UNIT 11

HYPERMETER

Thus far, we have examined the interactions among various levels of pulse within individual measures. We'll now investigate how measures themselves can group into still broader levels of pulse.

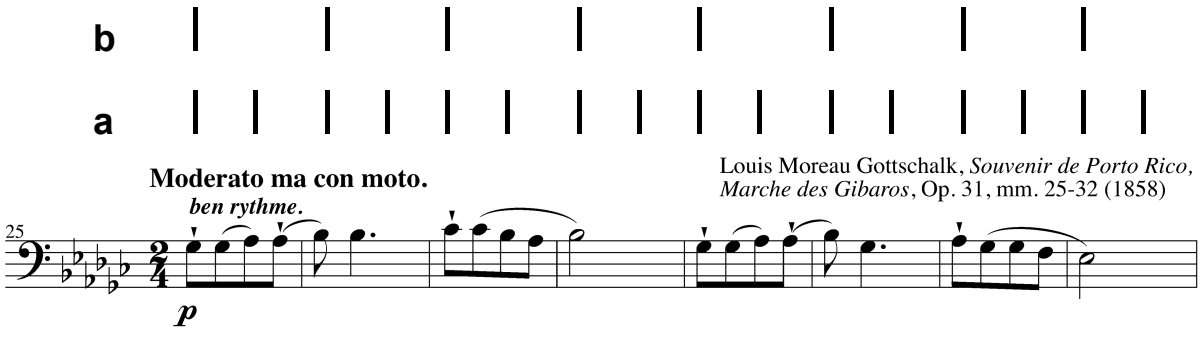
Meter as a Product of Levels of Pulse

In our earliest investigations in this book, we discovered that the pulse is a "regularly recurring feeling of stress in music" and found that meter is a result of pulses being organized into primary and secondary levels. The meters we investigated are a product of such interactions between levels of pulse. For example, $\frac{2}{4}$ meter is the product of one level of pulse (**a**: the beat level) grouping by twos into a broader level (**b**: the measure level) (see Unit 2).

We also found that some meters reflect interactions among more than just two levels of pulse. For example, $\frac{12}{8}$ meter is the product of one level (**a**: the eighth note) grouping by threes into another level (**b**: the dotted-quarter-note beat) which itself groups by twos into yet another level (**c**: the half-measure dotted half note) which then groups into the broadest metric level (**d**: the measure or dotted whole note) (see chapter 16).

Levels of Pulse Broader than the Measure

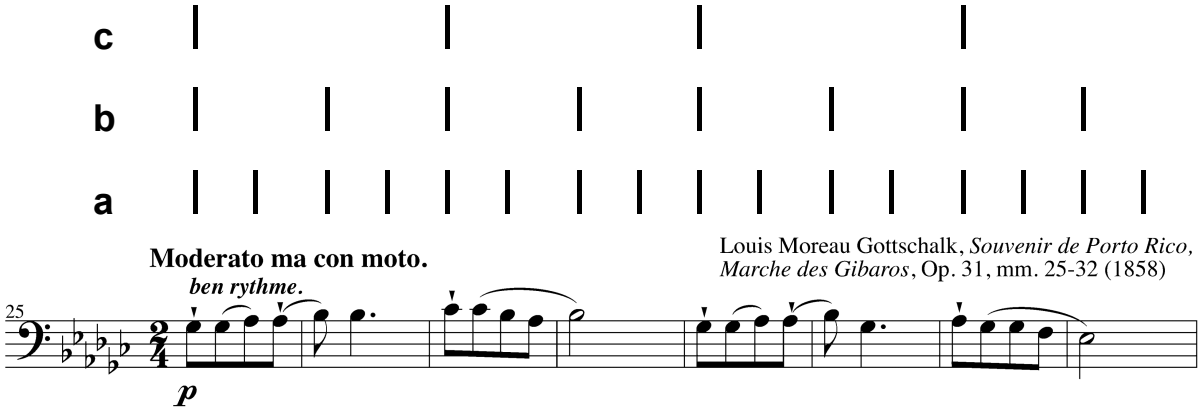
Up until now, we have examined these groups at levels up to and including the measure level. But pulses also combine into groups broader than the measure. Here is an excerpt with two pulse levels marked above the music: the quarter-note beat at level **a**, and the measure at level **b**:



Now ask yourself how those pulses at level **b** would group into a broader level **c**. Read through the passage while tapping or clapping once per measure (the **b**

level), but focus on whether those taps or claps should group into twos or threes. Which grouping feels more musically appropriate — twos or threes?

