

# Chapter 9

## The Rhythm Section-Based Orchestra

by David S. Winkler

Church music has changed immensely in the last 30 years. Traditional and classical styles have given way to music which is heavily influenced by the popular styles of our culture. The instruments common to popular music—guitars, drums, and various types of keyboards—have been accepted into our churches, sometimes reluctantly, but in more recent days, with great enthusiasm. The philosophy behind this change in styles could be debated extensively. Our purpose here is simply to examine the use of these instruments within the church orchestra, and to offer suggestions for using them effectively.

Throughout this book, various types of instrumental formats have been described—some based on a “core group” of brass, others based on the piano and/or organ. A marching band uses brass and percussion as its “core”; the symphony orchestra, strings. A stage band (“dance band” or “lab band”) consists of a full section each of saxophones, trumpets, and trombones, all built around a “rhythm section,” which usually includes a piano, electric bass, drums, and guitar. In reality, many church orchestras resemble the latter model, with additional instruments included from the woodwind, brass, and string families.

Modern multitrack recording techniques used in most contemporary music have had a great influence on the development of a rhythm section-based instrumental format. Typically, the rhythm instruments are recorded first; then the brass, followed by additional “sweetening” from woodwind and/or string overdubs. Finally, the vocals are recorded. The music thus produced could stand alone with rhythm section and vocals only, though the addition of the other instruments is designed to enhance the overall effect. A great deal of the music we listen to, even that produced for church choir and orchestra, is conceived this way, though in some situations the entire orchestra is actually recorded “live.”

The rhythm section could be called the “improvising section,”<sup>1</sup> because, unlike other parts in the orchestra, the rhythm player is required to create his own part from a simple “chart.” A typical rhythm chart will include chord symbols, some rhythmic notation, occasional written figures, and perhaps a few short verbal descriptions of the style in which the music is to be interpreted. From this basic sketch of the music, the rhythm player is left to his own abil-

ity to improvise a part which is appropriate to the music being played. To do this effectively, the rhythm player must be thoroughly familiar with the harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary of various musical styles, and must possess a certain amount of good taste which will guide him in choosing that which will best enhance the music.

Is this concept of an “improvising section” as a basis for the orchestra an idea which is unique to our generation? Hardly! Bach, Handel, and other eighteenth-century musicians would feel right at home in today’s version of what, in Baroque music, is known as the “basso continuo,” or figured bass. Though the instruments have changed dramatically, the basic concept of a continuo group as the harmonic and rhythmic foundation of the instrumental ensemble is much the same. Let’s examine the components of a contemporary rhythm section and see how each part functions individually and in relation to the entire group.

### The Electric Bass

The electric bass functions as the harmonic and rhythmic foundation of the rhythm section, and thus, of the entire orchestra in a rhythm section-based group. Harmonically, the bass helps to outline the chord structure at any given point in the music. Rhythmically, the bass establishes the predominant rhythmic pulse or “feel” of the music. Thus, the bass player has a great responsibility, even though his part may not be immediately apparent to the uneducated listener.

The bass player must have a clear knowledge of chord structure and musical harmony. Often, the bass will simply play the root of the chord, or an inversion using the third or fifth. At other times, the bass will fill in with passing tones to create a “walking” effect. Composite chords, with one chord in the treble clef and a single note in the bass (e.g., C/D), are quite common in contemporary music. In this case, the bass player should be careful to play only the lower note (in this example, the D), leaving the chord to the guitar and the piano (right hand).



The bass player also plays a very important role in establishing the basic pulse or “feel” of the music. The articulations used by the bass player, creating a smooth effect or a more “choppy” quality, are of great importance in establishing the basic rhythmic pulse





2. Swing or shuffle—a ragged or uneven feel.



Note that the music may actually be written in even eighths , or in a dotted eighth-sixteenth pattern , but it should be interpreted as written above. Again, this is not a new concept. The French Baroque composers often interpreted even eighth notes in an “unequal” style they called *notes inégales*.

