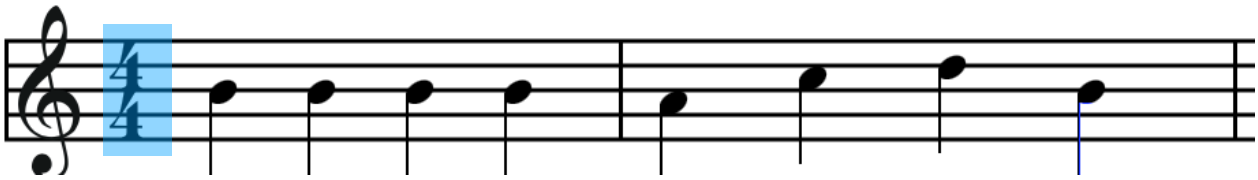
Time Signatures Demystified

Have you ever found yourself tapping your foot along to a great tune? Well you're actually emphasising the *beat* in the song.

Time signatures in music are used to specify how many beats are contained in each measure of music, and which note value is equivalent to one beat.



The **time signature** in music is represented by a set of numbers, one on top of the other, resembling a fraction. In sheet music, the time signature appears at the beginning of a piece as a symbol or stacked numerals. There are three main types of time signatures: **simple**, **compound**, and **complex** (it is extremely unusual to find complex time signatures such as 5/4, 7/4 or 5/8).

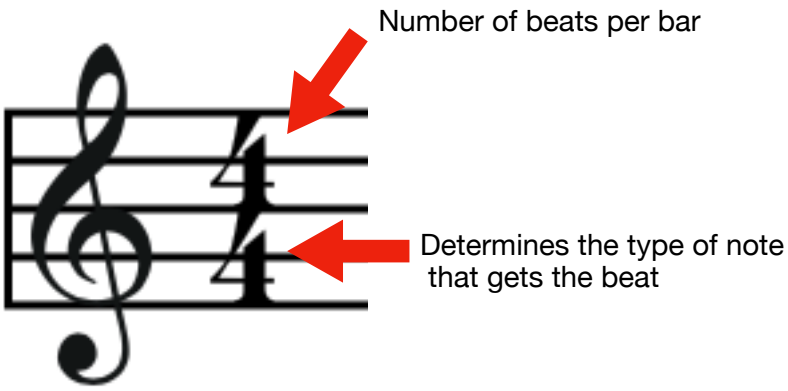
We're going to dive into each type (leaving out complex time signatures obviously) and discuss what their numbers mean, so the next time you're checking out at a piece of sheet music, you'll know exactly what you're looking at!

Simple Time Signatures

Time signatures where the beat can be divided into two equal parts are known as **simple time signatures**. Simple time signatures are the most common kind of time signature and they pop up regularly in popular music due to the clear, easy to determine beats. The most common simple time signatures you will see are 2/4, 3/4, and

4/4, although **any time signature with a 2, 3, or 4 as the top number** is classified as simple.

In order to truly understand simple time signatures, you must understand what the numbers represent. The **top** number determines *how many beats* are in a measure, while the **bottom** number determines what *type* of note gets the beat.

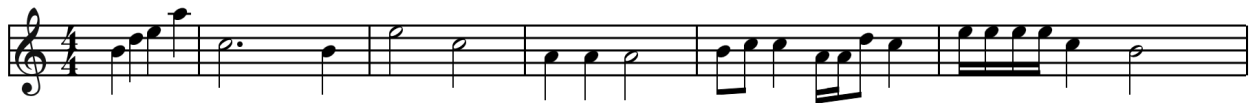


Looking at the example above, we can see that the top number is "4," telling us that there are four beats in one measure. But what kind of note gets the beat? The bottom number of a time signature can be 1, 2, 4, 8, and so on. These numbers coordinate with the following types of notes:

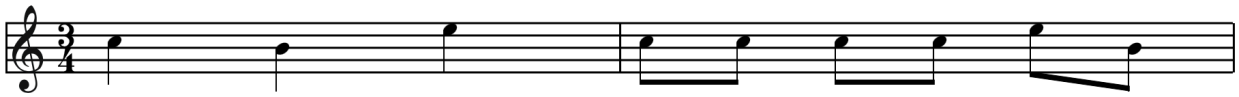
- **1**: Whole Note (*rare*)
- **2**: Half Note
- **4**: Quarter Note
- **8**: Eighth Note

Now that we can see the bottom "4" in this time signature represents a **quarter** note, we can conclude that a 4/4 time signature means there are a total of **four beats per measure, and one quarter note equals one beat**.

