

Lesson 4:

Polyrhythm: Mary Had a Little Lamb versus Hickory Dickory Dock

Overview: All activities up until this point have used the same subdivisions of the beat (either duple or triple). In this exercise we practice going back and forth between duple and triple in preparation for a polyrhythmic exploration. Polyrhythm is defined as the simultaneous use of triple and duple subdivisions of the beat or the simultaneous use of $3/4$ and $6/8$ or similarly related pairs of meters. In this lesson we will focus on developing the ability to use duple and triple subdivisions simultaneously in a group setting.

Objectives:

- Alternate between duple and triple divisions of the beat in both spoken language and music.
- Perform duple rhythms against triple rhythms.

Activity I. Alternating the Beat

1. Explain to the students that the beat can be divided into groups of two or groups of three. Practice this by dividing the class into three groups. Group one taps the beat. Group two will divide the beat into two equal parts by clapping. Group three will divide the beat into three equal parts by clapping.

2. Have group one begin by clapping a steady beat. Group 2 will divide the beat into 2 equal parts for 4 beats and then alternate with Group 3 who will divide the beat into 3 equal parts for 4 beats. Practice going back and forth between group 2 and 3.

3. When the students can do this comfortably, switch parts so that everyone eventually has played all the parts



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Activity II. Nursery Rhymes

1. Using the nursery rhymes "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Hickory Dickory Dock", students will practice going back and forth between a duple and triple subdivision. Write the first four lines of each rhyme side by side on the board:

Mary Had a Little Lamb
Little Lamb, Little Lamb
Mary had a Little Lamb,
Whose fleece was white as snow.

Hickory Dickory Dock (the)
Mouse ran up the clock (the)
Clock struck one the mouse ran down
Hickory, Dickory, Dock

2. Clap the rhythm in unison for all of Mary Had a Little Lamb (duple). Repeat this for Hickory Dickory Dock (triple).

3. Now, divide the class into two groups and alternate lines, keeping the pulse the same (example: Mary Had a Little Lamb - Hickory Dickory Dock -)

Activity III. Three Parts Percussion

1. Pass out percussion instruments and use them in repeating Activity II. Now divide the class into 3 groups: Group 1 keeps a steady beat; Group 2 plays the rhythm for Mary had a Little Lamb; and Group 3 plays the rhythm for Hickory Dickory Dock, all at the same time.

2. Discuss the effect of playing all three parts at the same time. Have students switch parts so that each student gets a chance to keep the beat, play the duple rhythms, and play the triple rhythms.

3. Explain that this is one form of polyrhythm where the pulse is constant, but there are simultaneous uses of differing subdivisions (ex. 2 against 3).

Activity IV. Extend the Learning

1. Divide the class into 4 small groups of 3-5 students. Ask 2 of the groups to create rhythmic phrases 4 beats long in 4/4 time using quarter notes and rests and eighth notes and rests. Ask the remaining groups to create rhythmic phrases 4 beats long in 12/8 time using eighth notes grouped in 3's, and combinations of quarter and eighth notes.

2. When each group can comfortably play their rhythmic phrases in unison, experiment with combining the different group rhythms.

3. Have one student conduct the ensemble by beginning one group playing one rhythm (which continues to repeat as a rhythmic ostinato) and adding other groups to the mix. The student can develop hand signals to cut off one group at a time or to ask the group to change rhythms. Allow each student to have an opportunity to create a new composition using the rhythmic phrases. After the performances discuss which patterns seemed to work best together and why.

Assessment for Lesson 4:

- [Rubric Generator](#)
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