Mastery of Subdivisions

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by Eugenio Ventimiglia

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Mastery of Subdivisions
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The role of a drummer, despite the extreme evolution of drum technique, the flashy stuff that we can play and the use of electronics in music, has always fundamentally been 'keeping time' (although it's obviously a lot more than that...).

Or rather, as I like to clarify, providing a steady pulse for the rest of the band.

I'd like to stress this point, because understanding this means realizing that the pulse (the quarter note) must remain constant regardless of the way we subdivide it while we play.

Of course it's one thing to be able to do it when playing eighth notes throughout the song, and a whole different story when subdivisions are mixed more creatively.

Two types of challenges arise: on the one hand we have to be clear about how a quarter note divided into 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9 and even 5 or 7 parts sounds (respectively, eighths, triplets, sixteenths, sextuplets, thirty-seconds, ninetuplets, quintuplets and septuplets).

On the other, even though we understand how each figure sounds, it can be tricky to play combinations where different subdivisions are performed in succession.

Which, needless to say, is exactly what happens when we make music, for instance in playing an eighth note groove followed by a sextuplets fill.

Unfortunately it's quite common for the drummer to alter the pulse when playing a complex fill or phrase, because there is confusion about the way the subdivisions involved work.

That, of course, translates into inaccuracies and playing 'out of time'.

In this lesson we are addressing this situation by exploring subdivisions from different angles, progressively, so as to remove any doubt about their workings:

- Basic Subdivisions.
- Tuplets.
- Progressions.
- Combinations.
- Applications.

These studies and exercises will help us gradually develop greater confidence around handling each subdivision, and also each combination, from the simplest to the most challenging.

It's important to study with a metronome but also to get used to dictate the tempo with confidence, even during difficult transitions, so as to avoid to rely on the click too much.

Many drummers, instead of focusing on developing their inner clock and taking responsibility for the pulse, become too reliant on the metronome and end up chasing it.

To take things to the next level we can try to orchestrate each phrase on the Drum Set, based on our musical taste, and also to use it as a fill, alternating it to a groove.

It's also useful to count, especially for beginners:
- In eighths: -1 - and - 2 - and - 3 - and - 4 - and -
- In triplets: - 1 - and - a - 2 - and - a - 3 - and - a - 4 - and - a -
- In sixteenths: - 1 - e - and - a - 2 - e - and - a - 3 - e - and - a - 4 - e - and - a -

- In quintuplets and septuplets we count each note (for instance -1-2-3-4-5-1-2-3-4-5-).

BASIC SUBDIVISIONS:

First of all it's important to review the most basic subdivisions, to also get a chance to practice them with a metronome and make sure we have a solid grasp of their spacing: 8ths, 16ths, sextuplets and 32nds.

I haven't included quarter notes since they are explored in depth in other lessons, like 'Playing Ahead or Behind the Beat - Full Course - Part 2: Exercises'.

It theory there are even sixty-fourth notes and twenty-eighth notes (and their triplets), but in practice we will never see them on a score.

TUPLETS:

Next we move on to a page all about irregular groupings called tuplets.

Let's not forget that even common eighth note triplets are an irregular grouping, although they are so familiar that we consider them normal notes.

Actually, the bracket and the number '3' we use to notate them are pointing exactly to this fact.

Since there are no notes of the value that we want to represent, we 'borrow' symbols used for other durations, and we cluster them to create an 'irregular' note grouping, whose total value is still the quarter note (or the underlying pulse).

For instance, when we write an eighth note triplet we use eighth note symbols, which have the value of half a quarter note, and not one third of it.

This is why we place a '3' above the three eighth note grouping, which without this notation would have a duration of a quarter note and a half, instead of a quarter note as intended.

Another way to see this is to think that when we play a triplet we are putting three notes in the same space where we normally play two.

This line of reasoning can be applied to all note values. As a matter of fact we can have triplets of all sorts: not just eighth note but also whole, half, quarter, sixteenth note triplets, and so on.

