

Groove-Based Practice for Horn Players

Jeffrey Agrell

As far as the rhythmic aspect is concerned, traditional horn etudes use mostly simple (duple and triple) meter and rhythms. Contemporary etudes may use more complex rhythms or meter, but often aperiodically or irregularly. What's missing? Groove! Boogie. World musics are overflowing with catchy rhythms, which are, to even the casual observer, studiously avoided in Western art music, which emphasizes melody and harmony to the neglect of rhythmic vitality and challenge.

Systematic study of rhythm is completely absent from traditional (classical) studies for horn (and every other instrument except percussion). We (classical musicians) are steeped in pitch studies (scales, arpeggios, etc.). Our training is all about notation and the getting the note (pitch).

We are apparently supposed to pick up rhythmic skills as we go, and the little rhythm study that do we get is devoted to interpreting notation, not in developing a *feel* for pulse and rhythm. "Feel" means a deeper sense of time, pulse, and rhythm as opposed to the superficial classical level of notation interpretation where we simply count the numbers of the beats as they go by (and hope they match the actual pulse). We are easily distracted and get lost relatively easily with this method; if something rhythmically different is going on within earshot, or we enter a syncopated section, or go into odd or mixed meters, we are much too likely to be thrown off.

"Feel" is not about counting numbers. *Feel is the inner sense of knowing where you are in time and at all times*, regardless of what you or anyone else is playing. Classical playing in general usually has someone (somewhere in the score) to "metronome" the beat constantly and plainly so that players are constantly reminded where the beat is and they are supposed to be. Players who have developed a deep sense of rhythmic "feel", on the other hand, have an inner metronome that informs their rhythmic "GPS"; they can play with or against the beat, speed up or slow down or even play out of time all together, but they still know exactly where they are in the form. Jazz players and players of various world musics acquire this as part of their stock in trade, but for most of us, classical training hinders or retards the acquisition of this level of rhythmic feel.

The millennium musician of today needs to go beyond the limits of traditional training and embark on a journey to develop a deeper sense of time feel. This takes time (no pun intended), practice, and patience, so the best time (there's that word again) to start is now. There are many ways to effect this kind of training; we are

going to propose some ways to get started here, emphasizing a simple technique that has somehow eluded those who have constructed etudes for horn players: the Groove. Otherwise known as a Ride, or, more classically as an ostinato. It is no mystery why the classical tradition has ignored using Groove: Classical music is based on pitches (melody, harmony), not rhythm, and musical cultures that are more rhythmic-based and aurally transmitted (as opposed to notation-only study as in Western tradition) are seen as more “primitive” and are studied mainly in their own, separate department in academia (ethnomusicology), being [snark alert] unworthy of being studied with *real* music [end snark alert].

We don't think this way. We think that there is a fabulous wealth of rhythm-based music right under our noses that we can learn from and improve our sense of beat, pulse, and rhythm. The exercises that follow are taken principally from Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, and African traditions, but there are of course many other world musics that could serve as wonderful sources of rhythm study.

Note: we in the Western art music tradition are used to considering pitch the highest value in what we do – Get the note! Don't miss the note! – so it will take some adjustment to considering some other musical element (RHYTHM) as the most important element for study. In the following exercises, the exact pitch you choose to play is very nearly irrelevant. We suggest you make choices that are very easy, pitch-wise, so that you can focus on the rhythmic aspect. You can (and should) of course use the exercise to improve your melodic playing (scales, arpeggios), but this is completely secondary to the primary goal of rhythm.

Rhythm Warm-Up Exercises

In most cases, you will need a (LOUD) metronome as accompaniment to all rhythm exercises. In more advanced exercises, you could also substitute a back-up rhythm track (friends with percussion instruments, rhythm apps (like Drumgenius or Afro Latin Drum Machine), or programs like GarageBand or Band in a Box) for the plain vanilla click of a metronome.

A word about your feet. Go ahead and tap them. As a matter of fact, do two things: 1) Help your foot/feet make lots of noise: use hard shoes on a hard surface (wood floors are great); fasten a bottle cap or two to each shoe sole; buy foot percussion (various shakers, tambourines, etc. that attach to your foot or shoe with elastic bands, etc.) and 2) *practice* tapping strictly your feet in time. Just your foot with the metronome, nothing else. Can you be exact? Consistently? If you are friends with a drummer, convince them to lend you some foot pedal percussion, like a high hat or bass drum, or cajon with a pedal, that sort of thing. It's worth a try.

