Music Theory 4

Rhythm Counting

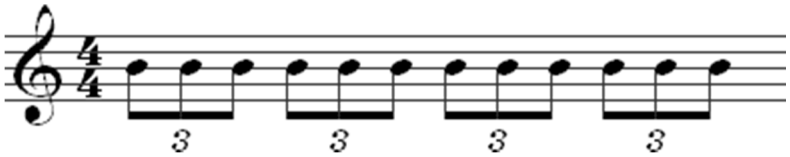
Second Chances Music Program

Counting Eighth Note Triplets and Rests

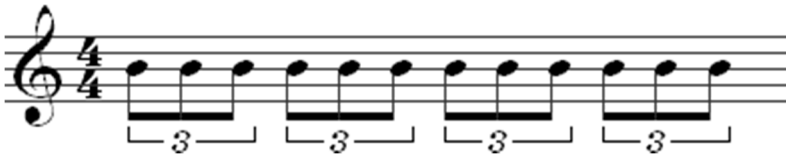
What is a Triplet?

The term triplet refers to a series of three notes that are played in the space of two notes of the same value. For example, an eighth note triplet occurs when a musician is expected to play three eighth notes in the same amount of time as they would normally play two eighth notes.

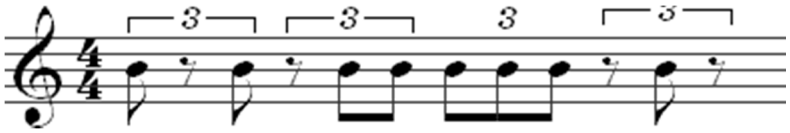
When written on the staff, the eighth note triplet will be notated by beaming three eighth notes together and placing a '3' above or below the middle note. The placement of the number 3 is dictated by the note's stem direction.



On occasion, composers and publishers will include a bracket along with the number '3' in order to indicate a triplet rhythm.



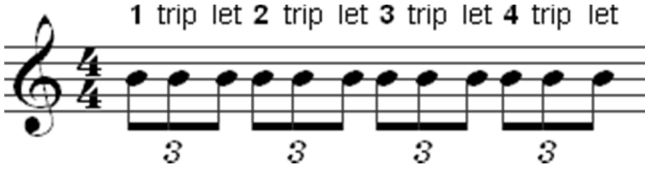
Although the use of these brackets may seem a bit unnecessary in the musical example above where there is a consistent series of eighth notes, the brackets can be very helpful when the triplet rhythms include both notes and rests.

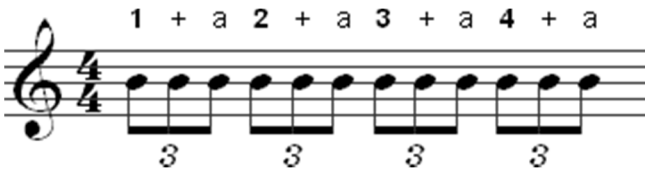
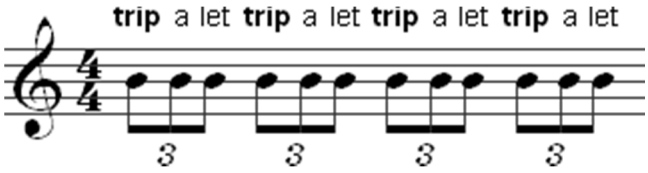


A triplet is the simplest incarnation of a tuplet. A tuplet occurs when a given number of notes of one type are spread equally over the same duration of a different number of notes of that same type. In this case, three eighth notes spread evenly over the space of two eighth notes. There are many other kinds of tuplets besides triplets, some of which are quite complex, but these are less common.

Counting Eighth Note Triplets

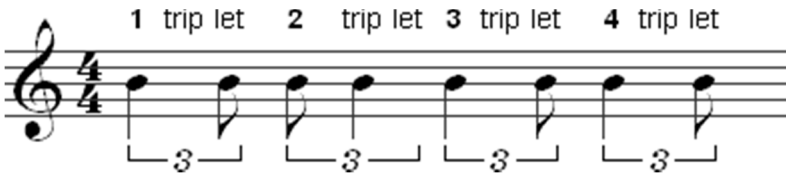
Just as there are many ways of counting rhythms in music, there are also multiple ways of counting eighth note triplets. Below are three common approaches:

Count in 4/4	Example	Notes
1 - trip - let 2 - trip - let 3 - trip - let 4 - trip - let		This is one of the most frequently used methods for counting triplets. The method allows the musician to remain true to our existing techniques for counting; using numbers to represent the beat.

