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Free Resources

5 Ways To Interpret A Drum Chart

Confident Drummer Series

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5 Ways To Interpret A Drum Chart

Simply put, reading music is not about reading but is about interpretation.

The main reason for this is that music notation, although very useful, is a quite limited tool, which can never possibly allow us to put on paper all the details that are necessary to accurately reproduce what was meant to be played.

That's why being a good reader is not about literal execution of what's written.

It's about adding what's not written, which is most of what we actually play.

And that's exactly the definition of interpretation: performing in a musical and meaningful way while approximating the markings indicated on the score, and including your own ideas as to how things should sound.

There are different levels of interpretation based on what kind of drum score we are reading.

If it's a note for note transcription then we have to accurately stick to it and reproduce each figure, idea and orchestration.

In this case interpretation is more about nuances, adding tiny details, personality and feel.

If it's a drum chart (just rhythmic figures, no specific beats or fills), which is the most common case, then we are a lot freer to do what we want, and express ourselves within the confines of the notes.

But that's exactly the trick. How do you make those figures sound like music on the drums?

We are going to focus on this last case, and use a 16th note drum chart to learn 5 different approaches, which are very helpful in becoming more comfortable and confident about our reading skills.

1- Phrasing: alternating 16ths and orchestrating the figures around the drum kit.

The most intuitive way to interpret rhythmic figures on a drum is to play alternating single strokes and accent the figures.

That's a great starting point, which I recommend you practice for a few weeks if you've never done it before.

Just play a stream of 8ths or triplets or 16ths based on the subdivisions involved, and accent the notes you are reading.

Then we can add an interesting variation, which makes it a lot more musical, by simply orchestrating the accents on the drum kit while the unaccented notes stay on the Snare Drum.

2- Groove: playing an 8th note basic groove, with the Backbeat on 2 and 4 and playing the figures with the Bass Drum.

As drummers we do two main things: we play fills (phrasing) and we play rhythms (beats and grooves).

With the first interpretation method we have covered the phrasing part. Now it's time to focus on the latter, using a very effective solution.

We interpret the figures by reading them with the Bass Drum while we keep 8ths on the Hi-Hat and a steady 2 and 4 on the Snare Drum. It's amazing how this always works. And it's pretty quick to learn.

3- Song form 1+1: Once we are familiar with both domains, it's time to combine them.

We can utilize both of the above solutions in a basic music structure, just playing one bar of groove and one of phrasing.

The best way to practice anything on the drums is always to contextualize it in a song structure, so that then we are able to do it when we play, because that's what's required to perform songs.

4- Song form 3+1: This is important because combining one bar of groove with one of phrasing is obviously not very applicable in a musical context.

It's useful, as a shortcut, to learn how to mix the different approaches with ease. But then we need to move on to wider structures.

Here we use a more common song form, with 3 bars of groove and one of phrasing, that we can then extend as we like to 7+1, 15+1 and so on.

5- Free: playing spontaneously and catching the figures. We can use dif-

ferent stickings, orchestrations, dynamics and we can fill in the gaps and use setups, in order to make it breathe and sound as musical as possible.

This is the most complete way to interpret, where we let go of all the stickings, rules, techniques and concepts and we just play, the way it comes out.

It's very important that we spend a long time on this one, as soon as we feel we are comfortable with the fundamentals of interpretation, because this is where we transcend reading and we move on to making music.

At the beginning is natural to feel stiff when using this approach, but as we keep at it we are going to notice that our hands and feet find a way to turn those figures into something that makes musical sense, in real time.

You can click on the above links to watch the [Video Demos on YouTube](#), where I play each example.

I recommend you start by practicing one technique at a time and one measure at the time, so that you can make sure everything is in the right place.

Then move on and combine 2 bars, and so on, until you can play the whole thing.

Also, try many different tempos, as usual. And then choose any chart you like and practice these 5 techniques until you can use them even when sight-reading.

In conclusion, it's worth to clarify that here we didn't consider dynamics, mixed subdivisions, setting up figures, and many other essential aspects.

Interpretation is a deep topic that deserves discussing its many details.

That's why I dedicated a whole drum book to exploring this area of drumming.

Check it out if you want to take your reading chops to the next level:

['Interpretation & Arrangement' - Altitude Drumming - Volume 9](#)

16th Note Drum Chart

♩ = 60-160 bpm

The drum chart consists of ten staves, each representing a different drum set interpretation of a 16th-note pattern. Each staff is divided into two measures by a vertical bar line. The notation includes stems with flags for sixteenth notes, beams connecting them, and various symbols for snare, hi-hat, and bass drum hits.