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Teaching With Chopsticks and a Rhythm Clock

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Teaching with Chopsticks and a Rhythm Clock

When teaching rhythm to students, whether high school AP students, music majors with little background, music minors, students taking remedial theory or aural skills, or non-music majors, it can be difficult to convey the concept that beats are not just attack points but have a full duration, and that those durations can be divided into many parts; it can also be difficult for students to understand how those divisions and subdivisions do or do not coincide. I have found that a clock face and a set of inexpensive chopsticks are very useful teaching tools.¹

I have created a number of rhythm clocks that include color-coded *Ta ka di mi* syllables (red) and *I ee and uh* counting syllables (blue), to show the division and subdivision of the beat into 2, 3, 4, and 6 parts, and to show simple and compound divisions and subdivisions combined. An instructor can use any or all of them (included in the attachments) to demonstrate various patterns; they needn't all be used together to be effective.²

I utilize the chopsticks to teach aurally one-beat rhythmic patterns. I demonstrate by tapping these patterns on the blackboard while students watch and tap on their desks, and I ask them to recite with me the *Ta ka di mi* and *I ee and uh* syllables. All patterns begin with both chopsticks several inches above their desk tops. There are only three striking motions (demonstrated in the “Rhythm Tapping Patterns” videos): the left chopstick tapping the desk, the right chopstick tapping the desk, and the left chopstick tapping on top of the right chopstick (which is held several inches above the desk). The “Illustrated Tapping Patterns and Notation” handout notates the tapping patterns two ways: in a protonotation for students who do not yet read music (or read it fluently), and in actual notation, for students who do read music, and/or for instructors. There are also three images showing the three striking motions.

I begin practicing these tapping patterns immediately at the beginning of the semester, introducing just a few at a time, so that by the time we begin the section on rhythm (after pitch and clef reading and notation), students already have some aural and physical familiarity with these patterns.

To discuss beats, I compare a single beat to a one-minute duration on a clock. The beat lasts for a full revolution of the second-hand around the clock. I have students stand with a chopstick in their right hand, conducting in a straight down-up motion, saying and sustaining alternately *Ta* and *I* for their full “60-second” duration, while I trace my finger a full revolution

¹ If students already own drumsticks they are free to use those.

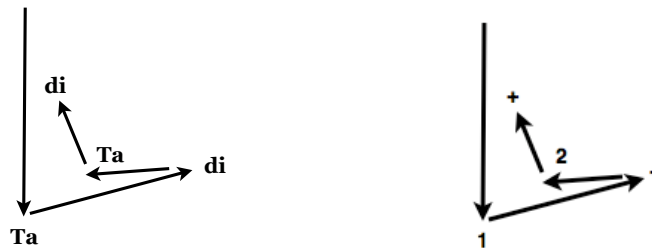
² Several clocks are shown in miniature below in Example 3. The entire series in miniature is contained in the “All Clocks” handout, which shows one possible ordering. Each individual full-size clock is also included in the attached files.

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around the clock that I have projected or drawn on the board. I then show students how to conduct in two, and again have them say and sustain *Ta/I* for the full duration of each beat they conduct while I trace a full revolution around the clock.

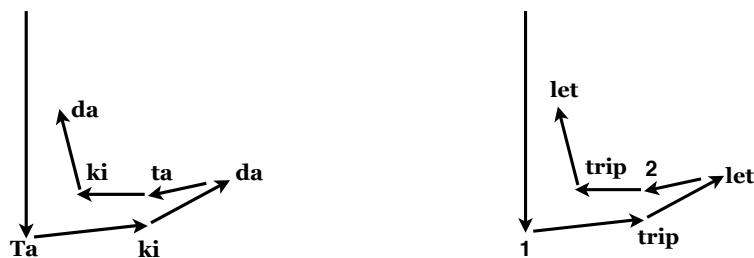
To divide the beat in half, we look at the two 30-second segments on the clock. We conduct while saying alternately *Ta/I* on the down motion of the chopstick, and *di/and* on the up motion, sustaining the syllables for their full “30-second” duration. I use a simplified conducting pattern to show the two-part division of the beat, so students can see and feel this division when conducting (shown in Example 1).

