EVERAL DIFFERENT time signatures have been covered in past Reading Syncs. We’ve talked about meters which use quarter notes as the basic unit of time (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 (but 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 beamed “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 in cut time, and you can see that it could easily be performed in common time (4/4) if there are two half notes during each measure, aren’t there also four quarter notes in each measure? After all, everyone knows such a half note has the value of two quarter notes. Yes, you could play this example as if it were in 4/4 time, but it just wouldn’t have the same flavor.

You know that 4/4 time has four beats per bar, but cut time has just two. In essence, it’s as though the 4/4 time was “cut” in half (only two beats). Notice how the syllables under the note values in Example #1 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 usual, using the syllables “and” and “and,” and the eighth notes in the third measure are the second level of subdivision (using the same “and” and “and” pattern). With 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 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 result? 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 about any tempo, cut time is usually fast. In reality, a moderate tempo in cut time is about the same as a moderate samba in common time. But, when the half note is getting the beat instead of the quarter note, many people feel the twice the pace and the game is played faster. A composer writing in march or jazz style places at you even if you 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 contains nothing more difficult than quarter notes and eighths. Writing the same rhythm in 2/4 time requires the composer to think of nothing more difficult than quarters and sixteenths. While those two figures aren’t extremely difficult (especially if you’ve heard a regular reading of this column), you’d be surprised how much musicians balk when they’re asked to read 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 idea.

Just one more item. Because cut time uses larger rhythmic values, there’s a tendency for the player to feel 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 (or drummed “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 two) 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 “a” and “d” 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 make that “d” strike the drum on syllables “2 e 4.” Once this becomes comfortable, substitute each eighth note into two quarter notes (in the example). Now you’ve got to use your left hand in between each quarter. In other words, play two half notes on the syllable “2” and two more notes on the syllable “4.” If you’re still having trouble with the cut time measures, just pretend their quarter time. As you can see, this little faster, change your counting system from four counts per bar to two counts per bar. When you change over the cut time counting system, the rhythm of the measures should stay the same.

As work on this month’s exercise, try to play it with a relaxed feel and at a comfortable pace. Really listen for (and let yourself feel the “b” two beat feel.)