It's important to know this doesn't mean there can *only* be four quarter notes in each measure, but rather that the total note value of each measure will *add up* to four quarter notes. For example, you could see any of the rhythms below, because they all consist of four quarter note beats in total.



As said before, a **simple** time signature indicates that the **beat** can be divided **by two**. Let's look at this example of a 3/4 time signature.



We know that a 3/4 time signature means there are three beats in a measure, and one quarter note equals one beat. Notice in the second measure that each of those beats can be divided in **two**.

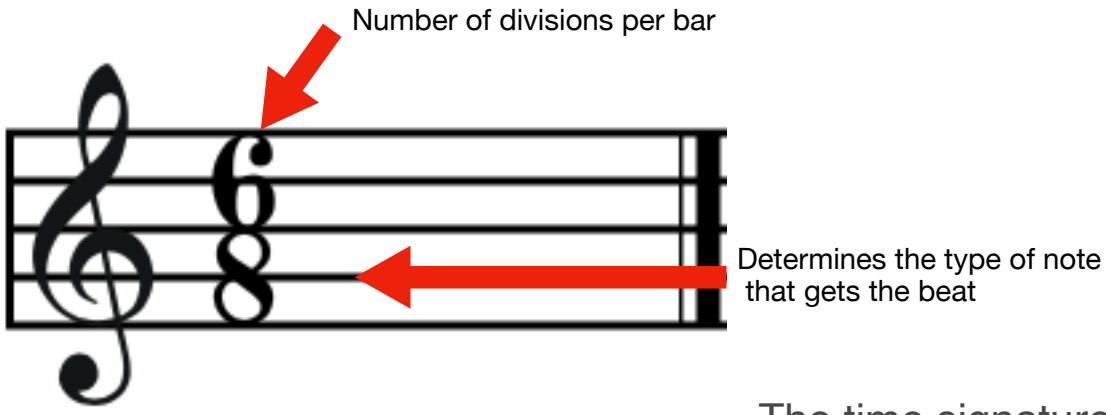
Compound Time Signatures

Compound time signatures differ from simple time signatures in that the beat is divided into **three** equal parts, rather than two. The top number of compound time signatures is commonly 6, 9, or 12 (multiples of 3), and the most common time signatures you will see are 6/8, 9/8, and 12/8. The numbers in these time signatures function nearly the same as simple time signatures, but there is one **key** difference.

The bottom number means the same thing as it does in simple time signatures. The difference is with the top number.

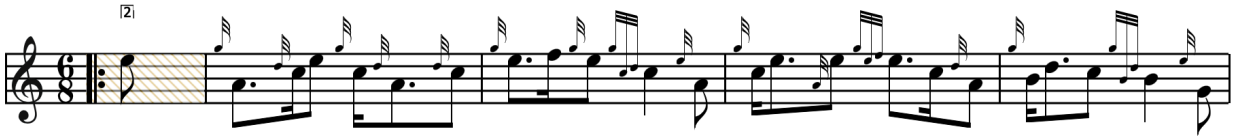
While the **top number** in *simple* time signatures represents how many **beats** are in a measure, the top number in **compound** time

signatures represents the number of ***divisions*** in a measure. While "divisions" and "beats" may seem like the same thing, we're going to demonstrate why they are different.



The time signature above tells us that there are six notes (or divisions) per measure, and an **eighth** note is equal to one division. However, 6/8 is *felt* in two, meaning that songs in 6/8 seem as though there are only **two** beats per measure instead of six.

Though you *could* tap "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6" over and over again, you'll naturally find yourself tapping "1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2." This is because the beat emphasis is on the 1st and 4th of the eighth notes in each measure. You can even see this reflected in Dr Ross.



Now that we understand that 6/8 is felt in two, we can observe that there are *two* beats per measure, with the **dotted quarter note** getting the beat. This is where the division of the beat into *three* equal parts comes in. Each dotted quarter note can be divided into three eighth notes, and since there are *two* dotted quarter notes per measure, there are *six* eighth notes, hence the 6/8 time signature.

Just like we talked about in simple time, each measure doesn't *have* to have six eighth notes, but rather the equivalent beat value.