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Playful Possibilities: Improvisation with Speech and Found Sounds

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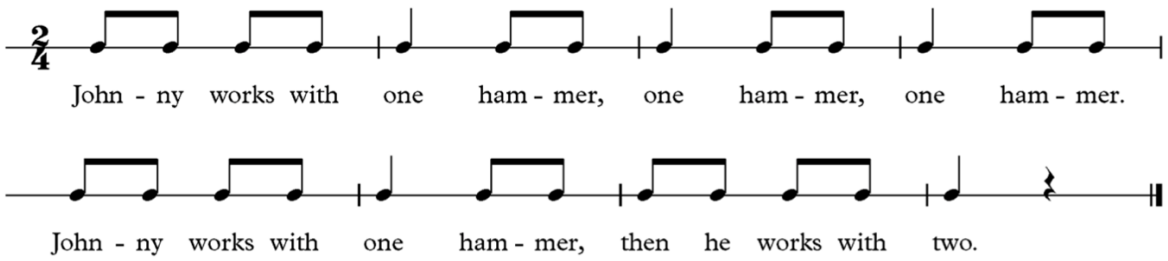
Introduction

When teachers consider Orff-Schulwerk as an approach to active music learning, the first images often conjured are those of students playing the recorder along with the various mallet instruments developed for the approach. The appeal of these instruments is, no doubt, strong, but elemental music does not require their use. Body percussion and everyday speech can each be a playful impetus for elemental music making and improvisation. Even phonetics can resemble the sounds of familiar instruments. During my online session presentation participants explored these possibilities for rhythmic creativity using rhymes, tongue twisters, chants, and words as departure points. We used typical household items such as pencils, paperclips in a box, marker pens, and even a ruler, as accompanying instruments.

Johnny Works with One Hammer

The traditional children's rhyme *Johnny Works with One Hammer* offers possibilities for younger students to reinforce the concepts of pulse, divided beat, rhythmic improvisation, and performing speech in a 2-part round. For each added verse, students perform the pulse using an additional part of the body. During the final verse, five different body parts should be moving simultaneously to the pulse!



Johnny works with two hammers... then he works with three.
Johnny works with three hammers... then he works with four.
Johnny works with four hammers... then he works with five.
Johnny works with five hammers... then he takes a rest! (*rit*.)

Using the words *hammer* and *nail* (beat and divided beat), students explore improvising a variety of 4-beat rhythmic patterns first with speech, then clapping, and finally with any level of body percussion or a found sound.

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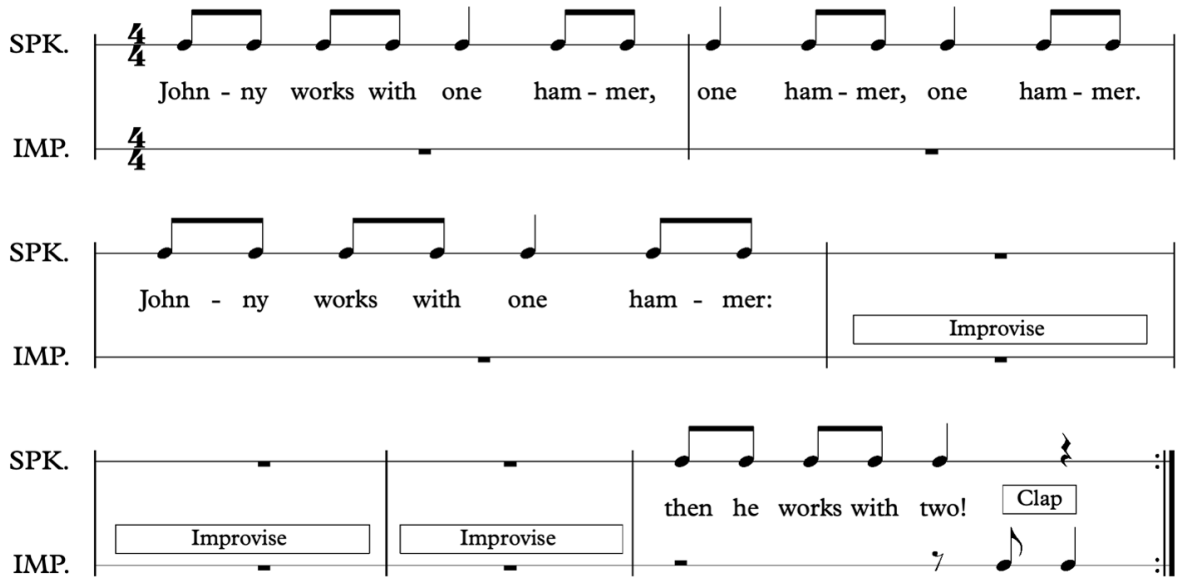
Once this skill is secure, guide students to improvise three different, or the same, 4-beat patterns in a row (12 beats) using their preferred performance medium. They can also change the performance medium within the 12 beats. To extend the form, students speak *Johnny Works with One Hammer* once again but include their improvisations (three 4-beat patterns) after the third time the word *hammer* is spoken (see below). Conclude the rhyme with "then he works with ___" and continue to the next verse or end with "then he takes a rest." Punctuate the verse with two claps (see below).



