

Setting the Foundation for Good Rhythm

By Kenneth F. Beard

kfb@banddaddy.com

www.banddaddy.com

Clapping Rhythms

Before you introduce notes, you will introduce rhythm. I am convinced that no other single factor in leading students to become good musicians is as important as learning to read rhythm. In most auditions, sight reading is the factor that gives students the most trouble. Sight-reading is the area that in many ways determines who places the highest in an audition. Sight-reading is the area that determines your band's level of performance in choosing literature. There are many factors that go into sight-reading, and I will discuss them in a later chapter, the first foundation that must be laid properly for success in sight-reading is the ability to count rhythm.

Having been a clinician and adjudicator in a variety of situations, I have often seen students who have not been taught to read music, but have been taught by rote. I clearly remember an honor roll student in a high school band I once directed. In the course of teaching this student during band class, I found that there was a problem rhythmically, in that the student in question could not read the rhythm correctly. The rhythm in question was a whole note. I asked him to play it, three or four times, explaining that it was four counts. This intelligent student had been taught exclusively by rote and could not "measure-out" four counts. He and other students in the class asked me to sing it to them. I refused and even though it frustrated them, I required them to count for themselves.

I am a firm believer and know from extensive experience that in many cases, the smartest person in the band class is not the band director. If given proper instruction, students will be able to succeed beyond your wildest dreams in learning to read music and to sight-read as well as any adult. It has been my experience with high school students that they can be taught to read as well as many college music majors if given the proper instruction. Clapping rhythms is the first step in the process. I urge you to become a fanatic in this regard, especially in the first two or three years of helping young people learn to play an instrument.

During the next section, I will be teaching the use of foot tapping in counting rhythm. I know that there are some who would debate this teaching technique; however, I really recommend that you give this a try. I have found very few ways of teaching large groups of students how to count and play rhythms correctly without it. Having placed several hundred students into All State Bands and other similar groups, as well as achieving great success in teaching bands to sight-read; I encourage you to adopt this teaching tool.

You will begin by teaching whole notes, half notes and quarter notes. You may introduce whole notes or quarter notes first. Either is fine. I start with whole notes. Do not talk to them yet about time signatures but do explain measures and bar lines, and explain that a measure has four beats in it.

Have the students sit with correct posture and ask them to pat their foot. Explain that to pat their foot correctly, they must keep their heel of their foot on the floor and quietly tap their toe. Make sure you tell them they will not be following instructions if they stomp their foot or make noise at all. If you allow them to stomp their foot now, you will be amazed at how much louder their foot pat will be when they dress up for a concert. Those soft soled tennis shoes will become hard soled dress shoes, especially with the girls, and the noise will be distracting. Be specific about “quietly tapping the toe.”

While counting to four, have the students pat their toe while sitting up straight. Practice this with a steady beat, making sure every student is counting out loud. Don't allow them to shout, but they should count aloud. Let them know that part of the process is to train their brain and that they need to tap their toe and count out loud.

Using a marker board or chalk board, draw a measure and a whole note inside of it. Tell the students that a whole note gets four beats and that they must memorize that. Then to test to see if they are paying attention, ask the students to raise their hand if they can tell you how many beats are in a whole note.

I play a silly game with my students, that is an attempt to get them to internalize new information more quickly. You may try it or you may not want to use it. It is not an integral part of my system and you may discard it if you wish.

Immediately after teaching a new concept, such as a whole note gets four counts, I ask the students how many counts a whole note receives. When someone says “four”, I act like I'm disappointed that they didn't get it right. “Are you sure?” I ask? If they have been listening, they are firm in their response. Often, I can get them to vacillate and change the answer. If they do, I tell them that I was attempting to trick them to see if they were sure. I give this example to them, “if I told you that your name was Alphonzo or Elvira, you wouldn't hesitate or agree with me. Since you know your name, I can't trick you. Watch out! I will try to trick you if you aren't paying attention.”

Show the students that a whole note gets four beats by drawing 1-2-3-4 underneath the whole note that you have drawn on the board. Draw a circle around the four numbers (but not the whole note) and explain that all four counts are inside the whole note. Ask the students to sit up straight and clap the rhythm once with you. Demonstrate first that they should clap on one, and then hold their hands together while counting 2-3-4. Make sure that they are patting their foot and counting aloud while they clap the whole note. Don't be surprised at the number of students who will clap four times. Correct them patiently and do it again until all of the students can successfully clap a whole note.

