



# Swing Music for Fanfare and Concert Band

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## Abstract

Popular music compositions and arrangements for fanfare and concert band may be written in swing style. This document gives background information about and performance guidelines for swing music.

## 1 Introduction

*Swing music* is a style within the jazz idiom, that emerged in the 1930s and its heyday lasted into the 50s of the 20th century. This jazz and dance music was performed by many renowned jazz orchestras and big bands touring the country.

The swing style has also re-appeared in musical compositions and arrangements for fanfare and concert band. Although most amateur musicians in these bands have been listening to swing music, they might encounter interpretation problems when faced with swing music in print,

Part of the interpretation problem has to do with the *notation* of swing music. It has become a convention to use a convenient rhythmic notation for swing style music that differs from the actual performance. This has occurred in classical music before: the *notes irrégales* in French Baroque music or the three equal quarters in the well-known *Wiener Walzer* all are characterised by a slight irregularity when interpreting the written regular notes. Well, the same holds for swing music.

This document will give guidelines for the interpretation of swing style music for fanfare and concert band. This subject has also been dealt with in a Dutch textbook, see [4]. However, remember that the rhythmic interpretation of swing patterns is only part of the problem; other aspects important in creating swing music are the appropriate application of articulation (accent placement), phrasing and dynamics. See [3] for an overview of various aspects in jazz music and also a detailed treatment of swing music.

## 2 Interpretation of the swing pattern

The problem with the interpretation of the *swing pattern* boils down to the degree of *triplet feel* that has to be applied to the written groups of two subsequent eighth notes (the written regular subdivision of quarter notes).

Notation standards require the composer or arranger to indicate the swing style at the top of the musical score. Next to the label *Swing* (with tempo indication, such as *Moderate Swing*, *Medium Swing* or *Up-tempo swing*) there might be the added remark *Play with triplet feel* or *Jazz Feel*. In some published swing music there is the continuous use of the dotted 8th plus 16th pattern: this is not recommended, since it leads to visual cluttering and will encourage an inappropriate triplet feel.

The reminder at the top of the score to play the pairs of 8th notes with triplet feel is not the full story: the amount of triplet feel depends strongly on the tempo of the piece, as depicted in Figure 1. The rhythmic irregularity may range from the *bounce* pattern (dotted 8th, followed by a 16th note) with the

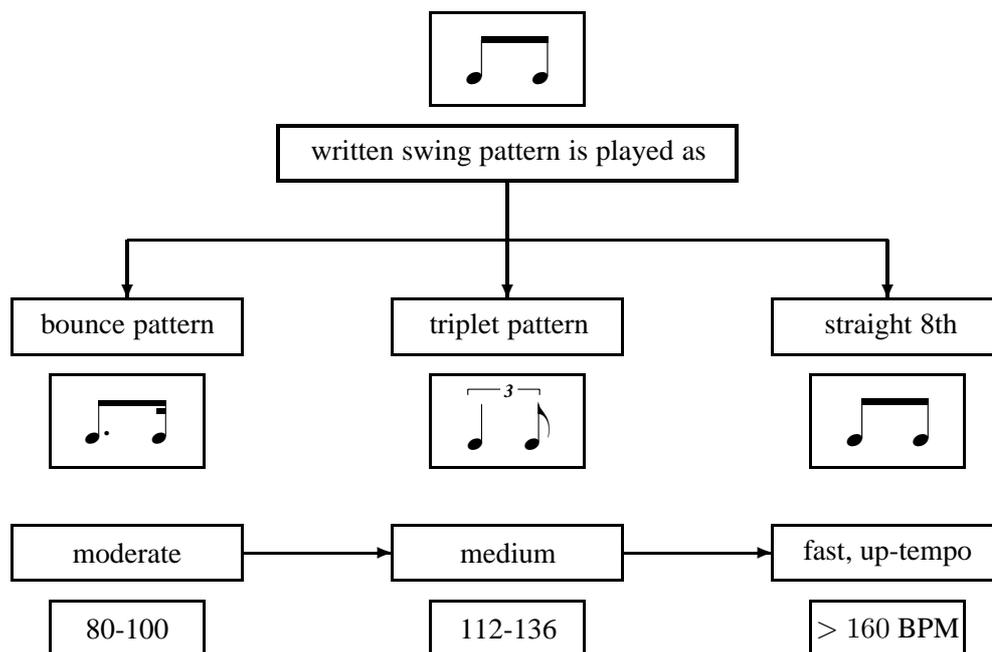


Figure 1: Interpretation of the notated swing pattern (top of figure) with varying triplet feel (centre) at different tempos (bottom). BPM: Beats Per Minute (the equivalent of the MM metronome markings).

rhythmic 3:1 ratio, via the exact *triplet* (rhythmic ratio 2:1), to the regular pair of *straight 8th* notes (ratio 1:1).

The triplet feel will generate the relaxed swing style and, if the rhythmic ratio is right, will make people in the band and in the audience want to tap their feet or dance. The music then has the appropriate *groove*; a sensation that is not easy to achieve!

Occasionally, a genuine bounce pattern may be required: this should be notated as such (a remark above the notes may help). When performed clearly, this makes a nice contrast with the other, more relaxed swing patterns. Listen to the *Count Basie Orchestra* for some occasional and very outspoken bounce patterns.

