

The Metronome: use it, or throw it out the window?

Wikipedia: “ A metronome (from the Greek metron) ‘measure’, and (nomos) ‘law’” is a device that produces an audible click or other sound at a uniform interval that can be set by the user, typically at beats per minute.”* And it goes on to explain that it’s used by musicians and other professionals to maintain a steady tempo with a regular beat or pulse.

Readers may go to Wikipedia to learn much more about the metronome and its uses, or continue reading this article to learn what local musicians had to say in response to a five question Q and A. Their answers are edited for brevity, and because this is a family publication.

Question 1:

Do you use a metronome when you practice and why? (Spoiler alert, they all use a metronome.)

Jane Swanson, former Symphony Musician, French Horn

It is necessary for each performer, or each hand of the pianist, to be absolutely mathematically precise in order for the parts/lines to line up. If one line is either rushed or slow they will not be together and it will sound like total chaos. (Jane added this piece of music to indicate potential chaos)



Jessica Hoffman, Symphony Musician, Principal Oboe

I use my metronome from college. It’s held together with a purple rubber band. When the rubber band breaks, I steal a new purple one off of broccoli to replenish it. I am emotionally attached to this travesty of time because it’s been with me for so long and has supported my growth as a musician.

Chris Woodruff, Youth Symphony Conductor Concert Orchestra

Yes! As a conductor, I am preparing a score in service to the composer and the players. As a trumpet player, I use the metronome to build my technique on tricky passages

Tanya Streder, Symphony Musician, Violin

I do use the metronome when I practice. Otherwise I might slow down in the hard places, but the conductor will not!

Cricket Handler, Artistic Director Canzona Women's Ensemble, former Symphony Executive Director

I do use a metronome but really to figure out the tempos for the pieces I'm conducting. (In reference to her husband Jerry Boots, former Symphony trumpet player.) His metronome is electronic and makes an annoying noise!

Question 2:

Did you ever destroy a metronome on purpose, or want to?

David Johns, Leader of Johns Jazz, and Symphony Trumpet substitute musician

No. There have been several attempts over the decades to destroy my instrument (throw it into a pillow), but the metronome is the only tool to let you know just how well (or how bad) you are playing.

Tanya

No! The metronome is your friend. But I threw my violin once.

Clifton Swanson, Board President, former Symphony Conductor, former Symphony Bass Musician

No, I've never destroyed a metronome or even been tempted to. I have considered destroying the instrument on occasion!

Chris

Yes. Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale* offers awesomely frustrating asymmetric meters for the young conductor. A constant-pulse metronome used in preparation of this work is an unforgiving taskmaster.

Question 3:

Do you have a funny story to share about the metronome?

Karen Loewi Jones, Symphony Musician, Viola

One day I was practicing with the metronome . . . one from 6th grade . . . you know the one I mean, wooden, shaped like a pyramid with a metal rod going back and forth . . . tick tick tick tick. I used it all the way through high school. Not sure what happened, but one day it started to drive me crazy. Instead of even beats it started to lean more in one direction. Suddenly I was practicing scales with a jazzy rhythm, if you get my drift! I gave in and bought a digital metronome. It's a Seiko DM 20 circa 1990. Takes a licking and keeps on ticking!

David

Metronomes are like a toothbrush. No one likes to use one, but they are both good at keeping you in shape.

Clif

Actually, no.

Question 4:

For those of you who teach, how do you get your students to use one without making threats, or are threats part of the teaching process?

Jane

I never make threats of any kind! I want my students to be successful and want to continue to study music.

David

That's simple. If the student doesn't have the exercise, etude or piece playable at the tempo assigned to them, they get to practice it for another week.

Tanya

No, we don't get to threaten our students anymore.

Question 5:

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Karen

I don't know how many times I've looked at metronome markings in a piece of music and then turned the metronome on only to find myself saying, are you &#\$@ kidding me?

Stefan Podell, Symphony Board Member, Composer

We practice with a metronome for hundreds of hours so we can play as accurately as possible. And now there are thousands of YouTube videos demonstrating just how boring music sounds when a human performance is made totally accurate by a computer.

Andrew Sewell, Symphony Music Director

(In response to the questioner's distaste for the metronome) I think what you may be loathing is the incessant ticking to have to keep time to stay in rhythm, or keep up through difficult passages. This can be both challenging, and annoying, or even loathsome! 😊 I like your lighthearted disdain for the invention which happened at the time of Beethoven.

Jane

I just LOVE metronomes and always have! Try a google search for poems about metronomes. I found some interesting ones.

Tanya

The metronome is your friend.

Chris

Our human perspective of tempo is influenced by time-of-day, caffeine, and even a healthy plateful of pasta. The metronome is uncompromising and does not hold back its criticism when our subjective sense of time has sway over our performance.

Clif

You can always go into the issue of Beethoven and his metronome. Some of his tempo indications are so impractical that it has been speculated that his metronome wasn't accurate.

Jessica

The only way to make sure that you are learning to play it at the tempo the conductor wants is to turn on that classical torture device.

David

The evolution of the metronome is just like any other tech tool. It has become more complicated to use without getting any easier. And now with the metronome apps you find your phone, find the app, get past the ads, move your finger until you get the tempo, set the number of beats per bar, set the volume, then try and remember what you wanted the metronome for in the first place.

A tremendous thank you to Tanya Streder, Jane Swanson, David Johns, Karen Lowe Jones, Chris Woodruff, Jessica Hoffman, Cricket Handler, Stefan Podell, Andrew Sewell, and Clif Swanson for sharing your thoughts on the metronome!

*Not the actual words in Greek.