Rhythms have always been a challenge for singers. Instrumentalists have to learn to read rhythms accurately, while vocalists are often asked to just imitate what they hear. Would you like to be able to read rhythms like a good instrumentalist does? This class assumes no prior understanding of rhythms, but will start at the beginning and explain basic concepts, giving you a chance to practice on increasingly difficult rhythms. By the time you're done, you should be able to handle any rhythm you can expect to see.

What this class is not:
This is not an information-only class; it is a skill building class. A lot of group participation will be involved.

This is not a class that focuses on reading pitches. We use four simple notes throughout the class so that we can focus on learning how to sing different rhythms. All the exercises are in the same clef and key. If you want help on reading pitches, look for my other class, Sight-Singing for the Non-Musician or go online to SingTheSpots.com.

Introduction: Pitch and Rhythm, what are they, and how are they indicated in the music.

Three common note lengths:
Quarter Note (crotchet)

\[ \text{\begin{tikzpicture}[baseline=-0.5ex]
  \node[anchor=west] (n1) at (0,0) {\#};
  \node[anchor=west] (n2) at (0.5,0) {\#};
  \node[anchor=west] (n3) at (1,0) {\#};
  \node[anchor=west] (n4) at (1.5,0) {\#};
\end{tikzpicture}} \]
Half Note (minim)
twice as long as a Quarter Note

Whole Note (semibreve)
four times as long as a Quarter Note

Measures and Time Signatures
Music is typically broken up into “measures” by the insertion of “bar lines” at regular intervals. Each measure has the same amount of music in it.

How much music does each measure contain? That is determined by the “time signature”, a vertical pair of numbers at the beginning of the song.

The bottom number, typically a 2, 4, or 8, tells what kind of note gets the beat, or pulse. In this case the 4 indicates that you're beating quarter notes. The top number tells how many of these beats are in a measure. You could read this time signature as indicating that there are 3 quarter-note beats in each measure. What does the following indicate?
Counting:
Here we're going to introduce a practical system of counting the rhythm.

Look first at the time signature to determine the count

Exercises: count on numbers and “Ta”

Some Notes to Sing:
How Dry I Am
same 4 notes that begin Home on the Range (O Give Me a Home), Down in the valley, and You Are My Sunshine
Duple and Triple Meter:

Duple meter

If exercises are challenging, you can:
– speak the rhythm – either counting or on “Ta”
– speak or sing melody on “Do Re Mi”

Triple meter
Cut time (a la breve):

The bottom number of the time signature can be 2, indicating that we are counting in half notes.

If quarter-notes are present, they are two per beat, counted with “and”.

Notice the double whole note.

Pick-Up Notes:

A melody or phrase can start in the middle of a measure, as a poem can start with unaccented syllable(s). (’Twas the night before Christmas...)

So the song can start with a partial measure, often matched by another partial measure at the end. Determine which beats are represented by the partial measure.
Ties to Connect Notes:
A curved line, called a “tie”, between notes on the same pitch
connects them into a longer note.

Dotted Notes:
A dot adds 50% to the length of the note.
Musical Rests:
A rest symbol indicates a period of silence equal to the corresponding note.

Quarter rest
\[ \text{quarter rest symbol} \]

Half rest and Whole rest
\[ \text{half rest symbol} \]
\[ \text{whole rest symbol} \]
Review and Practice:

The Eighth Note:

Half as long as a quarter-note

Alone, they have a flag

Eighth rest

In common time they get half a beat. Count with “and”.

Dotted Quarter Notes:
A dotted quarter-note is equivalent to a quarter-note tied to an eighth-note.

Dotted quarter-notes often occur in combination with an eighth note.

Syncopation:
A shifting of stress to a weak beat (or part of a beat)

Syncopation with eighth-notes often has notes occurring between beats. Much syncopation is a variation on this figure.

It can be repeated.

It can be tied.

Another common syncopation figure. A long note struck a half beat early.
One way to figure out syncopated rhythms is first do it without the ties, then insert them.

Ties Across Bar Line:

In this situation nothing is sounded on the downbeat. Often the note is struck a half beat before.

Another common figure.
Eighth Notes in Cut Time:
In time signatures with a 2 on the bottom, we're counting in half notes. A quarter-note is only half a beat, and an eighth-note is a quarter beat.

We've learned about counting the half-beats as “and”. A grouping of quarter-beats can be counted as “1 e and a”.

How would you count these various groupings?

Compound Meter:
In the time signatures we've looked at so far, the measures and strong beats subdivide into halves. Sure we've got triple meter, but the notes subdivide into halves and quarters.

It's a different situation in most time signatures with an 8 on the bottom. Presumably you're counting in 8th notes. But in reality there are two different levels of beats. We could call them “big beats” and “little beats”. The little beats are 8th notes, but the big beats are groupings of three 8th notes, hence compound meter.

In this case you're not really beating 123456, but 1 and a 2 and a. The dotted quarter is the unit of beat.
A time signature of 6/8 is considered to be compound duple because there are two big beats in each measure. We also have compound triple in time signatures like 9/8.

Triplets:
Suppose the composer is in a simple meter and he wants to subdivide a beat into 3?

It's important that the triplets be of equal length.
Sometimes there's a tendency to make the first one longer than the other two.
Long Triplets:

Sometimes two triplets can be tied together.

Or maybe we want a half-note divided into three equal parts.

Counting these is tricky.
Since eighth-note triplets are counted “1 and a”,
I suggest that you count quarter-note triplets as “1 a and”
to clarify where the notes fall within the beat.

Of course, in cut time quarter-note triplets would subdividing one beat and when
subdividing two beats you'd use half-note triplets.
Swing Rhythm:

Sometimes a composer will write in a simple meter, but intend for it to be performed with uneven 8th notes, the first one longer. This intent is often expressed by writing “Swing” at the beginning of the music, or using a notation like this.

Another way to conceive of this rhythm is to imagine it in 12/8 meter. Count it as you would triplets, “1 a 2 a”

Since this type of rhythm is common in jazz-related music, it's obvious that we can have syncopation with this rhythm as well.
**Sixteenth Notes:**

Half as long as eighth-notes, they will occur four-to-a-beat in common time.

They can occur in various combinations.

They occur in combination with dotted eighth-notes or doubly-dotted quarter-notes.
Weird Meters:

- **Alternating meters**

- **Unusual meters**

- **Occasional meter change**

Many more examples and exercises for practice can be found on the website at www.SingTheSpots.com