

# Mixed Meters

*Text and examples by  
Norman Weinberg.*

**S**O FAR WE'VE covered many of the common (and a few of the less common) time signatures. This month, we're going to take a look at something called changing meters. Music is said to be in changing meters (also called mixed meters) when the time signature changes often during the course of the composition. True, there are several works that change meters for different sections of the piece – perhaps a verse could be in common time while the chorus is in 12/8. But meter changes of this sort that last a good long while wouldn't qualify the piece to be considered a mixed meter composition.

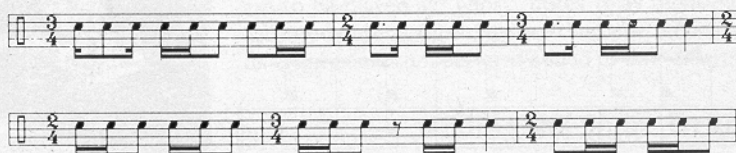
The meter changes in a mixed meter composition may follow an organized repeating pattern. In **Example 1**, you see measures of  $\frac{3}{4}$  constantly alternating with measures of  $\frac{2}{4}$ . This same concept could be notated in three different ways.

One method is to notate the new meter at the beginning of each and every new measure (like the first example). Another is to use a time signature at the beginning of the section to let the performer know that the meter changes will follow a particular format (see **Example 2**). In this case, the composer would simply write both meters in the first measure, one after the other, to set up the recurring pattern. The advantage of using this method is that the composer and/or copyist saves time and ink by not having to write the signature for every measure. There's an advantage for the performer as well since the page is less visually cluttered with meter changes. The last option (**Example 3**) is to use a different type of signature which ties two meters together with the "8lus" sign. In this case, the composer is informing you that a single measure is made up of a  $\frac{3}{4}$  bar plus a  $\frac{2}{4}$  bar. Notice that there are no barlines between the two parts of the measure. In essence, this creates a signature that is identical to  $\frac{5}{4}$  time, but will always be phrased as three beats plus two beats (to

phrase as two plus three would contradict the meter).

In the majority of mixed meter compositions, however, the changes don't necessarily follow a pattern, and the composer is free to use any meter at any time. Unfortunately, when working without a pattern, each and every change in the meter must be notated. There aren't any time signature shortcuts. This makes things a little more complicated because then you have to keep a close eye on the changing meters as well as the note values and the position of the notes on the staff (if playing

### Example I.



### Example 2.



### Example 3.



### Exercise 1.



on a drumset, marimba, or other instrument that makes use of the lines and spaces).

A few suggestions. The most difficult thing about changing meters is remembering what meter you're playing at any particular time. Time signatures work like speed limit signs, in that new speeds take effect at the location of the sign. If you're going through a school zone at 15 mph, you can't go faster until you reach the location of the next sign. If that sign tells you that the speed limit is now 35 mph, that speed stays in effect until you reach the next sign.



## Exercise 2.



Time signatures work the same way. If you're playing in a meter of 5/4, each succeeding measure will also be in 5/4 until you see the sign for a new meter.

Throughout this series of articles, I've suggested that you try to look ahead by keeping your eyes in front of your hands. When looking ahead, you can prepare for what's coming up next. Staying with the automobile analogy, when you're driving you usually keep your eyes several yards in front of your car. If your visual focus is only a few feet ahead of the hood, you won't be able to react to something that may cause you to crash. The same process is required when reading music in mixed and changing meters. It's important to see the meter, react to it, and make a mental shift before you actually begin playing the bar. If you don't, then you stand a good chance of "crashing" into the measure.

Notice in the two exercises that some of the lines end with a time signature. These might be called "courtesy signatures" because they give you advance warning that the time signature is going to

change at the beginning of the next line.

The two exercises presented this month are examples of mixed meters where the upper value (the one representing the number of counts in each measure) changes while the lower number (the note that equals the value of one count) remains the same. The first exercise uses the quarter note for the value of the count, the second uses the eighth note. For both of these exercises, the speed of the counts will remain constant. Next month, we'll take a look at mixed meters which change the number of counts per bar as well as the count's value. Until then, happy reading! ®

**Norman Weinberg** is an Associate Professor of Music at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, Texas and serves as the principal timpanist with the Corpus Christi Symphony Orchestra. He's had a love affair with electronic percussion instruments for several years.

*All examples in this column were produced using Finale, courtesy of Coda Software.*