

# Rhythmic Routines

Rhythm is the foundation of all music. It is the difference in rhythm patterns that distinguishes Western and Indian classical music

**T**AKE A listen to your environment. What do you hear? Do you hear people talking, the clanking of dishes, cars driving by? Do you hear birds chirping, dogs barking, rushing water? Is there music in the background, or the sound of a TV? Or do you hear and feel your vitality – your heartbeat, breathing, swallowing, sniffing, coughing, your stomach growling? This is the routine of your environment, this surfeit of sound that creates the rhythm of your life.

All of these functions stem from rhythm, which is essentially, routine. Rhythm is literally defined as a movement or activity in which some action or element recurs regularly. We are creatures who thrive on habit. We all cling to some daily routine to keep our lives progressing in a healthy way. Think about it, if your everyday routine is off, don't you feel a distinct gut-reaction of uneasiness and uncertainty?

Our bodies need rhythm. Without that seamless pulse, we would cease to exist. We thrive on our bodies' rhythmic cycles: Our sleep cycles, digestive cycles and respiration are rhythmic. As our heartbeats give us life, rhythm gives life to music.

Let's examine the purpose of rhythm in music. You may think this is a fairly obvious concept, correct? But have you ever thought about how you would verbalize the definitions of the words rhythm, melody, harmony and music? Understanding these components in their simplest states helps us understand why our beings react so strongly to music and why it is absolutely essential in our lives.

**Rhythm:** It is mostly associated with music and dance and it is inherent in any time-dependent channel. Musical rhythm is simply defined as a pattern of duration that is present in music. Rhythm is the foundation upon which melody and harmony are built.

Remember, literal rhythm is an activity in which some action recurs regularly.

**Melody:** A melody is a succession of linear events, not happening simultaneously to other notes. However, this succession must contain change of some kind and be perceived as a single entity. This can include patterns of changing pitches and durations of pitches. Melodies often consist of one or more musical phrases or motifs and are usually repeated throughout a song in various forms. Melody gives a piece of music richness and personality. It also helps the listener remember and identify music. In most cases, it is the melody of a song that is the most memorable part. Literally, melody is a sweet or agreeable sound.

**Harmony:** It is the combination of tones voiced simultaneously into chords and chord progressions. Harmony supports the melody. Harmony often refers to the "vertical" aspects of written



**DIFFERENT STROKES:** Right, tribal drummers beat out rhythms during a worship ceremony in Goalpara village, West Bengal. Facing page, Luiza Brunet, Queen of the Drums, performs in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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music while the melodic line is referred to as the “horizontal” aspects. Literally, harmony is a pleasing arrangement of parts, or accord.

**Music:** It is unpretentiously rhythm, melody and harmony. It has been called the “rhythmization of sound.” Music is an art form consisting of sound and silence expressed through time.

So there you have it. It all reads like a textbook, but it helps one grasp the concept of music.

Now let’s explore the duty of rhythm in the musical world. Musicians, instrumentalists and vocalists alike, are accompanied by a rhythmic instrument. In Western classical music, the rhythm sections usually consist of percussion instruments such as timpanis, bass drums, cymbals, snare drums, xylophones, keyboards, pianos and many other instruments that, when struck, produce pitch or no pitch. Jazz and pop music uses a variety of drums, guitars, bass guitars and string basses. Some of these instruments, like the guitar, are considered chordal and at times can produce rhythm and harmony simultaneously.

As you know, the rhythms of Indian music, rather than being organized into short measures as

in Western classical music, are organized in long rhythmically complex cycles called talas. There are many different talas in the Carnatic and Hindustani traditions. The rhythmic accompaniment is usually provided by the tabla, which is tuned to the melody or raaga. The harmony is usually provided by a drone instrument called the tanpura.

Different genres of music make diverse use of rhythm. Most Western music is based on divisive rhythm, while non-Western music uses more additive rhythm.

### DIVISIVE RHYTHM

A divisive rhythm is a one in which a larger period of time is divided into smaller rhythmic units. In Western classical music, rhythm is organized by meters then further divided into measures. For example, the time signature or meter is the notation used in Western music to specify how many beats are in each measure and what note value constitutes one beat, such as 4/4, 2/4, 6/8, etc. The speed of the underlying pulse, the beat, is the tempo.

In contrast to divisive rhythms are additive rhythms, which are larger periods of time constructed from sequences of smaller rhythmic units added to the end of the

previous unit such as with the talas in Indian music. Additive rhythms can have an aspect of improvisation to them, and although there is a certain structure to additive rhythms, they are not defined by meters.

African music is defined by the use of polyrhythms or the simultaneous sounding of two or more independent rhythms. An example of a polyrhythm is three evenly-spaced beats against two beats, with the three-beat pattern being faster than the two-beat pattern, so they both take the same amount of time. Polyrhythms are often referred to as beating three against two or four against three and so on.

Now in all of this analysis of musical and life rhythm, I am curious how you would answer this simple question: Do you have rhythm? If you answered no, then you are just letting your insecurities get the better of you.

Rhythm is intrinsic in all of us. It is interesting to note that famed composer and writer Howard Goodall, in his TV series “How Music Works,” offers that the theories of rhythm recall how we walk and the heartbeat we heard in the womb. Evolutionwise, this theory is that a simple pulse or beat recalls the footsteps of another person and that our urge to dance is primal and designed to boost our energy levels in order to cope with someone (or some animal) chasing us – the fight or flight response.

So just think of that the next time you say that you don’t have rhythm and choose to sit out a dance. Maybe you have just lost touch with what makes you innately human – your animal instinct.

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