

Time Signature – what it's really all about

In more traditional music teaching it is often the case that we look at something musical that is written down and try to work out how it works. When it comes to time signatures there is a great tendency to use a mathematical approach. Looking at things from a more musical perspective is usually better, so here are some thoughts about time signatures starting from the perspective of the music and then ending up with the theory behind it.

In the main there are three main basic time signatures. Two beats in a bar, three beats in a bar and four beats in a bar. There are others but let's start with the very basics.

Two time (sometimes called “duple time”) – When in two time, there is a natural accent on every second beat of the music. This is indicated in the music by having a bar line after every two beats worth of music. The first note after the bar line has a natural accent and is stronger than the other notes.


Three time (sometimes called “triple time”) - When in three time, there is a natural accent on every third beat of the music. This is indicated in the music by having a bar line after every three beats worth of music. The first note after the bar line has a natural accent and is stronger than the other notes.


Four time (sometimes called “quadruple time”) - When in four time, there is a natural accent on every fourth beat of the music. This is indicated in the music by having a bar line after every four beats worth of music. The first note after the bar line has a natural accent and is stronger than the other notes.

Please note that the function of the bar line in music is to show you where the strong beats happen. It is immediately after the bar line. (N.B. The bar lines are not there to stop the notes falling out of the end of the staff ..!!)

Once we have established the very basics of how many beats there are in a bar, i.e. whether the underlying beat of the music goes **1 2 1 2** or **1 2 3 1 2 3** or **1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4**, then we need to decide what sort of beats they are. Basically there are two fundamental beats known as simple and compound.

Simple beats are those that break down naturally into two, four, eight and so on. The most common “simple” beat is a crotchet (there can be others). When a crotchet breaks down it becomes two quavers, four semiquavers etc. etc. This gives music with a rather square rhythmic sound to it. If you say

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star quite quickly you will get the feel for this. It sounds as follows  which is the sound and feel of simple time.

Compound beats are those that break down naturally into three, six, twelve and so on. The most common “compound” beat is a dotted crotchet (there can be others). When the dotted crotchet breaks down it becomes three quavers, six semiquavers, etc. etc. If you recite Humpty Dumpty you will get the feel for compound beats. It has a sort of rumpety tumpety rolling feel to it all. The last two lines of this rhyme (All the Kings horses and all the Kings men, couldn't put Humpty together again) would sound as follows  which is the sound and feel of compound beats.

Just to recap, we have a certain number of beats to a bar, and in the main it is usually two, three or four. Within this there are two types of beats - simple or compound. This gives us the following combinations

Simple duple (two simple beats to a bar). This is usually 2/4 time

Simple triple (three simple beats to a bar). This is usually 3/4 time

Simple quadruple (four simple beats to a bar). This is usually 4/4 time

Compound duple (two compound beats to a bar). This is usually 6/8 time

Compound triple (three compound beats to a bar). This is usually 9/8 time

Compound quadruple (four compound beats to a bar) This is usually 12/8 time

Of course you can also have five, seven, eleven or any other number of beats in a musical bar, but these are nowhere near as common as the basic time signatures listed above. I can't think of any music that the band has played in the past five years that has contained any time signatures other than the six listed above.

I hope this helps with the mystique of time signatures and in particular with the rather confusing compound time signatures (6/8, 9/8, 12/8). This whole matter can be something that we will discuss on subsequent band rehearsals in order to help people better understand this side of things.

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The following table shows some basic time signatures

Time signature	Description	What it means	What you get in each bar
2	Simple	2	Two crotchet beats to a bar
4	Duple	♩	Two crotchet beats to a bar
6	Compound	2	Two dotted crotchet beats to a bar
8	Duple	♩.	Two dotted crotchet beats to a bar
3	Simple	3	Three crotchet beats to a bar
4	Triple	♩	Three crotchet beats to a bar
9	Compound	3	Two dotted crotchet beats to a bar
8	Triple	♩.	Two dotted crotchet beats to a bar
4	Simple	4	Four crotchet beats to a bar
4	Quadruple	♩	Four crotchet beats to a bar
12	Compound	4	Four dotted crotchet beats to a bar
8	Quadruple	♩.	Four dotted crotchet beats to a bar

The above table shows the six most common time signatures. The first column is the time signature, the second is the technical description, the third is what is actually meant (this is sometime used in education as it is more clear than the basic number type of time signatures), and the last column tells you what you get in each bar. Time signatures have been arranged in pairs with the shaded ones being the simple time signatures and the unshaded ones being the compound time signatures. Each pair has the same number of beats in the bar.

Please note that this is just the basics, but will cover virtually all the music you will come across to start with.