Arranged by Michael Chandler

Finally, extend the form by adding a refrain using exercise 17 (p. 6) from Gunild Keetman's *Rhythmische Übung* and the text provided below. For the final refrain (5th time) perform the text in a 2-part round.

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(2-part round)

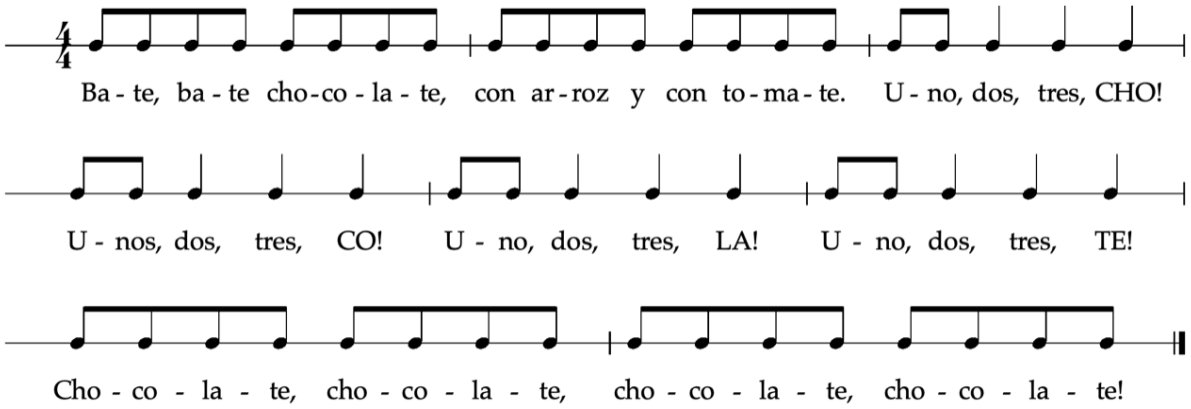
Working through the night.
Working through the day.
Working 'til it's time to play!

He's working through the night.
Working through the day.
Working 'til it's time to play!