Example 1: Conducting pattern for two-part division of beat



For a three-part division of the beat, we look at 20-second increments on the clock, and use the appropriate tapping pattern, intoning the syllables (*Ta ki da* and *1 trip let*), while I trace the segments on the clock. To conduct this we use a modified two-beat pattern, so students can see and feel the three-part division (shown in Example 2).

Example 2: Conducting pattern for three-part division of beat



For four-part divisions (*Ta ka di mi* and *1 ee and uh*), we look at 15-second increments while I again trace the segments on the clock as they intone the syllables and tap their chopstick patterns or conduct. For a 6-part division (*ta va ki di da ma* and *1 a trip a let a*) we look at 10-second increments.

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These clocks are also effective at teaching the various unequal one-beat patterns, such as *Ta–di mi*, *Ta ka di–* (*1–and uh*, *1 ee and–*), etc. To take *Ta–di mi* as an example: I explain that *Ta* lasts 30 seconds, while *di* and *mi* are 15 seconds each. The clock makes this easy to visualize and conceptualize. We again practice reciting the syllables as I trace my finger around the clock and they tap their chopsticks in the appropriate pattern.

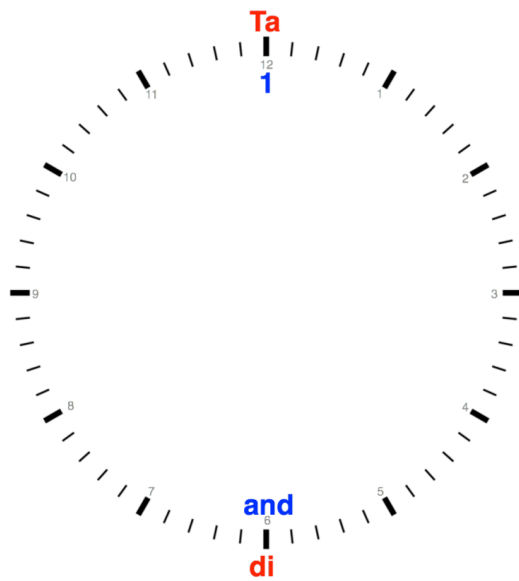
When I have students tapping these uneven patterns (as *Ta–di mi/1–and uh*), I have them tap out all four equal subdivisions (*Ta ka di mi/1 ee and uh*) while saying only *Ta–di mi/* and *1–and uh*; this keeps them from cutting the beat short—it is their underlying metronome.

These clocks beautifully illustrate the differences between compound and simple meter divisions, borrowed divisions, two-against-three patterns, three-against-four patterns, and so on, as well as often-confused patterns such as *Ta ki da/1 trip let* vs. *Ta–di mi/1–and uh* (shown below in Example 3). They can be used to illustrate very simple patterns as well as very complex and syncopated ones. I and my students find them incredibly helpful.

