

MU 1310 (Feurzeig) Compound meter—introduction

At the beginning of this course, we learned about meters where the beat divides into two equal parts, such as eighth notes in 4/4 meter. This is known as simple subdivision. 4/4 (or 4/2 or 4/8) can be called “simple quadruple time”. 3/4 (or 3/2 or 3/8) is “simple triple time”; 2/4 (or 2/2, etc.) is “simple duple time”.

In some music, however, the beat divides into **three** equal subdivisions, and this kind of time feel is known as **compound meter**. Compound meter is not inherently *complex*: many simple tunes are in compound time, including the nursery rhymes “Hickory Dickory Dock”, “Row Row Row Your Boat”, “Humpty Dumpty”, and “Pop Goes the Weasel”.

Compound duple meter

Sing “Row Row Row” while tapping the beat with your hand or foot. Now sing it again, this time conducting in a 2-beat (duple) pattern). Notice that some beats have one syllable, some beats have two syllables, and some have three. Are the syllables in the two-syllable beats evenly spaced? What about the syllables in the three-syllable beats?

Going back to the beat-box notation we used when introducing simple meter, we can explore how the rhythms relate to the beats in compound meter.

Row	row	row	your	boat
Gent - ly	down	the	stream	
Mer - ri - ly	mer - ri - ly	mer - ri - ly	mer - ri - ly	
Life is	but	a	dream.	

Here are the rhythm syllables that correspond to this rhythm:

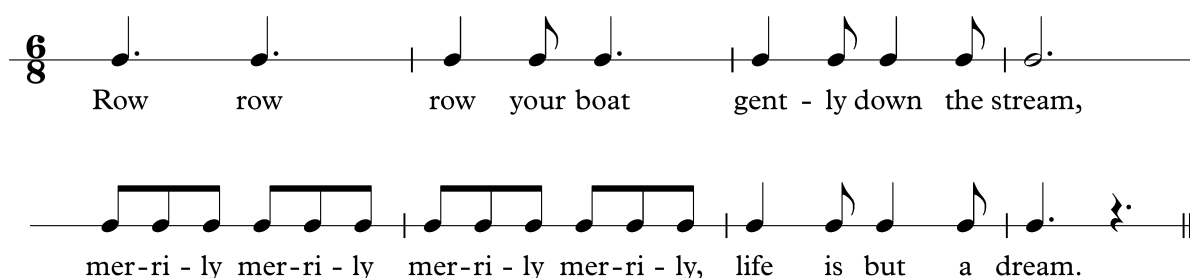
ta	ta	ta	da	ta
Row	row	row	your	boat
ta	da	ta	da	ta
Gent - ly	down	the	stream	(ah)
ta	ki	da	ta	ki
Mer - ri - ly	mer - ri - ly	mer - ri - ly	mer - ri - ly	ly
ta	da	ta	da	ta
Life is	but	a	dream.	(ah)

The beginning of a beat is spoken *ta*. Three equal subdivisions are spoken as *ta ki da*. Many beats contain only two events, in a long-short pattern; this is expressed *ta... da*. A beat with two articulations in a short-long pattern, with the short note on the beat (a pattern less common in Western musical styles) is *ta ki...* In all cases, the background subdivision is still into three, as this chart illustrates:

<i>ta</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>da</i>
<i>ta</i>	_____	<i>da</i>
<i>ta</i>	<i>ki</i>	_____
<i>ta</i>	_____	

three equal values
long-short
short-long
full beat

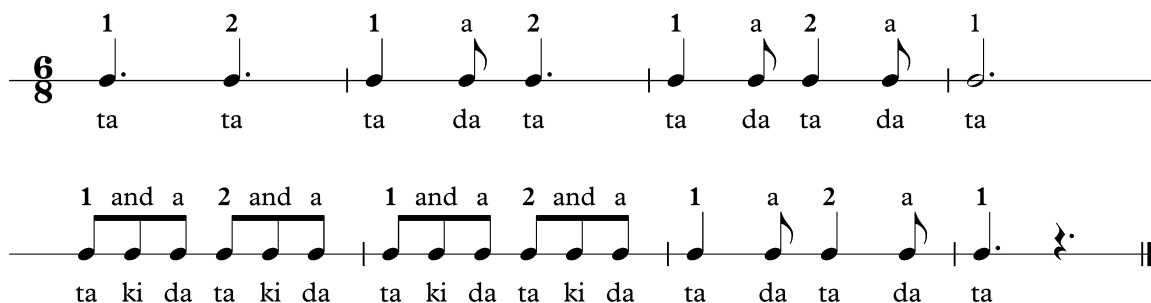
Here is “Row Row Row” in conventional rhythmic notation, with each beat given the value of a dotted quarter note (i.e. a duration equal to three eighth notes):



This tune is in **compound duple** meter, meaning there are two beats to the bar (duple) and each beat is divided into three equal subdivisions, or microbeats—i.e. compound (3-part) subdivision.

