

Counting Rhythms and Meter

The meter is the basic grouping of beats and accents in a musical piece. For instance in a $\frac{4}{4}$ meter the underlying pulse is grouped in 4 beat measures (also called bars) with each full beat represented by a quarter note. In a $\frac{3}{4}$ meter each beat is still represented by a quarter note, but the pulse is now grouped into three-beat measures. Each pulse in the meter is called a downbeat. In $\frac{4}{4}$ time there are 4 downbeats. (In $\frac{3}{4}$ time there are 3, and so forth). The spaces that are exactly between downbeats are called upbeats. The upbeat between the first and second beat is referred to as the upbeat of one. The upbeat between the second and third beat is referred to as the upbeat of two, and so on.

If you can count the music correctly you can play it correctly. Using an "incorrect" counting scheme, or not being able to coordinate counting the meter and playing the notes is where a good number of students seem to take a "wrong left turn." The basic principle I use is: *Always count every downbeat in a measure but only count the upbeats you play.* In $\frac{4}{4}$ time you count 1,2,3,4 over and over, inserting "and" wherever you have an upbeat to play. *Never count two half notes as 1,2,1,2 or a dotted half and quarter note as 1,2,3,1, etc.* That is the most common mistake made, and will prevent you from being able to read fluently.

In a measure of $\frac{4}{4}$, the first and third beats are the strong beats and the second and fourth are considered weak beats. (The upbeats are also weak beats). Syncopation is a strong emphasis on a weak beat. It is important to be able to hold your counting together through syncopated and tied notes, which can be difficult, especially at fast tempos. Difficult technical demands can also throw you off.

Make sure each note is properly placed in the measure. An eighth note can be a downbeat or an upbeat. If it's on a downbeat, count it as such; don't count it as an "and." You should count the meter and rhythms verbally until you can internalize them. In time, counting can become somewhat transparent, but you never get too hip to stop counting. *Work out the counting technique first, then make your playing conform to the counting and you will be successful.*