

Music Structure

compiled by Tim Marriner

Rhythm - The recurring pulse or beat arranged in groupings called measures.

Time Signature - The numbers of beats in each measure often identified in terms of a fraction. The upper portion identifies the number of beats in each measure, while the lower portion defines what kind of note gets one beat.

2/4 Time - Two beats per measure; ¼ note gets one beat. Often referred to as Boom/Chuck music, the first beat receives a heavier accent than the second does. Most of our modern square dance music is written in this time signature.

4/4 Time - Four beats per measure; ¼ note gets one beat. This time signature is sometimes referred to as March Music with a stronger accent on the first beat. Shifts of rhythmic emphasis also make it possible to create rhythmic styles such as shuffle rhythm, Latin rhythm, and ragtime rhythm.

6/8 Time - Six beats per measure; 1/8 note gets one beat. This signature time is referred to as Jig Time. The feeling of this rhythm can be simulated by the words “Rat-a-tat, Rat-a-tat where the “Rat” is the accented beat. This signature time is more often found in Contras or Quadrilles.

Melody – This is generally considered to be the tune that can be recognized. It is constructed out of the notes or tones of the musical scale and accompanying half tones. Do-Re-Me-Fa-So-La-Ti are seven basic tones of the musical scale. The “Do” at each end of the scale make an octave.

Harmony – The combination of two or more tones played at the same time. It can create dissonance (unpleasant to the ear) or consonance (pleasant sounding). Just as callers may create counter-rhythms by varying the rhythmic accents of their word syllables, so may they also create harmonious counter melodies by varying the tones or pitches related to the basic melody.

Sub-elements of music:

Tempo – Best described as the number of beats per minute. Generally, we dance comfortably between 124 – 132 BPM.

Phrase – The melodic line of square dance music is nearly always divided into eight beat segments that make up one phrase. It is a smaller time unit that divides the whole composition. The dance experience is enhanced when callers can develop dance patterns that match these eight beat phrases.

Downbeat/Upbeat – Downbeat, usually played by a bass instrument, is the heavy “Boom” accent of rhythm. Upbeat, usually played by a banjo, guitar or cymbal is an after beat or “Chuck”. That’s why 2/4 square dance music is often referred to as “Boom-Chuck” music.

Key – The common chord structure of a piece of music is referred to as the key. It determines the comfort zones of tones we use to deliver calls.

Pitch – In square dance calling it is the degree of accuracy with which a person sings a particular note. When done well a person is said to be “in-tune”. If one is slightly off pitch it is often referred to as being “flat”.

It is the responsibility of every caller to bring the music and the dancers together. The caller must provide choreography that encourages the dancers to match their steps to the beat, match their body movements to the rhythm, and match the steps to the musical phrase.

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