3. Triplet (compound rhythm)—6/8, 9/8, or 12/8 feel, though it may occur in 2/4, 3/4, or 4/4 meters.



### Backbeats

A “backbeat” is an accent which occurs on the weak beat(s) of a measure. On the drums, the backbeat is played on the snare drum, with the strong beats being assigned to the bass drum.

1. “Time”—normal or regular backbeats. In 4/4 time, the backbeats occur on beats 2 and 4.



2. “Double time”—The backbeats occur on the second half (the “and”) of each beat. This makes the music feel like it is moving twice as fast.



3. “Half time”—In 4/4, the backbeat happens on beat 3, giving the music the feeling of moving half as fast.



It is very important that all the rhythm section players agree on the type of subdivisions and backbeats to be used at any given point in the music.

There are times when a typical drum set style will not be appropriate for the music being performed. Certain hymns, for example, will call for more of a concert band or march style, in which the drummer uses mainly the snare and bass drum only. At other times, it may be more appropriate for the drums to play only a cymbal roll here or there. The drummer should always turn off the snare drum whenever it is not being used in order to avoid sympathetic vibrations which may occur.

When playing church music, a drummer will inevitably hear the complaint that “the drums are too loud.” Assuming that the drummer is cooperative and understands his role to be one of enhancing the music and message, there are several ways to approach the problem of excessive volume. One solution is to use wire brushes rather than sticks, but the brushes give quite a different sound and feel to the music. A better solution is to use lighter sticks and simply play softer. Also, there are several products available which can give a sound that is louder than brushes but softer than sticks. Calato makes a type of heavy plastic brushes called “Blasticks,” and ProMark has something called “Multi-Rods” which consist of a number of 1/8-inch dowels bound together to make a single “stick.”

Often, identifying the most offensive part of the drum sound can lead to the changes needed to rectify the situation. For example, a boomy bass drum could be toned down with blankets or foam rubber. A loud cymbal can be softened somewhat with a piece or two of duct tape. A simple trick to quiet a snare drum is to have the drummer lay his wallet on the head of the drum. A shield of plexiglas set up around the drums can help to contain the sound without blocking the player’s view. Finally, the size of the drums may be a problem. The larger the drums, the bigger the sound; thus, a set with smaller drums, such as those designed for jazz use, may be more desirable than a larger set designed for the rock drummer.

One other option which may be considered is the use of electronic drums. These consist of rubber pads connected electronically to a synthesizer which is programmed to reproduce various drum sounds. The drummer plays on the pads using regular drum sticks, and the sound is produced through a speaker/amplifier setup. The great thing about such a system, obviously, is the ability to control the volume level of the drums, even though the drummer may be hitting the pads full strength. A more sensitive player will find electronic drums to be limited in terms of the various shadings of color which may be elicited from acoustic drums. Also, because of the complexity of cymbal sounds, an electronic drum setup will usually include regular cymbals, using the electronic section for the drum sounds only. All of the above strategies can contribute toward reducing the volume of the drums in a church rhythm section, but ultimately, there is no substitute for a sensitive and cooperative player.

## The Piano

The piano functions chiefly to provide the harmony and add to the overall rhythmic texture of the rhythm section. The pianist must be thoroughly familiar with various chord types, and be able to voice the chords in a way which best complements the style being utilized. With the electric bass providing the bass line and the drums and bass supplying the rhythm, the pianist is freed from the responsibility of having to lead the entire choir and orchestra, and thus may concentrate on creating various types of musical ideas to enhance the overall effect of the music. Here are some examples of what the pianist might play for the styles previously illustrated for the bass player and drummer:

### Ballad

### Two-Beat

### Shuffle

### Jazz (Swing)

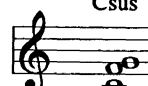

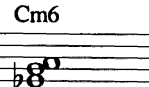
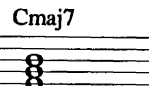
### Half-Time

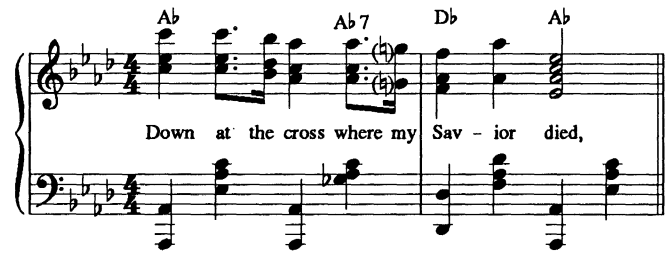
The "voicing" of chords refers to the particular arrangement of tones within a chord to create different textures and effects. Consider the following voicings of a simple C major chord:

As you can see from the examples given, the way in which a chord is voiced can make a great deal of difference in the sound or feeling of a particular musical passage. By practice and experimentation, the pianist can learn to choose those voicings which are most pleasing and which are most appropriate to the style of the music being played.

