

# Zee Brain Surgery Banjo

## Chapter 6.1

### Syncopation

Music is math. They are exactly the same thing. At least that is what frustrated math teachers like Miss Anxious and Mr. McMoody kept trying to tell me. They reasoned that a kid who could play a Bach Prelude should have no trouble with a quadratic equation. They were quite wrong.

Perhaps music really is the answer to  $V \text{ times } 3 \text{ minus the square route of } Z \text{ over } Y \text{ divided by the third Tuesday after the Spring Maudlin Moon}$  - I doubt I'll ever know for sure though. What I do know is that music is counting, and mostly it is only counting up to "Four". This is something I *Can* handle. This essay is about the various ways one can divide the four beats of a measure (gee – Division. Already I'm getting into higher math – perhaps Old McMoody was right).

### Pre-Syncopation

(tab pg: ZBSB\_0601\_1\_PreSync)

**Exercise 1** We'll start right out with the simple. – 1, 2, 3, 4 count. This is the frail and will be the basis of all the strokes that follow. Every note is On the beat. No thumb involved.

**Exercise 2** adds a thumb note to the second half of every beat. The MIDI plays these two notes as EXACTLY one eighth note each. It doesn't matter if it is a drop thumb or a note on the 5<sup>th</sup> string the thumb is always on the off beat.

**Exercise 3** shows the Bum Did-dy stroke – which is really just combining alternate beats of Exercise 1 and exercise 2.

**Exercise 4** shows the reverse of the Bum Did-dy, The "Did-dy Bum".

**Exercise 5** puts M Skips into the mix (see RSB Chapter 4). Notice how leaving out an On the beat note seems to syncopate the rhythm even though you are doing absolutely nothing save for putting a “gap” in the clawhammer line. Some of the tabs I have written use this for a cheap and easy syncopation effect. The tune “Jump Jim Crow” in my 200 tabs set relies heavily on the M Skip.

**Exercise 6** uses some simple double hammer-ons and pull-offs to create triplets. A triplet is simply dividing a note value into 3 parts instead of two. In reality the three notes that are shown as eighths are shorter in duration, but creating a new note value for them would make writing and reading music more complex. (The actual value of eighths in triplets would be twelfths!) When singing teachers start students on triplets they frequently use a clever mnemonic device to help the students. My mnemonic is the word “harmony”. I had my students speak out the rhythm of that first measure this way “Eighth Note, Har Mo Ny Eighth Note, Eighth Note” Both the word “Eighth” and “Note” equal one standard eighth in time, so together they equal a quarter note. “Har”, “Mo” and “Ny” each stand for a tripleted eighth. Listen to the MIDI and sing along (at least sub vocalize along) until the rhythm seems natural to you.

**Exercise 7** is a Galax Lick (RSB Chapter 4). In order to make this conform with the previous exercises I am putting the “Lick” within the measure. This is mostly to get comfortable with the rhythm. Galax Licks do indeed show up in the middle of measures but they are more frequently found in the beginning of phrases. See Exercise 8.

**Exercise 8.** Now I’ve added a “pick-up” measure to the beginning of the exercise so the phrase opening Galax Lick can be practiced. Notice that the final measure of the exercise has only 3 beats. This makes it dovetail with the one beat pick-up. The point to remember is that the thumb notes come ON the beat after the dragged frail of the Galax Lick.

**Exercise 9** isn’t really an exercise at all. It is the other part of the tune. Insert it whenever you think the first part is going to drive you crazy.

## Syncopation I – The Hornpipe

(tab pg: ZBSB\_0601\_2\_Hornpipe)

Exercises 10, 11 and 12 are three interpretations of Hornpipe rhythm – As they are written and two ways in which they are more likely to be played.

**Exercise 10** starting illustrates the strict dotted, eighth and sixteenth combination that is used for writing hornpipes. I've put all the thumb notes on the 5<sup>th</sup> string so you can concentrate on getting the feel of the rhythm. If you play along with the MIDI file this is actually not at all hard.

Most people find this is far too strict a rhythm and that the result is stilted, however, working on very formal exercises like this will not only help you get a feel for the hornpipe rhythm but will serve for syncopating other types of tunes (especially rags) later. Gaining the freedom to slip out of the "One & Two &" straight jacket and to slip back in again will help you add colour and excitement to your playing. This is also the rhythm used when a hornpipe is played as a "Slow Aire" – frequently on the pipes. It is very stately and formal. I like to start plaintive Irish hornpipe *The Rights Of Man* in this rhythm.