The most common types of tuplet are groupings of 3 (triplets), 5 (quintuplets), 7 (septuplets) and 9 notes (ninetuplets).

When notating quintuplets and septuplets we normally use the sixteenth note symbol: therefore we are placing, in the same space where we usually have four notes, five and seven notes, respectively.

As far as ninetuplets go, they are triplets within triplets, tuplets used inside tuplets, also known as nested tuplets.

Widely used in many music genres, ninetuplets are 9 note groupings, typically obtained from eighth note triplets by playing three notes for each triplet (we can help ourselves with a RLL-RLL-RLL sticking).

If we are completely new to ninetuplets we can start by playing a simple 3/4 bar in eighth note triplets: 3+3+3 = 9. In this way we will automatically be listening to a ninetuplet and we will be able to internalize its typical cadence.

PROGRESSIONS:

Once we are clear about each individual subdivision, it's time to move on to rhythmic progressions, in which we perform different subdivisions in sequence. This is where we test how strong is our inner pulse and our understanding of the way it's divided in each case.

Let's make sure our timing doesn't fluctuate, especially during the transitions.

We are going to work on two versions:

- A basic progression including just 8ths, 16ths, sextuplets and 32nds.
- An advanced versions that goes through all subdivisions, from quarter notes to ninetuplets, including all tuplets.

As we have discussed in many occasions, playing the same cell/combination of notes through a progression is one of the most powerful ways to master the elements we are working on.

COMBINATIONS:

The most advanced and challenging approach to studying subdivisions is combining them.
Seamless transitions from eighths to sextuplets, or from triplets to 32nds can only occur if we know exactly what we are doing, which entails having mastered all subdivisions.

To simplify the process, I have created a four step study:

- Change every 2/4.
- Change every quarter note.
- Basic figures.
- Advanced figures.

APPLICATIONS:

The applications are limitless. The reason why we want to master this topic is, as usual, to be able to then make music with what we have learned.
This was just the foundational work, and the applications are where the fun begins.

Since this is something I have covered in countless lessons and video demos in this Blog, I decided to avoid creating duplicates, and instead link some of the videos where you can see subdivisions at work, and download the materials you'd like to work on (they are all free):

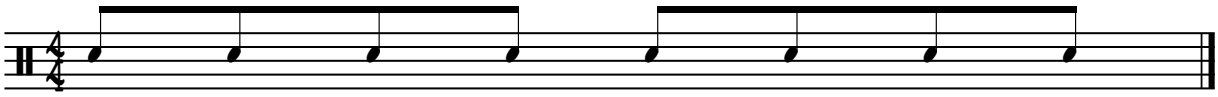
- 5 Stroke Roll Study
- Swiss Triplet Study
- Creative Paradiddle
- Coordination Study
- Fill Examples
- Advanced Fill
- Vinnie Colaiuta Lick
- PolyRhythms
- Trap Beat
- 'Best of You' Solo
- Hi-Hat Embellishments

Related resources:
'Theory & Concepts' – Altitude Drumming – Volume 1
Quintuplets - Drum Grooves - Fills - Practice Loops

