READING RHYTHMS

CUT TIME

Text and examples by Norman Weinberg.

SEVERAL DIFFERENT time signatures have been covered in past Reading Rhythms columns. We've talked about meters which use quarter notes as the basic value of the count (4/4, 3/4, 5/4, 7/4, etc.) and those which use eighth notes (3/8, 4/8, 6/8, 9/8, etc.). This month, we're going to dive into a special type of time signature which most of you have probably seen but have never really stopped to analyze – namely "cut time."

Without going into a long explanation of the history of rhythmic notation throughout the centuries, let's just begin by recognizing that the meter of 4/4 has long been represented by a large "C" at the beginning of a piece of music. For this reason, 4/4 is often called "common time." But there's another meter which uses the same "C" figure, this time with a line running through it (see the signature on Example #1). This meter is commonly referred to as "cut time."

Cut time is actually a time signature of 2/2, and the bisected "C" figure acts as an abbreviation. In this meter, there are two counts to each measure and the half note (instead of the quarter or eighth note) receives the value of a single count. Let's see how this meter is related to two other familiar meters.

Take a look at Example #1. This is a measure of cut time which looks as though it could easily be performed in common (4/4) time. If there are two half notes during each measure, aren't there also four quarter notes in each measure? After all, everyone knows that each half note has the value of two quarters. Yes, you *could* play this example as if it were in 4/4 time, but it just wouldn't have the proper feel.

You know that 4/4 time has four beats per bar, but cut time has only two. In essence, it's as if each bar of 4/4 time has been "cut" in half (only two beats). Notice how the syllables under the notes in this example show that the first measure should have a count under each half note. In measure two of the example, the quarter notes serve as the first level of subdivision (as always, using the syllables "and"), and the eighth notes in the third measure are the second level of subdivision (using the "e" and "a" syllables).

For an easier way to understand the difference between cut time and common time, compare Example #1 with Example #2. While these two examples look totally different, they sound the same and are counted the same. You can see that cut time actually has more in common with 2/4 meter than it does with 4/4 time.

Examples #3 and #4 show this same relationship. Example #3, in cut time, uses the values of quarter note triplets to divide each count into three equal parts and eighth note triplets to divide each count into six equal parts. Example #4, written in 2/4 time, must use eighth triplets and sixteenth triplets in order to convey the same rhythm.

So why would a composer write anything in cut time, if 2/4 can be used to achieve the same results? Well, it all comes down to the fact that cut time has certain musical associations. Many jazz pieces, pop tunes, and marches are written in this meter. And while 2/4 time can progress at just about any tempo, cut time is usually fast. In reality, a moderate tempo in cut time is about the same as a moderate tempo in common time. But, when the half note is getting the beat instead of the quarter note, quarters move by at twice the pace and the page is played "faster." A composer writing a march or jazz style piece at an up tempo will often choose cut time instead of 2/4.

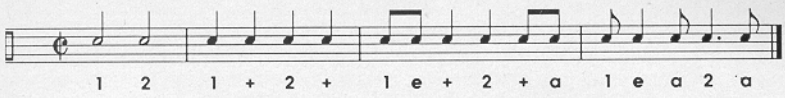
There is also another reason for using the cut time signature. Just compare measure three in the first two examples. In cut time the measure consists of nothing more difficult than quarters and eighths. Writing the same rhythm in 2/4 time requires two distinctively different figures that use eighths and sixteenths. While those two figures aren't extremely difficult (especially if you've been a regular reader of this column), you'd be surprised how many musicians balk when sight reading these figures. If a composer thinks he may be dealing with players with limited reading abilities, he may choose cut time over 2/4. Cut time allows the composer to use simpler rhythms to communicate the same musical idea.

Just one more item. Because cut time uses larger rhythmic values, there's a tendency for the player to be more comfortable with the page. Most drummers tend to get a bit nervous when looking at music that has a bunch of beams on every note and very little white space (the dreaded "Black Page" syndrome). If a player is walking into a high pressure studio or free-lance situation, they are likely to be more calm and laid back when reading something in cut time. This feeling will translate into an easy going, relaxed performance. When you look at the exercise for this month, you might think, "Gee, this doesn't look very hard." That's just the feeling a composer probably wants to convey.

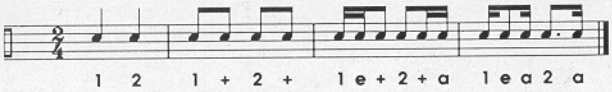
Here's yet another performance note about this month's exercise. Sixteenth notes (like those found in measures eight and ten) will require playing four notes in the space of one-half count. There's an easy way to accomplish this. During measure eight, play the two eighth notes on the "e" and "a" syllables of count one. When you arrive at count two, instead of playing the sixteenth notes, play two eighths and a quarter with your right hand. Playing this new rhythm will mean that you'll strike the drum on syllables "2 e +." Once this becomes comfortable, subdivide each eighth note into two parts by using your left hand in between each right. In other words, play two notes on the syllable "2" and two more notes on the syllable "e." If you're still having trouble with the cut time measures that contain sixteenth notes, slow them down and count them just as you would if they were written in common time. Then, as you take them a little faster, change your counting system from four counts per bar to two counts. When you change over to the cut time counting system, the rhythm of the measure should stay the same.

As you work on this month's exercise, try to play it with a relaxed feel and at a comfortable pace. Really listen for (and let your playing convey) the "two" beat feel. ®

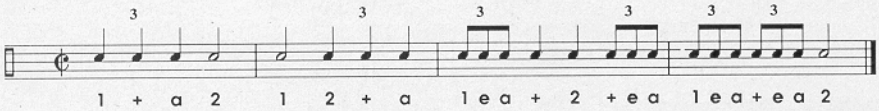
Example #1



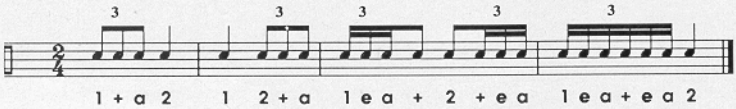
Example #2



Example #3



Example #4



Example #5