

Quarter Notes and Eighth Notes

The two most common beats in music

The most common rhythm in music is the quarter note. It lasts for one “beat”. There are usually four beats in a measure. Here is one measure of music with four quarter notes in it.



Take a minute to examine the symbol that makes a quarter note. It’s basically a black dot with a stem coming up from the right side of it.

Sometimes, if the quarter notes are higher on the staff, the stem will be on the left side and face downward. The fact that the stem is on the left and facing downward doesn’t change the rhythmic value. It is only to keep the music compact on the page.



It would take up too much space if the stems faced upwards when they are on the top of the staff.

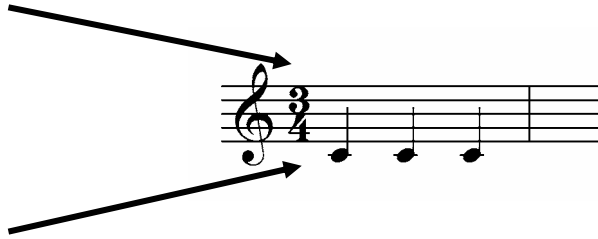
There are some odd key signatures in which there will be more or less quarter notes in a measure.

QUARTER NOTES AND EIGHTH NOTES

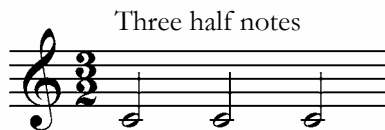
For example in what's called "three four" time, you'll have 3 quarter notes in a measure.



The "three" represents the number of beats per measure.



The "four" means that the quarter note represents one beat. So if for example, you were in "three two" time, you would still have three beats per measure, but the quarter note wouldn't be the beat, but rather a half-note would. Half notes look a lot like quarter notes, except the dot isn't filled in. It is a hollow dot.



Sometimes you'll find music with more than four beats in a measure, but this is rare.

Here's a measure of music in "five four" time:



That means there are five beats in the measure, and the quarter note gets the beat.

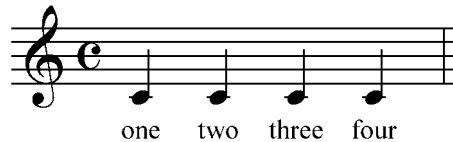
The most common time signature is "four four" time. It is often just called "common time" because it is the most common time signature.

QUARTER NOTES AND EIGHTH NOTES



The cursive C means that we're in common time, or "four four" time. The first "four" means that there are four beats per measure. The second "four" means that the quarter note gets the beat.

When you count beats in a measure, each beat will have a number assigned to it. So you would count four quarter notes in a measure, "one, two, three, four"



Each of these beats is equal in length but fall in different places in the measure.

Usually, the **downbeat** of a measure will have a greater emphasis. The downbeat of a measure is the first beat, beat "one".

So if you had four measures in a row, you would count beat "one" slightly louder, than the other three beats in each measure.

EXAMPLE 1 -- http://www.patternpiano.com/rhythm/example_1.mp3



Eighth Notes

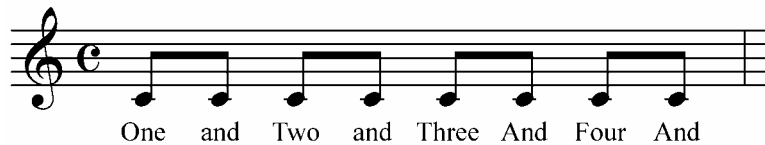
Eighth notes are like the little brother of the quarter note. They are half the durational value. In other words, they last half as long, so they make the music seem faster.

Visually, eighth notes are a little deceptive because they look just like quarter notes, except that their stems are connected by thicker black lines called **beams**. You have to learn to distinguish them by their beams rather than their dots, because their dots look just the same. Here is a measure of eighth notes. Notice that we are still in common time (we know this because of the cursive C). So there are now eight notes being played in the same length of time as the four we've seen previously.

QUARTER NOTES AND EIGHTH NOTES



When we count eighth notes, we want to keep track of where we are in the measure, so each eighth note that falls on a beat will get a number, and the eighth notes that fall in between the beats will be counted “and”.



The eighth notes that are counted “and” are called **off-beats**. Usually they are not emphasized as much as the beats, so you will want to say them a little quieter than the beats.

So generally, the first beat is the loudest, the next three beats slightly softer, and the four off-beats are softer still. This should sound something like this:

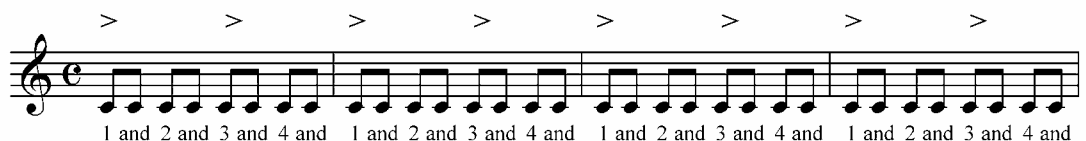
EXAMPLE 2 -- http://www.patternpiano.com/rhythm/example_2.mp3



Of course, the style of the music and the “groove” of the music can change the way it’s counted. For example, Reggae music emphasizes the off-beats. Also, you might not want to emphasize the downbeats as much depending on the style.

