

Analysis of Time Signature Choice

A composer has considerable latitude in deciding what meter signature will best communicate his music to a performer. If the metric flow contains no triple ratios, in other words simple duple, a top number of 2 or 4 over any simple note value will work very well.

fig. 1

Five musical staves showing the same melody in different time signatures. The lyrics are: Yank - ee Doo - dle went to town.

- Staff 1: 2/4 time signature. Notes: quarter, quarter, half, quarter, quarter, quarter.
- Staff 2: 3/4 time signature. Notes: quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter.
- Staff 3: 4/4 time signature. Notes: quarter, quarter, half, half, quarter, quarter.
- Staff 4: 2/2 time signature. Notes: half, half, half, half, quarter, quarter.
- Staff 5: 3/2 time signature. Notes: half, half, half, quarter, quarter, quarter.

Of course, if you want to sell your music, you probably should use a quarter note beat.

If your musical idea contains a grouping that creates a triple pulse ratio, simple triple will be a practical choice.

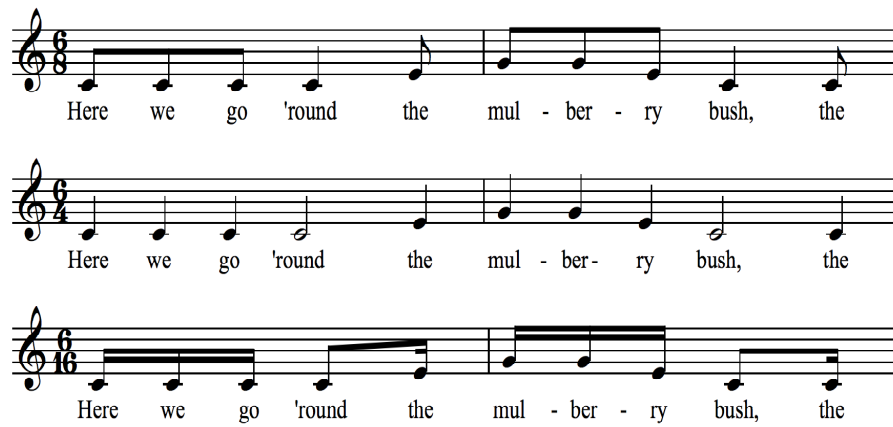
fig. 2

A musical staff in 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are: Here we go 'round the mul - ber - ry bush, the.

The melody consists of: quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth, eighth (triplet), quarter, quarter, quarter.

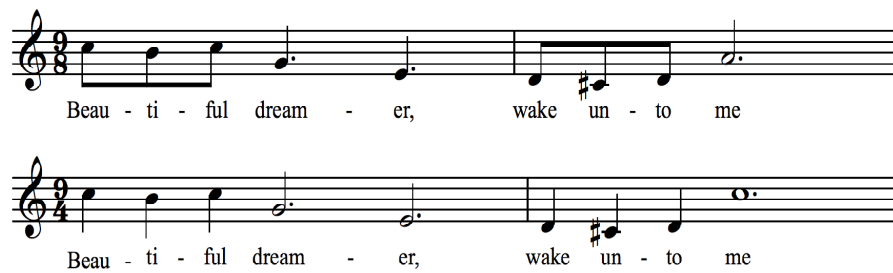
If your music has two main beats per group, each dividing into three parts, compound duple is the practical choice.

fig. 3



But if your music has two adjoining triple levels, you really have little practical choice other than compound time.

fig. 4



Sometimes a musical idea contains both a duple and a triple division of the beat. In such cases, use the meter that needs the least number of triplets or duplets.

fig. 5



Clearly, the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter is less complicated.

Here's an interesting problem: suppose your name is Maurice Ravel and you have this great rhythmic idea for a Bolero that goes like this

fig. 6



If we assume the beat unit to be the dotted quarter note, the music seems to group into twos. The grouping of the bars, however, seems to be in threes, due to the rhythms in bars one and two being repeated in bars four and five. So do we pull a Beethoven trick and numbers the bars in lots of three?

fig. 7



The real Maurice Ravel solved the problem this way. Since the strong sense of a slow triple grouping was appropriate to the melody, he opted for simple triple time, writing out the triplets in the second division level.ⁱ

fig. 8



ⁱ all excerpts are taken from Lies my music teacher told me (Eskelin, 1994)