

Rhythmic Basics (Part I)

Meter

The *time signature* (or metric signature) appears at the beginning of a piece. It tells you how many beats will be in each measure. This is not just technical information - the number of beats per measure (or the *meter*) determines the overall “groove” of the piece. It is one of the most obvious things you can pick up just by listening.

The time signature includes two bits of information:



number of beats per measure

which “note value” gets the beat. For now, we’ll assume that the quarter note is getting the beat (which is the most common case, and it’s what it says here.) We’ll discuss this more later.


Note Values (and Counting)

Usually, the *quarter note* is worth one beat.  = 1 beat

If we saw a measure full of quarter notes, we might write the beats below the staff, like so:



And we’d “count it out” by simply saying “one, two, three, four”

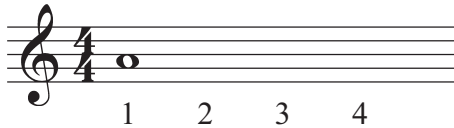
The *half note* is usually worth two beats.  = 2 beats



We would count it by saying one and three loudly, but also mentioning the two and four - so “one, (two), three, (four)”

A *whole note* is usually worth four beats.

♩ = 4 beats



There are also rhythmic values that are worth a fraction of a beat.

An *eighth note* is half the value of a quarter note. ♪ = 1/2 beat
(In other words, it moves twice as fast as the quarter.)

When you see eighth notes on the staff, you add a plus between the beats.



and you'd count this out by saying "one and two and three, four"

A single eighth note has a "flag" that hangs down from it, as in the measure above. However, the notes are often connected together with *beams*, like in the following example:



We'll talk more about the beams later!

A *sixteenth note* is a quarter the value of a quarter note. ♪♪ = 1/4 beat

When we see sixteenth notes, we insert "e" and "a" into the beats





and we say "one *eeh* and *uh* two *eeh* and *uh* three, four"

Rests

Rests indicate silence, rather than sound. Each note value has a corresponding rest.

quarter-note rest  = 1 beat

half-note rest  = 2 beats

whole-note rest  = 4 beats

eighth-note rest  = 1/2 beat

sixteenth-note rest  = 1/4 beat

The quarter-note rest is terribly difficult to draw the way it appears in professional music. Most people just make a kind of squiggle, like so:

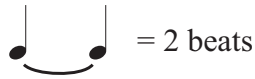


With the eighth and sixteenth-note rests, the “flag” from the note simply flies off of a diagonal line.

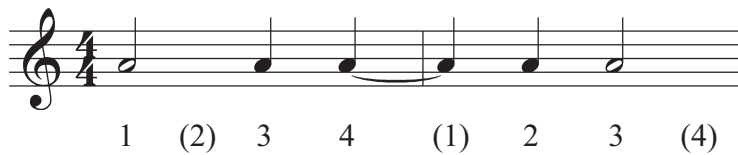


Ties, Beams, and “Showing the Beat”

A *tie* connects two notes together, creating one long note that is the sum of both.



This is useful when you have a long note that “hangs over” from one measure into the next. When this occurs you must break it up into parts and use a tie to connect them.

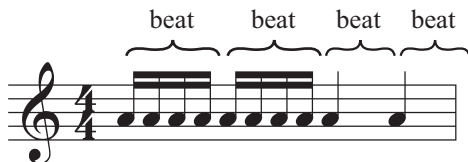


This break at the beginning of the measure is a form of “showing the beat.” Putting a note at the beginning of the measure makes the whole passage easier to read.

When you are working with the “subdivisions” of the beat (the “eels”, “ands” and “uhs”), you also must take care to visually separate each beat. We’ve already seen that a *beam* simply connects consecutive notes together visually - it doesn’t change how they sound.



We beam notes within the beat together, but separate them from the notes in the next beat. This makes it easy to scan the measure and see where the beats are.



Note how there is a break in the beams where the second beat starts.

When you have notes that “hang over” from one beat to the next, you should break them into parts and tie them together.

1 2 + (3) + a 4 + 1 + 2 e + a (3) 4

Notes that hang over the beat are *syncopated*, and they can be tricky to understand and execute.

Ways to Practice Rhythms

There are a variety of ways you can execute rhythmic passages for practice.

1) Tapping a beat + tapping / clapping / saying rhythm.

This is probably the simplest method for beginners. Many people like to tap the beat with a foot while they execute the written rhythm by some other means - clapping, hitting the table, or saying “ta ta taaa.” You can also tap or clap the beat while speaking the rhythm.

2) Counting out loud

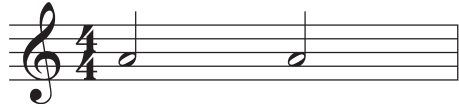
The simplest way to count out loud is to say all four beats, with extra emphasis on beats where there is a written rhythmic value. If there are written notes that fall between the beats say “eehs” “ands” and “uhs” as needed. So if you saw this:

You could count “one! (two) three! (four).” And this:

would be “one and two and three, four!” (all loud.)

3) Counting only what's written

This is the same as #2, except when you see this..



you would say only “one...three...” You probably want to tap a foot etc. to represent the beat.

4) Two-handed tapping.

Use one hand to tap the beat, and the other hand to tap the written rhythm. It's a nice coordination exercise.

5) Conducting + Speaking

It may seem crazy at first, but college music students are usually required to conduct the beat with their hand while they speak the rhythm with a neutral syllable like “taaaa.” (There is even a more specific set of syllables that some people teach which sounds like “ta, ta, ti ti ta!”)

We are eventually going to learn how to do it! The good thing about conducting is that the pattern becomes physically automatic and intuitive, and each beat has a different motion to it, so you become intimately familiar with the way rhythms flow. Conducting is also a good tool to figure out rhythms by ear - the motion of your arm can tell you what beat a note lands on.

Like I said, we'll get into this more in a future lesson. For now, though, I will show you the conducting pattern for 4/4 meter.

