

RHYTHM AND PULSE



Be honest – have you always understood the distinction between rhythm and pulse?
Cyrella Rowsell presents a range of activities devised to help primary-aged children feel and understand this key distinction

I have always felt that 11 years of piano lessons as a child taught me something about playing the piano, but almost nothing about music. Music, to me, was just learning to decode the black dots, which told me where to put my fingers (not always successfully, being a graduate of the Les Dawson School of Piano Playing).

One of the things I found most difficult was rhythm. I was taught to count long notes (which I understood) – but then my teacher had this mystifying practice of writing ‘1+2+3+4+’ all over my music (which I didn’t). Maybe I was a very dense pupil – but it was only years later that the penny dropped. These strange numbers and plus signs represented the beat and subdivisions of the beat!

When I first started to learn the Kodály principles I remember finding rhythm names an absolute revelation. And there is nothing like having to teach something that really makes you think deeply about what you are teaching, why and how.

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My experience now tells me that you have to start with pulse – then rhythm, then understanding the difference between the two, then the relationship between them. Without this understanding rhythm reading is never going to be successful. My memories of guessing wildly at the rhythm (‘those are semiquavers so they’re fast notes’) have haunted me to this day – as has the memory of my teacher sighing and eventually saying resignedly, ‘Well, it goes like this, dear’.

But a major part of our job, as music educators, is to develop musical independence in our students – and independence cannot come without understanding. So where to start? I remember an instrumental teacher saying to me once, ‘I have this pupil who just can’t hear the pulse!’ My reply was that you do not hear the pulse, you *feel* it. I don’t believe that a good sense of pulse can ever be developed through counting; it cannot develop without *movement*. With the youngest children this is most effective when the movements are those suggested naturally by the words of the song (eg See-Saw and Cobbler, Cobbler – see my article on pulse in the May 2011 issue of MT).

ACTIVITIES

Children need to experience pulse using as wide a variety of movements as possible – simply clapping is not enough. I use songs and rhymes where the children tap, pat, sway, walk, jump,

rock, pass objects – and also include songs such as Copy Cat where the leader sings the song, improvising their own pulse movement for the class to imitate (example 1).

When the children are familiar with Copy Cat, play the ‘odd one out’ game. Lead the song four times and tell them that one time will be the odd one out. They have to identify which it was and say why it was the odd one (you performed the rhythm rather than the pulse). Then lead the song and tell the children that if your movement matches the pulse, they are to copy the song and action, but if the movement shows the rhythm, they must fold their arms and not copy! An extension of this is to tell the children to copy with their singing voices when you show the pulse, but when you show the rhythm they should copy the movement but sing the song in their thinking voices – quite a challenge, even for Key Stage 2. Then invite a child to lead the same game.

I use a lot of songs that are eight beats long and the children are used to singing the song and tapping eight drawn heartbeats on the board in time with the pulse. One of these songs is Listen, Listen (example 2).

The children learn this first as a game; one child walks round the circle while the class sings, playing the pulse on the drum. Whoever he stops at is the next ‘special person’ to walk round the circle. Later you can ask individuals to sing and play the pulse in the same way – then turn the beater round so that they are holding the ball part, and tap the rhythm on the drum this time.

Copy Cat

Teacher Pupils

Off we go:- Co - py cat, Co - py cat, Sit - ting on the door mat!

Example 1

Listen, Listen

Lis - ten, lis - ten, here I come,
 Some - one spe - cial gets the drum.

Example 2

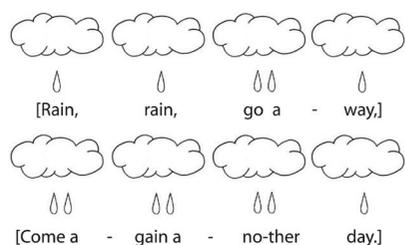
See- | saw, | Up and | down, | In the | air and | on the | ground.



Example 5

Ask the children to sit cross legged, facing a partner. Ask them to put their hands on their partner's shoulders and sing the song, tapping the pulse. Ask individual pairs to demonstrate. Ask them to put their hands on their partner's knees and to tap the rhythm this time. Then ask one child to have hands on shoulders and one on knees, tapping the pulse on shoulders and rhythm on knees. This is quite tricky! Of course this activity can be done with any song, but Listen, Listen is a good one to start with because the rhythm consists of two identical phrases.

