

Feeling the 3:2 Polyrythm

by Dennis Winge

A quick Wikipedia search under “polyrhythms” will indicate the prevalence of such in modern music, with many examples cited from pop music to jazz to classical to African and Indian music. There has to be an easy way to feel polyrhythms. There is much on the internet on the topic already, but you can’t just read or watch something about polyrhythm, you have to feel it to really ‘get it.’

The following is a step-by-step, hopefully easy and straightforward, approach for you to feel the basic polyrhythm of 3 against 2. We will use a rhythm map of the lowest common multiple of each element. The lowest common multiple of 2 and 3 is 6.

We are going to start with your foot tapping “in 2” (twice in the cycle of 6) while your hand taps “in 3” (three times in the cycle of 6). First, look at the diagram, then follow the steps below.

Figure 1 - 2:3 from the perspective of 2

unit:	1	2	3	4	5	6
2 count	1	&	a	2	&	a
2 beat	x			x		
resulting count	1		a	2	&	
3 beat	x		x		x	

1. say the “2 count” above, out loud, slowly, where every syllable is equally spaced
2. tap your foot on the “1” and “2” while counting the above, so that you are now playing the “2 beat” line in the table
3. continue tapping and counting slowly, but do not vocalize the first “&” or the second “a” so that you are now saying the “resulting count” line
4. let your hand tap everything you are now saying except the “2,” so that you are now playing the “3 beat” line in the table

If you have trouble doing this last step, you are simply going too fast. You can do it, I know you can; just slow it down until you can. It will pay off big dividends in your musical future. Only when you are able to play step 4 above should you read on.

Figure 2 - 2:3 from the perspective of 3

unit:	1	2	3	4	5	6
3 count	1	&	2	&	3	&
3 beat	x		x		x	
resulting count	1		2	&	3	
2 beat	x			x		

Now we are going to do the exact same thing but with your foot tapping in 3 while your hand taps in 2.

1. say the "3 count" above, out loud, slowly, where every syllable is equally spaced
2. tap your foot on the "1," "2" and "3" while counting the above, so that you are now playing the "3 beat" line in the table
3. continue tapping and counting slowly, but do not vocalize the first or the last "&" so that you are now saying the "resulting count" line
4. let your hand tap only the "1" and the "&" so that you are now playing the "2 beat" line in the table

If you are able to play both examples above, well done! You are on your way to feeling all kinds of polyrhythms, as the basic concept remains the same for any other pair of subdivisions. Because you can now feel it, you will start to hear the 3:2 polyrhythm in all kinds of music much more easily.

As an added challenge, try changing the way you count while maintaining the same physical motion. In other words, let's say your foot is in 2 while your hand is in 3 as in the first example above, and you are counting the last line of Figure 1, "1 a 2 &." While keeping the exact same motion in your limbs, try switching the count to the last line in the second table "1 2 & 3." When you can do that back and forth, now leave out any syllable that is not a number. The result is that you can now switch from saying "1 2" to "1 2 3." Remember to also try this with your foot tapping 3 and your hand tapping in 2.