In fact, the measures seem to come in pairs. This means that the measure-level pulses (the **b** level) group by twos into a broader **c** level:

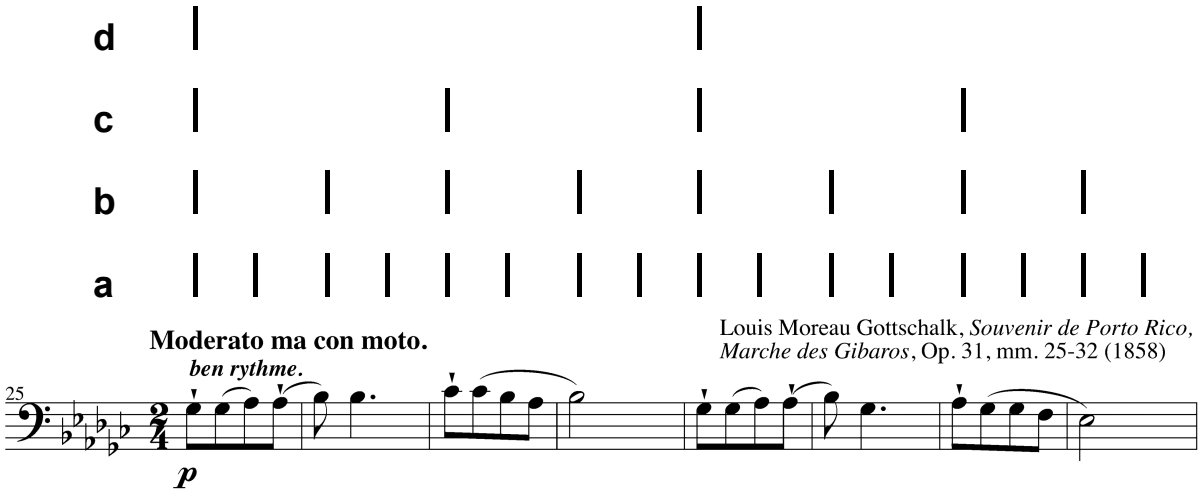


The way that measures combine metrically into broader groups is called **HYPERMETER**.

HYPERMETER is the way measures combine metrically into broader groups.

This patterning can continue to levels even broader than this initial grouping of measures. For example, the **c** level in the excerpt above is organized into an even broader **d** level. Read through the excerpt again and try tapping or clapping the **c** level pulses in groups of twos and then in threes.

The grouping is once again duple (as with all other levels in this excerpt):



Much Western music behaves like the excerpt above — comprising many levels of pulse simultaneously. Some of these levels are explicitly represented in meter signs, but other levels exist implicitly at broader levels, combining measures into groups, and those groups into still larger groups, and so on.

Duple and Triple Groupings are Fundamental

You may have noticed that we have always looked for metric groups of either twos or threes. This is because duple and triple are the two fundamental types of metric organization in Western music. Any other type of group is the product of some combination of twos and/or threes. For example, when we investigated simple quadruple meter in Unit 2 we found that it is the result of not just two levels (one level grouping by fours into another) but is in fact derived from *three* levels — an **a** level (the beat) grouping by twos into a **b** level (the half-measure), which in turn groups by pairs into a **c** level (the measure).

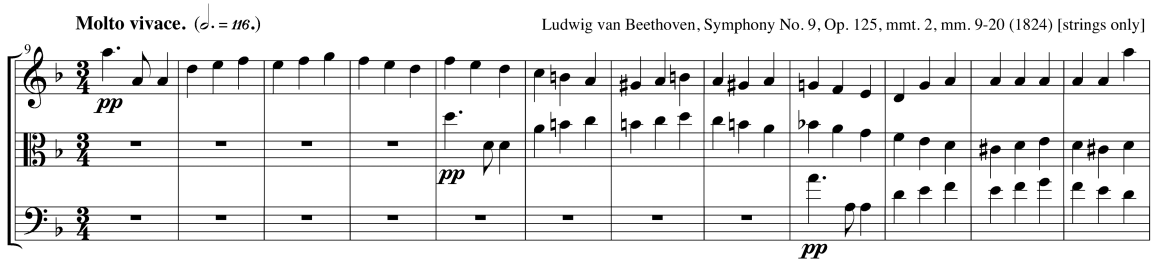
Even more complicated meter and hypermeter can always be conceived of as some product of twos and/or threes. What seems to be a group of five pulses at one level can be felt best as a combination of 2+3 or 3+2. Similarly, a group of seven might be 2+2+3, 2+3+2, or 3+2+2.

It seems that, in most Western music, broader levels of pulse (those beyond groups of two or three measures) nearly always group in a duple fashion. Triple grouping at very broad levels is rare.

