



Right-Hand Studies- Playing Polyrhythms

by Lucas Michailidis

The term fingerstyle refers to the use of the fingers to activate the ringing of strings on the guitar. For the majority of players, it is the right hand that performs this function. This technique can be found in numerous styles and genres including classical, flamenco, jazz and blues.

If we are to develop competency and consistency as fingerstyle players, it is necessary to focus attention on the use of the right hand.

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

Exercises 1 and 2 are what I regard as meat and potatoes studies - fundamental with no frills. Ex. 1 deals with an arpeggiated C major chord and uses the thumb (p), index (i) and middle (m) finger to execute the triplet pattern. Ex. 2 is similar but uses the thumb, index, middle and ring (r) finger to perform the eighth-note pattern.

The way in which we can breathe further life into these exercises is through the accenting of different beats (Ex. 3 & 4). This serves a dual purpose: it develops independence and control of each finger and adds a dynamic component to the pattern. Accenting of different notes results in a subtle, yet noticeable variation that can be a very useful musical tool. It is important to ensure that the non-accented notes are even and consistently quieter.

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

In Ex. 1, a set of three notes is grouped as triplets. Let's retain the same note sequence but change the rhythmic subdivision, playing the pattern as 16th notes as opposed to 8th-note triplets.

Ex. 5

Some interesting elements arise. We see that the 3-note group (which once sat happily as triplets) is now being displaced by a 16th-note group. Because the pattern is condensed, it now repeats over the duration of 3 beats (hence the 3/4 time signature). Accenting the start of every 3-note group results in 4 even pulses over the 3 beat measure. This is regarded as a 4 over 3 polyrhythm (the term refers to multiple rhythms played simultaneously).

Similarly, let's retain the same note sequence found in Ex. 2, but alter the subdivision from 8th notes, to 8th-note triplets:

Ex. 6

This time the 4-note group (C E G C) is displaced by an 8th-note triplet throughout. Accenting the start of every 4-note group results in 3 even pulses over the 4-beat measure. This pattern is regarded as a 3 over 4 polyrhythm.

Having gained a mastery of these two polyrhythmic exercises, we can proceed to accent different beats as demonstrated previously in Ex. 3 & 4:

Ex. 7

Exercise 7 is a musical exercise in 3/4 time. The top staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes with accents. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with fret numbers 3, 2, 0, 3, 2, 0, 3, 2, 0.

Ex. 8

Exercise 8 is a musical exercise in 4/4 time. The top staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes with accents and triplets. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with fret numbers 3, 2, 0, 1, 3, 2, 0, 1.

I am a great advocate of incorporating numerous challenges within an individual exercise, changing its focus from the realm of technique to that of actual music. This exercise cultivates a polyrhythmic dimension, independent finger dexterity, and dynamics through the use of accents- all whilst promoting an engaged and concentrated mind.

I would recommend that each of the examples in this article be played with a metronome. Aim for a smooth and even consistency and be sure to vary the tempos. There is no better way to integrate and internalise these rhythms than by practising them while you walk - making use of all four limbs and your voice. Passersby won't help but notice the groovy gait.

I'll see you down that polyrhythmic road!
Lucas

To learn more about Lucas Michailidis and his music, please see his website at:
<http://www.lucasmichailidis.com/>