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Time Signatures & Conducting Patterns

with MP3 files from the Suzuki literature, performed by *Connie Sunday*

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There are two basic types of time signatures, Simple Time and Compound time.

Simple Time is 2/4, 3/4 and 4/4. The top number indicates how many beats to a measure and the bottom number, 4, indicates that a quarter note gets one beat. A quarter note is the "unit of measurement."

Compound Time is 6/8, 9/8 and 12/8. The bottom number, 8, indicates that an eighth note gets one beat. 6/8 (for example) may be thought of as getting six counts, but two beats. The pulse is in two, with two subdivisions: 1-2-3, 4-5-6 (each beat is an eighth note) and thus is conducted in two. Likewise, 9/8 is three pulses per measure and 12/8 is four pulses per measure. In compound time the eighth note is the "unit of measurement."

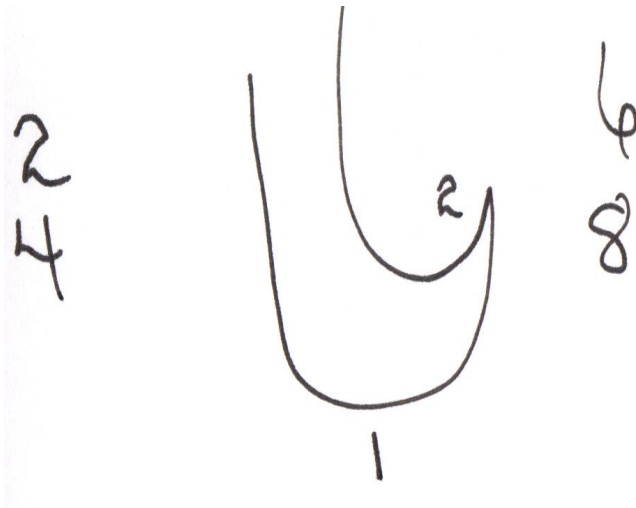
The first beat of every measure is the "downbeat." Note that with professional players it is usually safe for the conductor to give the beat prior to the starting beat of the piece (as long as that beat is also in the desired tempo). With students and semi-professional groups it is probably a good idea to give a "free measure," again, as long as that measure is in exactly the tempo the conductor wishes the work to begin. If there is a pick up note at the beginning, it is usually a good idea to give a whole measure. For example, if the work begins on beat four in a 4/4 pattern, conduct 1-2 and 3, and then bring the group in on 4.

What students must develop internally is the tactus, or "the moment of the beat." That is the exact instant when the beats occur. I would maintain that learning the conducting patterns—even for students who have no intention to conduct or play in orchestra—is useful in terms of developing rhythmic accuracy.

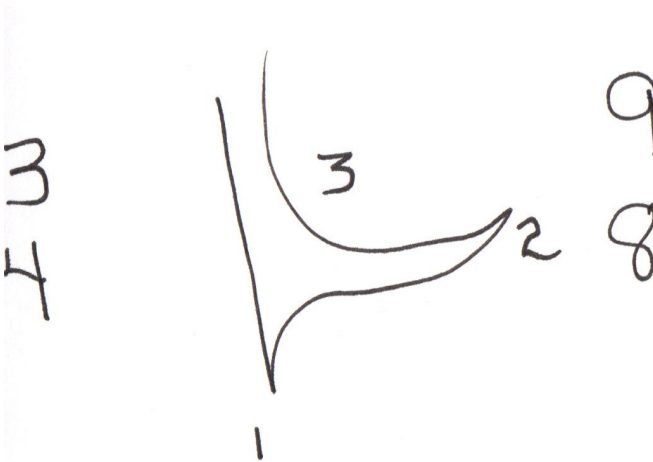
2/4 is two beats per measure; the unit of measurement is a quarter note, which gets one beat. 6/8 is conducted in "2" but the unit of measurement is an eighth note, which gets one beat. 6/8 is "compound" because there are two groups of three eighth notes. In 6/8 a quarter note gets two beats; a dotted quarter note gets three beats. 2/4 is characteristic of marching band (for example). See:

Click to listen →

[Simple Duple Meter](#)



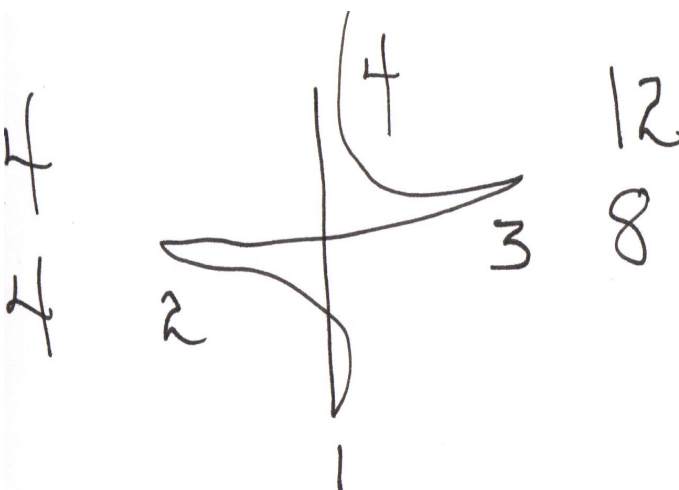
Click to listen  [Compound Duple Meter](#)




