

Soft Rock

Introduction

A great style to learn initially is the Soft Rock. You will find many elements of Soft Rock in Latin American styles, Jazz, Country, Ballads, and most other popular styles. There are a few core elements that will be consistent from one style to another. Often I will scan the radio stations letting my students identify those elements, whether it is a Jazz station, Country, Pop, Hip Hop, or any other style we might chance upon.

To understand any popular style of music, the trick is to have a fairly good understanding of what a drummer is doing. Many years ago, I was taught this by some incredible recording engineers and music producers. If you wanted a tight rhythm section, which is the core of most recordings, the idea was to think a bit like a drummer, matching certain elements.

What does a drummer have in his or her arsenal? Let's name a few items:

Bass Drum (Kick Drum - "Kicker")

Snare

High Hat

Tom Toms (Small, Medium, Large – Floor Toms, Specialized Toms (Roto-Tom))

Ride Cymbal

Crash Cymbal

Splash Cymbal

Cow Bell

Blocks

Clave

Bell Tree

Triangle

Cabassa

Shakers

Eggs (Various types of shakers)

Tamborine



To create a "tight" groove, you would only need to focus on three elements:

Bass Drum (Kick)



Snare



High/Hat

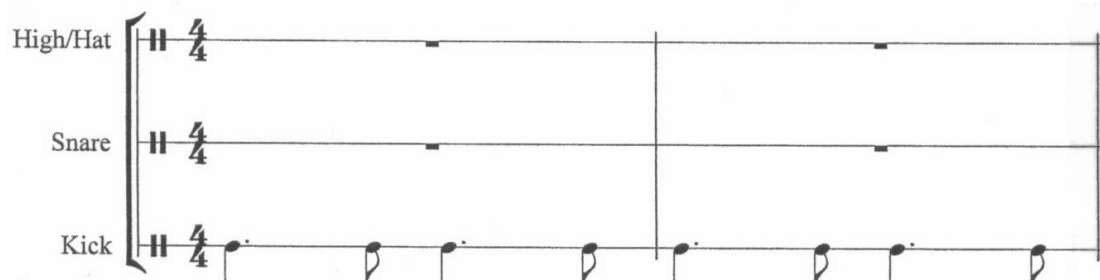


Everything else is fluff .. used mainly for fills and variations in creating musical interest.

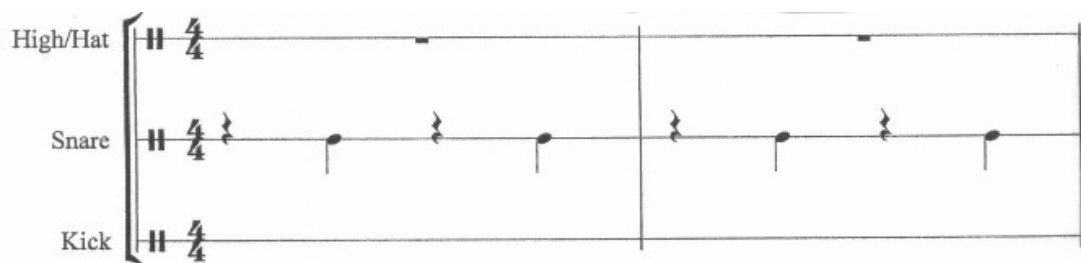
Just like a pianist would use fills, broken chords, arpeggios, licks, riffs, scales and grooves to help create musical interest. A subject we will cover at another time.

A common thread among many popular styles is the “**heart beat**” rhythm. This is played by the “**Kick**” drum. Instruments that would follow this part of the drum would mainly include the Bass, some keyboards (synthesizer), Bari-Sax, Trombone, Tuba, Half of a Cello section, Bassoon, or any other low sounding instrument.

Accenting the downbeat a bit creates a nice groove, the upbeat could be slightly ghosted (softer). Occasionally the heart beat rhythm could be modified with a half note instead of the dotted quarter – eighth note.



The most common thread among all popular styles is the “**back beat**” of the **Snare**. Listen to practically any radio station, and you will hear the snare coming on beats **two and four**. Often the snare is electronically manipulated with reverb or other effects. It is found everywhere from Soft Rock to Country, Latin, Pop, Hip-Hop, Dance, Jazz, nearly every style.