Try making rhythm pictures, where one picture represents the pulse and one the rhythm (example 3).



Example 3

This illustration shows the rhythm picture for the song Rain, Rain (example 4):



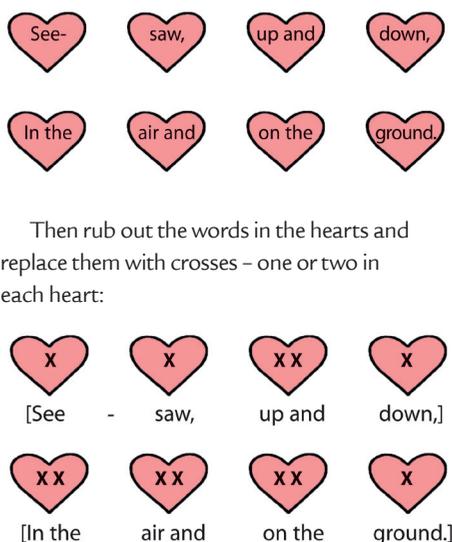
Example 4

So many songs will lend themselves to this idea. Use as many as you can so that the children are experiencing the same thing but in a different context each time.

Play the 'pass the song' game with See-Saw. Ask eight children to stand in a row, holding out their two hands joined in a fist in front of them. Sing the song, walking along the line and tapping their fists in time with the pulse. A child can also act as the leader in this way. Then ask the children to sing the word or words that were on their beat, travelling down the line. This can take a bit of practice! When they can do it, ask the children who sang one word to keep their hands joined in front of them, and the children

who sang two words to separate their hands into two fists – and instantly the children can see the connection between pulse and rhythm – the bodies represent the pulse and the fists represent the rhythm. This activity can also be performed with the children holding heart cards which the leader can tap in time with either the pulse or the rhythm (example 5).

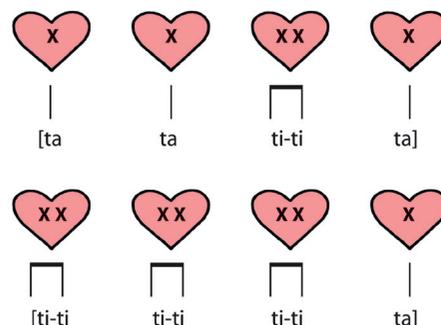
Using the eight drawn heartbeats, tell the children that you are going to sing See-Saw in your thinking voice, tapping the heartbeats in time with the pulse as you do so. Then repeat this but stop on the fourth heartbeat, asking the children which word or words belonged in that beat; then write the word, 'down' in that beat. Repeat this activity with the second, first and third heartbeats respectively, with the children realising that two words fit into the third heartbeat. This can then be repeated with the second half of the song.



The children can then come and sing the song, tapping the rhythm onto the hearts. It is only at this stage – when the children can explain verbally, and show with movements, that they understand the difference between pulse and rhythm, and that sometimes a beat can have one sound in it, or two sounds, that I introduce rhythm notation.

Draw a crotchet and ask if the children know what it is (often some children learn instruments and will know the name). Explain that knowing that this note is called a crotchet does not help us know how to perform it. Ask which part of the note took the longest to draw – the stick or the blob?

Explain that we can write music in a quick way by just writing the stick, and that when there is one sound in the beat it looks like this and the rhythm has the name of *ta*; but when there are two sounds in the beat the rhythm looks like this and is called *ti-ti*. Write the rhythm sticks for the first line and invite individuals to write the rhythm sticks for the second line.



Sing the song with the rhythm names and ask the children to imitate. Now they can continue to work out rhythm names and write the notation for the rhythm of known songs and rhymes, and also read the rhythm of a new song.

Children who receive this type of experience and skill/knowledge development in the early stages will hopefully not suffer the 'it goes like this, dear' scenario in later days... **MI**

MI The ideas in this article also feature in *Jolly Music* by Cyrilla Rowsell and David Vinden, a complete primary music resource published by Jolly Learning (jollylearning.co.uk).

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