3/4 is three beats per measure; the unit of measurement is a quarter note, which gets one beat. 9/8 is conducted in "3" but the unit of measurement is an eighth note, which gets one beat. 9/8 is "compound" because there are three groups of three eighth notes. In 9/8 a quarter note gets two beats; a dotted quarter note gets three beats. See:


Click to listen  [Simple Triple Meter](#)

Click to listen  [Compound Triple Meter](#)



4/4 is four beats per measure; the unit of measurement is a quarter note, which gets one beat. 12/8 is conducted in "4" but the unit of measurement is an eighth note, which gets one beat. 12/8 is "compound" because there are four groups of three eighth notes. In 12/8 a quarter note gets two beats; a dotted quarter note gets three beats. See:

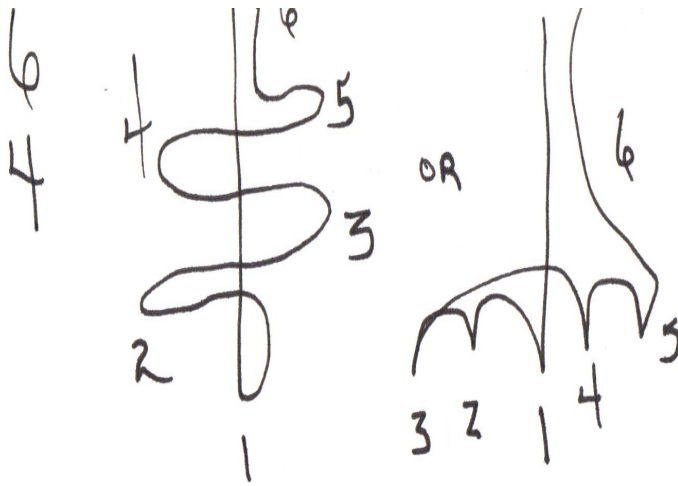
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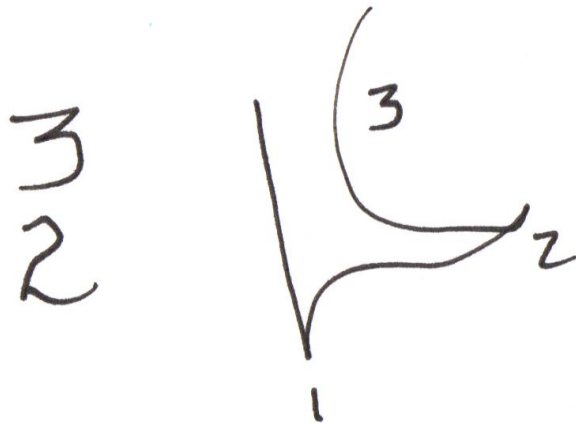
An abbreviation for 4/4 is the large C found in some works; this stands for "Common Time" and so called because +/- 80% of our music is in this time signature.

A derivative of Common Time is "Cut Time" which is the C with a line drawn through it vertically ("alla breve"). Cut time is a faster 4/4 and while one still counts 1-2-3-4 the actual subdivision is in "2". May also be written as 2/2.

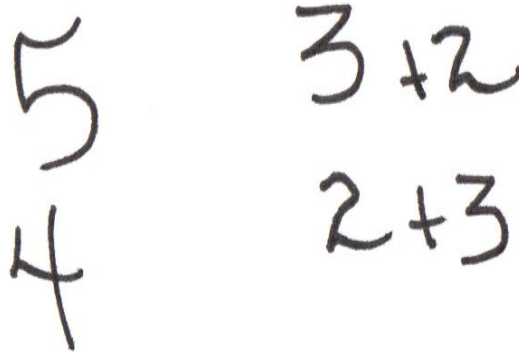
There are two basic patterns for the 6/4; the candelabra (see,



left) and the sideways pattern (see, right) which is more suitable to a slower tempo. A faster 6/4 could be conducted in two. Remember the rule that there are only two numbers in music, 2 and 3, and everything is a derivative of this.



You do see patterns where the half note is the unit of measurement. The top number indicates how many beats per measure and the bottom number indicates that the half note is the unit of measurement.



5/4 is fairly common, but musicians are very down-to-earth people, as a rule, and they just say, okay, well that's 2+3 or 3+2, as appropriate.

7/4 is less common but again, it's usually conceived as some reasonable configuration of 2 plus 3, depending on the phrasing of the music in question. It is not, as a rule, 1-2-3-4-5-6-7, but rather broken up into units of 2, 3 or 4, in combination.

7
 $4+3$
 $3+4$
 $2+3+2, \text{ etc.}$

It is not uncommon in 20th century works to have within one movement of a work, a string of multiple time signatures of all types. My best recommendation when you encounter this sort of thing is to listen to the recordings carefully and to practice both your instrument and the conducting patterns, carefully, in order to produce the rhythmic configurations the composer indicates.

Another common practice by conductors is to conduct a work "in One." This is not written in the music so much as the musicians write "in One" in pencil at the top of the part. When conductors do this and you're not familiar with the score, and you're just watching, it can be difficult to determine if the work is being conducted by the beats of the measure, or by the measures in phrases. It can be fun to try to determine this, in listening to works with which one is not familiar.

See: [Two Essays on the Development of Student Orchestras](#)



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