Bulgarian Dance Rhythms

By Ludmil Krumov

Metric chemistry

In order to completely understand and learn how to feel and count Bulgarian rhythms and groves we need to take a closer look at the relationships of the single pulses or beats within the meter itself.

There is a natural tendency for the ear to hear regular groupings even in a series of identical sounds repeating at equal time - intervals. We hear some sounds as more important than others - some beats are perceptually dominant, and other beats that follow them, are perceptually weaker until another strong one comes in. We can understand such a series as subdivided into groups of two or three beats. In two-beat groups, one of the beats is always felt as accented while the other makes the impression of unaccented relaxation. The group may begin with either one:

One – two *or* one- **Two**

In three- beat groups, the accent is felt on one of the beats while the other two seem unaccented:

One – two – three *or* one – **Two** – three *or* one – two – **Three**

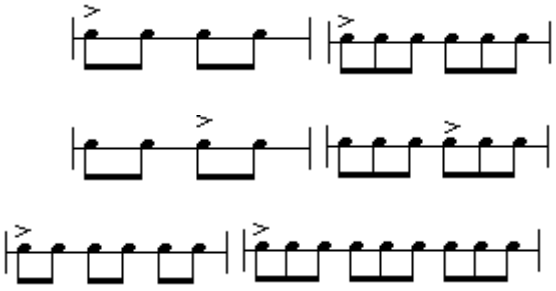
The two-beat and three-beat groups could be used as constituent elements in compound metric patterns. The following compound patterns are possible:

2+2; 2+2+2; 2+2+2+2; 3+3; 3+3+3; 3+3+3+3;

Furthermore, combinations of 2 and 3 (discussed further), such as:

2+3; 3+2+2 etc. are possible.

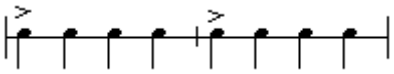
In a compound consisting of two elements, one element has the metric accent (order: heavy-light or light –heavy); in a compound with three elements one heavy group is associated with two light groups.



etc.

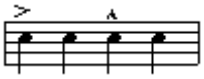
The most common compound pattern in Western music (4/4=2+2) is for the strong beats to occur once every 4 beats:

STRONG-weak-weak-weak **STRONG**-weak weak-weak.



Usually the third beat in a four-beat pattern is somewhat stronger than the second and fourth: There is a hierarchy of beat strengths, with the first being the strongest, the third being next, followed by the second and fourth.

One – Two **Three** – Four



The first beat is called to be carrying the principal metric accent, and the third - the subordinate metric accent.

Every musical system that we know of has patterns of strong and weak beats, and Bulgarian folk dance music makes no exception to that rule. So let's take a closer look at the different type of rhythms found in the Bulgarian singing and dance folk tradition and explore the way they have been constructed, and the hierarchy of the metric accents within the meters.

Classification of the Bulgarian folk dance meters

The complexity of the rhythms is one of the most characteristic features of Bulgarian folk music. Rhythm and melody, originate in the speech. Due to the unevenness of the syllables and the different uneven stresses within the phrases in the language, the melodies and the rhythms became uneven. Bulgarian folk dance rhythms are constructed by combining simple duple and triple meters, thus creating different heterometric patterns. Each pattern serves as the basis for one or more dance types, which may be differentiated by region and choreography. The two main types of dances are Horo (pl. Hora) and Ruchenitsa (pl. Ruchenitsi). Horo is a collective open-circle or line dance formed by dancers (usually more than two individuals) holding hands (or belts). Ruchenitsa is a solo (or couple) dance in 7/8 heterometer. Bulgarian ethnomusicologists have developed a precise system for classifying the most common symmetrical and asymmetrical metric structures. Meters are classified by the number of beats in a measure and how those beats are grouped in combinations of twos and threes. For example, 7/8 of the type 2+2+3 is classified as unevenly grouped (asymmetrical), consisting of 7 beats and 3 groupings where the group of three is placed on the third grouping.

