

When a Half Note Doesn't Get Two Beats

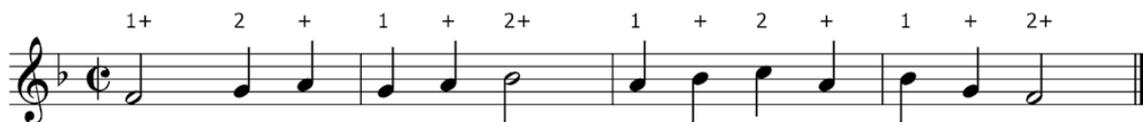
Breaking Down Cut Time

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One of the first things we learn in music is the basics of rhythm: a quarter note gets one beat, a half note gets two beats, and so on. Sometimes, though, things get a little more complicated—or maybe simpler, depending on how you look at it.

Cut time, also known as “a la breve,” breaks the rules. It cuts rhythms, as we typically know them, in half. In cut time, you will think of a whole note as getting two beats, a half note getting one beat, etc. Cut time is most often used in fast tempos, where it becomes simpler to count in slower, fewer beats.

This example shows the counting for a phrase in cut time:



How will you know when to think in cut time? Often, a composer will indicate cut time in the key signature: In place of the “C” sometimes used to indicate common time (4/4), you will see a vertical line through the “C,” as shown in the example above. Other times, the key signature will show a normal “C” or “4/4,” yet the conductor will announce that he or she will lead the piece in cut time, or “in two.” (“In two” refers to the fact that two beats will be shown in each measure, even though it is written in 4/4 time.)

Not only does cut time allow the conductor to avoid waving his or her arms frantically, it also encourages a sense of flow that might be lost by trying to count each and every beat. Even if you are not playing with a conductor, you might find that thinking in cut time helps with shaping phrases.

Although they are not “cut time,” strictly speaking, other time signatures can be conducted or felt in bigger beats. For example, 6/8 is often felt in two and 9/8 is often felt in 3. In each of these cases, the dotted half note gets the beat.

