

Make the Metronome Your Friend

by
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It's very common for me to have my students play with a metronome during a lesson. If the students have trouble keeping in time with it, I often ask if they practice with one. Frequently the answer is no. When I question a student about why this obvious learning step was omitted, I often hear, "I'm not comfortable using the metronome;" or "I hate it! I can never stay with it!"

Sound familiar? Even though I am somewhat of a tyrant about students using the metronome, I'm never in their practice rooms to enforce my policy. In fact, no teacher can ever make a student use one except during the lesson. A student must want to use the metronome, which means knowing how and when to use it and using it frequently. This won't happen until the student and the metronome become "friends."

Below are some suggestions regarding metronome usage. Once the student understands the benefits of using this "persistent clicker," the metronome may become more of a friend than a foe.

Why Use the Metronome

Before a student can be persuaded to use a metronome, he or she has to know why it is important. The most obvious answer is to help keep rhythms even and clean. Another reason is to keep the meter consistent, placing beats in their proper positions in the music.

Metronomes can also help a student to find and fix problems. That is what a teacher does during the once-a-week lesson, but something a student may do far too seldom in the practice room. The metronome quickly alerts the player to these problems by suddenly not clicking in time with the player's beats. That is when a metronome is most useful, when the student is no longer with it. Then the true learning can begin. So, like a mirror, a tuner, or a teacher, a metronome is just another tool to help the student become his or her own teacher.

Of course the main goal is to no longer need a metronome. That constant ticking should eventually become internalized inside the musician, creating a regular and accurate "inner metronome." Far too many players, however, assume that they can get to the final stage without using this valuable tool.

Purchasing a Metronome

Once the need for a metronome is accepted, the purchase can be made. Several should be tested to find the one that best fits the student's needs. The comments below should be considered before making the final purchase.

Buy an electric metronome. Today's electronic circuits help guarantee that modern metronomes are more even and accurate than the older wind-up models. Many come with an AC adapter, which allows power from either batteries or wall sockets.

Buy a loud metronome. Be sure that the metronome's tick is loud. Often the saxophone dynamic is loud and can easily cover the sound of a soft-ticking metronome. Test the metronome to be sure it can be heard over at least a *mezzo forte* playing volume. Consider timbre of the metronome tick as well. Some are rather high pitched and easily heard at most playing volumes, while others are dark and easily covered. Some even have volume controls, which provide the most options.

Buy a metronome with a light. A visible flashing, rather than an audible ticking, can be a very useful feature on a metronome. Be sure the light is bright and obvious. It is especially useful if the metronome has a function to turn the light on and off.

Buy a metronome with subdivision capabilities. This will allow you to hear subdivisions while thinking the larger beat. A metronome with subdivisions also can click twice as fast. (While most only tick around 208 as the maximum, a subdivision metronome can double that, giving you 416 ticks per minute.) Also consider a metronome that produces a different sound to indicate the beginning of duple, triple, and quadruple meters. This can be very useful for more complicated contemporary pieces, where rhythms can obscure metric downbeats.

Buy single-function metronomes. Some expensive models provide more than one function, such as doubling as a tuner. While the design of two machines combined into one unit may be convenient, you usually can't use both functions at the same time. I recommend that you buy just a metronome, to give yourself the most practicing flexibility. (Metronomes with multi-beat functions and many options, however, are highly recommended.)

Befriending the Metronome

For a person to be considered a friend, he or she has to be someone with whom you spend a lot of time. The same is true with a metronome. It's logical to assume that you won't be comfortable with one, if you only use it occasionally. It takes time to get used to that never-ending tick and to view it as a help, not a nuisance. Consider these steps toward making the metronome friendlier.

Use the metronome in every practice session. Frequent usage will breed familiarity. It may be torture at first, but force yourself to use it almost all the time at first. (Using it in the daily warm-up routine is a perfect place to start, since this material is often the most familiar and most rhythmically accurate.)

Listen to the metronome. This may sound silly, but it is surprising how many students turn the metronome on, but totally ignore it. A clicking metronome is of no value unless it is being heard.

Don't tap your foot. Foot patting can be a very useful tool for keeping the beat, however it can often be in conflict with a metronome. Follow the metronome and allow it, not your foot, to keep the pulse in the practice room. (Eventually that persistent tick will be internalized, allowing your foot pat to become more even and consistent.)

Trust the metronome. Modern metronomes are very accurate; most humans are not. If you are playing along and suddenly realize you are not with the metronome, assume that you are wrong. Then go back and find out why.

Finding creative ways to use this electronic tool is a very personal task. The metronome can be invaluable in mastering the finger control of scales and chordal patterns. It can point out places in a technical passage where you may be rushing (the norm) or dragging the beat. Most of all, however, a metronome can help the player build that sense of rhythmic and metric evenness so important in music making. Let's face it, it has to happen eventually, so why not start making that new friend today.