Practicing Rhythm

By
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After spending four days at the International Association of Jazz EducatorsConvention in New York, I'm trying to digest all the wonderful music that I heard. The convention schedule was packed with concerts, clinics and exhibits from morning until late night. I heard a wide range of jazz from legendary players like Phil Wood, Kenny Barron, Bob Brookmeyer, established artists likes Maria Schneider and Mulgrew Miller, various college bands and a 14 year old kid from Italy who impressed the entire convention audience with his alto sax bebop playing.

What becomes apparent is how individual the music of jazz is. Each performer has his/her unique quality of sound and style, which is why you can spend four days listening to jazz without getting tired of it. I highly recommend that serious students of jazz go to this yearly convention, if only to get a huge dose of inspiration.

After listening to several outstanding pianists this weekend, I decided the focus of this month's article would be on "time." A solid sense of time/rhythm is something that all the great jazz musicians have in common. For example, Oscar Peterson, McCoy Tyner and Louis Armstrong have different harmonic language when they improvise but they all have perfect time. I think it's safe to say that time is what separates the good players from the great ones.

Make sure that you make time for rhythm exercises in you practice sessions. Good sense of time and rhythm will strengthen your personal playing as well as your overall musicianship. Here are some tips on how to improve your time.

1. Listen to a lot of different jazz music.
2. Get in the habit of practice everything in time.
3. Use the metronome.
4. Use Play-Along recordings.
5. Record yourself and listen to the time feel.
6. Try to locate the areas where you have problems (we all have them).
7. Transcribe other pianists and learn to play along with them.

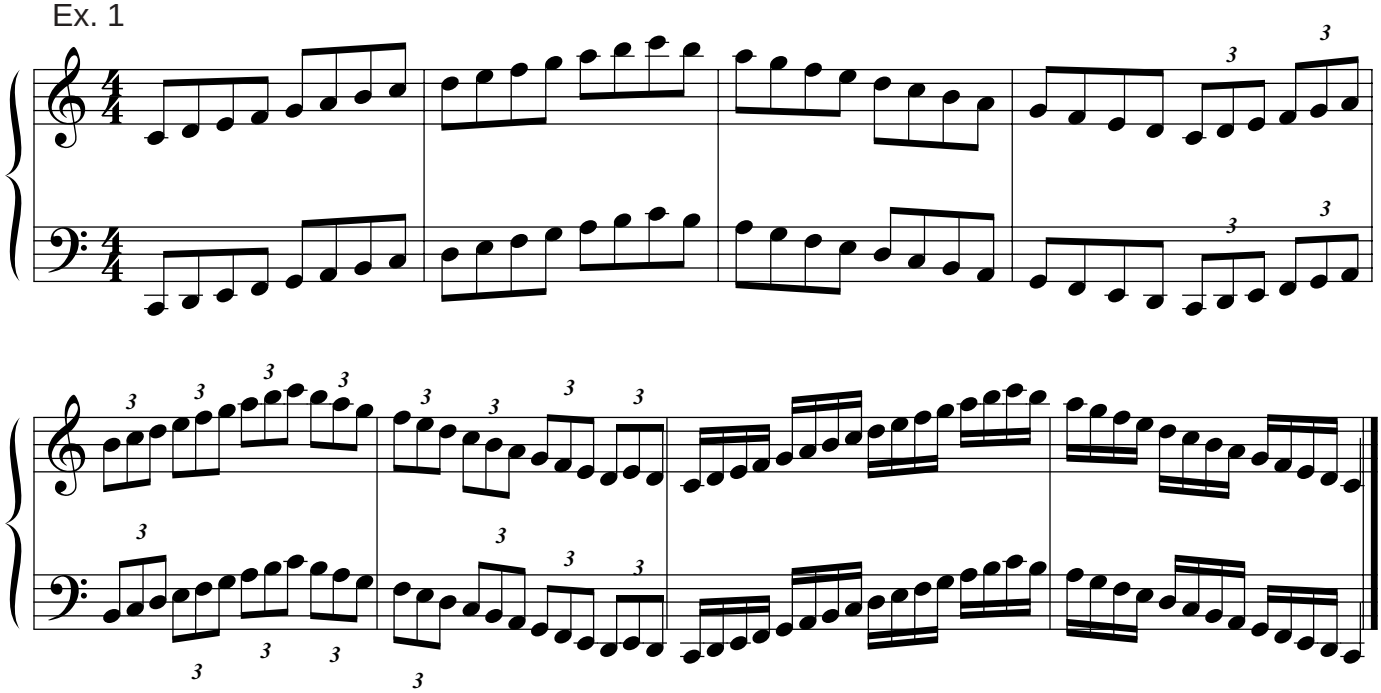
In order to create a solid time feel it is important to be able to feel the difference between 8th notes, 16th notes and tripplets. The following exercises will help you gain facility in these areas. Make sure you practice all the exercises in different tempos. You will eventually discover which tempos you have problems with. Use the metronome to locate those tempos and practice them until you are comfortable with them.

