

## **In Praise of the Metronome**

**by Tom Poore**

From time to time, I see students advised to ditch the metronome. I find such advice odd, especially when directed at students. (Students are notorious for struggling to keep a beat.) What's particularly irksome, however, is that there appears a fundamental misunderstanding of the true value of a metronome for a practicing musician.

First, I'd like to dispense with an argument I've seen repeatedly. It's illustrated by the following internet exchange, in which I wrote:

"Really, there's no fundamental difference between keeping up with an orchestra and keeping up with a metronome."

...which prompted this reply:

"There's a fundamental difference, otherwise we'd be happy with computers playing everything. The metronome may have a pulse, but it doesn't breathe."

Try as I might, I can't understand why someone thinks any musician needs to be told this. Yes, the metronome is inflexible. That's no secret. Everyone who uses a metronome knows it. To tell a musician that a metronome is inflexible is tantamount to thinking you're talking to a dolt who can't tell the difference between a living, breathing musician and a machine. Isn't it more charitable to assume the person you're talking to has something less inane in mind?

Which brings me to my defense of the metronome. I don't see it as something that teaches us how to keep a steady tempo. It may, but that's not its true value. Its true value is that it trains us to be objective about our playing. Rather than relying on our internal and subjective sense of tempo, the metronome makes us attend to something outside ourselves. We must match our playing to something that cares not a whit for our problems in playing a nettlesome passage or technique. Either we can do it or we can't. The metronome immediately tells us. There's no negotiating, begging, or wheedling with it. And that's what I mean when I say there's no fundamental difference between playing with an orchestra and playing with a metronome.

When you play with a metronome, you're forced to listen objectively to something other than yourself. That's a skill that transfers seamlessly to playing with other musicians. So if playing with a metronome annoys you, think differently. Think of it as the real friend who tells you the truth, rather than the false friend who praises any old thing you do.