Characteristics of Groove-Based Practice

1. The Ears Have It. Classical music is devoted to the printed note. Classical instruments have the peculiar quality of being mute when not in the immediate presence of ink. True, some instruments (e.g. piano, strings) are accustomed to performing pieces from memory, but they are really just playing from scores in their heads. Their learning process is still largely notation-based. GBP may use some written material to get started or recall a rhythm, but getting off the page as soon as possible (or not use it at all) is highly encouraged. Notation is only used to clarify or illustrate a basic principle – it is up to the player to extrapolate and create many possible versions and variations. Continuous staring at ink is discouraged. GBP is largely aural (away from music notation), either for the player practicing alone, or for work in groups.

2. Groups are Good. The paradigm for classical practice is like a monk in a cell – work alone. GBP may be done alone, but it works especially well in groups, since GBP works best when one rhythm plays against another. This can be done in a simple sense with a metronome as partner, but is more interesting when done with other players. Other pluses: more than two rhythmic layers at a time are possible with more players, and players can switch off roles to deepen their experience and understanding.

3. Repetition. Any kind of practice, classical or otherwise involves repetition of some sort. Classical practice, especially for horn players, is mostly concerned with finding and fixing errors of pitch. Classical practice repetition is seldom characterized as “fun”; it’s more of a necessary evil to be endured for most of us. This kind of repetition and this attitude are part and parcel of the definition of what practice means to us traditionally trained players. Players of other styles of music don’t subscribe to this definition. Some players in jazz and other non-classical genres might even deny that they “practice” – they just say that they “play,” which means that what they do is less like doing one thing over and over and more like *music*. One of the things that makes it this way – and makes this version of practice fascinating and fun – is groove. Rhythmic interest and variation. This can be done alone (well, with a metronome or other time source) or with others. When a partner lays down some catchy groove accompaniments, it is irresistible to play over them.

4. Simplifying Pitch Choices. Classical practice focuses on control of pitch. The element of rhythm is usually kept very simple: usually duple meter with limited note values (e.g. scales in steady 8th notes). In GBP, pitch choices are simpler (at least at the beginning) in order to concentrate on rhythmic challenges: mixed and/or odd meters, syncopation, wide range of note values and tempos, and so on.

5. Metronomicity. Classical practice of technique often uses a metronome as an external check on the player’s consistency of pulse and accuracy of note values, usually pulsing on every beat (4/4 meter gets four quarter note clicks). GBP uses the metronome in many different ways, and for a different goal, i.e. the development of

an *internal* time feel. Playing quarter notes and 8th notes over a quarter note metronome click is quite different from, for example, hearing the metronome click on the third note of swing triplets while you play on the second triplet eighth of every beat, or playing a string of mixed meters over one steady click. *Inchronation* (author and percussionist Mac Santiago's word for the rhythm equivalent of intonation for pitch) gets really interesting in some cases where, the player orients to a *line/sound/rhythm that is not being played*, such as the *son clave* beat in Afro-Cuban music.

6. Move It, Move It. Classical players are trapped in visual tradition: things are just so in performance and not otherwise. Players play from printed parts, are required to wear formal clothing, and are forbidden to tap toes in concert or otherwise do more than minimal moving. GBP encourages players to consider practice or performance of groove-based music a chance to “dance” through their instruments and music and to move as much as possible.

7. Sing. Clap. Dance. Play. Classical players may occasionally sing tricky passages, but most players most of the time just practice using their instruments. In GBP, the instrument comes last in the learning process. Working on a new rhythm? Sing it first (or: make up a sentence with the rhythm and speak it). When that goes well, clap it. Sing and clap it together. Clap the beat and sing the rhythm. Get your feet into the act and step the beat and sing, clap, or both. Or step the beat and sing and clap different rhythms. When this goes well, pick up your horn. Note how quickly you master the rhythm on your instrument with this routine.

8. Multitasking. As indicated in #7, GBP establishes a deeper sense of pulse by challenging the player to do several things at once. Singing, clapping, and stepping at the same time is one thing; playing one rhythm and meter while hearing a different beat, rhythm, or meter is another.

The Groove exercises can be used in all kinds of technical study. We will outline some ways to use GBP with the harmonic (or overtone) series, scales, arpeggios, and more.

#1 - Accents!

The first step in more rhythmic challenges might be simply acquiring familiarity and comfort in being able to add various kinds of accents to your scales, arpeggios, and patterns, instead of playing everything the same, i.e. accent-free. To start, make a choice of the F overtone series, the C major scale, or C major arpeggio. Pick one for now, then return to do the other two later. Also: when possible, repeat the overtone exercises in other “horns” (fingerings) and the scales and arpeggios in all other keys (you can do this over several days or even weeks).

Defaults

Consider these three your Default choices – same choices in nearly every exercise to come. Default means what you play when you start each time, unless it is specified otherwise. Other defaults:

- Starting metronome marking of a comfortable tempo: MM = 72.
- Clap and/or sing the exercise, if even briefly. If you can't sing it, you can't play it.
- Start with only one or two pitches for the entire exercise (most of which are quite short). As you gain familiarity you may gradually establish a wider range, but for some time move mostly stepwise (or to the next adjacent overtone). You can add more leaps later. *Tip:* With scales, experiment with all/every length of scale.
- Pitch is secondary. A comfortable chord tone is your default choice, which may be different from someone else's.