Understanding and interpreting chord symbols is a major challenge to the rhythm section pianist. He will often have nothing more than a single chord symbol to go by. Not infrequently, errors in the music or confusion in chord terminology will exist. In such cases, the director and pianist must confer in order to determine that which makes sense musically for the point in question. Some of the more common chords and chord symbols are listed below.

Symbol: C	Cm
Type: Major	Minor
C dim or C°	C aug or C+
Diminished	Augmented

 Csus Suspended (Four)	 C2 or C (add 9) Added Two or Nine
 C6 Six	 Cm6 Minor Six
 C7 Seven (Dominant)	 Cmaj7 Major Seven
 Cm7 Minor Seven	 Cm (maj7) Minor-Major Seven
 Cm7 (b5) Minor Seven with flatted fifth	 C dim7 or C° 7 Diminished Seven
 C9 Nine (includes the flatted seventh)	 C13 Thirteen



Here, a G-flat has been added to the A-flat chord on beat four of the first measure, making the tonic chord a dominant seventh of the subdominant (D-flat) chord which occurs in the following measure. Normally, this would work well; however, an obvious conflict exists between the added G-flat in the accompaniment and the G-natural in the melody. Thus, the pianist would do well to simply leave the chord alone, saving his idea for a more opportune time. The director, by listening carefully, can be aware of such conflicts and bring them to the attention of his players.

### The Guitar

There are two basic approaches to playing guitar in a rhythm section. In one approach, commonly labeled "rhythm guitar," the guitar keeps a steady beat, either strumming full chords, or playing arpeggiated figures. In the other, referred to as "lead," the guitarist acts in a melodic role, playing various "fills" and "licks" to complement the music being performed. In rock bands, there are often two individual players who act in these roles. In groups where only one guitarist is present, however, the guitarist may utilize both types of playing within a single piece of music.

Many of the suggestions mentioned in regard to the piano relate as well to the guitar. In a rhythm section where both piano and guitar are present, it is critical that the pianist and guitarist cooperate musically and work out their parts so that no clashes occur. The director can help by being aware of when it is most appropriate for the guitarist to "strum," "pick," or "play licks."

The comments made in regard to voicing for the piano apply equally to guitar. Typically, a guitarist will learn only one way to play a chord. He should be encouraged, with the use of various method books, to experiment with different inversions and voicings in order to expand his array of musical choices. Generally speaking, the guitarist in the rhythm section should avoid playing the lower notes of a chord, so as not to interfere with the line being played by the bass. This is particularly important in composite chords and inversions, where the root of the chord is not being played in the bass. In such cases, a higher voicing of the chord may be used, or the guitarist can simply play the chord in standard position and avoid playing the fifth and sixth strings.

Much of the guitarist's sound will depend upon the instrument he uses. Acoustic guitars come in several types: classical (nylon string), steel string, and twelve-string. These may be amplified using a microphone or an internal pickup. Electric guitars may

The book, *Standardized Chord Symbol Notation*, by Carl Brandt and Clinton Roemer, is an excellent resource for further study in this area (available from Roerick Music Co., 4046 Davana Road, Sherman Oaks, CA 91423).

It is common practice for rhythm players to add chord tones—sixths, sevenths, etc.—in order to harmonically embellish the music being played. Often, this can be quite desirable, adding much to the flavor of the music. However, two basic rules should be followed. First, the added notes should always be appropriate to the style of the music in question. The major seventh chord, for example, is rarely used in country or Southern gospel music, and therefore should be avoided unless the song specifically calls for such a sound. The major sixth chord can sound quite trite if used inappropriately. On the other hand, the added ninth (or second) is a neutral sounding chord tone, and can be used in almost any style of music to lend an added fullness to the harmony without significantly altering the harmonic color.

