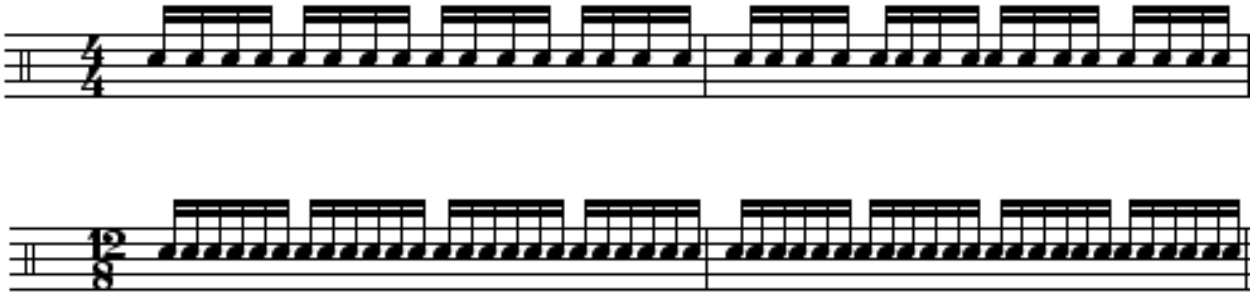The Steady Streams

by Mark Shelton

The ostinato was a part of music long before “groove” was coined. An ostinato is simply a repeated rhythmic figure, usually heard in accompaniment. A great deal of rhythm section work in modern worship music (and mainstream popular music) is groove based and percussion parts often include ostinatos of steady streams of eighth or sixteenth notes. Think about the typical tambourine or shaker part in either 4/4 or 12/8 time. Frequently, it is a steady stream of sixteenth notes. If you are going to lay down an intensity-building snare drum or tom-tom line, a steady stream of sixteenths or thirty-seconds is probably your choice.These rhythms give energy and drive to the music while slicing the beat into smaller parts, providing a steady time reference for the ensemble. Whether beginner or a seasoned professional, you can find value in refining your ability to control rhythmic subdivision, consistent tone, and the dynamics of a steady stream of equal value notes.

The focus of this article is on the sixteenth note version of the steady stream, but the practice techniques can be applied to other note values. The steady sixteenth stream is notated below in both 4/4 and 12/8.



Real-time Analysis And Correction

Set the metronome at a comfortable speed and play the 4/4 steady stream version on a drum with alternating strokes beginning with your dominant hand. Play each version for about one minute. (You might want to set a timer.) Listen critically.

- Are the downbeats lining up with the metronome?
- Is the spacing between the subdivisions even?
- Do you hear big differences in the tone quality between the hands?
- How about the consistency of volume from hand to hand?

Make another run and adjust your playing to correct any problems you heard. During real-time playing your ear, brain, muscle combination can accomplish a lot.

Apply the same process to the 12/8 version.

As you work the 4/4 and 12/8 steady streams to a satisfactory level, increase both the tempo and duration. Can you make the steady streams sound great for 90 seconds at a tempo of 150 beats per minute?

The Recorder Is Really Your Friend

As musicians, we sometimes listen as we play and think that the great sound in our minds is being transferred through our hands onto our instruments. An audio recorder is a truth machine. Listening to yourself on a recording can reveal the stark differences between perception and reality.

Record about thirty seconds of a steady stream of sixteenths and immediately analyze the recording. Make it a goal to produce a one minute recording of a your best steady stream of sixteenths. It might take several takes, but you will benefit from the self-evaluation.

Seeing Is Believing

Along with aural feedback, it is possible to evaluate your steady stream using visual information. If you have access to a digital audio workstation such as Pro Tools, Logic, or Audacity, that displays the waveform of your playing, you can see where there are minor flaws in volume and rhythmic subdivision. It can be surprising to record eight bars of sixteenths with a shaker and afterwards view unintended accents and inconsistencies in rhythmic spacing on your computer screen.

In my decades as a worship team percussionist, a steady stream of sixteenths is probably my most-played ostinato. In addition to mastery of both the 4/4 and 12/8 versions for groove playing, control of a steady stream is crucial to the development of the single stroke roll used on snare drum, congas, timpani, and a variety of percussion instruments.

You need not be concerned about sounding mechanical. If you get to that point, it should be easy to loosen up and inject your humanity.

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