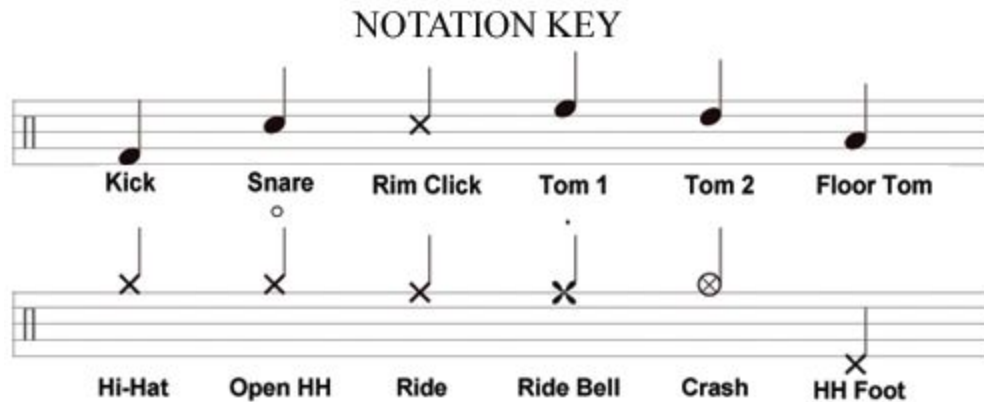


Notation Tips For Drum Set by Andy Gagnon

Hi! My name is Andy Gagnon. I'm a drummer, composer, and music teacher. If you write a piece with a drum set part for Music COMP, I'm probably the guy who will be playing it. This little handout is designed to make both of our lives easier. You'll know how to write drum set parts that are easy to read and play, and I'll be able to play them better for you!

Learn The Drum Set Notation Key:

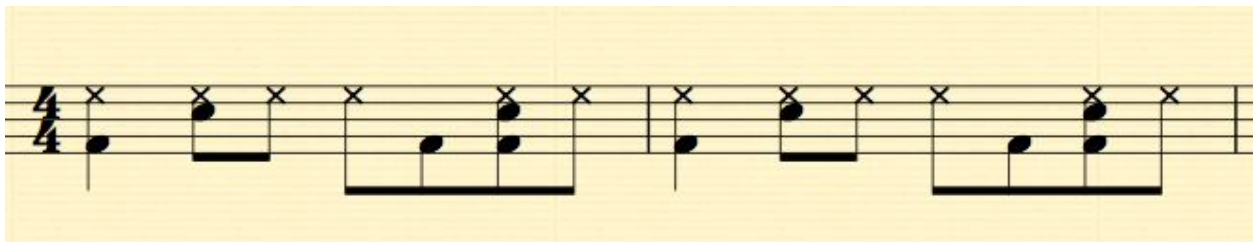
Here it is:



When in doubt, put some text in the drum part to explain what instrument you want played/how it should be played.

Stems:

One of the classic blunders when writing drum set parts is to mess up the direction of your stems, like this:



NO THANK YOU!!!

Drum set does not follow the usual rules about stems. Here's the drum set stem rule:

If it's something you play with your hands, stems go up.

If it's something you play with your feet, stems go down.

Example: In this rock groove, the foot is playing the bass drum, so the stems for the bass drum notes go down. The hands are playing the hi-hat and the snare, so the stems go up. Notice that the snare and hi-hat notes that happen at the same time share a stem. Also notice that there is no quarter rest between bass drum notes. No rest is needed since the drummer is playing other instruments during beats 2 and 4.

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

YES!!!

Keep It Simple:

At this point in your compositional journey, you are probably used to writing parts showing every sound exactly as you want to hear it played. This is a great skill to have! When writing for drum set, you don't always need to be as specific as you do when writing for other instruments. A skilled drum set player will know how to take a part that outlines the big ideas of your piece and turn it into a musical and expressive part. For example, if you write in the groove notated above and text that reads something like "rock feel, ad lib," your kit player will know that you want them to play in a rock style and that they can spice it up a bit.

Slashes:

Above is an example of slash notation. This tells the drummer to keep doing what they're doing. In the example, the composer has given the drummer a measure of the groove they want to be played followed by three measures of slashes (one slash for each pulse in the measure). The drummer will keep playing the same groove for all four measures, possibly throwing in an occasional variation here and there. Slashes keep things easy to look at on the drum set player's sheet music.

Notating Phrasing/Sections:

Drummers like to know about the form of the composition. Use double bar lines to indicate the start of new sections/phrases, especially if there isn't a rehearsal number or letter there. When using slash notation, indicating the total number of bars played at the end of each section is a good way to ensure that your drummer doesn't get lost:

The image shows four staves of drum notation. Each staff begins with a rehearsal number: 9, 13, 17, and 21. The notation consists of four measures per staff, with diagonal slashes representing drum hits. The first three measures of each staff are identical. The fourth measure of the second and fourth staves is enclosed in a double bar line and labeled with a circled '8', indicating an 8-measure section.