Count in 4/4	Example	Notes
1 and a 2 and a 3 and a 4 and a		This approach is not as good as the first. Although it does allow you to keep track of the beats with numbers, it might be somewhat confusing when used in passages that include both eighth note triplet rhythms and 16th notes.
trip - a - let trip - a - let trip - a - let trip - a - let		Using the vocalization "trip - a - let" is another fairly common way of counting triplets. The only short coming of this method is that it doesn't allow you to keep track of the beats.

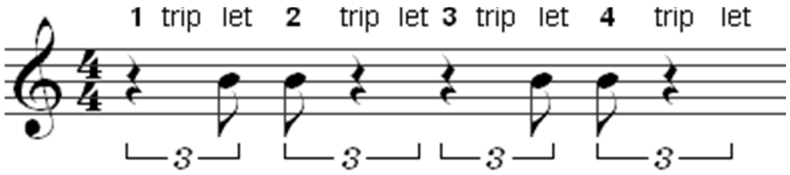
Quarter Notes in Eighth Note Triplets

Since there are three eighth notes in the triplet, it is possible to combine either the first two or last two into a quarter note as in the examples below:



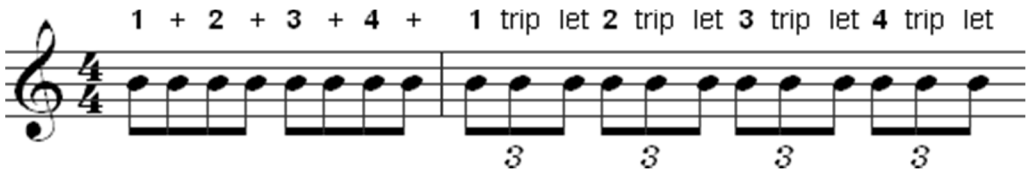
Again, notice the use of the brackets here. The brackets help establish the triplet figure as well as make it easier for the musician to read. The quarter notes in this case, are part of the triplet so their value will be equal to two of the eighth notes in the triplet (2/3 of the beat) rather than a full beat like you would have with a regular quarter note.

Remember as well, that just as you can replace the eighth notes with eighth rests, so too can you replace any quarter note in the triplet figure with a quarter rest. The rules of counting these rests will remain the same as if they were written as a note.



Switching between Eighth Notes and Eighth Note Triplets

Switching from playing eighth notes to eighth note triplets can be difficult at first. You should practice each rhythm separately until they become easy before trying to play an alternating eighth note to eighth note triplet pattern.



Simple and Compound Time Signatures

Subdivision of the Beat

Up to this point in our musical learning, most of the rhythms you have been asked to play have been written in a time signature where the top number was either 2, 3 or 4 and the bottom number was a 4. In teaching beginning musicians, it is very common to establish the quarter note as the fundamental beat. However, as a player becomes more advanced, they begin to see that rhythm is more transitory and that the quarter note will not always be same as the beat. We begin to see this change when we use a 2 (half notes) or an 8 (eighth notes) as the bottom number.

In all of these examples though, we are only considering *simple time signatures*. 2/4, 2/2, 4/4, and 3/4 are all examples of simple time signatures. In a simple time signature, the TOP number indicates how many beats are in each bar, while the BOTTOM number tells you which kind of note gets one beat. Simple time signatures are those where the beat can be subdivided into two equal parts.

However, it is also possible to have a time signature where each beat is subdivided into three parts. These are known as *compound time signatures*. 6/8, 9/2, and 12/8 are examples of compound time signatures.

How to Read Both Simple AND Compound Time Signatures

In order to be able to read both simple AND compound time signatures, we need to think about the meaning of the top and bottom numbers slightly differently. In either time signature, the top number will represent the number of subdivisions in a measure. For example, in a simple time signature like 2/4 time, the subdivision is a quarter note and the top number is two, so there will always be the equivalent of two quarter notes per measure. Similarly, in a compound time signature such as 6/8 time, the subdivision is an eighth note and the top number is six, so there will always be the equivalent of six eighth notes per measure.

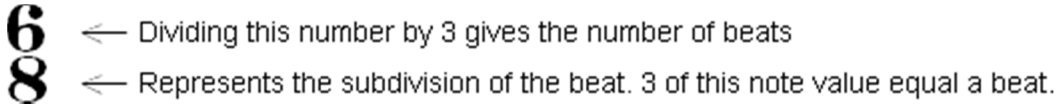
Don't confuse this with the beat!

Although it is true that in a simple time signature, the number of subdivisions in the measure is also the number of beats, in a compound time signature these subdivisions must be divided by three in order to determine the number of beats. Dividing the six in 6/8 by three will result in there being two beats per measure of 6/8 time.

The Bottom Number in Compound Time Signatures

The bottom number represents the note value that subdivides each beat. In compound time signatures, this number can be used to determine the kind of note that gets the beat by adding three notes of this value together. The resulting note will always be a dotted note of some kind. For example, the bottom number in 6/8 time is '8', which represents an eighth note. If you add three eighth notes together, they equal a dotted quarter note. So then, the dotted quarter note is the note that gets the beat in a measure of 6/8 time.

