

Standard African 12/8 Bell: A study in ternary rhythm structures

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To get inside the 12/8 Standard African bell pattern we will use the spoken language of the Ewe people of Ghana. The words “matekpo matekpo” translate to “I jump, I jump.” The words kple (ple), ku, and dza (ja) are drum syllables that finish the phrase. As a learning game, Ewe children speak “matekpo matekpo kple ku dza” and jump to land precisely on the syllable DZA (pronounced “JA”). Speak the syllables over and over without any awareness of pulse and downbeat (ex. 1). In this manner we are learning the African way.

matekpo matekpo kple ku dza
matekpo matekpo kple ku dza

As we will see, the bell pattern actually begins off of beat 1 with matekpo. Beat one (dza or ja) is, in fact, the end of the musical phrase, not the beginning. This is also true of all the support drum patterns for the rhythm “Agbekor”, for example, which do not have open sounds on beat 1. Using a non-western notation system we can realize the 12/8 bell as a series of 7 strokes 5 five rests, or as long and short durations configured as LLSLLLS. Shown below in example 2, the twelve 8th note pulses are set to the top line, with numbers 1, 4, 7, 10 underlined to indicate where the dotted quarter note “beat” is located. The second line indicates Long (quarter note) and Short (8th note) bell tones, the third line marks actual bell strokes. The 4th line sets the matekpo language into position, revealing how the syllable “ja” marks the end of the phrase landing to beat “1”.

<u>1</u>	2	3	<u>4</u>	5	6	<u>7</u>	8	9	<u>10</u>	11	12
L		L		S	L		L		L		S
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
ja	–	ma	tek	po	ma	tek	po	–	kple	–	ku

western notation:

Stepping Sequence

Now we can add a 4-beat stepping pattern to establish the literal “ground beneath our feet” for clear and consistent time keeping. A 4-beat stepping cycle begins with the right foot out, followed by the left foot coming in for beat 2, then left foot stepping out for beat 3, followed by the right foot stepping in for beat 4: R L L R. This sequence aligns beats 1 and 4 to the right foot, and beats 2 and 3 to the left. As shown below, the right foot (1, 4) coincides with “X” bell strokes (resolution), whereas the left foot (beats 2, 3) does not align with bell strokes (tension). An elegant balance of tension and resolution is built into the phrase. Notice in example 3 below that the syllable “tek” marks the left foot for beats 2 and 3, helping to ground the phrase and eliminate tension. Cycle the pattern many times to enhance your awareness of bell and beat.

beat/bell/voice/step:

1			2			3			4		
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
ja	–	ma	tek	po	ma	tek	po	–	kple	–	ku
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–

Beat Study

This next level will challenge our awareness of the actual 4-beat of the phrase (dotted quarter note), and our skill with just playing the bell. Begin by cycling the previous example. When comfortable, stop speaking “matekpo” and speak the word “one” on beat one where the jump occurs, as shown below on example 4. Repeat at least 4 times.

X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
one											
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–

Example 5, speak the 4th beat to mark bell and beat resolution points.

X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
one									four		
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–

For example 6, speak beat 3 to mark the 3, 4, 1 energy that is present in the dance, and support drums such as totoji. You may notice immediate challenge when speaking the third beat. Remember, “three” does not align with the bell, but does align with the left foot.

1			2			3			4		
X	-	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	X	-	X
one						three			four		
R	-	-	L	-	-	L	-	-	R	-	-

Finally, add beat 2 to finish the 4-pulse. As shown below in example 7, all four beats align with the stepping sequence. With all four beats spoken cleanly, return to the matekpo phrase and repeat the entire beat study.

1			2			3			4		
X	-	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	X	-	X
one			two			three			four		
R	-	-	L	-	-	L	-	-	R	-	-

The same beat study can be realized by switching voice and stick patterns: speak “matekpo” while sticking beats in the same sequence. In example 8 below the stick plays each of the 4 beats that align with the stepping pattern. Mix up all possible combinations.

1			2			3			4		
X	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	-
ja	-	ma	tek	po	ma	tek	po	-	kple	-	ku
R	-	-	L	-	-	L	-	-	R	-	-

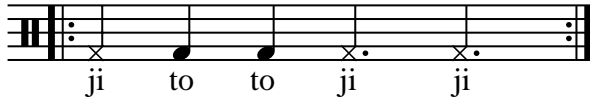
Speaking Support Drum Patterns

Some Ewe drums are actually named for the patterns that they play. For example the totoji pattern is built using the syllables of its name. Totoji introduces a combination of a half bar “6” feel (beats 1, 2) and a half bar “4” feel (beats 3, 4), bringing out a rich polymetric quality to the phrase. The syllable “to” pronounced (“toe”) represents open tones on the drum, “ji” represents closed (pressed) tones. Shown below in example 9 is the totoji analysis, revealing the 6 + 4 quality (X = closed tone, O = open tone).

_____ 6 _____ 4 _____

JI TO TO JI JI
 X - O - O - X - - X - -

In western notation the phrase contains three quarter notes and two dotted quarter notes, as shown below in example 10.



In mathematical terms, the formula for the totoji rhythm would be:

$$[3 \times 2] + [2 \times 3] = 12$$

Using this formula we can speak Indian drum syllables to mark the entire shape of the totoji phrase as: **ta ka ta ka ta ka / ta ki ta ta ki ta.**

Combining All Parts

We can now introduce the totoji pattern into the 12/8 bell and stepping sequence. As shown below on example 11, all “ji” strokes align with beats 1, 3, and 4 (from our previous beat study). Both “to” syllables align with bell tones. It is the 3rd beat, marked by the second left step that does not have a corresponding bell tone, creating strong tension at that moment.

1		2		3		4					
X	-	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	X		
ji		to		to		ji		ji			
R	-	-	L	-	-	L	-	-	R	-	-

Again, this method of learning rhythm allows the voice and stick patterns to switch parts. For example 12, speak matekpo while sticking the rhythm of the totoji (X). Also incorporate Indian syllables **ta ka ta ka ta ka ta ki ta ta ki ta**, shuffling all possible combinations.

1		2		3		4					
X	-	X	-	X	-	X	-	-			
ja	-	ma tek	po	ma tek	po	-	kple	-	ku		
R	-	-	L	-	-	L	-	-	R	-	-

Conclusion

This fundamental study of 12/8 bell, beat, and totoji phrases represents a good beginning to an immense subject. It is best to master one idea on as many levels as possible before delving into new territory. So many musical stories can be told with one potent idea that is clearly understood and realized on many levels using theory and movement exercises, applications on piano, drums, and your primary instrument. These universal studies of rhythm can benefit any musician who chooses to see the value of the traditional context, and who puts in the work to reach new musical levels of application.