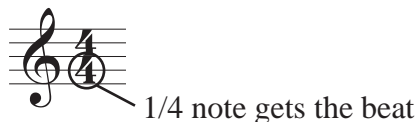
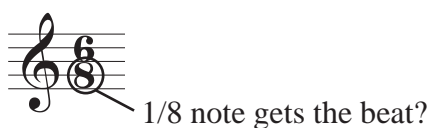


Rhythm III - 6/8 Time

When we were first introduced to the idea of meter, I said that the bottom number in our time signatures indicated what kind of note would get the beat. Up until now, every meter signature you've seen has had a four on the bottom, meaning that the basic unit of time is the quarter note.



This is true for “simple” meters. However, we now going to consider what is called a “compound” meter, where things are somewhat different. Specifically, I want to look at 6/8, the most common compound meter.



The eight on the bottom of the time signature implies that eighth notes should get the beat. This, however, is a lie! Or, at least, it's not the whole truth.

Counting it in six

If we are going very slowly in 6/8, it is possible to count out six beats, just like you would expect, with a count for each eighth note.



Counting in two

However, in 6/8 there is a sense that the measure also breaks into two halves.



These halves are usually felt as the “real” beats in 6/8 -- it's like 2/4 that's been subdivided into groups of three, or triplets. If you think about it I bet you can come up with a lot of music that has this triplet feeling - for instance, the “Mr. Softee” theme that blares from ice cream trucks throughout New York City begins in 6/8.



(Yes, apparently, the jingle has actual words to it.)

So when you are counting off 6/8 at anything but the slowest tempo, you usually count it in two. And if you want to indicate the subdivisions, or each individual eighth note, you could say “1 and uh 2 and uh.”

a 1 + a 2 + a 1 + a 2 + a

Also, I like to say “triplet” broken into three syllables, like “tri puh let tri puh let” to indicate the feeling of 6/8, though it is not really very accurate for referring to specific notes.

And sometimes I’ll count all six numbers, but emphasize one and four, like “ONE-two-three FOUR-five-six.” This can become confusing because you are counting to six and yet you only feel two main “beats.”

The basic vocabulary

Our first passages in 6/8 are going to be very simple - we are going to fill in our triplet beats in a few specific ways. Once you get comfortable with these basic concepts it will be easy to parse the examples in our rhythmic anthology.

all eighth notes

1 + a 2 + a

dotted quarters

1 + a 2 + a

the “rocking horse”
rhythm*

1 + a 2 + a

rests

1 + a 2 + a

* That’s just what I call it, not sure why.
Also I like “clip-clop” rhythm, to continue
the equestrian theme.

Other options - 9/8 and 12/8

You know that 6/8 is like a 2/4 that has been broken into triplet-like beats. We can have a triplety 3/4 and 4/4 as well. 9/8 is a three-beat measure made of triplets, and 12/8 is a four-beat measure.