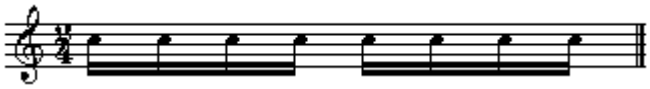
Simple meters

Simple meters are meters which have one accented (strong) beat such as 2/4, 2/8, 3/4, 3/8

1. **Duple meters – 2/4, 2/8**

Due to the simpler dance composition, the duple meters are the most popular and widespread dance meters (generally called **Pravo Horo** - Право Хоро - straight dance), found in every ethnographical region in Bulgaria. Although described and written by contemporary musicians as 2/4, this dance meter often has semiquaver or triplet underlying structure.

1.1 Semiquaver underlying structure (2/4=4/16+4/16)

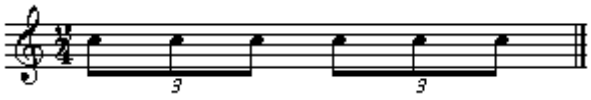


Dances based on this meter are:

Trite pati (Трите пъти), **Buenek** (Буенек), **Kasapsko Horo** (Касапско Хоро), **Dobrudjansko horo** (Добруджанско Хоро), **Kalipetrovo horo** (Калипетрово хоро), **Danec** (Данец)

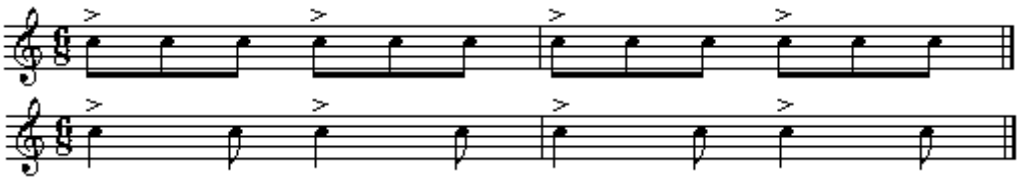
2.2 **Triplet underlying structure** (2/4=3/8+3/8)

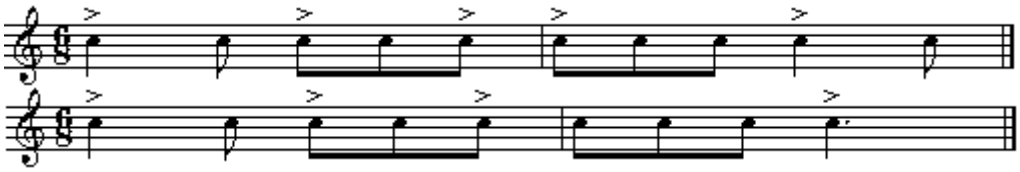
This is the most popular duple meter dance – the **Pravo Horo** (Право Хоро), played and danced on almost every festive event. It has the underlying compound duple character of 6/8.



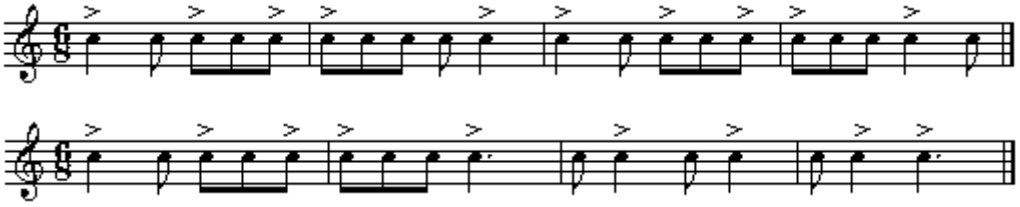
Usually Bulgarian musicians playing in the style of the wedding bands from the 80's and 90's create two or four bar rhythmic patterns, which include different accents than the original meter.

Two bar patterns could be something like this:





Four bar patterns:


etc.

2. **Triple meters – 3/4**

Melodies in triple meter are rare except in Pirin ethnographic region (South-West Bulgaria).

Complex (compound, additive) meters

Complex or compound are meters constructed by two or more simple meters merged together. Compound consisted of two identical simple meters is called a complex bipartite even meter.