Accent exercise

Start the metronome (amplify it if necessary) at quarter note = 72. Play a string of eighth notes. Before adding any accents, listen to see if your 8ths are exactly with the click. Then start with an accent every 5th eighth. Make it a clear difference between accented and unaccented notes. If there are several players, everyone can play in unison here. Then Player 1 starts accenting every three notes. Next, Player 2 starts playing groups of five (accenting every sixth note). Player 3: groups of six. Player 4: groups of seven (2+2+2+3 – subdivisions are okay to start). Player 5: groups of eighth, but accented 3+3+2.

Clap it first. Then: players should start with one note (pitch) only. Then gradually add more.

When everyone has spent some time on all accents and can play scales (etc.) over a wider range, bump up the tempo, say, to MM=84. Repeat tempo increases as you gain mastery and familiarity at each level.

Idea: Try different kinds of articulation: 1) all tongued 2) all slurred and especially 3) mixed articulation

Note: If you feel a bit over your head at any point, decrease the tempo.

Variation 1: Switch to any other accent group at will (e.g. switch from accenting every three to every seven).

Variation 2: Instead of accenting on the first note of every grouping, be silent (reverse accent?) on that note.

Variation 3: Limit the group to 3 or 4 players. Free choice for all of any accent grouping, how long to stay on it, and when to change to a new one.

Variation 4: Instead of constant 8th notes, play all long notes, each equal to the length of the accent grouping.

#2 Pulse/Meter Challenge #1

Note that every measure is a different meter, but the meters are not printed.

1) Use ♩ click 2) Use ♩. click

As preparation, warm up and get familiar with this sequence by changing the clapping pattern every measure to match the rhythms. You can also help your singing/speaking rhythms by adding syllables: say “ta-ka” for duple rhythms and “ta-ki-ta” for triple rhythms (everything can be broken down into groups of two or three). At higher speeds you could use “ta ka di mi” instead of “ta ka ta ka.”

Got it? Now: set the metronome to click on every quarter note. Moderate tempo. Sing and/or clap it again. Note that this quarter note click will *not* line up every measure. Be able to do every measure in isolation first before you tackle longer strings (add measures progressively). Your mission is to keep absolutely consistent and steady and not be “thrown” when the click does not line up. Repeat without stopping when you get to the last measure. Once you can sing/clap it, play it.

No problem? Good. Repeat all at a faster tempo. As before, repeat until very comfortable and familiar. Then up the tempo again, and so on.

When you can run it this way fairly effortlessly and accurately, repeat it all again with a new challenge: set the (slightly slower) metronome click to a **dotted quarter**. This may seem a bit tricky when you’re used to the quarter note click. Again: sing/clap each measure in isolation against this new click before you do longer strings of them.

For this and all exercises, don’t stop after only a couple times through. If possible, continue for several minutes after you can sync up consistently; give it time to sink in, work the *feel* of the rhythm into your DNA. What we are aiming at is a feeling of *effortless* awareness of pulse. That takes time and practice. When you lock in, sit on it. Live in it. Breath it. Own it. Enjoy your new life in the Beat.

#3. Pulse/Meter Challenge #2

Same challenge, different rhythmic sequence.

1) Use ♩ click 2) Use ♩. click



#4 Alternate Scale Rhythms

Our music school training has imbued in most of us the habit of practicing scales in very narrow ways, namely playing a scale up and down in one or more octaves in steady 8ths or 16ths. Borrrrr-ing. In our quest to deepen our sense of time feel and broaden our rhythmic vocabulary, we are going to list a whole bunch (technical term) of alternative rhythms that you can and should use regularly instead of steady 8ths or 16ths. For lagniappe, we have two other ideas: 1) practice these rhythms not just in octaves, but in every scale length, starting with two notes. 2) Any of these can be played with 1, 2, or 3 partners, either the same rhythm in canon or different rhythms against each other. Either is fun and fascinating.

Play everything with a metronome or any kind of back-up band (see below). Feel free to make up your own and add them to the pile. It goes without saying (so I'll say it anyway) that if you can nail all these patterns at one moderate tempo, ratchet up the tempo a bit to maintain a challenge and keep yourself alert.

The examples are given on one pitch, since pitch choice is up to you. Each measure is separate; use each by itself to practice scales (or arpeggios). Switch to another one (not necessarily in this order) at will.



Try one or two new ones each day. Note that these rhythms are given in quarters and eighths; you may encounter the same rhythms as 8ths and 16ths.

