

The Elements of Rhythm

Volume II

**Relative Notation and
Counting Syllables**

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Preface

How many different ways to count a rhythm pattern do you suppose there are? The literal answer depends on the metric context in which the pattern occurs. Notation is a relative medium, so, the answer is relative as well. The **sound shape** of the pattern, however, remains **absolute**.

The Elements of Rhythm Volume II presents the fundamental building block rhythm patterns from *Volume I* in up to five different metric contexts on multi-music staves, such as in this example:

The image shows five musical staves, each representing the same rhythm pattern in a different time signature. The time signatures are 4/2, 4/4, 4/8, 4/16, and 4/32. The rhythm pattern consists of four measures. In the 4/2 staff, the notes are half notes and quarter notes. In the 4/4 staff, they are quarter notes and eighth notes. In the 4/8 staff, they are eighth notes and sixteenth notes. In the 4/16 staff, they are sixteenth notes and thirty-second notes. In the 4/32 staff, they are thirty-second notes and sixty-fourth notes. The pattern is: Measure 1: quarter rest, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note; Measure 2: quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note; Measure 3: quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note; Measure 4: quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note.

This approach assists readers in achieving a better understanding of the relativity of notation and counting syllables by:

1. Playing identically sounding patterns that are counted identically with different note values
2. Using different counting exercises for these patterns and disregarding the time signature

A complete list of counting syllables are included in stand-alone tables. These are especially helpful for young and beginning readers, and they also have some very interesting applications involving the visualization of notation.

Volume II's primary objective is to help decondition readers from certain expectations associated with rest/note values in standard metric contexts. The traditional and alternative counting exercises provided offer ample study material for all instrumentalists and vocalists, and both *Volume I and II* may be used interchangeably for study and teaching purposes.

Introduction

Music notation is as close to an international language as anything ever invented. Like mathematics, the shared understanding of rest and note values makes performance possible across virtually all borders. While the literal language of counting may differ, our exploration of relative notation and counting syllable concepts can be applied across those borders as well.

Our approach to relative notation is particularly valuable for readers wishing to further develop their conception of how polyrhythms sound. For example, if you can read a basic quarter note rhythm in 5/4, you can eventually progress to playing that same pattern in 5/8 and 5/16. When you then encounter a complex quintuplet in 5/4, it will be far less intimidating.

The Elements of Rhythm Volume I presented a unifying theory of rhythm pattern development that introduced binary logic (2^n) to create the fundamental building block rhythm patterns. However, only the basic aspects of counting were explored. In *Volume II*, we thoroughly examine counting syllables, focusing on the issue of “translating” rhythm patterns as they occur in different metric contexts. We also categorize the fundamental patterns using the Binary Rhythm Pattern Indexing System, introduced in *Volume I*.

There are indeed many ways to count a rhythm pattern as you strive for mastery of performance. With hard work and continued practice, a thorough study of these materials will help make your rhythmic objectives quite attainable. *The Elements of Rhythm Volume II* is dedicated to that journey and the rewards it will yield.

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“**Relative notation**” refers to the rest and note values used to express absolute sound shapes, based on the metric context in which they occur. For example, the eight rest/note values in **Figure 5** (p. 11) could be expressed as beat note combinations occurring in 3/4 and as quarter note triplets occurring in 4/4 (**Figures 5a-5b**).

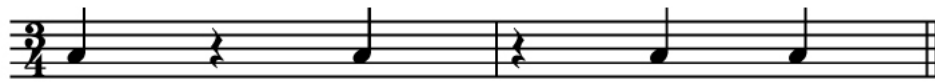


Figure 5a. *Quarter Notes at the Beat Level in 3/4*



Figure 5b. *Quarter Note Triplets in 4/4*

The context is significant for two reasons: expectation and temporal translation. Throughout the experience of learning how to read music, we become somewhat conditioned to seeing and expecting to see certain rest/note shape combinations that are counted at certain division levels.

As **Figure 6** illustrates, we are generally used to seeing a group of four sixteenth rests and notes occurring at the beat subdivision level. We are also used to counting those sixteenth rests and notes with a fairly standard group of syllables:



Figure 6. *Sixteenth Notes at the Beat Subdivision Level in 4/4*

Likewise, when we see identical rest/note values in different meters (**Figure 7**), a sort of “**temporal translation**” process is required, where we substitute the syllables used to count the patterns:



Figure 7. *Same note symbols, **different** beat note values, similar counting syllables*

The highest workload level of the temporal translation process occurs when we experience **shifting meters** in a composition (**Figure 8**):



Figure 8. *Same note symbols, **different** beat note values, **different** counting syllables*

The reality of sight-reading music, especially in cases like this, is that we must interpret notation as quickly and accurately as possible. The practicality is that by studying the finite building block patterns in a **non-sight** reading environment, we can take our time and become familiar with both their absolute sound shapes and their possible counting contexts.

We will be applying this concept to expand our understanding of relative notation and to improve our temporal translation abilities. We'll do this initially by reading the fundamental building block rhythm patterns in a series of multi-stave environments (**Figure 9**).



Figure 9. ***Different** note symbols, **different** beat note values, **same** counting syllables*

This example offers a clear illustration of our relative notation concept, where the patterns **sound** identical, are **counted** identically, yet **differ** only in their beat note contexts.

Now let's look at how we'll specifically address the deconditioning process.