Rhythm Triangle

by Mark Shelton

The triangle part looked simple. Several days before the recording session, the producer had given me access to sheet music and recordings so that I could prepare. As I listened to the recordings, I realized that a “simple-on-paper” rhythm triangle part was clocking in at *tempo-de-impossible*. No matter how I practiced and experimented, the down/up motion coupled with the open/close technique was more than I could handle at that breakneck speed. I made it through the session by recording a short segment and letting the engineer use “copy/paste” to complete the remainder of the passage.

After playing in symphony orchestras, concert bands, chamber ensembles, jazz groups, and worship teams, I had encountered the world’s most difficult triangle excerpt. I’m grateful that there were enough triangle chops in me to crank out a smidgen of notes for the digital editor to manipulate.

Allow me to offer some advice on playing rhythm triangle (including the down/up technique that helped me out on that hypersonic recording).

We generally think about the triangle supplying a few well-placed dings to the musical fabric rather than taking on a timekeeping role. While the triangle does a great job as a coloristic element, it can also be effective as a groove instrument.

Pay close attention to “Barlow Girl” by Superchick. Do you hear the rhythm triangle? Yep, the ding in the mix. You can find those bright tones in electronica, smooth jazz, and pop music. The rhythm triangle technique is also used to produce the chanky-chank grooves of the Cajun “tee-fer” and the “triangolo” parts of Brazilian music.

Gear

• Invest in great sounding instruments--that includes triangles. Build a collection of triangles along with an arsenal of triangle beaters.

• Simply changing the striking implement can make a significant change in the tone of the triangle.

• Make sure to have a couple of suspending clips rigged with two loops. (Loop #2 is the safety loop--a.k.a. “the clunk stopper.”)

Rhythm triangle parts consist of repeated rhythmic figures that usually include ringing (open) and muted (close) tones. One hand holds the triangle and controls the open/close sounds while the other hand maneuvers the beater to play the rhythm.

The Holding Hand

The subdominant hand usually holds the triangle and makes the movements that mute the tone or allow ringing. You can either suspend the triangle with a clip and hold onto the clip or remove the clip and suspend the triangle with the upper corner over your curled fingers.

The palm and fingers are used to gently squeeze the triangle for the closed sound.

With the “no clip method,” you will loose some resonance on the open tone, but you will have more control of the instrument as you move between sounds. (I favor the “no clip method.”)

The Rhythm Hand

The rhythm is normally played by the more agile dominant hand. Slow to moderate tempo patterns should be played on the outer area of the triangle leg that is across from the open corner (see photo). When the speed increases and the note values decrease, the “inside-down/up” technique can come to the rescue. Place the beater inside the triangle near the bottom closed corner and use a down/up motion. The beater can strike the bottom leg on the downstroke and tap the nearby side leg on the upstroke.

Besides executing the correct rhythm, this hand plays a role in tone production. Both the section of the striker used and the point of contact on the triangle influence the timbre. Experiment to find the best tone quality to complement the character of the music being played.

Basic Patterns

Practice the notated patterns paying careful attention to the open (o) and close (+) markings. Observe the down (D) and up (U) symbols in pattern # 5 and # 6.
Number 6 is a traditional Brazilian triangolo pattern given to me by my former student Pablo Motta from Belo Horizonte, Brazil

When you have these patterns under control, compose a few of your own and find the right musical moment to add some rhythm triangle to a song.



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