

Using a Metronome

Robert Higginbotham

The metronome is arguably one of the more important tools we have available to help us develop musically. The metronome plays a steady ‘click’ which is measured in beats per minute (bpm)

The metronome has evolved from the pendulum-based mechanical device on your grandmother’s piano to a digital tool in modern times. There are several free offerings available for smart phones, tablets, and computers.

The metronome plays an important part in:

- Developing and maintaining a good sense of time
- Learning to listen while you play
- Learning not to rush tempos
- Gauging progress in specific musical passages and other musical goals.

Using the Metronome

Start by setting a tempo and tapping your foot in time with it. This will allow you to feel the tempo and be in synch with it – a critical musical skill. Once you, and your body, are comfortable with the tempo begin your practice. You can practice anything, from fundamental scales and finger exercises to full songs and beyond.

For scales and finger exercises always start at a slow enough tempo that you can execute with ease. All notes should ring clearly with a minimum of string noise. Increase the tempo slowly and continue to practice in tempos that are comfortable. Enhance your practice by mixing in any of the following:

- Practice in various time signatures
- Play note for note with the metronome
- Play two notes per beat (eighth notes), three notes per beat (triplets), four notes per beat (sixteenth notes), five notes, six notes, etc.
- Play on the ‘ands’ in between the clicks
- Some digital metronomes have “rhythm trainers” built in where the beat is silent for an adjustable time before resuming. This helps you check that you are playing with precision.
- Listen closely to the metronome when practicing with it. This will help you to listen to other musicians when playing with them. If you don’t listen to fellow musicians while playing with them, you shouldn’t be playing with them.
- Know that you will likely want to “rush” tempos. We all do it. Listen closely and avoid rushing.

Note: you will almost always tend to rush. The reason for this is rooted in how our brain processes music. When playing we perceive the music is slower than it is being played.

Important note: ***Never, ever, practice something faster than you can play it.***
This leads to sloppy performance.

When practicing songs and other musical passages, start out the same way by tapping your foot first, until you feel the tempo. Keep in mind that the metronome is 'rigid'. Real music is typically not. Emotion is a fluid thing. Most music should be as well. With that said, the metronome is an excellent tool to identify where you tend to speed up (usual) or slow down (never) within a piece. If you identify a musical section where you tend to rush the tempo (a chorus for instance) you can work the correct it.

Note: Often musical notation, and tab on the internet will tell you the beats per minute (BPM)

Metronomes can be used to gauge progress. When working on music you always want to start slow and build up speed (as needed) over time. Say you are a beginner working on changing from the G chord to the C chord. You could start this at 50 bpm. Once you can do this comfortably, increase the speed incrementally i.e. to 55 bpm. Once you are comfortable at this speed, give yourself a pat on the back and increase it to 60 bpm. Repeat this process until you can change the chords fast enough for the piece you are working on. Always listen closely to the metronome and the passage you are playing to ensure you are keeping good time and playing good notes.

Practicing with the metronome is something I recommend doing daily to whatever extent you can. If you are curious and inclined, you may want to investigate hardware and software-based drum machines. They allow you to practice with complex rhythms and arrangements. They are big fun.

It is important to re-state what was said earlier – most music is not rigid. Music breathes and can vary with the tempo. Metronomes are incapable of doing this. To this end, for intermediate and advanced students I recommend improvising along with jam tracks. Although most jam tracks do not vary in rhythm, they have much more 'groove' than a metronome and allow the student to improvise in a way that 'breathes' with the music. Just as I recommend tapping your foot to synch up with the metronome, I recommend listening closely to the jam track before improvising on top of it. Listen closely to all the information being presented so you can decide how best to serve the song before improvising. This is the most important skill when working with others. You need to process the information being supplied so you can serve the song as effectively as you can. When improvising, listening to others creates opportunities to go 'places' as a unit. Listening affords the opportunity to serve the song to the best of your ability.

In closing, the metronome I use on my IOS devices is 'Pro Metronome' by EMU labs. It is available for both Android and IOS. I have found it to be very versatile and meets most of my needs.



Android: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.emulab.android.prometronome&hl=en_US

IOS: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/pro-metronome-tempo-beat-subdivision-polyrhythm/id477960671>

There are many other products on the market, along with new products all the time.

Enjoy!