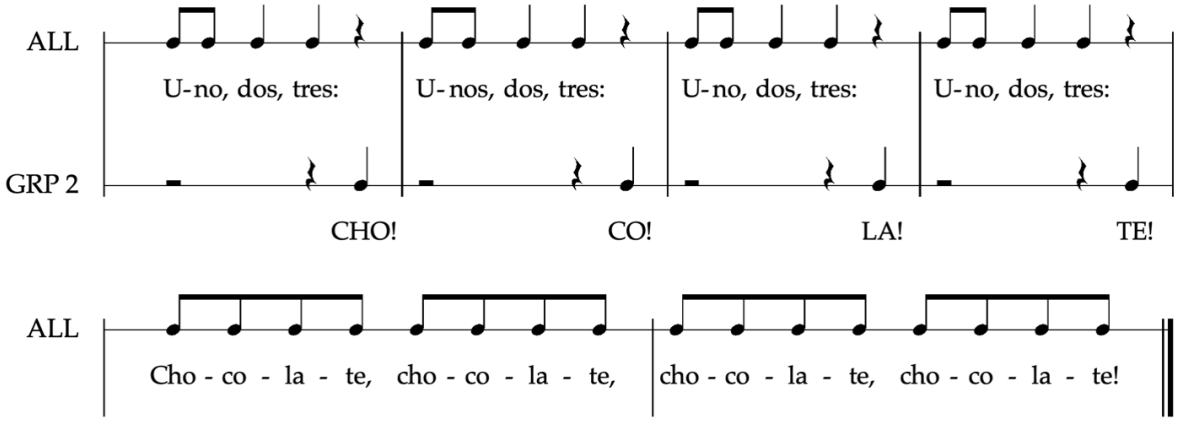
Text by Michael Chandler

Bate, Bate Chocolate

The traditional Mexican children's rhyme *Bate, Bate Chocolate* also offers plenty of opportunities for playful exploration and improvisation.



Add a simple pat-clap ostinato with quarter notes to establish an accompanying pulse and speak the rhyme while performing this pattern. Because this children's rhyme does not fit the typical 8-measure phrase structure of most rhymes, it presents possibilities for playful extensions. Perform the counting phrases separately from the syllables of the word *CHO-CO-LA-TE* with two groups in a call-and-response manner. Everyone joins together on the last measure: *chocolate, chocolate, chocolate, chocolate*!



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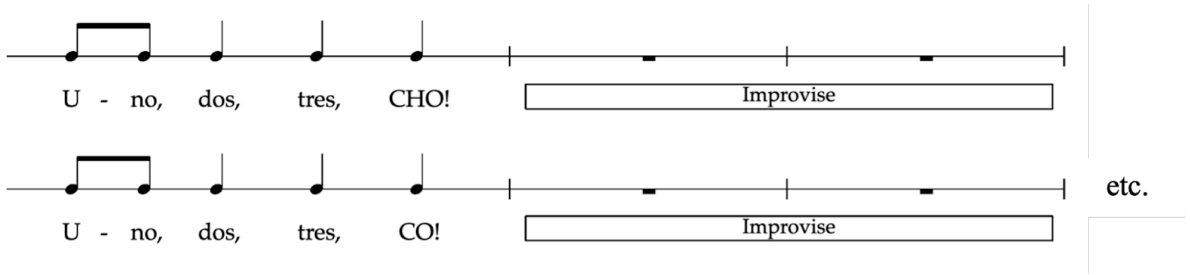
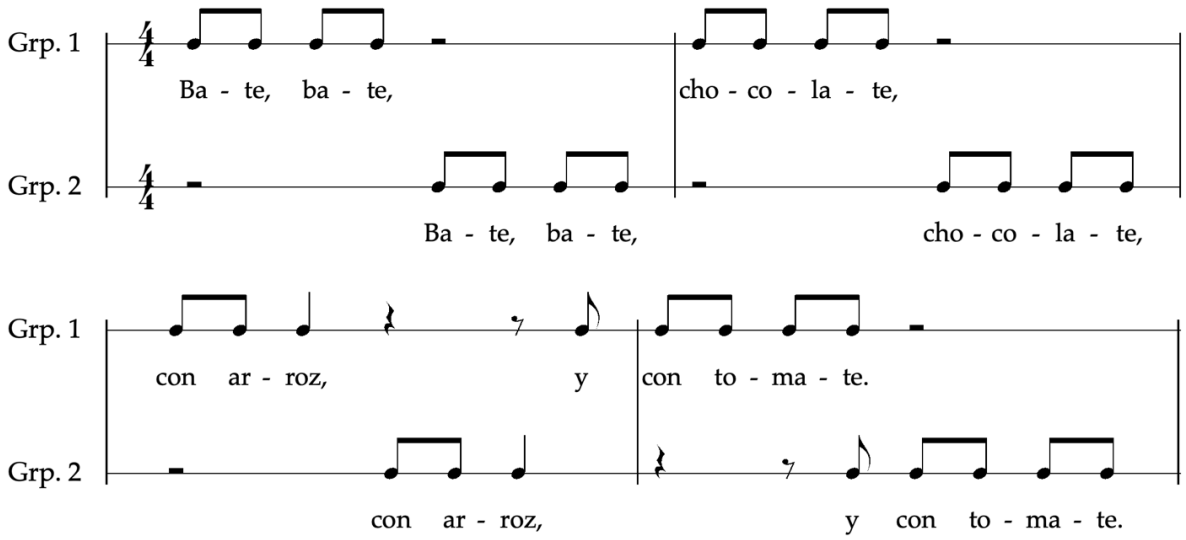
Transfer these same phrases to body percussion or found sounds such as pencils or markers (rhythm sticks), paper clips in a box (shaker), or strike the desktop (drum). Speak the first two measures of the rhyme together and then play the remaining six (see above) in two groups with or without the text. Explore and improvise 8-beat rhythmic patterns using the five ingredients found in most chocolate bars arranged to fit Keetman's "rhythmic building bricks" from *Elementaria*. Transfer these improvised patterns to body percussion or to found instruments.

