

Beat, Pulse, Tempo, and Meter



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Four musical terms that get used in dance are "Beat, Pulse, Tempo, and Meter". Let's find simple definitions for each:

Beat - A basic unit/measurement of musical time.

Pulse - A series of uniformly spaced beats.

Tempo - The speed of the beats.

Meter - Groupings of beats.

When counting movement phrases, we are usually counting the pulse we feel in numbered beats. So when a teacher says "5...6...7...8...", they are counting the pulse in numbered beats. How fast or slow that teacher is counting, is the tempo. A fast tempo will have a quick pulse and a slow tempo will have a slow pulse. Tempo is the speed of the music. When we count in different groupings, we get the meter. The most used meters in dance are 3, 4, 5 and 7. If we group counts in a meter of 3, the phrase will follow as 1...2...3... and then repeat. If we group counts in a meter of 4, the phrase will follow as 1...2...3...4... and then repeat. The same is true for 5, 7 and any other meter.

Meters that are in 2 or 6 are also used frequently to count movement phrases, but because these are both related numbers ($2+2 = 4$ and $3+3 = 6$) we will not focus as much on them. We will talk more about complex groupings of beats and meters in a later lesson.

Not all music has a pulse, so not all music has a meter or tempo. You can have a pulse without having a meter and if you have a steady pulse, you have a tempo. Pulses, tempos and meters can all change throughout a piece of music. Each meter and tempo allows for a huge range of types and genres of music.

A person is not a better or worse dancer if they choose to use, or not use, counting with movement. There is shame and shaming around this topic, especially when working with accompanists, composers, and musicians. You will get just as many folks saying how important it is to count movement as you will find folks that say how important it is to not count movement. After 25 years of accompanying and composing for dance, I'd say that it is pretty evenly split down the middle when I need to be able to play supportively with counts or without. Some of the most amazingly free form, seemingly improvised movement, is made from choreographers that count in the same meter and tempo for everything. Some of the most unison and strict movement is made from folks feeling each other in space over time without any counted movement whatsoever. There are many situations for each, and a combination of both; there is no correct way.

What is not okay, is the shaming around it. If someone is struggling with either situation, then it is a moment to learn and not a moment to shame. The coolest part of working with dance for me, is the incredibly complex way that all dancers relate to counting or not counting movement. This shows up most often in technique classes. Just like every other type of group collaboration, we need to lead with kindness and respect for folks' diverse experiences. Shame based on someone's perceived deficit around counting or not counting utterly breaks down the collaborative spirit. We all play a part in this experience and can work to learn from collaboration, sharing our own experiences with each other.

Music Practice

Break up the class into small groups of just a few people. Ask each of the groups to go over the four musical terms and write them down. Have the students take turns in the groups explaining what each term is. The goal is for each student to feel super comfortable telling another student what each of the terms mean and how they are different from each other. Take turns asking and answering, "What is the difference between beat and pulse?" or "Is it possible to have a tempo without having a meter?"

Then gather together and have a discussion on everyone's individual relationship to counting. Do folks feel more or less free moving with or without counts? When do we find ourselves counting movement and when do we find ourselves not using any counts? How does counting play into everyone's choreography?