By the way, it's very common to have certain problematic tempos, both slow and fast ones. It helps to sub-divide and feel the pulse in 1 and 3, when you practice the problem tempos. The fast tempos should be sub-divided because it's easier to achieve a relaxed feel by using this technique.

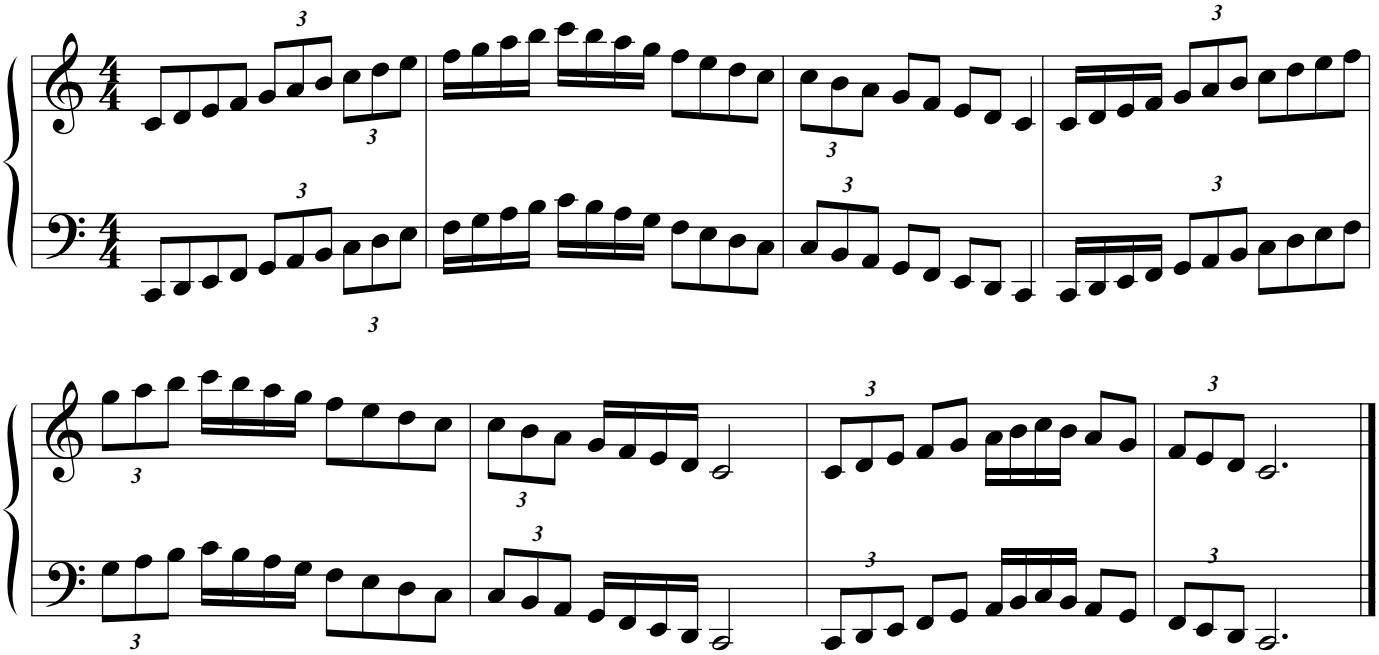
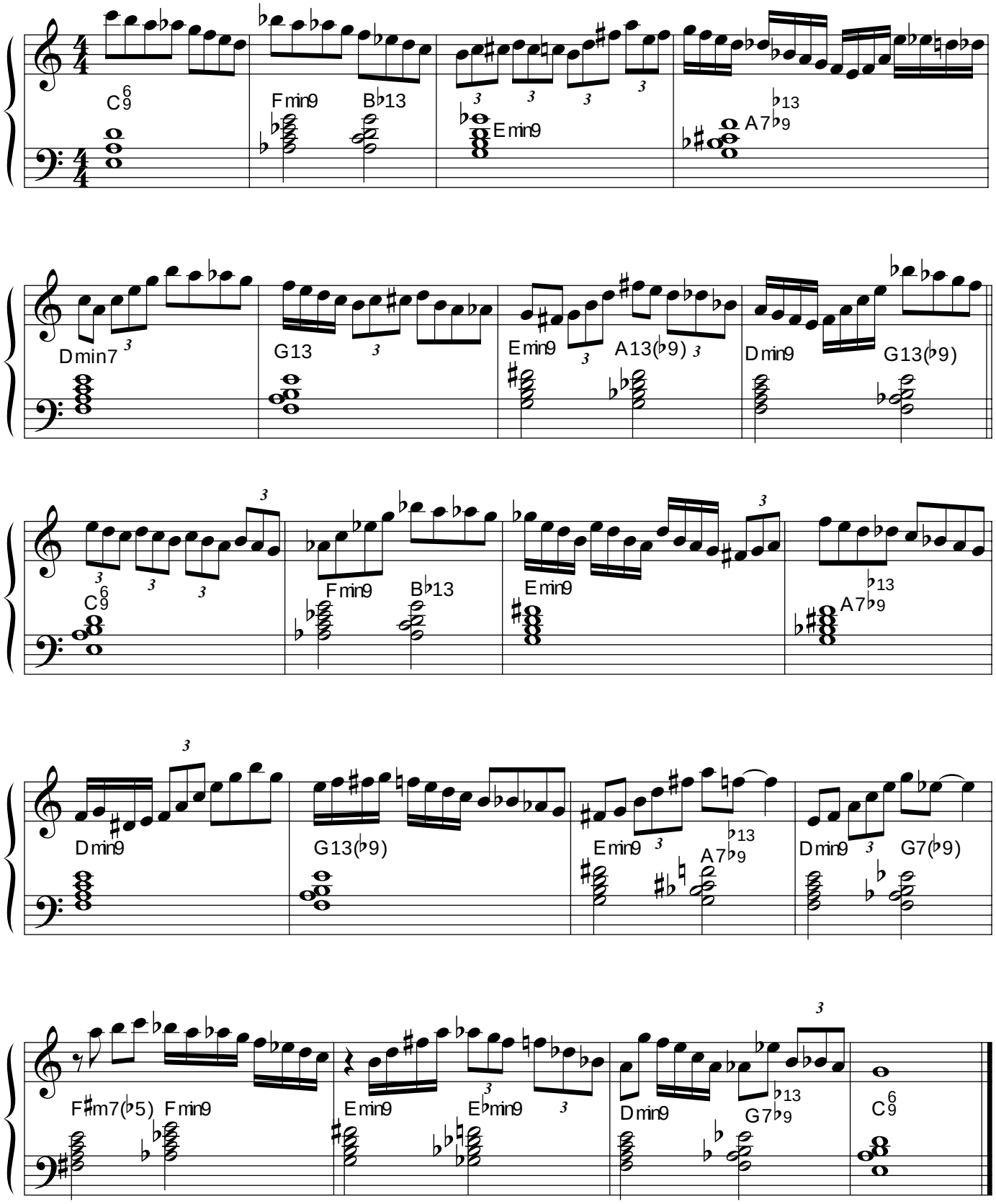
Practice these exercises slowly with the metronome. Make sure that the transition between 8th, 16th and the tripplets is smooth and that you stay with the metronome. Do not increase the tempo until you “feel” the time.

To start, you might want to practice each hand separately.

Ex. 1



Ex. 2



The following example contains some tricky fingering. Practice the piece slowly and work out the fingering in order to play it smoothly. Correct fingering is an important part of playing with rhythmic perfection.