The Final Exam

Text and examples by Norman Weinstein.

WELL, AS THE saying goes, "You've come a long way, baby!" Back when this column began in June 1986, we started with quarter notes and eighth notes. This month, the final exam covers just about any type of reading situation you're likely to encounter. But, there is still one aspect to reading percussion music that we've yet to examine: Dynamics.

The term "dynamics" includes all of the different types of musical symbols that describe performance volume. In addition to indicating rhythms, our notation system includes several symbols that tell you how loud a certain passage should be played.

Most dynamics are written as abbreviations, and, unfortunately for us, dynamics make use of Italian words and phrases (this isn't a problem if you speak Italian). Italian composers were one of the first groups of musicians to incorporate the idea of dynamics into written music, and their terms have become standard throughout the musical world. So, just what are these abbreviations and their meanings?

p - The letter p stands for piano (pronounced just like the instrument with keys). In the true Italian, it means "weak." In most Americans, the concept of "soft" will work fine.

F - The letter f stands for forte. As the opposite of weak, it actually means "strong." Again, in musical terms: you can think of forte as meaning "loud." The name f is from the Italian word for "fat," and is an abbreviation meaning "moderately" or "moderately loud." This is never seen alone, instead, it's used along with piano or forte to temper their meaning somewhat.

The dynamic symbol ppp (see page 2, Fig. 3) means very softly (not quite as soft as piano), while the marking fff would be interpreted as extremely loud (not quite as loud as forte).

In addition to these markings, their comparatives are also possible. In English, we have three different levels of softness. We can say that something is soft, softer, or softest; or loud, louder, or loudest. The Italian language has a similar construction. One level softer than piano is piano pianissimo - written in music as the abbreviation pp. The softest indication is pianississimo and is written as ppp. When working with forte, the next level up is fortissimo or ff, and the loudest level is fortississimo or fff.

For those of you trying to keep all of this straight in your mind, the first example shows how the dynamic markings would progress from the softest level to the loudest. At times, you may run into dynamic markings that use four p's (or four f's). This dynamic really doesn't have a particular name - at all. If you tell you to play at your softest level, where can you go from there? In such cases, the composer is just trying to make a statement that the music at this point should be really soft or really loud. Dynamics operate much like speed limit signs and time signatures. If a piano dynamic is indicated, then the soft volume is in effect until you see a different dynamic. For example, at the beginning of this month's exercise, you see a marking of piano (or piano and forte), which means the music will go back to being piano as soon as forte begins. After this, you see a marking of piano piano (or piano piano and forte), which means the music will be piano as soon as forte begins. At this point, you see a marking of piano piano piano (or piano piano piano and forte), which means the music will be piano as soon as forte begins.

Two last dynamic features: a crescendo is an indication to gradually get louder over a period of time. A diminuendo also called a dimmendo is an indication to gradually get softer over a period of time. These symbols are pretty easy to remember because they indicate a change in dynamic. The crescendo at measure 13 works in a similar fashion, except that the music will become gradually softer rather than louder. Sometimes, crescendo (or diminuendo) will occur over a long period of time. Instead of having a graphic symbol spread over several measures, a composer or copyist may choose to use the abbreviations "cresc.," "dim.," or "dimm." to indicate the gradual rise or fall of volume.

In the very first installment of this column, it was said that reading music can increase your musical knowledge, just as reading English can increase your gener- al knowledge. Now that you can read the rhythms presented in this series, you will be able to read over 90% of all the music that's out there. And believe me, there's a lot of music out there.

There are music books that contain transcriptions of the parts from your favorite recordings, books that give information on how to apply Latin and African rhythms to the drum set, and there are the theoretical studies, books on dynamics and symbols. If you could go on for days. With this knowledge, you can investi- gate the rhythms of any culture; you could play around the world like mirror images. Of course, you can get the real feel for the music when you actually play the real instruments. So, in my next letter, I'm going to ask you to fill out a questionnaire to help me find out what you've learned so far. In the meantime, practice the rhythms you've learned so far, and you'll be able to get more out of the music you hear.

In case you might want to review one of the rhythmic ideas presented in this series, this list will point you to the tour you need:

Aug. 30
Sept. 16
Oct. 13
Nov. 17
Dec. 15
Jan. 27
Feb. 17
March 14
April 11
June 12
July 10
Aug. 8
Sept. 26
Oct. 23
Nov. 20
Dec. 17
Jan. 24
Feb. 21
March 18
April 15

Quantum, Quarter Beats
Group of Two Eightfts
Sixteenth Notes
Sixteenth Notes
Eight Preceding Eight Preceding Two
Eighth Notes
Three Eighth Notes
Eighth Notes
Sixteenth Notes
Sixteenth Notes

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Example 1.

Example 2.

Composite Examples.

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