

TWO AGAINST THREE, HANDS AGAINST FEET

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Recently, my friend and fellow teacher Jimmy Pemberton asked me to demonstrate a groove in which I played eighth-note triplets with my feet while playing straight eighth-notes with my right hand. I demonstrated the groove, and while I did it I realized both how cool this polyrhythm created between the hands and feet sounded, but also how tricky it was to lock in with the 2:3 created between the right hand and both feet. I decided that explaining how to break this down would make a great lesson. I've been a fan of polyrhythms, which are two or more rhythms played simultaneously, since I first discovered them nearly thirty years ago. They can be challenging, but when broken down into their component pieces they are as straight-forward and easy to understand as any other rhythm.

The first step in making this groove happen is getting comfortable with the 2:3 ("two-against-three") polyrhythm. The easiest way to begin is to work with a group of six notes. Count "One-Two-Three-Four-Five-Six." Play on "One" with both hands, rest on "Two," play on "Three" with your right hand, play on "Four" with your left hand, play on "Five" with your right hand, and rest on "Six." This works especially well if you use two different sound sources. Start very slowly, and make sure to count evenly. A metronome is very helpful.

A musical staff in 4/4 time showing a 2:3 polyrhythm over six notes. The notes are quarter notes. A bracket above the staff spans all six notes and is labeled with a '6'. The notes are: quarter note (1), quarter rest (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4), quarter note (5), quarter rest (6). The numbers 1 through 6 are written below the staff.

After getting comfortable counting it that way, you can begin to let the rhythm speed up, and modify how you count it. Now you should be counting "One-Two-And-Three."

A musical staff in 4/4 time showing a 2:3 polyrhythm over four notes. The notes are quarter notes. A bracket above the staff spans the last three notes and is labeled with a '3'. The notes are: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). The numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 are written below the staff, with a '+' sign under the second note.

Eventually you will be able to consciously switch your focus between the groups of three with your right hand and the groups of two with your left hand. This can take some time to feel natural, but it is critical to being able to move forward. If you can't hear and feel the 2:3 at this point, keep repeating the above examples until you can shift your focus between the two rhythms. When you can feel the separation, you're truly playing a polyrhythm.

Now that you have control over the 2:3 polyrhythm, let's start working at it between the hands and feet. The first step is to use just your right hand and right foot. Play eighth-note triplets with your right foot and right hand simultaneously, and then switch to straight eighth notes with your right hand. Listen for the groups of twos and threes interacting with each other; use the measure when you play the triplets with both your right hand and foot to sync up the time. Keep counting "1-2-+-3" when you're playing the straight eighth notes with the right hand; it'll help to solidify your feel. You may find it helpful to work with your right hand without the foot at this point to get used to switching between the straight feel and the triplets. Keep using a metronome, set at a very slow tempo.

A musical staff in 4/4 time showing a 2:3 polyrhythm between hands and feet. The staff is divided into two parts. The first part shows eighth-note triplets with brackets above and below, labeled with a '3'. The second part shows straight eighth notes with brackets above and below, labeled with a '3'. The notes are: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4), quarter note (5), quarter note (6), quarter note (7), quarter note (8).

Next, use an alternating sticking with both your hands on the snare and your feet on the bass drum. As above, working with the hands alone may help you lock in the shift in feel between the straight eighths and triplets. Use alternating sticking for both measures with the hands – at first. Once you can feel the straight eighths with the alternating sticking against the triplets in the bass drum, start using alternating sticking for the measure of triplets, and then play the measure of straight eighths with just your right hand. It's easy for your right hand to sync with your right foot, and then you'll be playing an off-beat triplet feel with your right hand; watch out for that. This is the most important step; it's all downhill from here.

After that, do the same thing, but move your right hand to the ride cymbal. Leave your left hand on the snare for the parts with alternating sticking. For this step you can skip playing the straight eighths with alternating sticking.

When you are comfortable with the straight eighth notes on the ride against the triplets on the bass drum, add the snare on "two" and "four," and there you have it.

This independence can lead to some very funky sounding grooves as you start to break up the triplets in the bass drums, creating broken 2:3 parts. Play one measure on the groove with steady triplets with the bass drum, then play the measure with broken triplet rhythms. Then start experimenting. In no time you'll be coming up with your own patterns.

Finally, there's plenty of room for fills over the steady triplets on the bass drum. The first step is to add the left hand on off-beat sixteenth notes to the straight eighth notes with the right hand to make a steady stream of sixteenth notes. This will alter the polyrhythm slightly to 4:3.

Then start experimenting with any of your favorite rhythms. Here are a couple ideas to get you started.

In conclusion, I have to thank my main teacher when it came to polyrhythms, the late Ed Kaspik, whom I studied with during my time at Berklee. Using polyrhythms you can create limitless layers of rhythmic ideas, you just need to start from a basic framework, and build them up from there.

Thanks! And have fun!