The second rule of thumb in adding extra tones to a chord is that the added tone should not clash with the melody of the song. An illustration of this can be seen in the following example based on the hymn, "Glory to His Name":

be either the hollow-body or the solid-body versions. The tone of the electric guitar can be varied greatly by adjusting the controls on the instrument itself and on the amplifier. The tone can also be affected by the types of strings used. Heavier gauge strings have a more mellow sound, whereas the lighter strings have a brighter, more "twangy" sound. Lighter strings also bend more easily, which can cause some intonation problems.

### The Rhythm Section as a Unit

The stage setup of the rhythm section is critical to the group's ability to function well musically. Ideally, all of the players should be situated together on the same floor level. They should be able to see and hear each other easily. In particular, the bass player and drummer should be seated close together, and the guitarist and pianist should be near each other. Each rhythm player should be facing the director, and should be able to hear the orchestra, the choir, and vocal soloists. For the latter, stage monitors are of great assistance.

Each rhythm player should have a "flow sheet" or program listing all of the events in the service, with special instructions for the worship leaders. The use of headsets or other communication devices can also be quite helpful in a "planned spontaneity" mode of worship. The director may also invent certain hand signals to communicate with the rhythm section during the performance of the music. For example, touching the top of the head can indicate a return to the beginning or "top" of a song; a hand held up to the chest, with the palm facing down and the arm parallel to the floor can signify a repeat at the half-way point or refrain of a song. A downward pointing finger can indicate a "turnaround" or repeat of the last phrase, and an upward pointing finger can signify a predetermined modulation to a new key. Holding up one finger can be used to represent a "I" chord, five fingers a "V" chord, and so on. To indicate an unaccompanied or *a cappella* section, a "cut-throat" sign can be given (the index finger moved across the neck). Closing the hand to a fist can signify the end of a song in cases where a song is repeated several times. With practice, all of these signals can be incorporated into the director's conducting technique in a way which is barely noticeable to the congregation.

When playing in an orchestra, the rhythm players should be aware of what is happening with the other instruments and how they can best be supported by the rhythm section. For example, the drummer should note any accented figures in the brass and copy them in his time patterns. If the pianist is playing from the printed keyboard part on the choral score, he should be aware of orchestral figures which may have been written into the part and avoid playing them unless it is necessary to support a weaker part. The organist should be careful not to overpower the orchestra; in fact, if the orchestra is full and the rhythm section is capable, it may be preferable to leave out the organ for certain selections. If a syn-

thesizer or electric piano is used in addition to the acoustic piano, the players should be careful to choose musical ideas which complement rather than compete against each other.

The rhythm section members should constantly be seeking to improve their skills through an expanded knowledge of musical styles. Listening critically to recordings can be of great value for this purpose. A bass player, for example, may listen to a recording, focusing his attention upon the bass line, in order to determine the types of figures which may be used in a particular style of music. There are many method books available to aid in this learning process, of which some include a companion recording for illustrative purposes.

The players in a rhythm section should be aware of the principle of contrast within an individual piece, or between pieces in a set of music. Sameness can be avoided by varying the texture from heavy to light, or the volume from loud to soft. On the drums, contrast is achieved by changing from ride cymbal to hi-hat, or from rim shot to stick on the snare. In the bass, piano, and guitar, a nice effect can be created by changing from a lower to a higher register. A "layered" approach, starting with piano only and gradually adding bass, guitar, and drums, is a common way to build momentum within a song.

In conclusion, a well-balanced and capable rhythm section can serve well as the basis for an orchestral ensemble, and can add much to the excitement of the music used in a worship service. The extra effort needed to develop a sensitive and creative group of rhythm players will be rewarded as we see the Lord use our music to reach this generation with the message of Christ's love.

<sup>1</sup>Steve Houghton, *A Guide for the Modern Jazz Rhythm Section* (Oskaloosa, Iowa: C. L. Barnhouse Company, 1982), 1.

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