Ensemble Rhythms vs. Hits

Ensemble Rhythms are rhythms being played by other instruments that you want your drummer to know about. You don't expect them to play the rhythm in its entirety, but you think it's a rhythm your drummer may want to play with/around. Ensemble rhythms should be written *above the staff*, like this:

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. Above the staff, there are three groups of eighth notes, each marked with a '3' above it, indicating triplets. The first group is followed by a quarter note, the second by a quarter note, and the third by a quarter note. Below the staff, there are four measures of drum notation with diagonal slashes. The first measure is marked with a '64' and a dynamic marking of 'mp'.

Hits are rhythms that you want your drummer to play in their entirety. They will probably embellish and set up the hits, but every rhythm in the hit will be played. Hits should be written *on the staff*, like this:

The image shows a drum staff with a treble clef. Above the staff, there is a musical notation for a horn part, labeled '(with horns)'. The notation consists of two groups of eighth notes, each marked with a '3' above it, indicating triplets. Below the staff, there are four measures of drum notation with diagonal slashes. The first measure is marked with a '64' and a dynamic marking of 'mp'.

(Notice that the notation implies that the first set of hits would be played with the hands while the second set with the feet.)

Fills:

Fills are variations on a groove that drummers play to add contrast and variation to a drum set part. They are often used to emphasise the transition from one section of a piece to another, or to set up hits/important rhythms in the composition.

Writing out fully realized fills is usually a bad idea. Drummers do not like to read things like this:

Australian surf metal
♩=192

mp < f fff ppp f pp mf

Cool idea, friend...but it won't sound good when your drummer tries to play it live.

Drummers would much rather read something like this:

Australian surf metal
♩=192

Big Fill!

By stating that you want a fill while leaving the fill open to interpretation, you invite your drum set player to use some of their creativity and musical experience to enhance your composition. Smart move!

Simplify Rhythms For Instruments With No Sustain:

Let's say you're writing some hits in the drum part, and you want the hits to double the exact rhythm that the trumpet is playing at that moment:

Since the snare drum will be playing the same rhythm, you might be tempted to write it using identical rhythmic notation. However, since the snare drum can't sustain its sound (unless you use a drum roll), the rhythm above can be simplified and written like this:



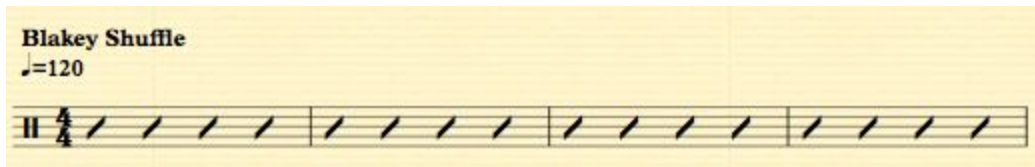
Since there is no difference in the sound of an eighth note - eighth rest combo and a quarter note played on a snare drum, when drummers see eighth notes and eighth rests in 4/4 time, we assume that there is some syncopation in play. By simplifying the rhythm above, you've made it easier for your drummer to quickly understand that the rhythm is primarily hits on the downbeats of the measure. You should transfer this core concept to all meters and all subdivisional levels.

Talk To Drummers:

If you want to know how percussionists like their parts to be written, ask them. Nobody knows as much about the little things that make or break a drum part than the person who needs to play it. Ask your drummer friends to check out your drum parts and give you feedback.* (This rule holds true when writing for any instrument.)

Listen To Great Drummers:

"You know, it's a Purdie Shuffle sorta' thing." "Take a Buddy Rich solo." "Gimme a Bonham groove." "Do a Sheila E. fill." "This shuffle needs to have a Blakey feel." This is how groove musicians talk to each other about drumming; by referencing the great players and their musical ideas. If you want to write drum parts that sound good, you need to know what good drumming sounds like. Listen to great drummers play to expand your musical vocabulary. Sometimes, this is all it takes in the drum part to make a composition sound great in live performance:



It's the same idea as the old saying "a picture's worth a thousand words." You don't need to spend hours and hours notating an Art Blakey shuffle and Art Blakey fills if both you and your drummer know what Art Blakey sounds like. Strive for common listening experience with your performers so you can be imagining the same sonic references in your head. (This is essential when composing for any instrument and any style of music.) www.drummerworld.com is a great place to start. Listen to recordings and watch some videos.

*If you don't have any drummer friends, you're seriously missing out.