In case of a popular musical piece in mixed style there must be a clear indication of the transitions between *swing* (irregular, triplet feel groups of eight notes) and *non-swing* (regular eight note groups) sections; the latter is indicated as *straight 8ths*.

### 3 Instrumentation aspects

All instruments in the band will have to apply the triplet feel rhythmic interpretation of the swing patterns in the score: pairs and sequences of 8th notes and even individual 8th note accents will require the appropriate triplet feel. Musicians should be capable of mentally experiencing the swing feel throughout the piece.

The main element in the band to create and support the swing style is the *rhythm section*, and in particular the *drummer* and the (*double*) *bass player*. This tandem will provide a continuous swing background to the rest of the band. A jazz guitar may add a harmonic groove (steady 4 beats to the bar chord playing), while a keyboard player (preferably acoustic piano) might create an exciting touch by

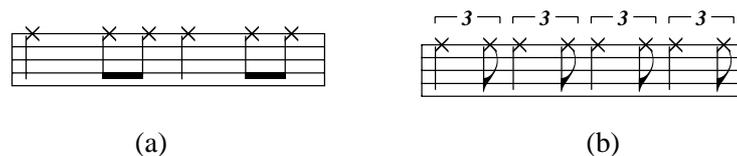


Figure 2: Ride cymbal swing patterns (sticks). (a): Regular 4-beat swing, (b): Shuffle rhythm.

tastefully placing occasional harmonic and melodic accents.

The *drummer* has two standard options for playing swing rhythms:

1. *Sticks* on the *ride cymbal* of the drum kit. Most frequently, swing pieces are based on the *4-beat swing pattern*, depicted in Figure 2. Another swing style is based on the *shuffle rhythm*, also shown in the figure (deliberately in triplet notation). Note the difference between the two patterns on the 1st and 3rd beat.
2. *Brushes* on the *snare drum* of the drum kit. This is a more suitable swing accompaniment at softer dynamics. If done well, this subtle basis can create an immense groove for an entire orchestra.

The sense of swing may be increased by having the drummer play more towards the bounce swing ratios, while the horns (the generic jazz term for the collective brass and saxophones) play a more relaxed swing (between triplet and straight 8th feel).

If the *percussion* section of the band contains a set of *congas*, the player, using light hand tapping, may also play swing patterns during sections of the music (playing throughout the entire piece is not recommended). Drummers may consult [1, 2, 5] for further reading.

## 4 Guidelines for the bass part

Although the drummer is the main person responsible for the swing style, here it is appropriate to say something about the other partner in the rhythm tandem: the *bass player*. In jazz music, this usually implies a double (acoustic) bass player; sometimes a bass guitar player replaces the acoustic bass.

In the fanfare and concert band, the bass part usually is played by the *tuba* or *baritone saxophone*, *bass clarinet*, *bassoon* and *bass trombone*. This fact is seriously hampering the band in achieving a swinging groove. The string bass instruments are *essential* in the swing rhythm section. Any band that wants to perform swing music in concert should really do its best to find a string bass player in the area; even a bass synthesizer or sampler keyboard player is a better starting point than having your tuba player provide the bass line. Published music will contain a tuba bass part in swing music, but this is only pragmatism, that should be prevented in actual performance.

The two basic types of swing style bass lines are shown in Figure 3: the *rhythmic bass* (2 strong beats in the bar with shorter filler notes) and the *walking bass* (4 beats to the bar). Of these two, the rhythmic bass lends itself best to the tuba: some musical sections, say a 8 or 16 bar phrase for horns, may really benefit from a tuba that is more or less doubling the acoustic bass. This has been demonstrated so beautifully in recordings by the *Miles Davis Nonet* (on *Birth of the Cool*) and *Miles Davis with the Gil Evans Orchestra* (on *Miles Ahead* and *Porgy and Bess*).

In case the walking bass line is played by the tuba, it will immediately create the impression of *Dixieland music* or *New Orleans Marching Band*. That is incompatible with the genuine swing feel from a later period. The tuba walking bass, supporting a soloist (in an *ad lib* improvisation), will instantaneously reveal the instrumentation defect.

Read [6] as a reference for bass playing.

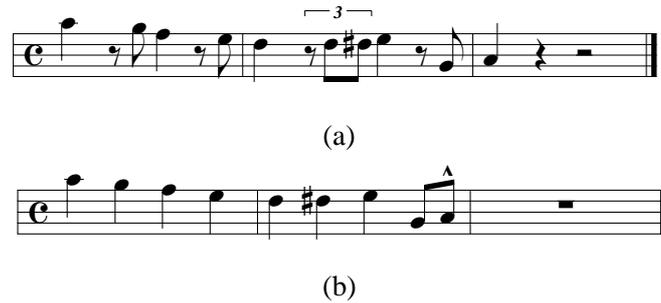


Figure 3: Swing style bass patterns (a): rhythmic bass, (b): walking bass.

## References

- [1] Dirk Brand, *1000 Faces of Drum Styles* (in German), AMA Verlag GmbH, Brühl, ISBN 3-927190-93-4, 1997.
- [2] Siegfried Hofmann, *Das große Buch für Schlagzeug und Percussion* (in German), Voggenreiter Verlag, Bonn, ISBN 3-8024-0221-9, 1994.
- [3] Barry Kernfeld, *What to Listen for in Jazz*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, ISBN 0-300-05902-7, 1995.
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