## **Developing Rhythmic Vocabulary**

## Working on your rhythmic conception

An article by:

Dr Christopher Smith -- TTU School of Music christopher.smith@ttu.edu webpages.acs.ttu.edu/chrissmi www.geocities.com/coyotebanjo

Here's a way to think about polyrhythms:

Imagine you have two instrumental parts, percussion or otherwise (handclaps, two different drums, two different pitched instruments, the left hand and right hand parts on piano or harp, etc). Imagine that you've got 6 8th notes (sorry for US-specific terminology) in each part, but that each part is accented differently. Part A counts "1 2 3 1 2 3", with accents on each "1":

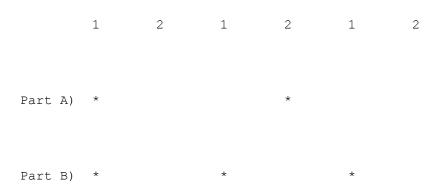
1 2 3 1 2 3
Part A) \* \*

Part B counts "1 2 1 2 1 2", with accents on each "1":

1 2 1 2 1 2

Part B) \* \*

Put them together and you get two parts, each of which takes up 6 beats (and hits together on every beginning of the cycle), but which places the accents in different locations: 1 2 3 1 2 3



What you'd hear is Part A going "123 123" and Part B going "12 12 12", with Part B's notes being shorter and coming quicker.

This is a polyrhythm sometimes referred to as "3 against 2", because it's a triplet feel (Part A) against a duplet feel (Part B).

The reason that polyrhythms are thought of as "Africanisms" is because the use of polyrhythms (and polymeters, wherein the above sort of thing is maintained not just for a phrase but for an entire composition) is an especially noticeable part of West and Central African indigenous musics; it's very widely practiced, both in ensembles where each player has 1 part, and in solo performance situations, where a single player thinks of each hand, or the hands versus feet, or the dance step versus the musical rhythm, as a "separate player."

It seems entirely possible to me that polyrhythms came into American old-timey music via the banjo and an indirect African influence, both for geographical reasons and also for reasons you can \_hear in the music\_. Somebody else said "but the early banjo was strummed, how can you have polyrhythms?" (paraphrased), as if 2 parts, or polyphony, have to be present for polyrhythms to be present. Technically that's true, but remember that you can play a counterrhythm, in a solo melodic or rhythmic line, which for a moment, or a phrase, or an extended section, works "polyrhythmically" against the underlying pulse.

Try this:

Sit down and tap the "123 123" of a typical jig or pipe march. Now, on your instrument, or with handclaps, or the voice, and using 8th notes of the same duration, play "12 12 12". You'll hear/feel the cross-rhythm between the 6/8 implied by the tapping and the 3/4 implied by the handclaps/voice/etc.

If you're playing an Irish or Scots tune solo, and you, for a moment, accent the notes of the melody line in such a way as to bring out such a cross-rhythm, you're at least "implying" (I'd say "playing") a polyrhythm to the underlying pulse. Drummers and dancers do it all the time.

I wouldn't say that "polyrhythmic implications in Scots or Irish music must come from Africa", but somebody doubted that there were p-rhythms in those repertoires at all. I'd say, maybe not as the tunes are printed on the page (and who cares about that?) but I'd suggest that p-rhythms are definitely \_implied\_ by lots of players in performance. Playing against the rhythms is one of the ways that melodists make the tunes "lift."