Complex Bipartite even meters

1. **Four beat bipartite meters** 4/4; 4/8 = 2 + 2
2. **Six beat bipartite meters** 6/4; 6/8 = 3 + 3

The six beat bipartite meters is being used very rear in Bulgarian folklore. In fast tempo the folklore musicologists prefer to think of the 6/8 as 2/4 (2/4 with frequent triplets). **Shopsko horo** (Шопско хоро)

Complex Tripartite even meters

Compound consisted of three identical simple meters is called a complex tripartite even meter.

1. **Six beat tripartite meter** 6 = 2+2+2

Bipartite heterometres

Now we come to the most interesting futures of Bulgarian dance rhythm, which made Bulgarian folklore popular around the world – the odd meters. These meters are created by using various combinations of simple duple and triple meters – usually one triple and one or more duple meters. Because the dance melodies are usually being played in medium to very fast tempos, Bulgarian musicians do not count every beat in the meter. They think in terms of short and long pulses – short being the duple, and long being the triple meter of the compound heterometer. When people learn to dance, they do not know if the dance is in 5, 7, 9, 11, 13 or 15. They learn the name and the steps of the dance (Ruchenitsa, Pravo Horo, Paidushko Horo etc.), and then they learn to count the dance using the short – long system. For example one of the most popular dance – Ruchenitsa (7/8=2+2+3) is counted: **One** Two **Three-e** (short short lo-o-ong) instead of one two three four five six seven. Further on when the tempo gets even faster, One Two Three-e becomes **One** – Two-o (One = half note, Two-o = doted quarter).

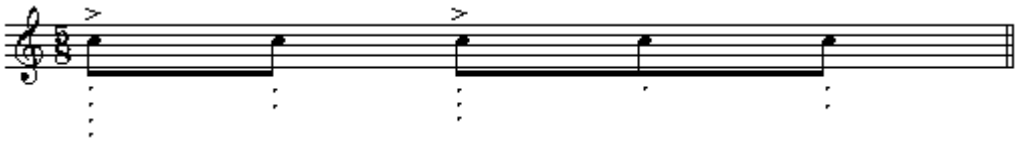
Having said all that let us explore the simplest combination of duple and triple meters classified as:

Five beat bipartite heterometres

(Odd-meters consisting of five beats grouped together in two groupings)

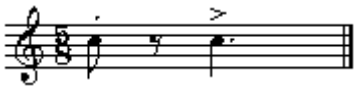
1. **5/8 a = 2 + 3**

This is one of the most popular odd-meter dances, called ***Paidushko Horo*** *or* ***Kalaydzhiysko Horo.*** It is build by combining one short (two notes) and one long (three notes) group.



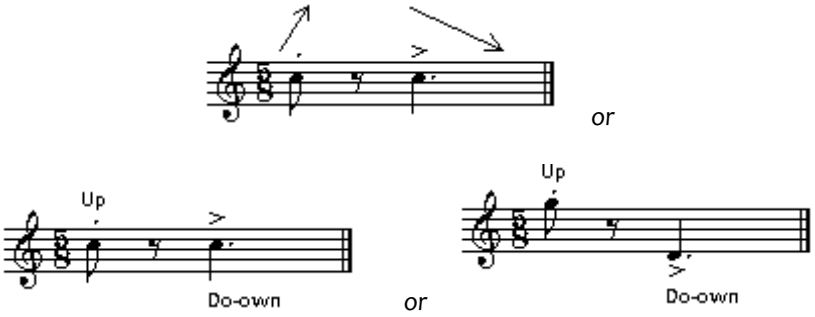
The dots under the staff correspond to levels of metric hierarchy . A metric event is more or less accented depending upon the number of levels on which it occurs, indicated by the greater number of vertically aligned dots under that event.

The metric hierarchy and the relationship between the principal and the subordinate metric accents are the key elements in defining and understanding how to feel the groove in Bulgarian folk music. Usually the first note of the meter gets the principal and the first note of the triple group gets the subordinate accent. The principal accent defines the beginning of the measure and is felt like a short (staccato) note, while the subordinate accent is long and brings a feeling of relaxation and resolution. In 5/8a it looks like this:



We could also conditionally visualize the groove using Up and Down motion. The principal accent gives us a feeling of fast upward motion and the subordinate accent – slow downward relaxation (This is not always true for the actual motions of the dancers – the long beat is usually where the dancers jump up except in the Ruchenitsa (7/8a = 2+2+3) where the body goes down on the long three).