Next to the whole note draw a measure with two half notes in it. Write in the counts underneath the two half notes. Under the first half note write 1-2 and circle them, under the second half note write 3-4 and circle them. Explain to the students (in super slow motion) that they are to clap on 1, hold on two, clap on 3 and hold on four while patting their foot and counting. Practice the second measure by itself until the

students are able to master it. When the second measure is learned, ask the students to clap both measures.

In the paragraph above I mentioned what I call “super slow motion”. When teaching new rhythms for the first time, I do not keep a steady tempo, but stop at each beat and demonstrate it to the kids. If eighth notes are involved, I stop at each half beat and demonstrate it to them. I ask the students to copy me by doing the rhythm in “super slow motion” with me. As the students begin to understand the rhythm, I will gradually go from a slow tempo up to a moderate tempo.

In the third measure, draw four quarter notes. Under each quarter note draw a number. Under the first quarter note write a 1, under the second a 2, under the third a 3 and under the fourth a 4. Explain and demonstrate that the students are to clap on 1, clap on 2, clap on 3 etc., while patting their foot and counting out loud. When they master the third measure, ask them to combine measures 1 through 3. Practice until they can all do it well.

After you have introduced whole, half and quarter notes, you may proceed to other combinations. (A half note and two quarter notes; two quarter notes and a half note and a quarter note followed by a half note followed by a quarter note.) Practice each measure, and then combine all of the measures. Make an effort to commend and congratulate the students for their success. Let them know that their success will result in them being better musicians.

Practice clapping rhythms daily. A great use of your students’ time will be to have a new rhythm (or more) written on the board each day before class. As students enter, they are to sit quietly and “finger tip study”. When all of the students are in their seats, clap it together, going over any problem areas that the students encounter. This accomplishes two things; it gets them quiet without wasting time, and gets them started reviewing rhythms.

Drill work in this area will pay huge dividends in the future. Later I will introduce some fun activities that will help to keep learning rhythm fun and enjoyable for you and the kids.

Teaching Rhythm Correctly the First Time

One of the most important aspects of reading music is the ability to read rhythms. Reading rhythms along with note recognition and finger facility are the major factors in determining sight reading ability.

When teaching students to read rhythms, the first aspect is to instill the habit of clapping, counting and patting the foot as in step one already mentioned. Drill rhythms on a daily basis by reviewing already learned rhythms and introducing new ones.

Introducing Eighth Notes

For several weeks prior to teaching eighth notes, have the students practice clapping on the down pat and the up pat of their foot. To do this, ask the students to tie an imaginary string onto the toe of their foot and the bottom of the palm of their hand.

When they pull up on the string, their toe pulls up, when they pull the foot down the hand goes down as well. Practice saying down-up-down-up many times and watch the foot pats. Make sure that they say “down-up” while they move their foot.

When the students are good at the hand-foot coordination, have them clap on the down and then on the up. This is most easily accomplished by clapping on the down, and then all pause and wait to clap on the up. Little by little, add some tempo to it and the beat will become established. Watch the foot pat, it must stay with the hand and mouth on “down-up”.

The preparation to clap eighth note rhythms should last several days and should be well established before proceeding to the next step. Watch to make sure that all students are easily able to accomplish clapping on the down and on the up, without the foot going down-down. There is a kinesthetic benefit in taking the time to establish this ability in the students.

Next, after practicing the clapping on the down-up, write eight eighth notes on the board in groups of two. There will be four beats of eighth notes clearly bracketed in groups of two.

Let the class know that they have been clapping the pattern you have written on the board, then draw over the notes, arrows pointing down on the first of each group and up on the second of each group. The arrows will be showing down-up, down-up, down-up, down-up. Have the students clap that with you and say “down-up”.

Now, underneath the notes, write the numbers under the first note and the up arrow on the second note of each group. The numbers and arrow will be showing 1-up, 2-up, 3-up, 4-up, drawn under the eight eighth notes. Have the students practice clapping the rhythms with you again only this time saying “1-up, 2-up, 3-up, 4-up”, as they clap.