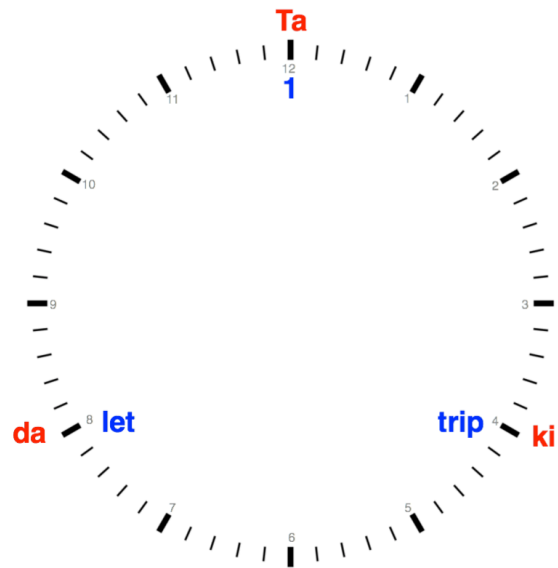
Example 3: Rhythm Clocks

a. Simple and Compound divisions

2-part divisions
Takadimi and Counting syllables



3-part divisions
Takadimi and Counting syllables

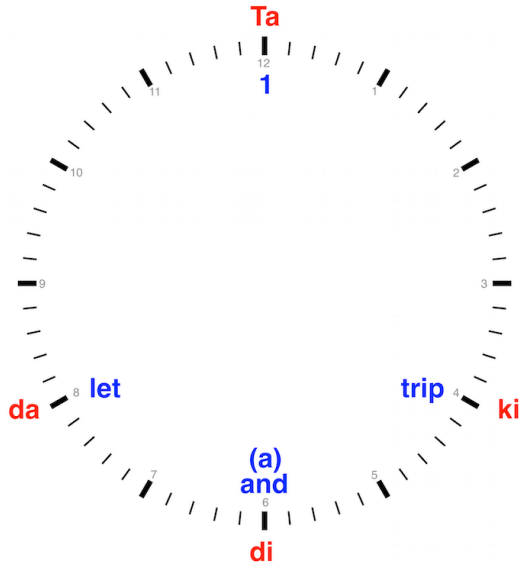


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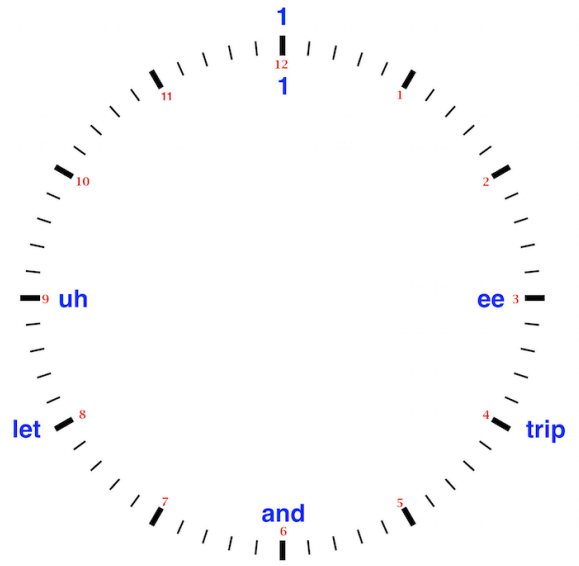
Example 3: Rhythm Clocks (cont.)

b. Simple and Compound patterns juxtaposed

2- and 3-part divisions
Takadimi and Counting syllables



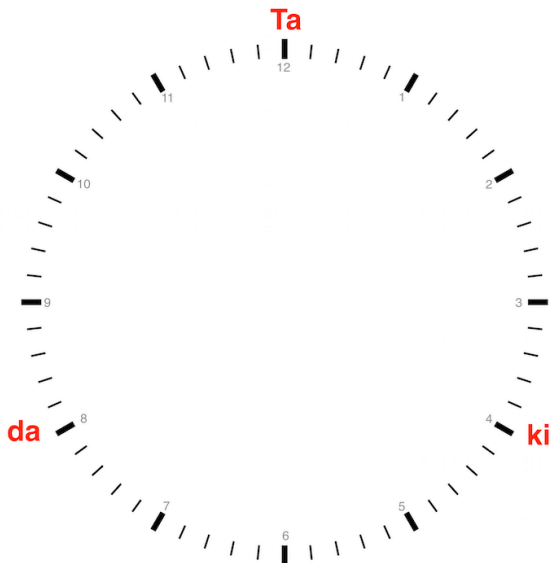
3- and 4-part divisions and subdivisions
Counting syllables



c. Ta ki da vs. Ta-di mi



3-part division
Takadimi syllables



4-part subdivisions
Takadimi syllables

