

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Fall 2018

Prof. Smey

Class 6, Thursday Sept 20

After we finished our first quiz we revisited the world of musical meter. Here are slightly more detailed notes on that.

A “Musical Skill” for Quiz Two: Identifying Duple and Triple 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.

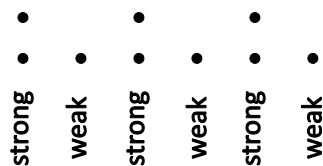
We can define meter as the “groove” or “beat pattern” of a piece of music.

I showed a brief video about the general concept of “pulse,” which we could define as 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 row 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.

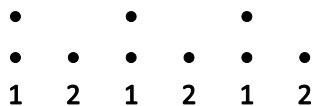
Music isn’t just a series of repeated sounds, though, it tends to “breathe in and out,” creating an alternation between strong and weak beats. We could represent the stronger beats by stacking another layer of dots on top of the pulse.



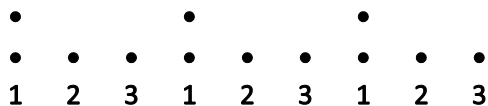
This means that the beats on the lower level are heard in a strong-weak pattern (because a taller stack = a stronger beat). Also, that top layer often seems to represent a slower pulse from strong beat to strong beat that you could follow if you wanted to. Thus, the strong/weak alternation can also be explained as a hierarchical layering of pulses. (That sounds really abstract! I also made [a youtube video](#) about this layering that shows it in action.)

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

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



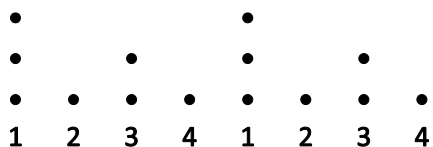
- a *triple* pattern is three beats, strong – weak – weak



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, and tap along with it. This is difficult for some students at first, but with a few minutes of practice it should become more comfortable.
- 2) Test whether it seems to follow a pattern of two or three. Make a back-and-forth or triangle pattern with your taps, and judge which one seems to fit the music better.

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.