Section 1.6

Compound and Asymmetric Meter

Compound time signatures

Beats in compound time signatures divide into three division notes, not two. The top number indicates the number of division notes per measure. The bottom number indicates the division rhythmic value (not the beat unit). It takes three division notes (not two) to make one beat.

\[
\begin{align*}
1 & \quad 2 \\
\text{\footnotesize \text{\(6\)}} & & \text{\footnotesize \(\text{\(\frac{8}{6}\)}\)}} \\
\text{\footnotesize \(\frac{6}{8}\)} & & \text{\footnotesize \(\text{\(\frac{8}{6}\)}\)}}
\end{align*}
\]

One beat = \(\text{\(\frac{8}{6}\)} + \text{\(\frac{8}{6}\)} + \text{\(\frac{8}{6}\)} = \text{\(\frac{8}{6}\)}\)}

Decoding compound time signatures

A time signature with 6, 9, 12, or 15 on top is compound. To get the number of beats, divide the top number by three. The beat unit is a dotted rhythmic value one larger than the bottom number; sixteen on the bottom means a dotted-eighth beat unit, eight on the bottom means a dotted quarter, and so on. Compound time signatures can be duple, triple, quadruple, or even quintuple (five beats).

\[
\begin{align*}
1 & \quad 2 & \quad 3 \\
\text{\footnotesize \(\frac{9}{16}\)} & & \text{\footnotesize \(\frac{12}{16}\)} \\
\text{\footnotesize \(\text{\(\frac{9}{16}\)}\)} & & \text{\footnotesize \(\text{\(\frac{12}{16}\)}\)}
\end{align*}
\]

One beat = \(\text{\(\frac{12}{16}\)} + \text{\(\frac{12}{16}\)} + \text{\(\frac{12}{16}\)} = \text{\(\frac{12}{16}\)}\)}

Tempo and Meter

Sometimes tempo can make a normally compound time signature into a simple time signature, or a normally simple time signature into a compound one. This is especially common if the top number is six or three.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{\footnotesize \(\frac{6}{4}\)} & \quad \text{\footnotesize \(\frac{6}{4}\)} \\
\text{\footnotesize \(\frac{6}{4}\)} & \quad \text{\footnotesize \(\frac{6}{4}\)}
\end{align*}
\]

One beat = \(\text{\(\frac{4}{4}\)} + \text{\(\frac{4}{4}\)} + \text{\(\frac{4}{4}\)} = \text{\(\frac{4}{4}\)}\)}

Compound Duple

Simple Sextuple
Asymmetric time signatures have a mixture of two and three-part beat divisions. The top number indicates the number of division notes per measure (often 5, 7, or 11, but varies). The bottom number indicates the division rhythmic value (not the beat unit). The beaming indicates beat groupings for individual beats.

For time signatures in asymmetric meter, beats with three division notes will be longer than beats with two division notes. The length of the division note value, not the beat, must remain constant. In the left example below, the eighth note pulse remains constant, while in the right example the quarter note pulse remains constant. See 1.7 Tuplets/Grouplets for an explanation of the triplets in the right example.

Music in compound meter may also include an anacrusis. If so, the last measure will be shortened by the amount of the anacrusis, as in simple meter. Stress patterns for duple, triple, and quadruple compound time signatures match those given at the end of 1.5 Time Signatures in Simple Meter.

Simple time signatures are simple: the top number is the number of beats, and the bottom is the beat unit. Compound time signatures nearly always have 6, 9, 12, or 15 on top, indicating the number of division notes; the bottom number indicates the division rhythmic value. Asymmetric signatures have beats with unequal lengths. Like compound time signatures, asymmetric time signatures indicate the rhythmic value for one beat division, not the beat unit.