

THE ONES TO BEAT

Understanding Tricky Time Signatures

You can understand any time signature simply by knowing that the top number shows how many beats are in each measure, while the bottom number indicates the note value that represents the beat. This number will usually be a two, a four, or an eight to indicate a half note, quarter note, or eighth note, respectively, as shown below.



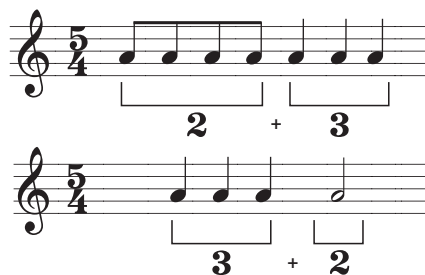
In some cases, it makes more sense to think of a meter in terms of its “big beats.” For example, the melody below is in 6/8, but each measure naturally divides into two groups of three eighth-note beats (the equivalent of a dotted quarter-note). The big beats are on the first and fourth “small” beats. If this were conducted, the conductor would most likely show the two big beats rather than six quick eighth-note beats.



This is called a **compound meter**: a time signature, such as 6/8 or 9/8, in which the “big beat” is made up of three equal smaller beats. A **simple meter**, on the other hand, is one in which the big beat is made up of two smaller beats.

Sometimes, the big beats within a measure will have to be uneven. For example, if the meter is 5/4, the big beats could either be made up of “two plus three” or “three plus two.” A conductor’s pattern will change to show where the big beats, or emphasis, should lie in each measure. Knowing where to put the emphasis helps these uneven meters make sense to the ear.

As the examples below show, the rhythm often makes it fairly simple to tell how to divide the measure into big beats:



A time signature in which the top number is not divisible by two or three, such as 5/4 or 7/4, is called a **complex meter**.

You might even run into music where the meter changes. Seeing one or two meter changes in a piece isn’t so unusual; just make sure to mark them with your pencil so that you don’t forget! But if the meter switches in just about every measure, the composer may have been purposefully trying to eliminate the sense of steady, rhythmic patterns.

For example, the opening movement of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* is supposed to depict the composer wandering through an exhibition. Because he’s not moving at a steady pace, but meandering freely, the meter changes from measure to measure, as shown below.



A frequently changing time signature is called **mixed meter**.

