Subdivide and Conquer

by: William W. Gourley

We have all heard the quote, “United we stand, divided we fall”. Well, in music we need to subdivide to be united. Confused?

One of the great distractions when we listen to ensembles is a lack of precision at the beginning of eighth or sixteenth note passages. The clarity often remedies itself within a beat but the beginning of these passages always has a jumble of notes out of pulse.

The challenge is to keep the ensemble focused not only on the pulse, but the division of the pulse as well. If the music calls for sixteenth notes after a series of quarter notes, the performer needs to feel the subdivision before he plays it.

Generally, the subdivision is being performed by one of the other sections in the ensemble. If the performer listens closely, he can pick up the proper speed for his rhythm from another section in the band. Try to get the feeling of “handing-off” the subdivision from section to section.

Another area where this phenomenon is an eighth note followed by sixteenth notes. The eighth note will likely be held too long. If the performer maintains the subdivision of the sixteenth note while playing the eighth note he will be more likely to play the eighth note the proper duration.

Obviously, the trick here is to get the musician to feel the subdivision of the pulse as they play. Too often, when we practice with a metronome it is set at the tempo we are trying to play. For instance, an eighth note scale pattern at mm=100 the metronome is set at 100. The newer electronic metronomes are able to play divisions of the pulse as well as the pulse. Using this feature when performing the scale creates awareness for the even division of the beat. This helps the performer to develop a feeling for the division of the pulse.

This same principal applies to using a metronome while rehearsing musical passages. Setting the metronome to the division of the pulse helps create the forward movement we need to achieve in performance. The music gains vitality.

I use the analogy that music lives between the beat. The beat is like home; it is where the music continues to arrive. The middle of the beat is like a vacation; it is what makes life exciting.

When you listen to a great drummer in a jazz combo, this becomes crystal clear. How a drummer handles the music between the pulse is what drives the ensemble. The bassist sets the tempo but the drummer gives it life and motion.
You will know when you achieve this awareness the next time you hear a car horn alarm and you sing between the beeps.