If you combine what you learned from each of these numbers, you find that 6/8 means that there are two beats per measure with the dotted quarter note getting the beat.



How to Tell Simple and Compound Time Signatures Apart

It is relatively easy to distinguish between simple and compound time signatures. A time signature is compound if the top number is greater than three and can be divided by three. Any time signature where the top number is equal to three or is another number that can't be divided by three is considered simple.

This is actually a bit of an oversimplification since composers may occasionally group rhythms in a time signature that are normally compound in such a way that it is no longer compound. Always be prepared to adjust your playing of these rhythms to properly reflect the composers intention.

Summary of the Differences Between Simple and Compound

Characteristic	Simple Time	Compound Time
Top Number in Time Signature	Gives the number of beats per measure	Dividing the number by 3 gives the number of beats per measure. If the number is greater than 3 and is also divisible by 3, the time signature is probably compound.
Bottom Number in Time Signature	Indicates the type of note that gets the beat	Indicates the note value for the subdivision of the beat. Adding 3 of this value together gives a dotted note value equal to one beat.
Subdivision	The beat is subdivided into two parts	Beat is subdivided into three parts.
The Beat	Will always be a normal note (quarter note, half note, etc.)	Will always be a dotted note value (dotted quarter note, dotted eighth note, etc.)

Common Compound Time Signatures

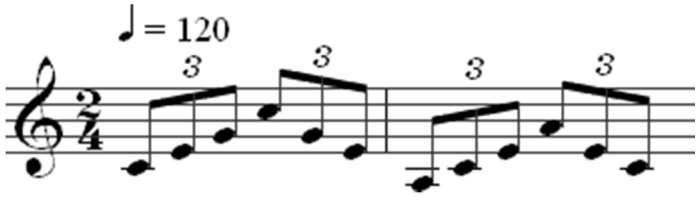
The chart below shows some frequently used compound time signatures with details on how many beats per measure and which note gets the beat.

Time Signature	Number of Beats	Type of Note that Gets the Beat
6/8	2	dotted quarter note
9/8	3	dotted quarter note
12/8	4	dotted quarter note
6/4	2	dotted half note

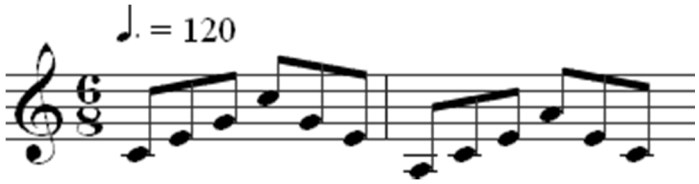
Triplets vs. Compound Time Signatures

Many people confuse compound time signatures and triplets. It is incorrect to refer to the subdivision in a compound time signature as a triplet. Remember that a triplet is three notes of one value in the space of two notes of the same value. Since the normal subdivision in a compound time signature is three, it can't be a triplet because the subdivision occurs in the space of three notes, not two.

It is possible to rewrite music in a compound time signature by using triplets in a simple time signature. Here is an example of the same passage notated in a simple time signature using triplets:



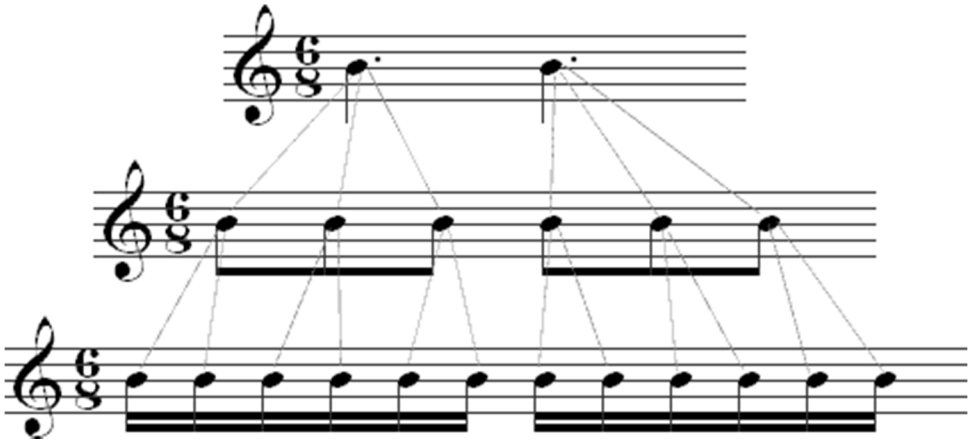
This passage is rewritten in a compound time signature below.