On the board you should have eight eighth notes with the 1-up, 2-up, 3-up, 4-up written under them. Ask the students how many eighth notes are in a quarter note. Guide them to the understanding that there are two eighth notes in a quarter note. When you have established that, erase the two notes on beat one and place a quarter note in their place. Under the quarter note write 1-up and circle the numbers “1-up”. Tell the students that the circle means you clap on the first (number) and hold on the second (arrow).

Tell the students to clap with you in slow motion. Then guide them in clapping the rhythm. “Clap on one, hold on up, clap on two, clap on up, clap on three, clap on up, clap on four, clap on up”. Practice the rhythm repeatedly until all students are able to do it.

Continue to take out groups of two eighth notes, asking the students how many eighth notes are in a quarter note, then placing a quarter note in the pattern and writing a circle around “2-up” or whatever beat you are on. Practice each one in slow motion, then in faster tempos. Eventually you will have four quarter notes on the board with numbers and arrows under them circled to show that the quarter notes have downs and ups within them.

The next step is to start with all eight eighth notes again and change the patterns until the students understand that the two eighth notes equal one quarter note and that you can interchange them on any beat. Practice this daily at the beginning of class until students are easily able to comprehend and demonstrate the ability to clap eighth note rhythms.

After a few days of work in this area, proceed to the eighth note rhythm sheet. Practice it measure by measure, even writing each measure on the board and showing the counts.

Eighth Note Rhythm Sheet

I have an Eighth Note Rhythm Sheet that you can download at www.banddaddy.com. Any similar sheet will work fine; there is no magic in the one mentioned. It is important that there be a methodical introduction and coverage of eighth note rhythms.

After introducing eighth notes as explained in the section above, clap a measure at a time by writing the measure on the board, writing the counting under it and then clapping it repeatedly until all of the students are getting it. There will be a large majority of your students who will understand what they are clapping and a few who will not. The few who do not understand will benefit from the drill, and will improve their rhythmical abilities as well, although more slowly than others.

After you drill each measure, you will have the students clap the whole line. So you start at measure 26, proceed to measure 27 and all the way on down to measure 33. When the students are proficient in each measure, practice the whole line. This pattern will be repeated on each measure and line.

After the students are proficient on the complete Eighth Note Rhythm Sheet, you can take the next step in teaching rhythms, and that is to have the students count the rhythms. Explain to them that they will say the number where the note begins and hold out that note as long as the note lasts. Rests are whispered as if the rhythm were a note.

Measure 26 through 29 will sound like this “1, 2-up, 3, 4/ 1, 2-up, 3-----/1-up, 2-up, 3, 4/ 1-up, 2-up, 3-----/ etc. This step will sequence the students from clapping to counting rhythms in a way that will help them internalize the beat and the rhythms that you have drilled into them.

Sixteenth Note Rhythm Sheet

Begin teaching sixteenth rhythms by writing four groups of eighth notes on the board. Place them in groups of two so that there are four beats of eighth notes evident. Discuss the foot pat and that eighth notes correspond to the down-up of the foot.

Explain to the students that when you begin counting sixteenth notes, there will be two sixteenth notes on the down-beat and two on the up-beat. Tell them that the syllables used are, “down-e” on the down-beat, and “up-e” on the up beat. With the foot, the syllables should be stated very methodically, like a metronome, “1-e-up-e, 2-e-up-e, 3-e-up-e, 4-e-up-e”. Keep the tempo relatively slow, quarter note about 60-72 on the metronome. Watch carefully to make sure that all of the student’s feet are going up and down with the syllables recited. Practice this repeatedly until the students can easily able to count sixteenths and pat their foot.

Do not clap with sixteenth notes. Clapping sixteenths will slow the beat down to a speed that will not be useful in most music. Clapping is also difficult to keep together on sixteenth notes. Counting is easier, it can be sped up, and it is easier to keep together.

The **Sixteenth Note Rhythm Sheet** will be used for the remainder of teaching sixteenth rhythms. You can get a free copy at www.banddaddy.com.

Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet (Measures 1-5)

Using the Sixteenth Note Rhythm Sheet, teach the first line, measures 1-5 first. Explain to the students that each group of four sixteenths is equal to one quarter note, and that you want them to count each group of four as if it were a quarter note. Teach the students to count measures 1-5 like this:

1, 2, 3, 4/1, 2(whisper), 3, 4(whisper)/1(whisper), 2, 3(whisper), 4/1(whisper), 2, 3, 4(whisper).