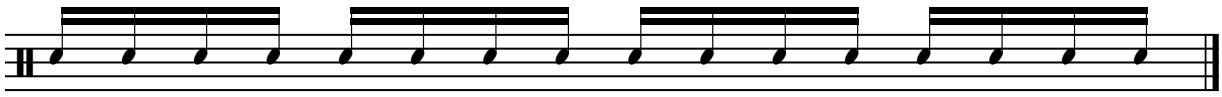
Basic Subdivisions

♩= 60 bpm

8ths

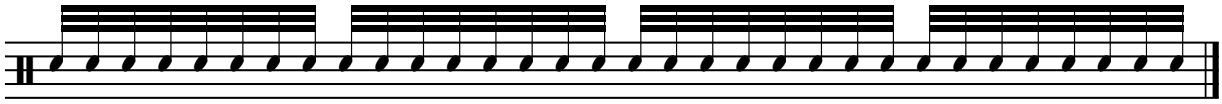


16ths



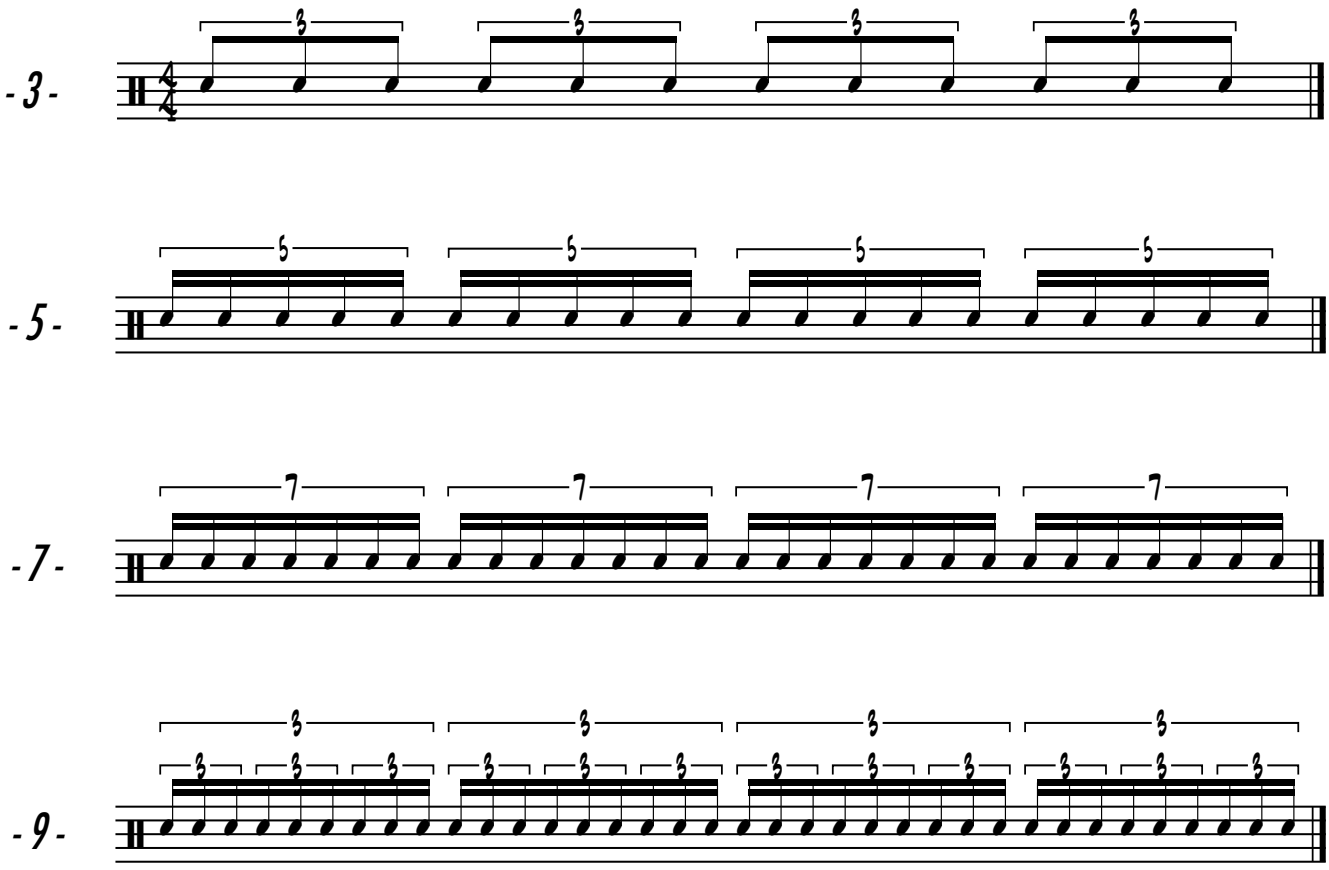
6tuplets

32nds



Tuplets

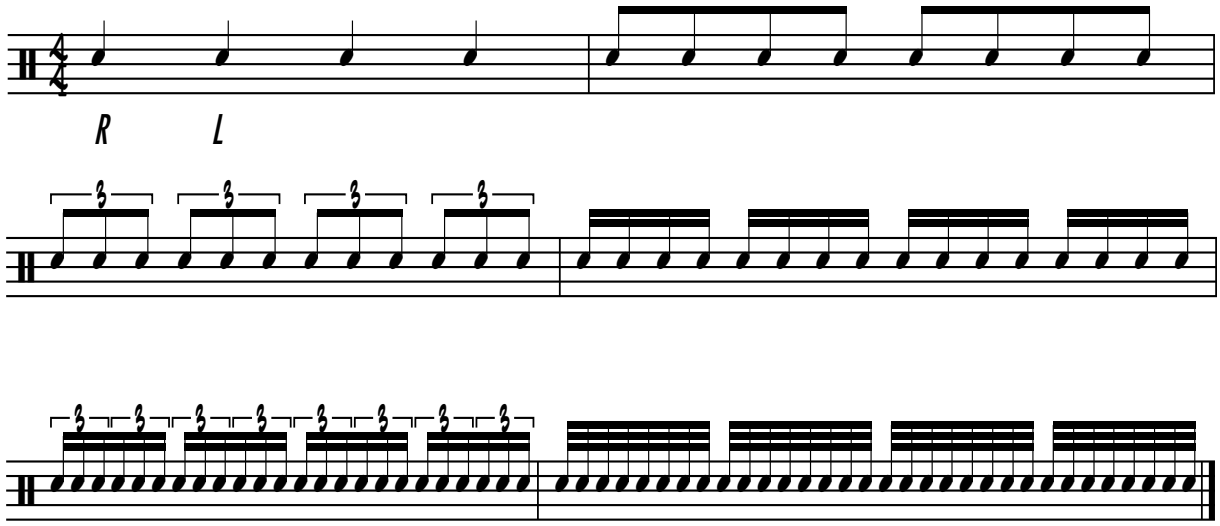
♩= 60 bpm



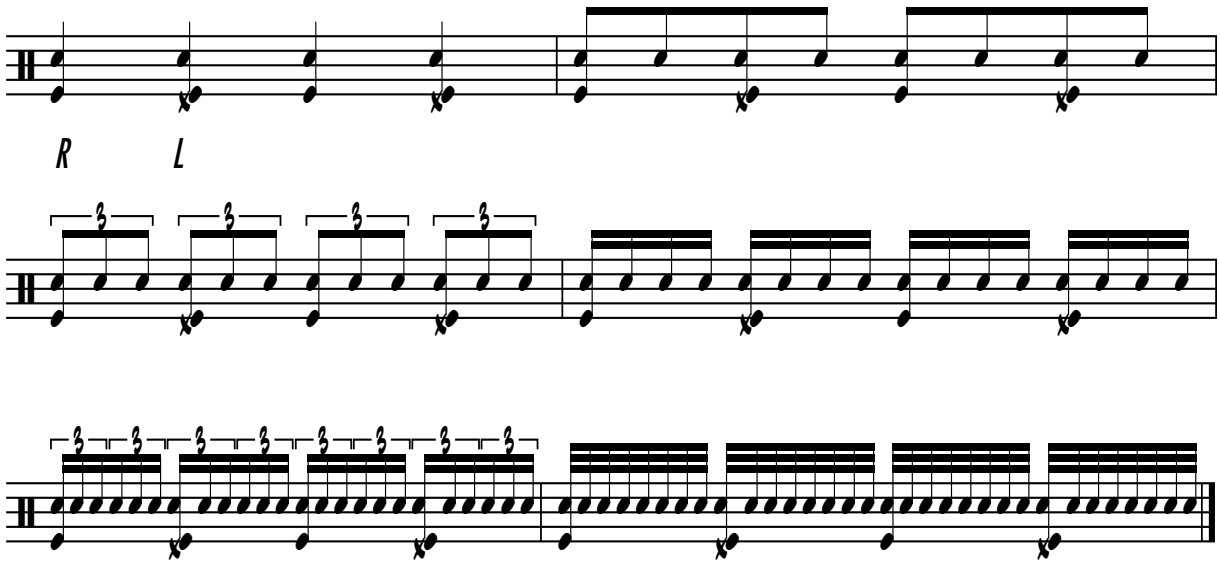
