



No 1: Rhythm and Beat

This is the first in a series of short music articles to help understand some basic music concepts.

Music is such an influential part of everyday life with powerful effects, subtle as well as obvious.

Many parents express concern about certain styles of music and their effects, but they lack knowledge and confidence to discuss music with their children. Each article will focus on one specific music element, giving a simple definition and a brief description on how to discern God-honouring music.

Firstly we will jump in the deep end and look at possibly the most sensitive, controversial music elements which easily dominates music — **rhythm** and its partner, **beat**. These work together and many confuse them.

Beat

The simplest definition is 'Beat is e-ven just like se-conds tick-ing on a clock.' Watch a clock and say aloud one syllable with each

tick of the second hand. You will feel how even and steady beat is.

Rhythm

'Rhythm is loooooong and short sounds (take a quick breath) and silences moving through a tiiiimeliine.' The repeated vowels lengthen the vowel sound. The quick breath represents silence. Practise these two definitions several times and feel the difference.

Time

Beat and rhythm are both based on time. Time has a start, a middle and an end. In the big picture, God created the earthly timeline in the days of Creation (Genesis 1:1). The middle has lasted thousands of years and will come to an end (Luke 21:33). Our lives have a beginning, middle and end as do rhythm and beat in music even if it is only a few minutes long. A clock ticks (beats) silently or quietly in the background all the time and we do not notice it — just like our heartbeats. Time, rhythm and beat are essential to our lives. Beats are used to measure the length of sounds and silences just as a ruler measures length in centimetres or a clock measures time.

Beat and the heart

Beat is repetitious and monotonous as it moves along the timeline. A short definition could be 'Beat is boring.' Beat is the 'thump, thump, thump' from the car next to you at the traffic lights. Music beat, like our heartbeat, is essential but also very stressful when extreme. Just as heart

palpitations cause stress to the body, so fast beats in music overstimulate and cause stress. When the heart beat is quickened the body wants to move. Slow heartbeats mean relaxation. Music beat affects our heartbeat and can make our body move more or slow down. Our hearts try to align with the beat of the music. Excessive loud beat can be hypnotic, addictive and lead to mind control by the manipulator.

Rhythm patterns

In contrast to beat, rhythm has more variety and interest with countless different patterns of long and short sounds and silences which move around the regular even beat. The word rhythm comes from the Greek *rhythmos* meaning 'measured movement'. Some sounds and silences might last two or three or four beats or even a half or quarter of beat. Together rhythm and beat cause movement and patterns. Hence we talk about the 'rhythm of life' referring to patterns and cycles.

Syncopation

Syncopation is when sounds are emphasised between the main regular beats, and therefore can be called 'off beat' or 'back beat'. Syncopation can become a major issue when used in extremes. The heart naturally wants to align with the main beat, but when the offbeat is louder than the main beat, the heart gets confused, causing a physical reaction. The body moves, especially the hips. Syncopation is not always negative. Many classical and modern composers have used it sparingly and with positive results.

Syncopation can be likened to spices in food. Too much spoils the taste and makes you ill. Excessive syncopation affects health.

A dangerous combination

Combining excessive beat, rhythms and syncopation with excessive loudness and speed has dramatic effects on the body, mind, emotions and spirit. Certain hormones called **opioids** are released from the brain. Sex hormones and organs are affected and a 'high' is experienced. Pain thresholds are raised so the volume knob is turned up for more stimulation. The cycle continues and leads to addiction just like sugar, caffeine or nicotine. Evidence for this is easily seen in the immoral behaviour of youth who listen to contemporary music styles.

Rhythm and the body

Because of the direct physical effects of rhythm and beat, we can say that rhythm represents the body, the carnal nature of man. In later articles we will learn how melody represents the spirit and harmony the soul and also learn how to discern positive, healthy musical balance between the three elements.

Rhythm silences

An important and often neglected part of rhythm is the silences or breaths in music. These bring rest and refreshment to the rhythmic movement along the timeline. In music, silences are called **rests** and they can be likened to the Sabbath. God created the Sabbath to be holy day and for us to rest and be refreshed spiritually and

gain more energy. God created the night/day pattern because He knows we need to rest. In the book of Psalms the word *Selah* means 'to pause, meditate, ponder and refresh the spirit'.

Musical rests, no matter how short (even microseconds), can be very effective in making the sounds lively and energetic and also provide a break from the sounds. So much popular music today is relentless, beat-driven and too loud with no rest at all. This drains and exhausts the body and mind. Ecclesiastes 3:7 tells us 'There is a time to be silent and a time to speak.'

The noise of war

In closing I would like to point out that the issue of rhythm and beat is not new but age old. Four thousand years ago when Moses and Joshua came down from Mount Sinai, they knew something was wrong even before they saw the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. They heard the loud, rhythmic beat, sounds not of victory but a 'noise of war in the camp' (Exodus 32:17).

The rhythm/beat issue is just so much more noticeable today because of the discovery of electricity in the 1800s. This has led to the technology and communication revolutions of the last century. New electronic instruments create new sounds. Amplifiers make the music so much louder. Instant worldwide communication spreads music at lightning speed. Music has exploded around the world even faster than the effects of an atomic bomb.

The power of music

Music has mighty power and can be used for good or bad purposes. In the hands of the powers behind the music industry it can be used for humanistic purposes, to manipulate youth away from their parents and for money making. In the hands of believers it is can be used as God intended it — for showing love to Him in worship, for His glory and for our health benefits. As JS Bach wrote in the early 1700s, 'Music is for the glory of God and the refreshment of man.'

By understanding these basic concepts of rhythm and beat we can be much more discerning in determining what styles of music are worshipful and hopefully guide our children's listening habits. As a teaching aid, the *Elements of Music* course covers rhythm and beat throughout the four volumes and shows how it was used throughout history as well as giving theoretical and practical knowledge. ■