Subdivisions in Compound Time Signatures

After the first subdivision of the beat, the rhythms in a compound time signature are subdivided pretty much like rhythms in simple time signatures. For example, in 6/8, the dotted quarter note is subdivided into three eighth notes. Each eighth note is subdivided into two sixteenth notes. Sixteenth notes are subdivided into thirty-second notes.

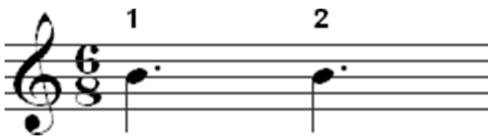
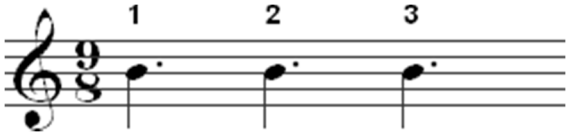
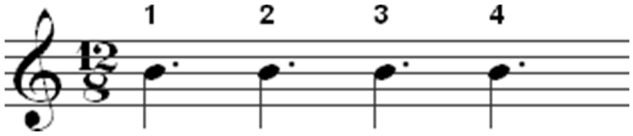
Below is the familiar concept of the note tree, altered slightly to be used with compound time signatures.



Counting in Compound Time Signatures

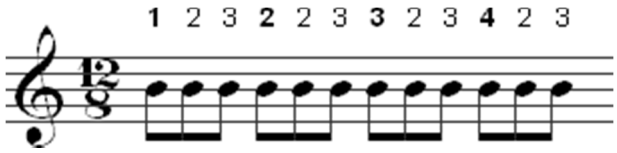
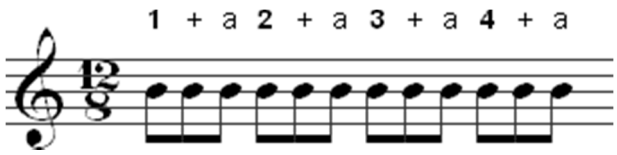
Counting the Beats in Compound Time Signatures

Rhythms consisting of note values equal to or greater than a beat can be counted as you would any other time signature. The chart below shows how this works in 6/8, 9/8, and 12/8 time.

Type of Time Signature	Example Time Signatures	How to Count	Musical Example
Duple	6/8, 6/4, 6/2	Count: one, two	
Triple	9/8, 9/4, 9/2	Count: one, two, three	
Quadruple	12/8, 12/4, 12/2	Count: one, two, three, four	

Counting Eighth Notes in Compound Time Signatures

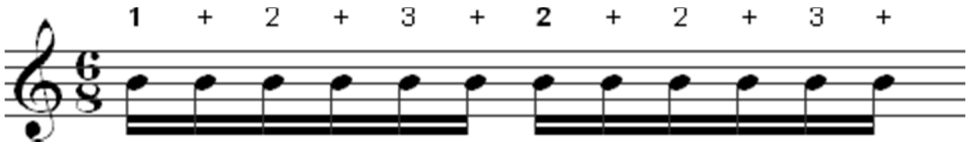
The chart below shows two methods for counting eighth notes in compound time signatures. 12/8 is used for the examples, but the methods can easily be adapted to any other compound time signature.

Count	Example	Notes
ONE – 2 – 3 TWO – 2 – 3 THREE – 2 – 3 FOUR – 2 – 3		This method is somewhat awkward at first, but it is a good approach because it is easy to keep track of beats and count subdivisions beyond an eighth note.
ONE – and – a TWO – and – a THREE – and – a FOUR – and – a		This is a simple method that works well with music that includes only one subdivision of the beat, such as an eighth note in 12/8. It doesn't work as well with subdivisions beyond this.

Counting Sixteenth Notes in Compound Time Signatures

Building on the first of the two techniques for counting eighth notes above, sixteenth notes could be counted by adding an "and" between each number. This is similar to how eighth notes are counted in simple time signatures.

Using this approach for sixteenth notes in 6/8 time would result in the count "ONE and 2 and 3 and, TWO and 2 and 3 and" as it is written below:



Counting Duplets

A duplet is a common rhythm in compound time signatures. Like a triplet, it is a tuplet. A duplet is when two notes of one value occur in the space of three notes of the same value. More simply put, it is the opposite of a triplet and is indicated with a "2" above or below the two notes.

In a compound time signature such as 6/8, this means that an eighth note duplet is two eighth notes that occur in the space of three eighth notes. The use of duplets can make a compound time signature feel like it is a simple time signature because the characteristic feel of the compound time signature is lost when the beat is no longer subdivided by three.

Duplets can be counted by keeping track of the sixteenth notes. The first duplet occurs on the beat. The second one occurs on the "and" of two. Below is an example of duplets in 6/8 with the count shown above the music: