Polyrhythms and Phrasing Over the Barline

Part 3: Four Limb Exercises

By Chris Munson

Concept

If you have been following along with the last two articles on polyrhythms and extended phrasing, this is the final phase of these exercises. This represents what is typically referred to as four-way independence. That is, all four limbs playing parts independent of one another. Conceptually it is somewhat similar to linear drumming except that the limbs can play together at any given time as opposed to playing separately.

I can recall hearing the terms “melodic drumming” and “four-way coordination” not too long after I first began playing drum set. I was not really certain what they meant, but I thought that it sounded cool so I approached the go to drum set guy where I lived and started studying it. I had no idea how difficult, time consuming, or humbling the whole process would be and I see students encounter the same issues I did when first approaching this subject.

The exercises in the previous articles should give you a basic idea of the sound and feel of the rhythmic tension created by using polyrhythms. Once you have a grasp on this, the next logical step is to remove the 16th note filler and distill the patterns down to the accent only. You then play that accent pattern on the snare while the ride, kick, and stepped hi-hat plays an ostinato pattern.

The ostinatos can be as simple as two beat patterns or as complex as multi-measure patterns. The basic idea is to set three limbs in motion and train your brain to put them on autopilot while the fourth limb meanders around. It is a good idea to start by allowing the snare to meander since we are most accustomed creating varied snare parts. However, you should eventually get to a point where you can play the moving line with any of your limbs and the ostinato pattern with the three remaining limbs (i.e., stepped hat plays the line while kick, ride, and snare play the ostinato).

Keep in mind that repetition is essential for these types of exercises. You want the mental flexibility required to play in this fashion to be second nature. If you try to pull off some four-way independence on a gig and have to consciously think about it, you are going to have some problems.
Application

Below are a few examples of three note ostinatos with the distilled accent pattern played on the snare. These can be lengthy exercises so I have only included a few examples. Hopefully you can intuit several other variations based on the information I have given you.

As with the other exercises, accuracy and sound production should come before speed. Make sure you treat the moving line as a melodic device and the ostinato as accompaniment (like melody and harmony). Remember that you are trying to create a sense of two different meters being played at once. Additionally, you are also trying to train yourself to play in phrases that are longer than one bar.

I suggest you try the following variations when practicing these.
- Play as written
- Switch the roles of the limbs so that another limb plays the accent pattern
- Maintain the ostinato and begin soloing with the left hand as freely as possible

Additionally, I like to create more elaborate sub-patterns while practicing this stuff. For instance, I may embed a paradiddle pattern on the toms when the left hand is playing the accent pattern. So the high tom would be the equivalent of a right hand stroke and the low tom the left hand. The pattern would be something like: high tom (right), snare, low tom (left), snare, high tom (right), snare, and high tom (right).

I will also get the right hand moving between cymbals or other sound sources (cowbells, toms, rims, etc.) while the left hand is doing the paradiddle thing. This can get pretty convoluted sounding but every once in a while you happen upon some real gems. And ultimately the point is to train your brain and limbs to do your bidding.

Ostinatos:

Basic four-on-the-floor ostinato

![Basic four-on-the-floor ostinato](image)

Second-line ostinato

![Second-line ostinato](image)

2/3 clave with tumbao ostinato

![2/3 clave with tumbao ostinato](image)
Combined examples:

Six against four with four-on-the-floor:

Six Against Four

Variation 6

Four against four with Second-line:

Four Against Four
Five against four with Clave:

Variations:
2) Hand Switch Parts

Seven against Four

4) Revoice with Rudiments

Five over Four