

Time signatures

Until now, you have only been clapping your rhythms note after note with no reference to finding the beat (which is what the conductor actually does!). Now it's time to learn about the job of time signatures.

What is a Time Signature and why do we need one?

Time signatures are very important as they tell you everything you need to know about 1) how to group the notes you sing and 2) how the piece will "feel". But most importantly for you, 3) they make it easier for you to follow the music and the conductor.

A time signature is made up of two numbers, one on top of the other, and looks a bit like a fraction:



The top number is the one that tells you how the notes are grouped and there are lots of different ways you can group notes, but 2, 3 and 4 are the most common.

Certain kinds of music use certain time signatures, for example, a waltz always uses 3 time – so these time signatures are responsible for the feel of a piece, straight away.

The third reason for using time signatures is to help you keep track of your place in the music. Take a look at the twelve crotchets below. If you were to just clap or sing your way through them then it's possible that you might get lost and miscalculate which one you were on.



But if you group them, then it's much easier to follow along – particularly useful if you're learning a new piece for the first time in choir.



See how much easier it is to read them already?
Next, we're going to look at how we group them by using bar lines.

Using Bar Lines

Bar lines are vertical lines that are drawn to separate notes into groups. The spaces between the lines are called "bars" or, in the US, "measures".



grouping in 2



grouping in 3



grouping in 4

One of the ways we make music sound, well, musical, is to emphasise the note at the start of a bar just a little bit more than the others. In a song, the first note of the bar usually has an important word or part of a word – rather than “the” or “and”.

When you see a bar line in your music you just keep singing or playing right past it – until you come to a different kind of barline altogether:



- 1) A double bar line like this indicates the end of a section of music. However, it's not the end of the piece, so you should still keep going.



- 2) A double bar line like this, where the second line is much thicker than the first, indicates that this is the end of the whole piece and you should stop.



- 3) A double bar line with two dots before it is a repeat mark/repeat sign and you should go back to where you see another of the same (pointing the other way):



If there is no other repeat mark then you should repeat all the way from the beginning of the piece.

Repeat marks can also be placed back to back if you want two sections repeated:



The two numbers of a Time Signature

As a singer, you'll probably find you use time signatures most for telling you what the piece will "feel" like and helping you keep track of where you are.

Remember, the **top number of the key signature tells you how many beats there are in each bar.**

So, if the top number is 2 then there are two beats in a bar.

If the top number is 3 then there are three beats in a bar.

If the top number is 4 then there are four beats in a bar – and so on.

[The bottom number is a little more confusing as it tells you what *kind* of beats they are. 4 means crotchets (quarter notes) so 4/4 time means **four crotchet beats in a bar (four quarter notes in a bar)**. There aren't so many numbers that are regularly found on the bottom; 2, 4 and 8 is probably all you will see and your conductor will help you perform those pieces differently].

EXERCISE have a go at putting bar lines into the following examples. In each case, look at the TOP number and put a vertical line (a bar line) every time you add up to that number. The first one is done for you.



EXERCISE listen to these different pieces of music and try to hear whether they are in 2, 3, or 4 time.

These examples can all be found at www.singoutstrong.co.uk/basics-resources

Example 1: This piece is in 2 3 4 time (circle the correct answer)

Example 2: This piece is in 2 3 4 time (circle the correct answer)

Example 3: This piece is in 2 3 4 time (circle the correct answer)

