

Music 101: Counting


Some Important Terms


Measure or Bar = Specified grouping or division of beats separated by bar line on staff

Time Signature = Set of two numbers on the staff. Top number indicates how many beats per measure, bottom indicates what kind of note gets a count of one beat.

How to Count


The first thing to do is look at the time signature at the beginning of the piece. The top number tells you how many beats are per measure. The bottom tells you what type of note gets one count. There are several types of notes. What the note looks like (not where it is placed) determines its length. The types are all related to one another:

 = Whole Note (equal to two half notes, four quarter notes, etc.)

 = Half Note (equal to two quarter notes, four eighth notes, etc.)

 = Quarter Note (equal to two eighth notes, four sixteenth notes, etc.)

 = Eighth Note (equal to two sixteenth notes, four thirtysecond notes, etc.)

 = Sixteenth Note (equal to two thirtysecond notes, four sixtyfourth notes, etc.)

It can keep going...32nd notes, 64th notes, 128th notes (by adding a flag to the stem), but realistically these are the five that you need to know. You will also see notes with a dot next to them like this:

 = Dotted Quarter Note

A dot means you add value to the note, precisely half the value, so this would be worth the value of a quarter note plus half a quarter note (an eighth note), so three eighth notes total.

Back to time signatures...the bottom number tells you what type of note is worth one beat. The most common number you'll see is 4 which means a quarter note is assigned one beat. However you will often see a 2 (meaning a half note gets one beat) or an 8 (meaning an eighth note gets one beat). So a time signature of 4/4 (also often indicated by a "C" on the staff) means there are four beats in a measure, and a quarter is valued at one beat, so you would expect there would be four quarter notes per measure. When figuring out a difficult rhythm, it is helpful to determine where each of the beats lay in each measure in relation to the actual notes by writing out each count. You can visit this URL to practice:

http://www.notationmachine.com/how_to_read_sheetmusic/reading_rhythms_exercises.htm