

Interlude – Musical Meter

This is going to be a useful concept for all of our music going forward. We'll even work on identifying different beat patterns by ear for Quiz No. 2. We introduce it now so we can discuss meter in our two instrumental dances, the Pavane and Galliard.

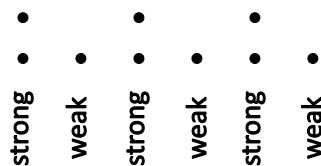
We can define meter as the “pulse” or “groove” of a piece of music.

I showed a brief video about the general concept of “pulse” – a series of equal time intervals that we can follow along with. We can call each moment in the series a “beat.” I like to represent a pulse as a series of dots, like this:



What's really interesting about our sense of meter is that we can anticipate the next event in the chain. Once one beat happens we can “see ahead” to the next one, and we can plan out muscle movements etc. in order to make something happen at that exact moment in time. This is why a groove seems to have “momentum,” and it is pleasant for us to follow it and move along with it.

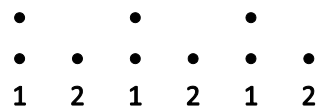
Music isn't just a series of repeated sounds, though, it tends to “breathe in and out,” creating an alternation between strong and weak beats. We could represent the stronger beats by stacking another layer of dots on top of the pulse.



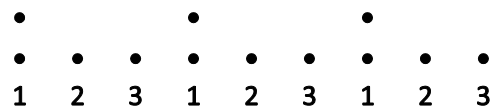
This means that the beats on the lower level are heard in a strong-weak pattern, and also that you could probably follow that slower, upper-level pulse that happens every strong beat, if you wanted to. Thus, the strong/weak alternation can also be explained as a hierarchical layering of pulses.

There are two basic patterns of strong and weak that you can make:

- a *duple* pattern consists of two beats, strong – weak.



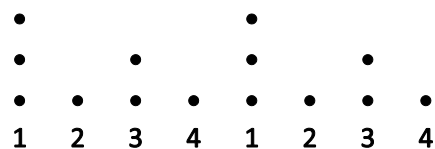
- a *triple* pattern is three beats, strong – weak – weak



We practiced listening to some tracks and identifying whether the pattern is duple or triple. The procedure for this is pretty simple:

- 1) Identify a basic beat in the music, tap along with it.
- 2) Test whether it seems to follow a pattern of two or three.

Also, I pointed out that it is very common to count music “in four” – most music is written with four beats per measure and I’m sure you’ve heard people do a four-count before starting a performance. We are going to understand four as a more elaborate form of two, a layering of two duple pulses.



Thus, if you find that it is comfortable to count a piece in four, you should indicate that it is a duple meter. For our purposes counting “in two” and “in four” are basically the same thing.

Secular Music in the Renaissance

So now let’s pick up where we left off in class 3, looking at the music that is being “at court,” for the entertainment of the upper class. Secular music continued to develop in the Renaissance, evolving out of things we saw in the Medieval period.

Secular Vocal Music = Madrigals

You may remember that in the late Medieval period the fashion was for troubadour and trouvère-type songs as court, which presented sophisticated, poetic words set to monophonic melodies.

By the Renaissance these songs evolve into *madrigals*, a more complex, polyphonic kind of secular piece.

Like the work of the troubadours, these will tend to be in the local, vernacular language (French, Italian, English, etc.)

The texts tend to be humorous and “clever.”

They are polyphonic, not monophonic.

And finally, they frequently indulge in a technique that can be called “tone painting.” (This is my preferred term for it. The book uses “word painting” and “madrigalism.”) This means that the composer tries to depict the contents of the text in the musical notes.

Our homework and quiz piece is [As Vesta was from Latmos Hill Descending](#) by Thomas Weelkes (1576-1623), and in it we can hear lots of tone painting. Whenever the text speaks of ascending the hill, the musical lines also go upwards, and when the characters are going down the hill the musical lines also go down. There is also some play with the words “two by two,” “three by three” and so on, which are set with pairs of voices, then trios etc. There is detailed commentary on all this in the book, p. 79 in the eighth edition and pp. 83-84 in the seventh.

I also played one “bonus” madrigal, ["Now is the Month of Maying" by Thomas Morley](#). This one doesn't feature any tone painting as far as I know, but it is amusingly naughty. Sexual innuendo was a common feature of this kind of entertainment.

Instrumental Music

For the most part the people of the Renaissance have the same instruments we saw in the Medieval period, including the recorder, shawm, crumhorn, viol, lute, and harp. The main new development is the popularity of *consorts* – collections of an entire family of the same sort of instrument, from small to large.

We saw a recorder consort play [John Dowland's Earle of Essex Galliard...](#)

and we saw a viol consort play [the same piece](#).

In general, this polyphonic dance music was still conceived for generic instruments – you can play them on whatever consort you might have, you can mix different kinds of instruments, and

you can even mix vocals and instruments. The title pages of this kind of music usually advertised its versatility “for singing or playing.”

There are also a few new instrumental developments.

- The *sackbut* is invented – this is early form of the trombone, which looks quite similar to the modern version.
- Lute music becomes more interesting thanks to the use of a special kind of notation called tablature. We heard a man play [John Dowland's Frog Galliard](#).
- Early forms of the harpsichord begin to crop up and so we have our first good keyboard music. The *virginal* was particularly popular in England – this is a small, rectangular-shaped harpsichord that could fit on a table top. We saw someone play [William Byrd's Rowland on a virginal](#)

Pavane and Galliard

Finally, we looked at the Renaissance dance pieces that we will study for Quiz #1 – an anonymous Pavane and Galliard.

I’ve got infographics up on [a youtube video](#), but let me also summarize the useful information here.

Both of these dances appear in an anthology called *Musicque de joye*. It was published around 1550 by Jacques Moderne, a French printer of music. The actual composers of these pieces are unknown.

The Pavane and Galliard were often paired together. The Pavane is a slow dance in duple meter, performed by couples who hold hands and do a walking step forward and back. The Galliard is faster, in triple meter, and it is more active – here dancers leap upwards on almost every beat.

In our recordings the Pavane is played on a consort of viols, and the Galliard is played on shawms.