Or dance music sometimes emphasizes beats one and three very strongly. Listen to example 5 to hear beats 1 and 3 emphasized. In the notation, I’ve added **accents** to show that these beats are to be emphasized.

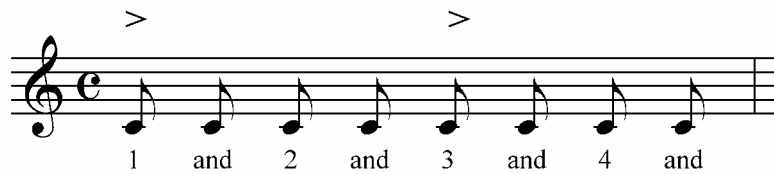
EXAMPLE 3 -- http://www.patternpiano.com/rhythm/example_3.mp3



QUARTER NOTES AND EIGHTH NOTES

Sometimes eighth notes are notated with flags instead of beams. Remember, beams are the heavy black line that connects two eighth notes by their stems. If you remove the beam, each eighth note will get its own **flag**.

Here are eighth notes written with flags instead of beams.



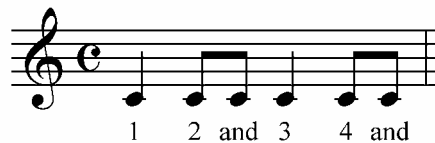
Eighth notes are harder to read when they are written with flags. The beam makes it easier to see the beats. Isn't it easy to see that there are four groups of eighth notes below?



But flags are a necessary evil. There are some rhythms where they can't be written without flags. But we'll get to that later. First let's keep our eighth notes nicely beamed!

Mixing Eighth Notes and Quarter Notes

More often than not, you will see a variety of durations in a measure. Let's look at some rhythms that mix eighth notes and quarter notes. First, take a look at this measure.

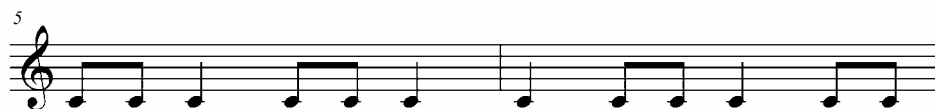


First find the quarter notes. We have quarter notes on beats 1 and 3. Now find the eighth notes. We have eighth notes on beats 2 and 4.

Exercise: Write in the Counting

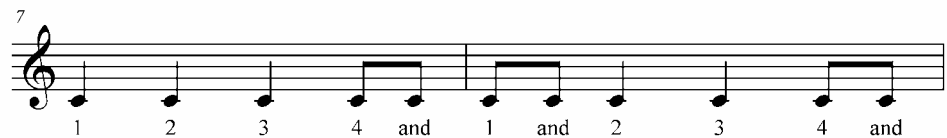
So now you should know enough to figure out how to count a few measures.

Write the counting in below the notes on this page. Then check your answers against the following page, where the counting is written in for you.



Exercise: Write in the Counting

Here is the correct counting.



A Note on Quality Counting

When you count, you have to remember that you are trying to help yourself understand **duration**. Duration, of course, means how long something is. Often when people try to count music, they make the mistake of thinking that the beats are four distinct “dots” in time, probably because, that’s the way they’re written on the page. But a beat actually starts at one finite point in time and then continues until the next beat.

QUARTER NOTES AND EIGHTH NOTES

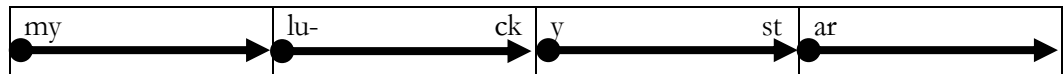
NOT four distinct “hits”



But the hit and then the time until the next hit.



When you are adding words to music, you have to be careful, because often to get the right groove, the consonants have to come *before* the beat, and the vowel comes on the beat. If you sing the words, “you are my lucky star”. You would hit the “ar” part of “star” on the beat, but the consonants, the “st”, would have to come *just before* the beat.



This is something that is in milliseconds, and it’s the kind of thing that you will just have to develop a feel for as you practice.

When you count, you have to anticipate when the beat is going to hit, and then put the consonants slightly before. If you don’t, your counting will always sound a little late.

NOTE: THIS IS PRETTY SUBTLE ON THE RECORDING. IF YOU CAN’T HEAR THAT MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE FOR NOW, DON’T WORRY ABOUT IT. YOUR RHYTHMICAL EAR WITH DEVELOP!

Listen to Example 6. The consonants are hitting on the beat, rather than slightly before. You’ll hear how it sounds just a little late or sloppy.

Now listen to Example 7. You’ll hear how it fits with the beat much tighter.

EXAMPLE 6 -- http://www.patternpiano.com/rhythm/example_6.mp3

EXAMPLE 7 -- http://www.patternpiano.com/rhythm/example_7.mp3