With all rhythm exercises it helps to have a set of words to make the sound easier to remember.. I've used Ry di, Ry di, here, but if you prefer something else, change it.

**Exercise 11** converts the notes into a set of triplets with only two notes – That sure doesn't make a lot of sense now does it? The middle note of the group is combined with the first note, so the normal triplet rhythm:

"Har Mo Ny, Har Mo Ny, Har Mo Ny, Har Mo Ny"

comes out

"Har \_\_ Ny, Har \_\_ Ny, Har \_\_ Ny, Har \_\_ Ny"

Just remember: "There Ain't No Mo."

**NOTE:** For reasons I don't pretend to understand, Tabledit will not write this figure correctly, even though it plays it right. I always get what appears to be 2 quarter notes instead of the quarter followed by an eighth I should get. Listen to the MIDI and play along until that "Har \_\_ Ny" rhythm is in your head, and you will do fine. Perhaps someone who has a better relationship with the author can get him to fix the program. My emails on the subject (or on any subject) go unanswered.

I actually don't use the triplet rhythm, although when anyone asked before I started using a computer to write tab, I thought I did and said so. A year or so ago I discovered while trying to write out some exercises that my tendency is to play most hornpipes, including the reel-ized American tunes like *Spotted Pony*, *Soldiers Joy* and *Turkey In The Straw* in a rhythm closer to the "swung eighths" of American jazz. My feeling is that anyone with some experience will tend to swing pairs of eighths in old time music – it give the music a gentle loping quality.

**Exercise 12** is done in the "swung eighths" style. The beats are divided into thirty-second notes – eight of them per quarter note beat. However, instead of using four of these thirty-seconds for each eighth note, I am putting Five of them on the first of each pair and Three on the second. Thus the accents fall XxxxxXxx, XxxxxXxx, throughout. Since this is the same rhythm used by

the big swing bands of the 1940s I have used Frank Sinatra's method of vocalizing the beats "Do be, Do be, Dooo" in the exercise.

## Syncopation II – The Strathspey

(tab pg: ZBSB\_0601\_3\_Strathspey)

This exercise is actually a lot harder to read than it is to play. Because there is no efficient way to write an eighth note with an extra Thirty-Second note added to it the program has to add rests. Just ignore them and work to make the second note come in at the right time.

Exercises 13 through 15 are the reverses of the hornpipe exercises above. These are Strathspey rhythms. The chances are good that playing American folk and old time music you will never run into a strathspey – at least not one that is still played as a strathspey, however these are again good for playing rags – in fact the strathspey rhythm is more common in rag than the hornpipe. So while there is no immediate practical application of these exercises, you will have use for the rhythm if you plan to do any ragtime or ragtime influenced tunes like those developed in places like east Texas.

**Exercise 13.** This is "official" strathspey rhythm. If you listen to much Scott Joplin you will probably recognize the figure. If you listen to much Scotts vocal or bagpipe music you will definitely recognize it.

**Exercise 14.** The triplets again, but this time there is a "MO". This time we are hitting:

Har Mo \_\_ Har Mo \_\_ Har Mo \_\_ Har Mo \_\_

This time, there ain't no NY

This time the program writes the rhythm correctly too, with a tripletted eighth note followed by a tripletted quarter note – I guess this figure is something the program's author does use.

**Exercise 15.** Now the swung eighths are on the other foot. The first note has only 3 thirty-seconds while the second note gets 5. I use this figure (and the one in Ex. 13) quite a lot when playing all sorts of old time tunes. The thumb note coming in early stands out quite nicely. I don't do it continuously as it is done in the exercises however, as that would tend to throw other players off the mark. It is just used as a cheap special effect – I like cheap special effects.

## Syncopation III, IV V etc?

This is just the first of a number of essays on rhythm I plan on writing on the subject of rhythm and syncopation. A couple of the rhythm exercise pages I'll be using for future essays can be found in the "***Samples***" pages included with the complete ***Rocket Science Banjo*** I hope to complete chapters on rag syncopation, leading the beat, and what I call "Thumb lead" clawhammer, where the frail becomes a grace note to the thumb. I also plan to do a few pages on doing triplet rhythms (like jigs and waltzes) while avoiding that overly busy sound that makes clawhammer triplets rhythms so wearing on the ear. Watch the **Sugar In The Gourd** and **Banjo Hangout** forums for announcements of future chapters of ***Zee Brain Surgery Banjo***.

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