Add a section for 8-beat improvisations (solos, groups, or everyone) after each phrase containing the separated syllables of the word *CHO-CO-LA-TE* (see below). Everyone joins together on the last measure: *chocolate, chocolate, chocolate, chocolate*!



Divide into two equal groups and place two beats of rest after each motive of the first two full measures to perform the text in a 2-part round. The first part may be performed by half the group or by one speaker as a caller. The second group echoes the text for each motive (see below). The anacrusis "*y*" (*and*) will overlap the end of the phrase it echoes. Continue performing the remaining phrases of the text in any of the ways described earlier.



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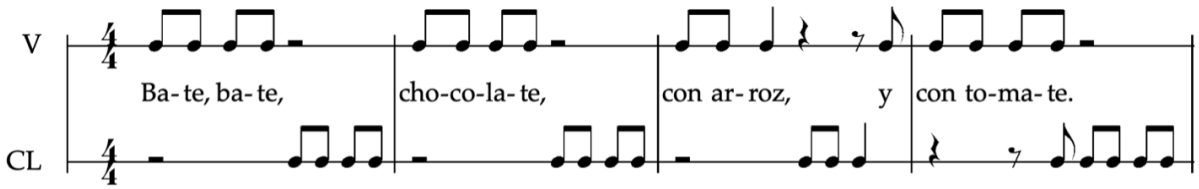
Another possibility is to perform the first part of the round with rhythmic speech and the second part of the round with clapping or a found sound instrument resembling shakers, rhythm sticks, or drums.



Use exercise 52 from Keetman's *Rhythmische Übung* to create a B section that follows the original rhyme. Perform the exercise in two groups using the text below or with body percussion or found instruments.

Let's mix this chocolate up! Let's mix this chocolate up!
Just stir! **Just stir!**

Just stir it round, and round, and round. (*all*)