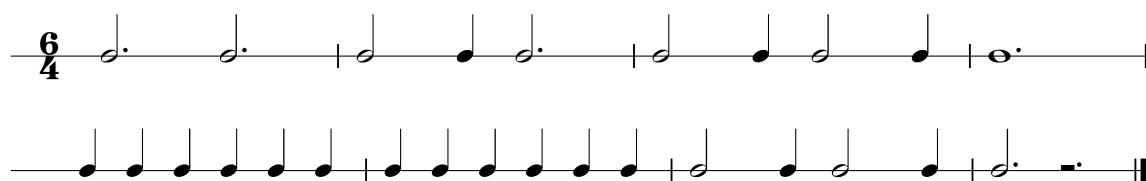
Our notation system is based on durations dividing by two, not three (a whole note divides into two halves, a half note into two quarters, a quarter into two eighths, etc.). So when the beat divides into three, we must work backwards from the subdivision (in this case, an eighth note) to build a beat that is a dotted-quarter in duration. A dotted quarter is also a quarter note plus an eighth note: i.e. two values “compounded” together.

The traditional Western counting syllables that correspond to *ta ki da* are *one-and-a two-and-a* (etc.). Here is “Row Row Row” in conventional notation with both syllable systems.

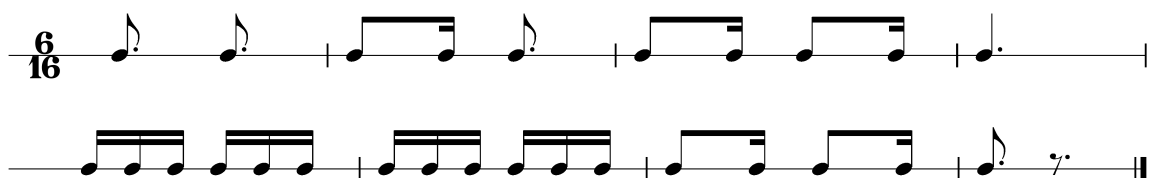


Note that the beat value in the above tune is a dotted quarter—**not** an eighth note. Unlike in simple meters, in compound meters you need to take the time signature “denominator” value and triple it to find the beat value. When do you know to do this? As a general rule, whenever the top number—the time-signature numerator—is 6, 9, 12, or any larger multiple of 3.

The most common beat value for compound meters is the dotted quarter. However, a compound beat can also be represented by a dotted half note (three quarters) or a dotted eighth note (three sixteenths). Here is “Row Row Row” re-notated in 6/4, with a beat value of a dotted half:



Here it is in 6/16, with a beat value of a dotted eighth:



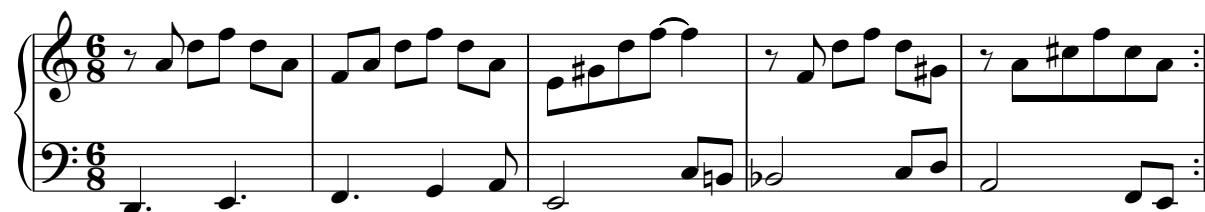
Just as in simple meters, where possible we beam together notes that belong to the same beat, but we do **not** beam across beats. In the 6/4 example above, there are no values shorter than a quarter note, so there is nothing we can beam.

Don’t make the mistake of reflexively beaming eighth notes in pairs. Make sure you are grouping according to the beat value (dotted quarter, or dotted eighth, or dotted half). Here is the beginning of the Beatles’ “I Want You (She’s So Heavy)” with incorrect and correct beaming.

with **correct** beaming:



with **incorrect** beaming:



Note the bass line in mm. 3-5. It may look more complicated in the correct version, but it is actually easier to read this way, because we feel the dotted-quarter beat as our metrical reference point. This reference point is clearly visible in the lower version; in the top version, the second beat of the measures is “hidden” within the half notes. Put another way, the bass C in m. 3 will be felt as off the beat, but in the top version, it looks like it could be at the start of a beat.

In mm. 1, 4, and 5 in the treble, the pairs of eighth notes at the beginning of each measure are correct, because they complete the first beat following the initial eighth-note rest.

Compound triple & quadruple meter

6/8, 6/4, and 6/16 are all examples of compound duple meter. Compound subdivision of the beat can also occur in triple and in quadruple meters. Here is a well-known hymn setting by J.S. Bach in compound triple time. There are three eighth notes to the beat, and there are three beats ($9 \div 3 = 3$) per measure, so this is an example of **compound triple** time.

J.S. Bach, “Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring”



In **compound quadruple**, there are four beats to the measure, each dividing into three subdivisions. This is notated as 12/8 ($4 \times 3 = 12$) or occasionally as 12/4 or 12/16. This is a very common time feel for blues and blues-related music.

Robert Johnson, “Sweet Home Chicago”



Sometimes this notation is simplified to simple quadruple time, with the indication “swing eighths” or “shuffle feel”, which tells the performer to play pairs of eighth notes in a long-short rhythm.



Triplets

A **triplet** is another way of indicating that a beat is divided into three equal subdivisions. It is generally used when a piece is mostly in simple meter (beats subdivided in two) but has **occasional** beats that divide instead into three, as in compound meter. It is indicated with the number 3 over a group of beamed notes, or (for unbeamed notes) with a bracket to show the notes involved. The following rhythm is notated in both simple and compound meter, and will sound identical in the two versions.

