

African Polyrhythms on Balafon: Lesson #2 – 4:3

Welcome to my second video lesson on vibeworkshop.com.

Before proceeding, please revisit the video and description of Lesson #1 – 3:2.

This second in a series of lessons on African polyrhythms focuses on a 4:3 phrase adapted to the African log xylophone called “Balafon.” My instrument comes from the country of Burkina Faso (north of Ghana), and has a 4-octave pentatonic scale. The ideas can be adapted to any percussion instrument including drum set, congas, African drums and bells, piano, and of course mallets instruments. The marimba is a direct descendent of the balafon and would be an obvious and effective place to begin. The goal is to develop independence between strong and weak hand for the ideas to flow consciously (literally) and subconsciously (spontaneously).

4:3 is a popular polyrhythm that is commonly found in African music, and numerous world music styles. As with the first lesson on 3:2, we will use simple left and right hand intervals to develop the mechanics to bring the phrase to life. Once you become proficient with the mechanics, you are free to move around the instrument, taking chances and switching hands to discover the infinite possibilities. Even though you might never play these examples in a literal context, the ideas you develop in your head, hands and heart will start to appear in your playing, increasing your confidence and creativity.

Left hand low register

The left hand will continue to play the phrase in 3, as if a quarter note 3/4 meter. Speaking each limb and subdivision using South Indian syllables (solkattu) takes you deeper to achieve complete ownership of the pattern. When you work on the mechanics (using the hands on your lap, a table, or wherever), the language becomes quite natural to understanding the different “gears” of the phrase.

3/4 awareness

Play the 3 pulse (quarter note) with the left hand and speak:

Ta – – – Ki – – – Ta – – – (pronounced: Ta Ki Tuh)

Keep playing the 3 and speak the 16th subdivision using the syllables Ta ka di mi.

(In Lesson #1 we spoke an 8th note subdivision, 4:3 places us into a 16th note subdivision).

Ta ka di mi Ta ka di mi Ta ka di mi

Alternate languages to understand the relationship between slow 3 and fast 4.

Now play the 4 pulse with the right hand (dotted 8ths in 3/4 meter) and speak:

Ta – – Ka – – Di – – Mi – –

Keep playing the 4 and speak the subdivision:

Ta ki ta Ta ki ta Ta ki ta Ta ki ta

Alternate back and forth to understand the relationship between slow 4 and fast 3.

As with Lesson #1, this video demonstrates speaking the slow 4 and slow 3, fast 3 and fast 4 in a complete sequence. Remember that the left-hand plays 3 groups of 4 while the right-hand plays 4 groups of 3. If we do the simple math 4×3 (or 3×4) = 12, which is the number of 16th notes found in one bar or 3/4. The same phrase can be realized in 12/8 by converting 16th notes to 8th notes. I suggest notating the phrase in 3/4 and 12/8 to discover more of the relationship between both meters. In the end, I really want you to focus on the flow of the phrase and allow academic considerations of meter and notation to be secondary to experiencing the potency of the groove.

Composite of 4:3 / 3:4

ta - - - ki - - - ta - - -
ta - - ka - - di - - mi - -

Composite of subdivisions

ta ka di mi **ta** ka di mi **ta** ka di mi
ta ki ta **ta** ki ta **ta** ki ta **ta** ki ta

The video also introduces variations for the right hand, playing double hits that increase the density and energy of the phrase (as done in Lesson #1). I highlight the fact that 4:3 and 3:2 have a direct correlation to each other — the 4 is played at twice the speed of the 2, allowing you to alternate between 3:2 and 4:3 with effortless mastery. We're only scratching the surface here so do not feel limited by the basic examples I present in these examples.

Phrase Rotation:

Phrase Rotation (also known as Phrase Displacement) is a big subject that I teach all my students on drum set and world percussion. As it turns out, my extensive collection of drum grooves and concepts from Africa and India can be adapted to the balafon, and it is my goal to do so in future lessons. As this video explains, I will keep the left hand playing in a constant pulse and rotate/displace the position of the right-hand pattern to create a new awareness and geometry from the original phrase. Rather than getting too technical in trying to describe this principle I ask that you work closely with the video and ask me any questions that may arise.

I wish you great success as you expand the grid of your rhythm awareness while expanding the range of your ideas across the entire instrument.

This entire series of polyrhythm lessons are based on an original composition of mine that we will examine at the end.