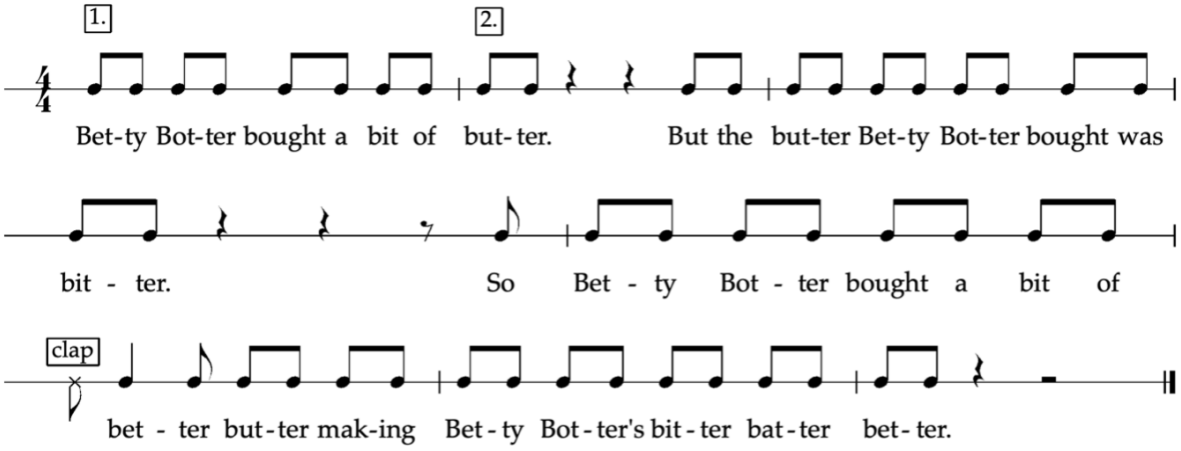
Let's mix this chocolate up! Let's mix this chocolate up!
Just stir! **Just stir!**

Just stir it round, and round, and round.
Just stir UNTIL IT'S DONE! (*all*)

Text by Michael Chandler

Betty Botter's Bitter Butter Batter

Tongue twisters can be a fun challenge for young musicians that also offer playful alliterative possibilities to create accompaniment patterns. The traditional tongue twister *Betty Botter's Bitter Butter Batter* is one such example arranged metrically in 4/4 meter. Speak it in a jazz style with swinging eighth notes.



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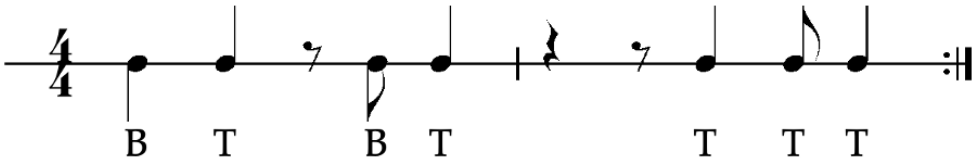
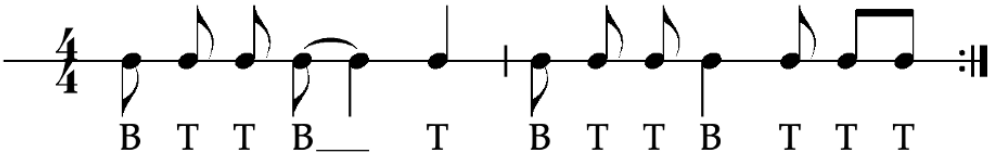
This tongue-twister emphasizes the “b” and “t” consonants, which make it possible for students to create percussion lines with these two sounds to accompany the text. The “b” sound can serve as the bass drum while the “t” sound serves as the snare drum. This is a great opportunity to include plenty of syncopation as shown in the examples below.





Guide students to improvise 8-beat rhythmic phrases using any variety of words from the poem: *batter*, *better*, *Betty*, *bitter*, *Botter*, and *butter*. Use full or partial words to create rhythmic interest and include sixteenth notes and syncopation! Create a final form that includes the poem spoken in unison over the “percussion” accompaniment, a section or two of improvisation, and a return of the poem spoken in a two-part round.

These examples represent departure points for countless other creative opportunities for improvisation and composition. Find your favorite chants, rhymes, and tongue twisters and explore new ways to introduce them to your students through extensions, additions, and found sounds. Enjoy finding your own playful possibilities!

References

Keetman, G. (1974). *Elementaria: First acquaintance with Orff-Schulwerk*. Schott.
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