

5 Strategies to Handle Timing Imperfections



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5 Strategies to Handle Timing Imperfections

No matter how hard we have worked to boost our timing skills, we still have to deal with the fact that we'll never reach absolute perfection of execution.

As we well know, especially if we have been playing for a while, perfection is non achievable, is a myth, and, most of all, is actually useless.

Because music is communication, and what arrives to the listener, and what is really important, is the authenticity, the uniqueness, the personality. In other words, the expression of what we are.

Which, paradoxically, is only possible with a great deal of accuracy but would be destroyed by perfection if we ever reached it.

So, in order to further optimize our timing, in this article we explore a series of techniques that we can include in our routine, both when practicing and when playing, to contribute to making it even more solid and definite, letting go of perfection yet still aiming for excellence.

In addition to whatever timing studies we are working on, it's going to be very helpful to learn strategies aimed at cleaning up any rough edges and handling the inevitable imperfections as well as possible, so as to be ready for when they will emerge in our live or studio performances.

Most of these ideas can be applied both with and without the metronome, granting huge benefits no matter what the setup.

1- We need to develop and finetune an inner alarm system. We can think of this mechanism like a warning device that gets activated when we deviate from the beat.

The longer we practice with a reliable external source of the pulse (metronome, loops or musicians with very good timing), the more this system becomes sensitive and gets triggered at the tiniest variation.

At some point it will be so effective that it will intervene even in absence of external references.

We are going to automatically feel a sensation arise, which will warn us we are deviating slightly, and as a consequence instantly proceed with a correction.

This precious tool will be crucial to make the right adjustments, in almost imperceptible ways, before the discrepancy from the beat gets so wide that it becomes impossible to perform a smooth and linear correction.

2- We need to take responsibility about where the beat is. We can't rely on the metronome forever, chasing it and using it like a comfortable crutch to continuously show us where the pulse is.

The rule is that the metronome is a useful tool when practicing, and even in those musical contexts that require it, but we shouldn't allow ourselves to become dependent on it.

In fact, it's easy to come to rely on it for such a long time that we end up believing we can no longer do without it.

The problem is that we can't afford to let the metronome lead, because we risk becoming drummers who play in time but sound terrible, totally stiff and constantly hesitant.

Always looking for confirmation from the click, at each and every beat, to tell us that we are right and we are doing fine.

At a certain point it's crucial to take things to the next level and start taking responsibility for the tempo, leading, trusting our inner sense of time, and, only when necessary, resorting to micro corrections.

Always from a position from which we are the ones providing the pulse, and we do it with conviction while maintaining our own cadence.

Let's give ourselves permission to drive the pulse and be true leaders: comfortable, confident, relaxed, strong. After all we are the engine of the band!

Here is the key distinction: even when we practice to a click, we think of it as a reference we use to verify the timing that we generate, as opposed to the correct pulse to which we must conform.

3- Never fluctuate. Even if we notice we are not exactly spot on with the click, once we take a direction we must maintain it, and take the risk of staying where we are, with consistency and resolution.

Then we can decide to lay back a bit, or push a little, to recover. But, when we feel we are a tiny bit off the metronome, trying to fix that abruptly, in the attempt to instantly regain perfect center of the beat, is the guaranteed recipe for destroying the groove.

Instead, we can use the micro corrections technique, based on the analogy of driving a motorcycle on a long straightaway road (playing drums perfectly aligned with the click).

If we keep the handlebar in a fixed position (we play a groove to a click while sticking to our own sense of time with an inflexible approach), it doesn't matter how precise we are, sooner or later we are going to drift toward the left or the right and we are going to end up off road (out of time).

The only way to make sure that we keep going straight (in time) is using micro corrections of our direction, through tiny adjustments to the left or

to the right (micro speeding ups and slowing downs), based on the side toward which we are tending to deviate (ahead/behind).

By doing so, when we observe the motorcycle from above (listen from outside to our performance/recording), we are going to see a vehicle going perfectly straight (we are going to hear perfectly in time drumming).

This is a very powerful technique and it's important to work on mastering it at the highest level.

Let's always keep our composure, our balance, no matter how out of synch we hear we are versus the click.

In trying to realign through micro corrections it's critical that we don't get stiff and rigidly attempt to control every millisecond.

Instead we can have a relaxed approach, sticking to our cadence and groove, breathing and letting the adjustment happen gradually and naturally.

This technique works in synergy with the alarm mechanism described before, and is going to be available to us in direct proportion to how much we have developed that component.

4- It has to seem perfect even though in actuality it never is. We need to let go of the idea of perfection and make the most of the realization that using micro corrections make us appear perfect.

The element that guarantees that things sound flawless, with great feel and groove even in presence of imperfections, is continuity and consistency.

If there is consistency (that is, if we manage to stay there and avoid sudden corrections) then the music will work even in case of slight variations.

Thus we will produce the appearance of perfection, in spite of its absence.

5- Let's focus on feel, not on tempo, and our timing will automatically be excellent. Until we think about timing we will inevitably keep pushing and pulling, constantly questioning whether we are spot on or a bit ahead or a hair behind.

Instead, by focusing on infusing the music with great feel, and concentrating on the groove, we are relieved from the task of having to play perfectly in time.

Let's be smart in using the power of shifting our focus: we want things to have a nice feel and we want to make sure they groove. Timing is not even in our thoughts anymore.

As usual it's going to be very helpful to record our performances and listen back to notice the way these strategies affect our timing and use the feedback to continually finetune them, so as to further clean up the imperfections.

By the way, as you have probably noticed, these strategies are not only useful for us drummers, but apply to all musicians. Fell free to share this article with your bandmates. You may be amazed by the results ;)

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