Visual representation:



So, *how do we count it*? The first step is to count all the beats accenting the first note of every group:

One Two **Three** Four Five

This is good, but it seemes to be a little too complicated when we speed it up. So, *how do we simplify it?* Let us firs count in a way that better emphasize the compound character of the meter and the independence of the compound groups:

One Two **One** two three

That already looks and sounds better. Instead of using five different words to count, now we use three.

The faster the tempo gets the more we start to think in bigger time (note) values (periods) in order to keep our place in time. In 4/4 in medium tempo we think sixteen or eight notes. When the tempo rises we start counting quarter notes then half notes, whole note then 2 measures then (very fast tempos) 4 measures. Same principal could be applied for the Bulgarian meters. Let's take 15/8 for example. Imagine you have to count every beat in the measure:

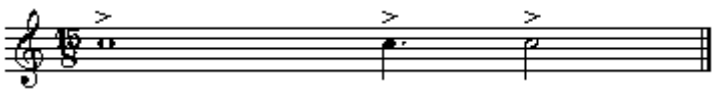
One two **three** four **five** six **seven** eight **Nine** ten eleven **twelve** thirteen **fourteen** fifteen

How fast could you count this way? Not too fast I guess. Even counting in twos and threes doesn't really go too fast:

One two **O**ne two **O**ne two **O**ne two **O**ne two three **O**ne two **O**ne two

The way I count and feel 15/8 in very fast tempos is this:

One Two-o-o One

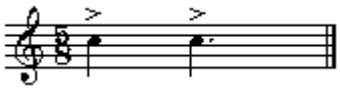


Instead of having fifteen different elements to count, I limit myself to three.

We are going to investigate the 15/8 meter in detail later on in this work, and now let us go back to the 5/8a meter.

Let us simplify counting by using the short – long system where the duple meter will be short and the triple – long, so instead of five eight notes now we have a quarter and a doted quarter note (two elements instead of five):

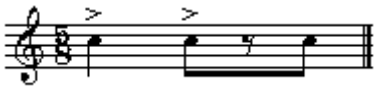
One Two-o



Short Lo–o-ng

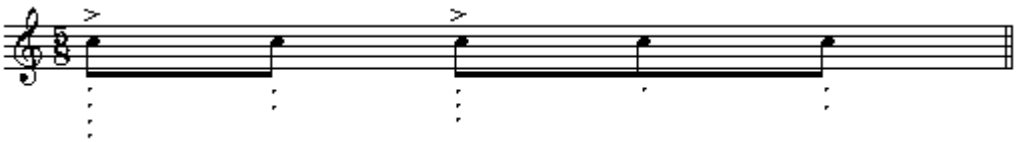
In faster tempo the short and the long become almost even and it is difficult to keep the long longer than the short. We can get more definition if we add the word 'and' at the last note of the triple meter:

One Two - And



or

One – Two **One** - Two - **And**



Bulgarian musicians often use syllables to explain rhythms. For the duple group they use **Ta** Ka, and for the triple – **Ta** Ka **Ta**.

So, the 5/8a pattern will look like that:

Ta Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta**

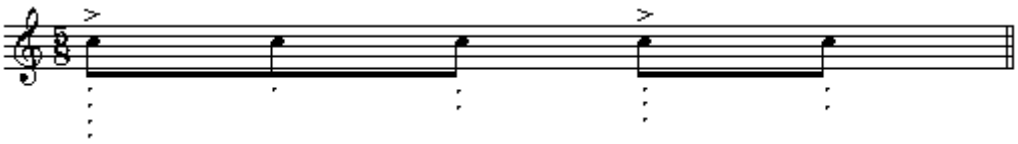
or

Ta Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta** / **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta** / **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta** / **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta**

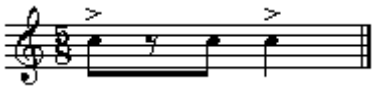
2. 5/8 b = 3 + 2

This version of the five- beat meter is less used in Bulgaria (mainly in slower tempo). However, it's been used as part of other compound meters, so let us take a look at it.