Progressions - Basic

♩= 60-80 bpm

1) Just Hands



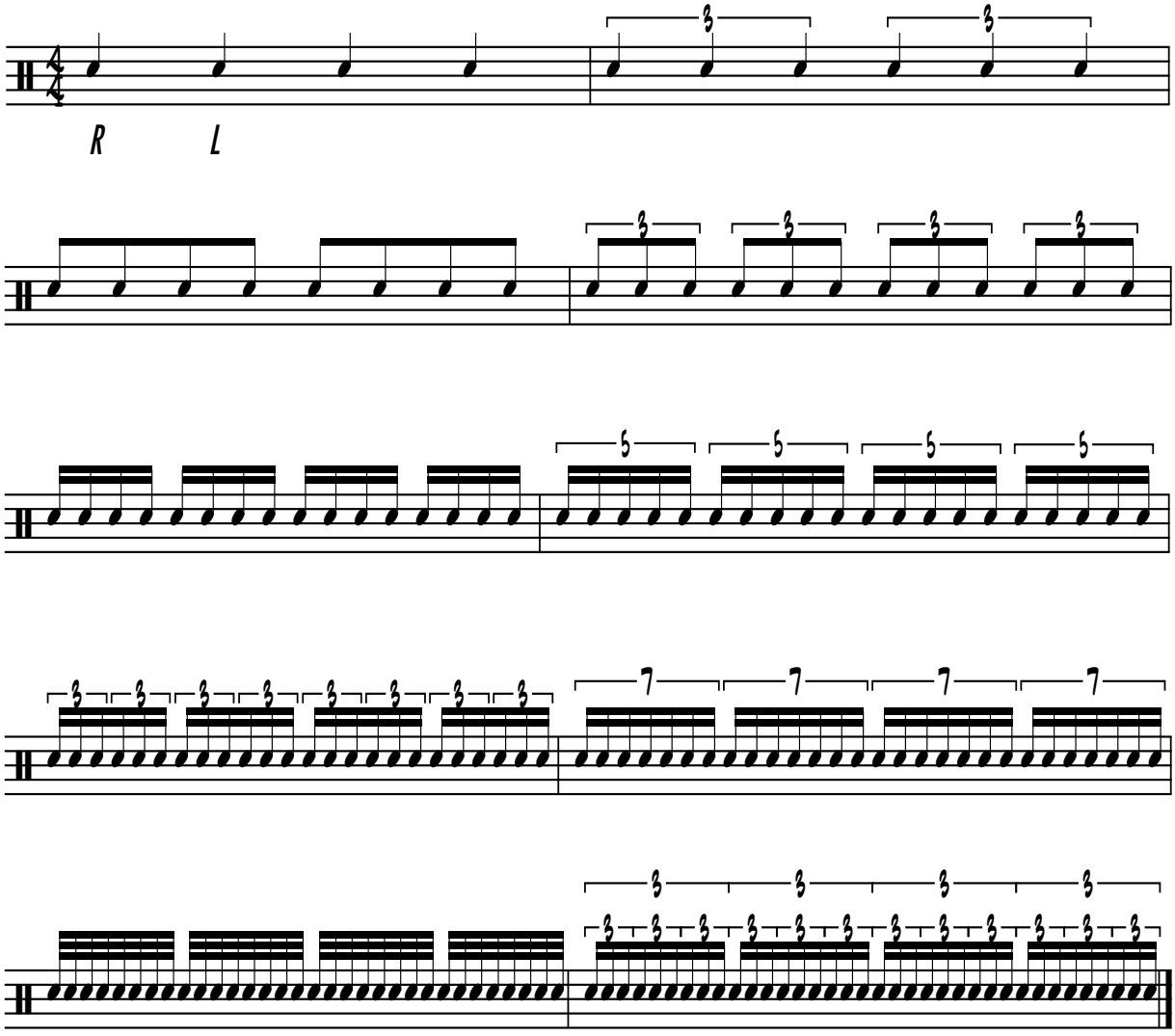
2) Adding the Feet



Progressions - Advanced