To simplify things for the future, I will denote the out-loud counts as numbers and the rests (whispers) as numbers in parenthesis. Measures 1 through 5 would look like this:

1, 2, 3, 4/ 1, (2), 3, (4)/ (1), 2, (3), 4/ 1, (2), (3), 4/ (1), 2, 3, (4)/

Spend a couple of days just counting the first line as if it were quarter notes, before proceeding to counting it as sixteenth notes. Establishing the pattern of notes versus rests is going to be beneficial later on the Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet, because the beginning of the sheet is written so that every line uses this pattern.

When it is time to continue, explain again to the students that when counting sixteenth notes, there will be two on the down-beat of each quarter note and two on the up-beat of each quarter note.

Practice **measure 1** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, up, e, 2, e, up, e, 3, e, up, e, 4, e, up, e/

Practice **measure 2** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, up, e, (2, e, up, e,) 3, e, up, e, (4, e, up, e)/

The students will count out loud on beats 1 and 3, and whisper on 2 and 4.

Practice **measure 3** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

(1, e, up, e,) 2, e, up, e, (3, e, up, e,) 4, e, up, e/

Practice **measure 4** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, up, e, (2, e, up, e,)(3, e, up, e,) 4, e, up, e/

Practice **measure 5** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

(1, e, up, e,) 2, e, up, e, 3, e, up, e, (4, e, up, e)/

After each measure is well established, practice counting the whole line, speeding up the tempo as the students gain proficiency.

Practice the above exercise daily until measures 1-5 are easy for all of the students. Do not proceed to the next line until each line is well established in all of the students.

Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet (Measures 6-10)

Once again, explain to the students that each group sixteenths in measures 6-10 is equal to one quarter note, and that you want them to count each group of four as if it were a quarter note. Teach the students to count measures 6-10 like this:

1, 2, 3, 4/ 1, (2), 3, (4)/ (1), 2, (3), 4/ 1, (2), (3), 4/ (1), 2, 3, (4)/

Spend a couple of days just counting the line as if it were quarter notes, before proceeding to counting it as sixteenth notes.

When it is time to continue, explain to the students that when counting measure 6-10, there will be two notes on the down-beat of each pattern, and one on the up-beat.

Practice **measure 6** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, up, 2, e, up, 3, e, up, 4, e, up/

Practice **measure 7** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, up, (2, e, up,) 3, e, up, (4, e, up)/

Practice **measure 8** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, up, (2, e, up), 3, e, up, (4, e, up)/

Practice **measure 9** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, up, (2, e, up,) (3, e, up,) 4, e, up/

Practice **measure 10** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

(1, e, up,) 2, e, up, 3, e, up, (4, e, up)/

After each measure is well established, practice counting the whole line, speeding up the tempo as the students gain proficiency.

Practice the above exercise daily until measures 6-10 are easy for all of the students. Do not proceed to the next line until each line is well established in all of the students.

Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet (Measures 11-15)

Once again, explain to the students that each group sixteenths in measures 11-15 is equal to one quarter note, and that you want them to count each group of four as if it were a quarter note. Teach the students to count measures 11-15 like this:

1, 2, 3, 4/ 1, (2), 3, (4)/ (1), 2, (3), 4/ 1, (2), (3), 4/ (1), 2, 3, (4)/

Spend a couple of days just counting the line as if it were quarter notes, before proceeding to counting it as sixteenth notes.

When it is time to continue, explain to the students that when counting measure 11-15, there will be one note on the down-beat of each pattern, and two on the up-beat.

Practice **measure 11** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, up, e, 2, up, e, 3, up, e, 4, up, e/

Practice **measure 12** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, up, e, (2, up, e,) 3, up, e, (4, up, e)/

Practice **measure 13** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, up, e, (2, up, e,), 3, up, e, (4, up, e,)/

Practice **measure 14** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, up, e, (2, up, e,) (3, up, e,) 4, up, e, /

Practice **measure 15** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

(1, up, e,) 2, up, e, 3, up, e, (4, up, e,) /

After each measure is well established, practice counting the whole line, speeding up the tempo as the students gain proficiency.