We now have two of the three elements to be listening for when creating this style. Practice tapping these rhythms on your legs or table. Since your hands are the band/orchestra consider what you are trying to accomplish. What instruments would play with the Kick? Do they play chords or single notes? Would you use your Right Hand or Left to play the Kick? What about the Snare?

Be sure to accent the snare a bit, it is rarely a timid sound in the various recordings. Also remember to accent the downbeat of the Kick, ghosting the upbeat.

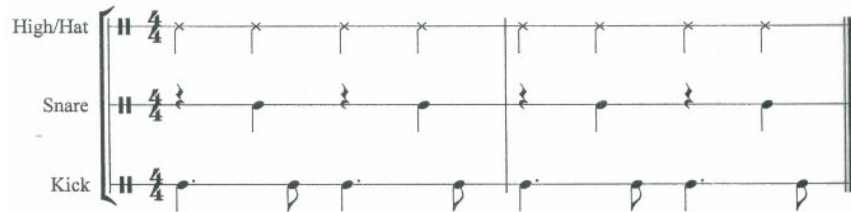


The third element to consider would be the High Hat. Often this is your consistent metronome, coming on every beat (quarter notes). You will also hear on many tunes a double time feel using eighth notes.



The real challenge is how to transfer this to our hands. Would you use your left or right hand? Would you use a full chord or just a single note? Where on the piano would it sound the best? How can you include the other two elements, the Kick and Snare?

Here are the three elements.



We have already discussed what instruments would work well with the Kick. Which **instruments** would work well with the Snare and the High Hat? Which **hand** do you suppose should play with the Snare, High Hat and Kick? For some, this might seem like an obvious answer, but for many, it is a mystery (after decades of asking this question to students).

Some of the interesting answers I have received have included:

- Playing the High Hat with the Right Hand in a different octave, usually higher.
- Playing the Snare in a different octave.
- Having the Left Hand play the Snare along with the Kick using chords.
- Having the Right Hand play a broken chord, half with the High Hat and the rest with the Snare.

Some of these ideas might even work, but there is a much easier solution. The method I am going to present would also work great as an accompaniment in a Band, or backing up a singer, vamping before a singer or instrument begins to play.

The method is to match the **Kick with the Left Hand (single notes, no chords).**

The **Right Hand would play the Snare and High Hat using chords.**

To match the Snare, you would only need to accent the **Right Hand on beats two and four.**

Positioning the two hands is also important. There are many transposed instruments in an orchestra, which just means if you wanted an instrument to “sound” middle C, some instruments would have to play a B \flat (clarinet), or an F (french horn) or an A \flat (alto sax). Bass (guitar, double bass) is also a transposed instrument, it sounds an octave lower than it is written.

Keep your left hand at least an octave lower or greater than middle C. Remember the Left Hand is only playing single notes. It might occasionally play through some chord tones as fills, but its main role is to establish the chords tonality by playing the root tone of the chord (the chord name – C chord, the Left Hand would play a C).

The right hand will sound best when it is around middle C, preferably the majority of the chord should be slightly below middle C. This might mean inverting the chord so one note is on or above middle C and the rest is below middle C (placing the top or bottom note of the chord an octave higher or lower).

Practice the soft rock pattern on your knees or on a table top, once you have it, try it on the piano. Work through the various keys. There is always a trick or two that can be learned to make this easier.

For the Soft Rock, try this:

| **Together** – **Right** – Left – **Together** – **Right** – Left | **Together** – **Right** – Left – **Together** – **Right** – Left |
 | 1 2 & 3 4 & | 1 2 & 3 4 & |

Here is a Soft Rock pattern written out for a C chord.



If you are trying to use eighth notes for the High Hat, you could pivot the chord. The method would be to play the upper notes of the chord first and the bottom note second. It doesn't matter whether the chord is inverted, added to (ie: seventh chord, ninth chord, etc.). you would still play the upper notes first (together) then the bottom note. This is an eighth note pattern, again around middle C with the majority of the notes slightly below middle C.



In another lesson, we will cover fills, breaks, various patterns and variations that you can try. For now become thoroughly familiar with this soft rock pattern. Work through the circle of fourths. Try it on some of your Fake Sheets. Try composing your own progression. Try playing along with the radio or mp3, especially if you have a chord chart.