♩= 60-80 bpm

1) Just Hands

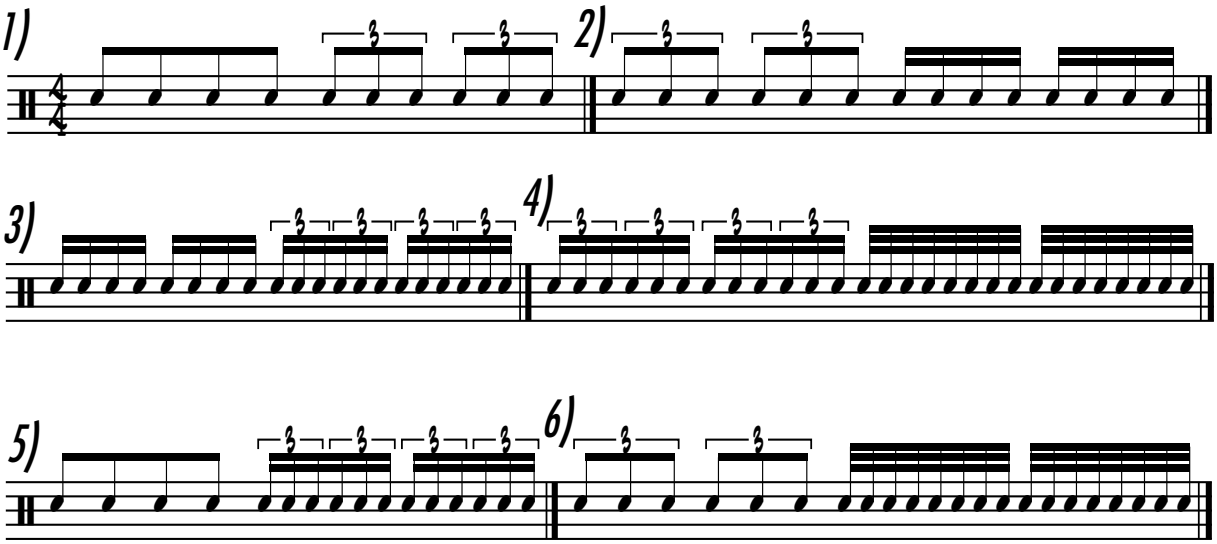


2) Adding the Feet (basic Ostinato like in the previous page)