Practice the above exercise daily until measures 11-15 are easy for all of the students. Do not proceed to the next line until each line is well established in all of the students.

Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet (Measures 16-20)

Once again, explain to the students that each group sixteenths in measures 16-15 is equal to one quarter note, and that you want them to count each group of four as if it were a quarter note. Teach the students to count measures 16-20 like this:

1, 2, 3, 4 / 1, (2), 3, (4) / (1), 2, (3), 4 / 1, (2), (3), 4 / (1), 2, 3, (4) /

Spend time just counting the line as if it were quarter notes, before proceeding to counting it as sixteenth notes.

Measures 16-20 are more complex than previous lines, but not difficult if approached slowly at first and practiced daily. The same routine as before, counting out loud on notes and whispering rests will enable the students to learn this rhythm.

When it is time to continue, explain to the students that when counting measure 16-20, there will be two notes on the down-beat of each pattern, and a rest on the up-pat where they will whisper "up", and the fourth sixteenth of each pattern after the up-beat.

Practice **measure 16** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, (up,) e, 2, e, (up,) e, 3, e, (up,) e, 4, e, (up,) e /

Practice **measure 17** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, (up,) e, (2, e, up, e), 3, e, (up,) e, (4, e, up, e) /

Practice **measure 18** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

(1, e, up, e,) 2, e, (up,) e, (3, e, up, e,) 4, e, (up,) e /

Practice **measure 19** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

1, e, (up,) e, (2, e, up, e,) (3, e, up, e,) 4, e, (up,) e/

Practice **measure 20** repeatedly until the students can count steadily with the foot-pat:

(1, e, up, e,) 2, e, (up,) e, 3, e, (up,) e, (4, e, up, e)/

After each measure is well established, practice counting the whole line, speeding up the tempo as the students gain proficiency. As the tempo gets faster, students will probably need to quit whispering the sixteenth rest. This is O.K. and will result in the following syllables being counted in measure 16:

1, e, -- e, 2, e, -- e, 3, e, -- e, 4, e, -- e/

The rest will not be counted as a whisper but will be silent. Make sure that the up-pat of the foot pulls up, right on the silent up.

Practice the above exercise daily until measures 16-20 are easy for all of the students. Do not proceed to the next line until each line is well established in all of the students.

Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet (Measures 21-25)

This once difficult rhythm will actually be easy for students, if they have learned measure sixteen through 20. The syllables used are the same, with the second syllable being sustained slightly longer and no rest put in the counting. Explain to the students that there are two sixteenth notes inside the eighth note and the “up” is combined in the counting.

The syllables used will be:

1, e-e, e, 2, e-e, e, 3, e-e, e, 4, e-e, e/

With practice this rhythm will be easy for the students to understand.

Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet (Measures 26-30)

This rhythm is easy to explain if you go back to measure one and explain that there are three sixteenth notes in a dotted eighth note. There are in effect two sixteenths on the down-pat and two others tied into the second one.

The syllables used will be:

1, e-e-e, 2, e-e-e, 3, e-e-e , 4, e-e-e /

With practice this rhythm will be easy for the students to understand.

Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet (Measures 31-40)

Rather than continue to explain the method of teaching each different rhythm, suffice it to say that if you continue to use the methods outlined above, the students will easily understand sixteenth rhythms. With enough practice counting these rhythms, the students will do very well when they need to be able to analyze and count sixteenth rhythms. To become good sight readers, it really does become a matter of drilling and practicing the rhythms enough until the students can recite the counts at will, automatically.

Sixteenth Rhythm Sheet (Measures 41-60)

The rest of the rhythm sheet is practice at what you have already drilled. The early measures can be practiced after you complete measures 1-15. The later measures introduce some patterns that are not practiced in the drill section, but you will find that students understand them easily, even though they will take a lot of practice to get good at them.

After students have spent enough time learning the rhythms and can count them, have them play the patterns on any note and practice matching the foot-pat properly. There will be a tempo at which they will not always be able to tongue the sixteenths, so be careful not to push it past their ability to tongue.

Any Method Is Better Than None

If you will adopt some method of teaching rhythm and make it a daily part of warm-up, you will see results. Any method of teaching rhythm is better than none. I wish you and your students the best of luck.