

Chapter 1: Break Down from The Whole Note On

In this beginning chapter, we will break down the time units (the notes) and what they stand for.

Time Units

People often get confused by the subject of time units. In music notation, time units are just the part of the time signature that gets the beat. This is the bottom number of the time signature.

The Whole, Dotted Whole, and Double Whole Note, Whole Rest and Alla Breve

The whole note is the starting point for advanced time signatures.

The history of the whole note, double whole note dates back to. During this time, music was originally non-metered. This allowed for longer lasting note values and rhythms. In the times of meterless notation, there were no time signatures. It's a little redundant, but the lack of time signatures gave way to these extended periods of playing or silence via the alla breve and double whole note.

The Half Note And Half Rest

The half note generally is a note whose circle is clear (not black or filled in like other notes). In basic music theory or common time, the half note gets two beats.

Chapter 2: The Value of the Dot

Beginning musicians are often confused by the dot and what it does in music notation. Basically, the dot next to a note adds one-half the value of the note that it is placed next to. For example, if you have a dotted half note, the dot adds half of what the regular half note is worth in time. To break it down,

(half note) + (dot) = new note value
2 counts + 1 count = 3 counts.

If you have a quarter note, a similar equation follows:

(quarter note) + (dot) = dotted quarter note
1 count + (one-half of a count) = 1 and 1/2 counts.

If you have an eighth note, here is the equation:

(eighth note) + (dot) = dotted eighth note
(1/2 count) + (1/4 of a count) =
 $\frac{2}{4} + \frac{1}{4} = \frac{3}{4}$ of one count.

If you have a sixteenth note, here is the equation:

(sixteenth note) + (dot) = dotted sixteenth note.
 $\frac{1}{4}$ of a count + $\frac{1}{2}$ ($\frac{1}{4}$ of a count or $\frac{1}{8}$ of a count) =
 $\frac{2}{8} + \frac{1}{8} = \frac{3}{8}$ of a count.

If you have a thirty-second note, here is the equation:

If you have a whole note, here is the equation:

(whole note) + (dot) = dotted whole note
4 counts + 2 counts = 6 counts.

Chapter 4: Value of Notes In Different Time Signatures

In the last few chapters, we have been talking about the basic notes in music notation and their fundamental functions. In this chapter, we are breaking the rules that were established before by introducing new time signatures.

Some of you may be confused by the different time signatures and the roles the different notes play when placed in these time signatures. Always remember this golden rule in music notation though:

The top number of the time signature is always telling you how many beats are in one measure of music. The bottom number always tells you what kind of note gets the beat in that measure.

For example, if the bottom number is 4, it means the quarter note gets the beat. If the bottom number is 8, that means the eighth note gets the beat. If the bottom number is 16, it means the sixteenth note gets the beat.

What is a beat? A beat is the method by which you count out music (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4...) So, no matter what number is on the bottom of the time signature, you will always count using the top number (the number of beats in a measure). For example, if you are in 9/16, you would count the measure out: 1, 2, 3,4,5,6,7,8,9. If it is, 6/8, you will count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6--knowing that the eighth note is the unit getting the beat.

This big explanation leads the way into examining the different time signatures and how they are counted in time units. Many people confuse the basic notes for permanent musical fixture that never changes, regardless of the time signature. The value of the note(s) change with the variations of time signatures. Below are some examples.

One common misconception is that most students or budding musicians think 2/2 is the same as 4/4. Not exactly...

4/4 time has 4 quarter notes in it and the quarter notes but 2/2 has two half notes and the half note is the time unit. The time is essentially cut in half. This is why we call it Cut Time.

Even more, 6/8 and 3/4 are two different time signatures. 6/8 is a time signature with six beats in a measure and the eighth note gets the beat. 3/4, on the other hand, has three beats in the measure and the quarter note gets the beat. The main difference between 3/4 and 6/8 is that 6/8 consists of two groups of three eighth notes. It only changes pulses every dotted half note--so on the 1st and 4th beats of the measure. 6/8 is closer to 2/4, only with the dotted quarter notes as the pivot units or the guidance poles that shape the time signature. 3/4 has only beats and every beat is accented. Think of a waltz. Generally, these are in 3/4.

3/4 and 3/2 are different because their bottom numbers are different. The first one is depicting three quarter notes in one measure. The latter is depicting three half notes in one measure.

6/8 and 6/16 are different time signatures. One has six sixteenth notes in one measure. The other has six eighth notes in one measure.

Chapter 5: Grace Notes and Other Decorations

This chapter we go into some different terminology that you either have or haven't heard before. Some of those are different valued notes that you would play against the main time units of a measure of music.

Do you ever wonder how you are supposed to play grace notes, turns, odd tuplets and other musical things within a constrained time signature? Well, this is the chapter for you.

Furthermore, if you are a composer and you're wondering how to get these figures into your scores using a notation program like Finale, then this is also the chapter for you.

To answer the first question, these figures are odd figures that aren't normally supposed to be a part of the traditional notation. Fitting a tuplet of 15 eighth notes in a measure of 4/4 may seem like it's unevenly spaced, but composers and players associate tuplets like sextuplets as groups of three; tuplets of twelve as four groups of three; and tuplets of 15 as 5 sets of three. This way, they maintain the tuplet feel while playing in an uneven time signature. When you play these uneven tuplets, you compartmentalize rhythms into sets or groups that they would normally fall into if they were in a time signature that was even for them.