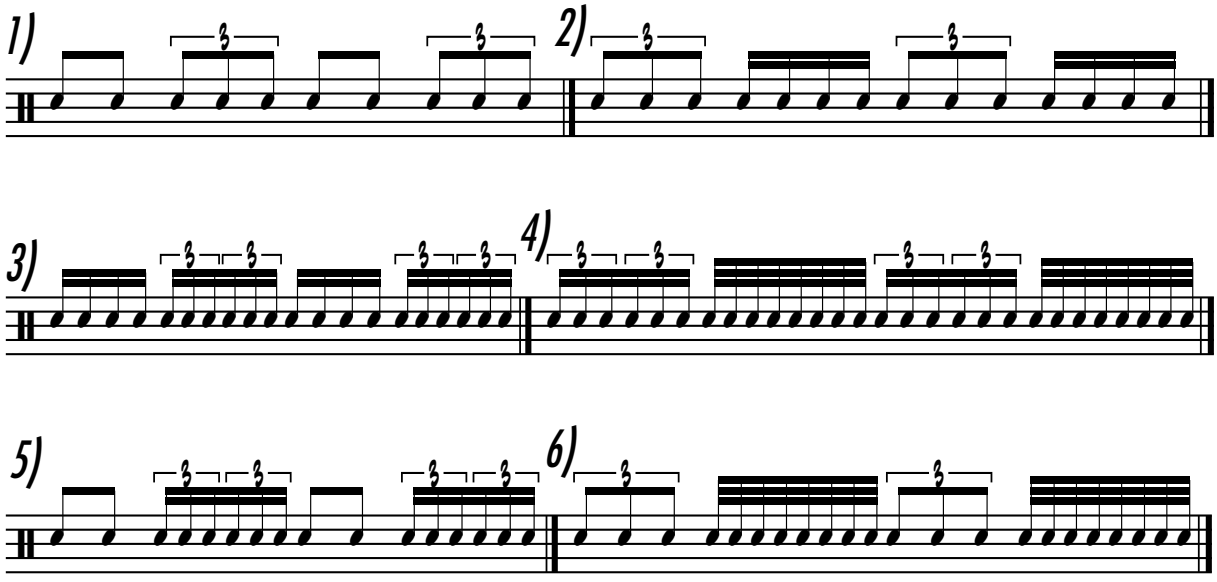
Subdivisions - Combinations

♩= 60-80 bpm

Change every 2/4



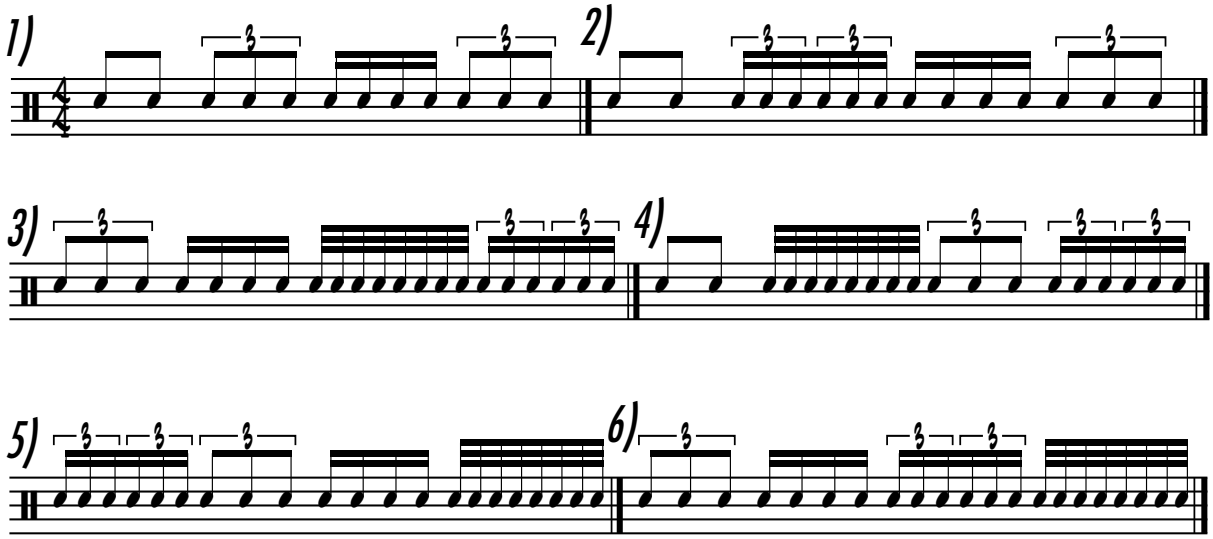
Change at each Quarter Note



Subdivisions - Combinations

♩= 60-80 bpm

Basic Figures



Advanced Figures