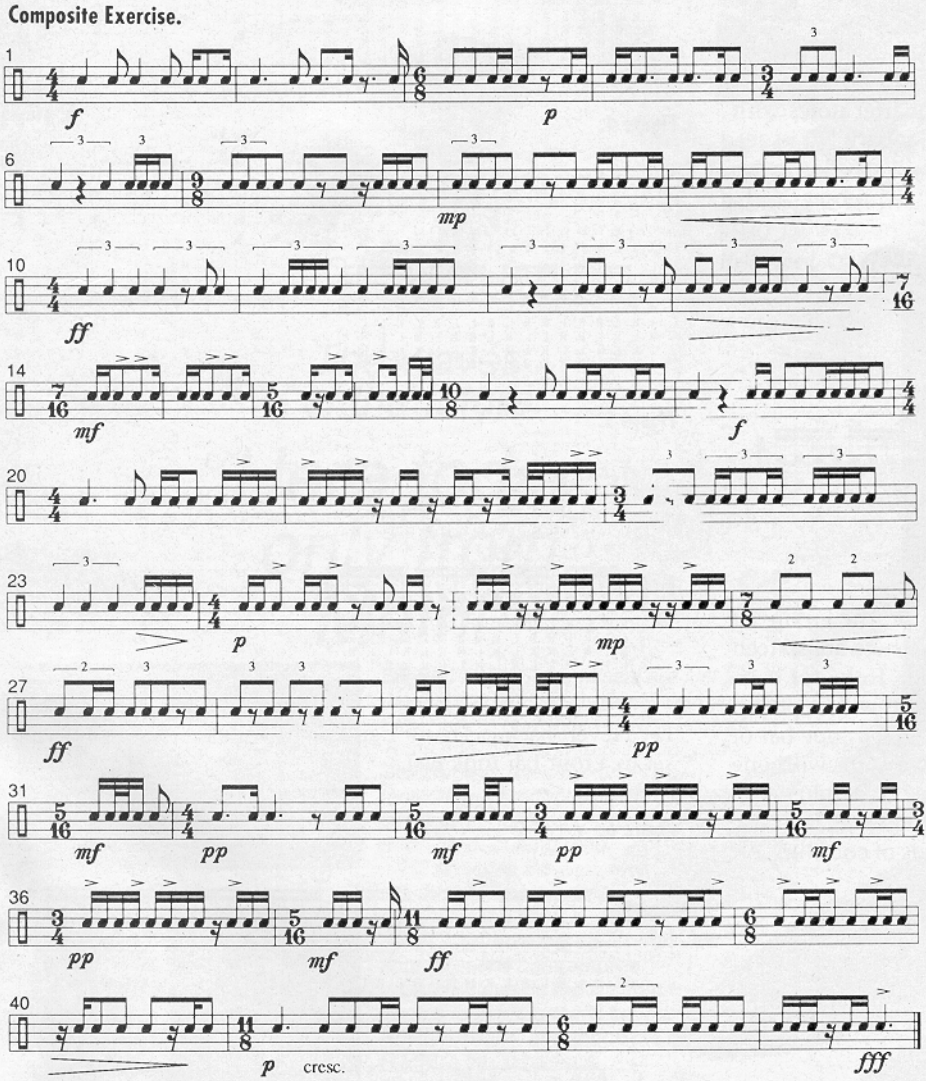
Example 1.



Example 2.



Composite Exercise.



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All examples in this column were produced using Finale, courtesy of Coda Software.