Changes in Pulse Grouping

In much music, one level of pulse groups into the next in a consistent manner. In these cases, once a particular level is perceived as grouping in either twos or threes it will typically continue throughout in that same way.

However, there are times when a pulse level will change from duple to triple grouping or vice versa. Look at and listen to the following excerpt from the second movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony:

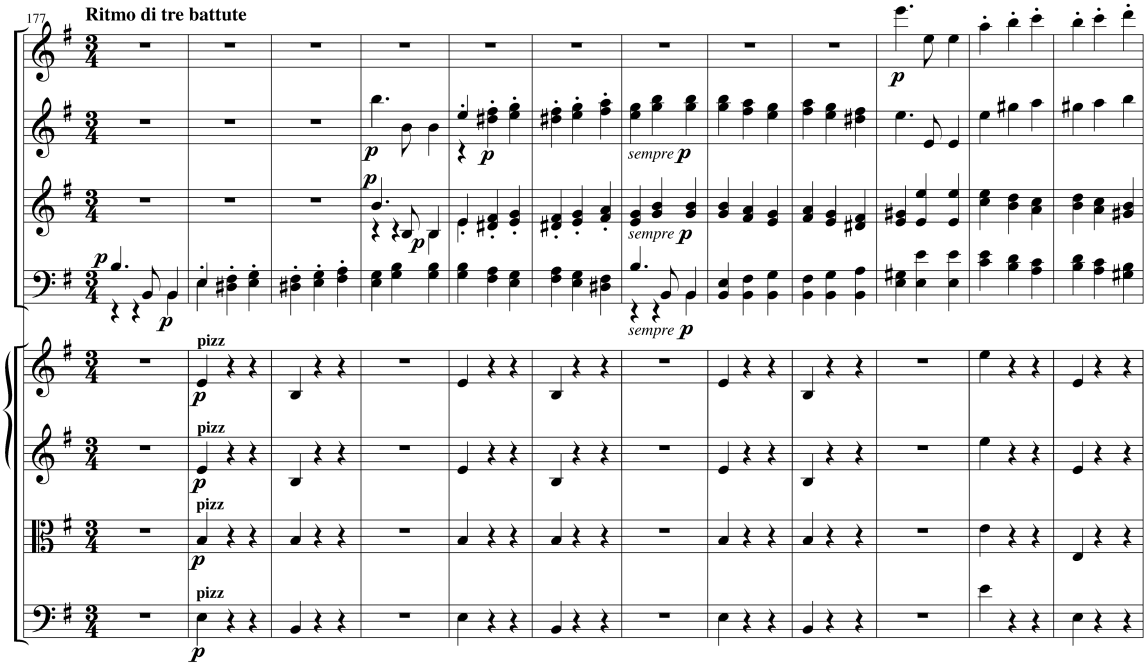


Notice how the fugue subject enters at four-measure intervals. This is a strong indication that some kind of duple-duple grouping is taking place between

successive levels of hypermetric pulse. You may think of the first measure of the excerpt (m. 9) in one of two ways: (1) as a hypermetric downbeat, the stronger of the first two-measure pair and the beginning of a four-measure group; or (2) as a hypermetric upbeat, the weaker of the first two-measure pair and the measure before the first four-measure group. Try thinking of this passage both ways (starting first with a downbeat and then with an upbeat). In either case, it should be clear that the measures group into pairs and then pairs of pairs to result in four-measure groups.

This pattern continues in this manner for well over a hundred measures. However, beginning in m. 177, Beethoven chose to group some measures differently:

Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony No. 9, Op. 125, mmt. 2, mm. 177-188 (1824)



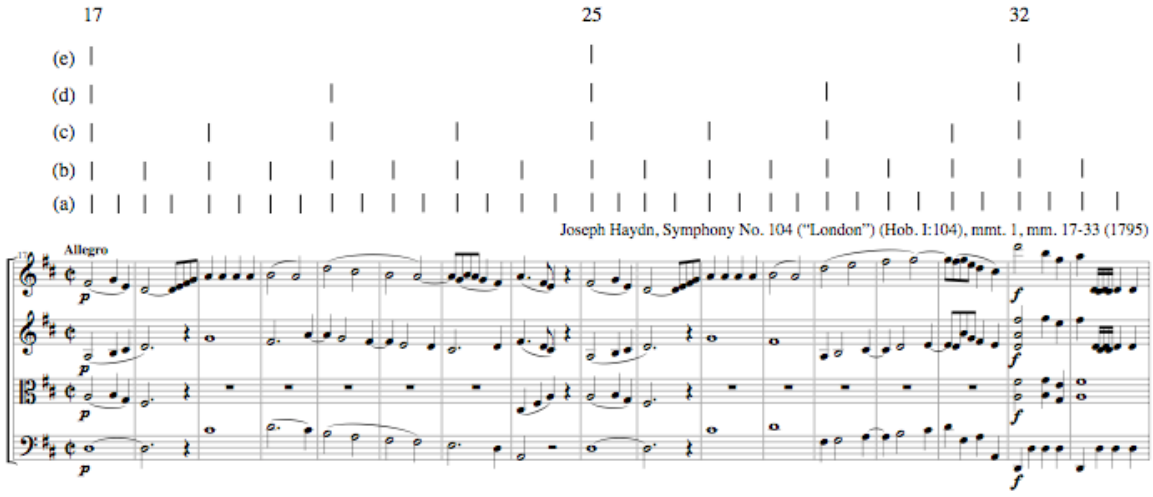
At the opening of this passage, the measures are clearly grouped in *threes* — note the three-measure spacing of the entries of the fugue subject, and even Beethoven's marking—*Ritmo di tre battute* (in the rhythm of three beats). Thus the hypermeter has changed from duple/quadruple to triple.

