MUSIC THEORY.aargh©

The Changing Meter Signature (Session 7)

By Dr. Ona Pinsonneault

I was playing the clarinet part of a composition for Concert Band the other day and counted six meter (time signature) changes in the first seven measures of the composition. The composer is Alfred Reed and the title is "The Hounds of Spring." The meters alternated between compound division and simple division of the beat; i.e., those with 6, 9, or 12 as the upper number and those with 2, 3, or 4 as the upper number. If the upper number is 6 the beat contains **three** eighth notes. If the upper number is 2 the beat contains **two** eighth notes. (For more on meter, refer to ***Session 2b: Rhythm*** in Volume 25, Issue 1 of the *Clapper Chatter*.)

There are two different ways to interpret meter changes between compound and simple meters.

1) The conductor's beat can slow down or speed up. In this instance, the eighth notes (in the above example) stays the same. The compound beat has one more eighth note than the simple beat.
2) The conductor's beat will stay the same length when changing from a compound to a simple beat. In this case the eighth note duration will slow down or speed up. (The compound beat has one more eighth note than the simple beat.)

A composition for handbells using changing meter signatures is "Roundelay" by Judy Phillips. (See below.) The two signatures have upper numbers of 6 and 3; with the 6 the beat contains three eighth notes, with the 3 the beat contains 2 eighth notes. **The conductor's beat speeds up and slows down in this composition.** Or, the eighth note duration remains the same throughout the composition.

The *tempo* indication is the dotted quarter (used when the number is 6) equals **112**. Also given in the *tempo*, the quarter note (two eighths) (used when the number is 3) equals **168**.

Why is the beat faster when there are two eighths? Let's do the math. If three eighths equal **112**, one eighth is about 336 (112 times 3). Then one quarter, or two eighths, is **168** (336 divided by 2). The eighth note remains the same, but the conducting pattern (the beat) speeds up and slows down. The eighth note needs to be counted in order to keep an even pulse when changing from one meter to the next.

We will look at the beat staying the same and the eighth note duration slowing down or speeding up in another column.

Why do composers do this? Because is gives an irregular accent; because it reflects speech (Bernstein's *West Side Story* lyric: "I like to live in A-mer-i-ca", or 1 2 3, 1 2 3, 1 2, 1 2, 1 2); because it creates some interest in the rhythm; because it makes the music sound really stupendous; and it is fun to perform and to hear!

Plan to attend the Music Theory Sessions at the 2012 Festival Conference in Duluth. Two theory sessions will be offered and topics to be discussed are in the works. If you have a particular music theory topic that you would like to have discussed, please let me know.

Until next time,
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April 2012