Music Fundamentals Primer
Lesson 6 – Meter

Time in music is organized by regular pulses, which are grouped together and divided. The grouping together of these pulses, or beats, results in meter. The way in which the beat is divided distinguishes the meter type.

The most common *groupings* of beats are into twos (**duple**), threes (**triple**), and fours (**quadruple**). In musical notation, groupings of beats are marked by measures, or bars, with barlines indicating where one grouping ends and another begins. The number of beats in a measure will typically be two, three, or four.

Beats themselves can be divided into two or three equal parts. These *divisions* are classified as **simple** (two equal parts), and **compound** (three equal parts). The way in which a beat is divided determines how a meter is indicated by its meter signature (or time signature).

If the top number of a meter signature is 2, 3, or 4, the meter is almost always simple. In **simple meters**, the beat is divided into two parts, and the top number of the meter signature indicates the number of *beats* in each measure. The bottom number indicates which note value receives one *beat*. For example, the meter signature $\frac{3}{4}$ indicates three beats in each measure, with the quarter note receiving one beat.

By contrast, in **compound meters**, the beat is divided into three parts and the top number of the meter signature *does not indicate the number of beats in the bar*. If the top number of a meter signature is 6, 9, or 12, the meter is almost always compound. Exceptions to this rule can be found when the tempo is extremely slow or extremely fast. The top number in compound meters indicates the number of *divisions* in each measure. The bottom number indicates which note value receives one *division*. In order to determine the number of beats in a measure of compound time, the top number in the meter signature is divided by three. To determine which note value receives one beat, three divisions are added together. This note value will *always* be a dotted note. For example, the meter signature $\frac{6}{8}$ indicates six divisions in each measure, with the eighth note receiving one division. Six divided by three yields two beats per measure. Three eighth notes added together gives a dotted quarter note as the unit of beat. A measure of $\frac{6}{8}$ has two beats, each lasting one dotted quarter note.

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Exercises for Lesson 6

I. Indicate the number of beats per measure for each meter signature.

$\frac{4}{2}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{9}{8}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{6}{8}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{12}{4}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{2}{4}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{2}{2}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{4}{8}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{3}{4}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{12}{16}$ has _____ beats per measure.

$\frac{6}{4}$ has _____ beats per measure.

II. Label the meter type for the given meter signature as A) simple or compound, and B) duple, triple, or quadruple.

$\frac{9}{16}$ A) _compound_ B) _triple_

$\frac{4}{4}$ A) _____ B) _____

$\frac{3}{2}$ A) _____ B) _____

$\frac{6}{8}$ A) _____ B) _____

$\frac{4}{8}$ A) _____ B) _____

$\frac{2}{2}$ A) _____ B) _____

$\frac{6}{4}$ A) _____ B) _____

$\frac{2}{4}$ A) _____ B) _____

C A) _____ B) _____

$\frac{12}{4}$ A) _____ B) _____

$\frac{9}{8}$ A) _____ B) _____