Be aware of the possibility that pieces beginning with one type of hypermetric grouping might change to another as they progress, and that such changes might occur multiple times throughout a composition.

Elision

Another feature of hypermetric grouping involves the shifting or reinterpretation of primary and secondary pulses.

Look at and listen to the following passage and follow the pulse graph written above it:



The pulse graph shows five levels of pulse, which begin with the half-note beat level (**a**) and progress through the measure level (**b**) and beyond. Notice that the relationships between pulse levels are all duple at the outset.

But now take a close look at (and listen to) the relationship between levels **b** and **c**. The measures (**b**) come in pairs (**c**), so that each odd-numbered measure serves as a primary pulse followed by an even-numbered measure as a secondary one. This pattern continues until m. 32, which should be a secondary pulse at the **c**-level, but is reinterpreted as a new *primary* pulse at that level. It is as if the primary pulse that would "normally" appear in m. 33 has been pushed one measure earlier to overlap with the secondary pulse there. In this way, m. 32 can be thought of as serving both as the end of one primary-secondary pattern and as the beginning of another. This kind of condition is called an **ELISION**.

An **ELISION** occurs when a pulse that would ordinarily serve as secondary is reinterpreted as primary.

Exercises

(A) Use hypermeter to compare the following two recordings of "Hound Dog" (written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller).

(1) Listen to Elvis Presley's rendition (recorded in July of 1956). Write a pulse graph that shows at least five levels of pulse. Why is this type of song called a "12-bar blues"? Click here for the YouTube audio:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnOpbvIwMBY

(2) Listen to Big Mama Thornton's version (recorded in March of 1953). Construct the same kind of pulse graph that you did for Elvis's version. What are some of the differences between these two performances? Why do you suppose there are differences in hypermeter between the two performances? Click here for the YouTube audio:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_QE7UrJ1oY

(B) Listen to the following excerpt:

Go to
http://courses.umass.edu/music114/ManualAudioFilesFrames.htm
and navigate to excerpt 77.04

(1) Construct a hypermetric graph of this excerpt representing at least five levels of pulse.

(2) What is unusual about the broader levels of hypermetric pulse in this excerpt?

(C) Listen to the following excerpt:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zzyfcys1aLM
(Sorry if you have to watch a short advertisement first.)

(1) Construct a hypermetric graph of this excerpt representing at least four levels of pulse.

(2) This song is in verse-chorus form. Each verse contains different lyrics, but all choruses repeat the same lyrics. As you construct your graph, line up the beginning of each verse and the beginning of each chorus at the left side of your graph.

(3) Consult your graph to answer the following questions: What is unusual about the choruses in this song? Are all of the choruses the same? If not, how do they differ?

(D) Listen to the following excerpt:

Go to
http://courses.umass.edu/music114/ManualAudioFilesFrames.htm
and navigate to excerpt 77.03

(1) Construct a hypermetric graph of this excerpt showing at least three levels of pulse for this short piece.

(2) What is unusual about the hypermetric structure of this piece? What hypermetric device creates that unusualness?

(3) Optional: This melody comes from a "teasing song," a genre that can imply potentially bawdy lyrics by using an interesting hypermetric twist. The title of this teasing song is "Suzanne Was a Lady." You may view the lyrics at the link below, but I must warn you not to click this link if you might be offended by the insinuation of four-letter words (some of which many find crude and even derogatory):

http://www.horntip.com/html/songs_sorted_by_name/with_music/s/suzanne_was_a_lady.htm

How does "Suzanne Was a Lady" (and other teasing songs) use the interaction between hypermeter and lyrics to pull off its special linguistic trick?