Idea: use these rhythms not only for scales but also for practicing arpeggios and overtone exercises.

Of course: Apply these rhythms to all keys and other scale types (minors, dominant 7th, chromatic, pentatonic, etc.) as well.

4A. These scale rhythms are set in duple meter, which is a great place to start, but shouldn't be where you stop with new scale rhythms. We don't have space here to list possibilities in other meters – except that once you're comfortable using these duple meter variations, create versions in $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{6}{8}$; and then go back to the Pulse/Meter Challenges above and use all the odd meter measures as sources of new scale rhythms. Besides that, make up your own odd meter scale rhythms.

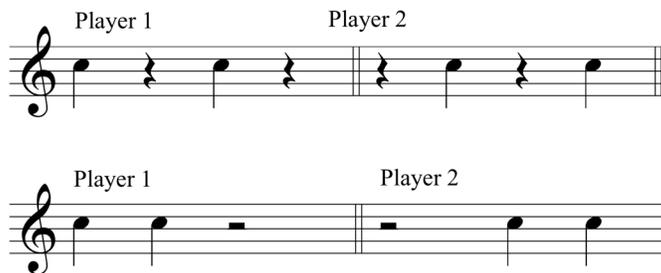
4B. Before you are even comfortable with duple or other new scale rhythms, you should reserve part of your practice to *free invention* of scale rhythms. They can be recurring ostinato figures, or through-composed. Do this with/against a strong quarter or dotted quarter metronome click.

#5 Background Grooves

While you are working on the above scale rhythms, it might be interesting to have some accompaniment. To that end, we provide below a number short background grooves for a collaborator to play while you do the scales (they fit only the duple examples above, but once you have the idea, you can tweak these or invent your own to fit odd meter scale rhythms). They are all two bars, and any of them could be used for any of the duple scale rhythms above. Feel free to tweak any of them in note or rhythm, and enjoy additional fun by making up more of your own. Trade off with your collaborator now and then to share the fun and experience of both roles. These Background Grooves are written only in C major, but they are simple enough to make transposition to other keys a piece of musical cake. (You are going to play them in all keys, aren't you? And in minor, et al.?).

Note: The BG player may play any of these in any order and repeat any *ad libitum*. They may also add or subtract notes or alter rhythms as they see fit. Transposition to other keys may also make certain note changes desirable.

Idea: Clap and/or sing them all before playing them.



The idea is simple: Player 2 fills in the gaps in Player 1's rhythm pattern. There are many possibilities; we give just a few here to stir your imagination.

Same idea with 4 players:



Interesting would be to work up any of these to a very quick tempo. As with all of these, make sure everyone gets to try every part.

Other ideas: the players may be independent of each other's rhythm choices, but it's also possible to have them relate, e.g. Player 2 could react to the direction of Player 1's line by either following the same direction or shape of Player 1's melody (up or down) or choosing to go in the opposite direction. P2 could also switch between these at will and/or add sections of being unaffected by P1's direction.

This 6/8 trio hoquet requires very exact performance (start with clapping it), but you will really sound like flamenco artists if you can nail the rhythms of this one. Learn it at variety of tempos, from medium to very fast. Can you maintain it for thirty seconds? A minute?



Advanced Hockets

Clave

This trio hoquet is the "three side" of the *son clave* rhythm, divided up. Unlike the others, there are some rests in spots for all three at once.



African Bell pattern

This hocket duet superimposes the two halves of the African Bell pattern:



Could also be played 1) 1 player playing both measures as scale rhythm; 2) as a canon, where P2 starts one measure after P1.

Two Measure Hocket



Odd Meter Hockets



African Rhythm Duets

The following scale rhythm duets are only one measure each, but each measure uses the longer, more complex rhythms characteristic of African percussion. As before, clap the patterns first until you can negotiate them with conviction. When you switch to the horn, stick to few notes at first. They are all one long measure; as before, simply keep repeating the rhythms of this measure as you play your scale or arpeggio.

Idea: Have both players play each part in unison (both clapping and with horn) as preparation for the duet. Note that the top part is the same for the first four while the lower part changes each time. If you have several players, play all of the lower parts together along with a doubled first line. Anyone left over should grab anything percussive and double the lines on percussion.

countermelody or 2) a simple(r) bass line, down under. The main idea is to explore and try stuff.

At some point someone should make up a new groove line for stacking, and the game begins again anew.

Variation 1: Try all different "horns" (keys/fingerings)

Variation 2: Switch to valves; try (eventually) all keys, many scale types.

Variation 3: This example is four measures, but try inventing new ones that are shorter.

Variation 4: These sound good mostly at brisk tempos, but experiment with a range of tempos, from slow to very fast.

Variation 5: Get away from duple. Try triple meters. Then odd! Live dangerously!