

# 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 is that there's a fundamental misunderstanding of the true value of a metronome.

First, let's address 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. Everyone who uses a metronome knows it. To tell a musician that a metronome is inflexible is tantamount to saying they're a dolt who can't tell the difference between a living, breathing musician and a machine. Isn't it more sensible 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.

There's another reason to use a metronome that goes overlooked. Students often freak out over playing in front of an audience. Why? There are many reasons. But a crucial one is that, when playing in front of an audience, our reaction to every little mistake magnifies. Mistakes in performance seem much worse than mistakes in the solitude of practice. So our stress level skyrockets.

An obvious solution is to bring this heightened stress into the practice room. Once you realize this, you start looking for surefire ways to dial up stress in the practice room. For example, zero tolerance for mistakes. (Concert guitarist John Williams, asked how he deals with mistakes during practice, replied: "I don't make them.") Practice with your eyes closed. Record yourself. Sit in an unfamiliar chair. In short, embrace anything that rattles you, and then learn how to handle it.

For some, the metronome is the perfect stressor. If the metronome freaks you out, then that's precisely why you should use it. After all, where would you rather work on handling stress? In the practice room, or in front of an audience?