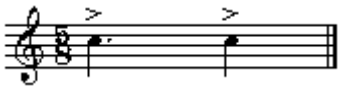
One – Two - **And** **One** - Two



One – And **Two**



One- Two



Lo-ong Short

Ta Ka **Ta** - **Ta** Ka

or

Ta Ka **Ta** - **Ta** Ka / **Ta** Ka **Ta** - **Ta** Ka / **Ta** Ka **Ta** - **Ta** Ka / **Ta** Ka **Ta** - **Ta** Ka

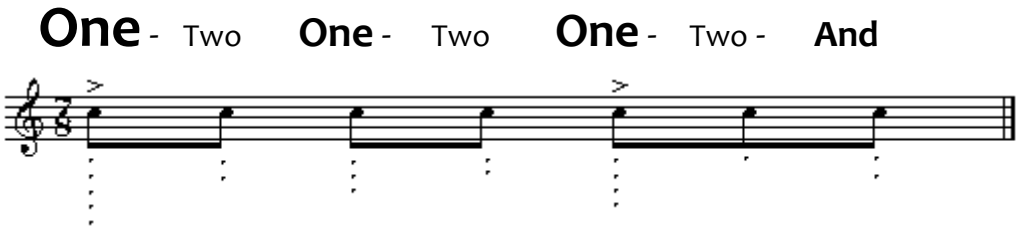
Tripartite heterometres

(Odd meters consisted of three simple meters)

Seven beat heterometres

The first variation of the 7/8 consists of two duple and one triple meters, where the triple is placed after the two duple.

1. **7/8 a = 2 + 2 + 3**



Rachenitsa

This is the most popular heterometric dance in Bulgaria. The name **"Rachenitsa"** comes from the word *ruchenik* - name given to a piece of cloth, which the dancers hold in hand (ruka) and wave in the air during dancing. In Bulgarian wedding customs, Rachenitsa has an important symbolic meaning. The best man and the best woman are challenged to dance with some relatives of the bride who keep a tray with a baked chicken, a home baked round bread (pita) and a bottle of wine. The whole dance is a competition for endurance. In order to obtain these gifts, the best man and woman have to dance until the guests are exhausted. The band starts playing in fast tempo, and speeds up to impossible fast until somebody gives up.

Layers of counting 7/8a:

As we did with the 5/8, first we count all the beats in the meter:

One two - **Three** four - **Five** six seven

Next we count every compound element:

One two - **One** two - **One** two Three

Using syllables:

Ta Ka - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta**

and

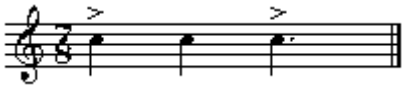
Ta Ka - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta** / **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta** / **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta/ etc.**

In faster tempos – using the short – long system we count:

Short Short **Lo-ong** *or* **One** Two **Thre-e-e**

Notice that in the example below we have two quarter notes and a dotted quarter. Now we have a group of two identical time values. As it was mentioned earlier in two-beat groups, one of the beats is always felt as accented.

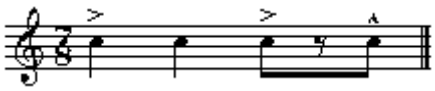
One Two **Thre-e-e**



Short Short **Lo-ong**

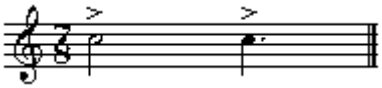
Adding the 'and' at the end of the triple group for more definition in fast tempos:

One two **Three-e -** and

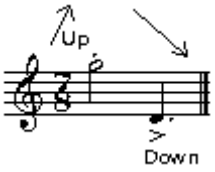


Counting in "two" in very fast tempos:

One **Two-o**



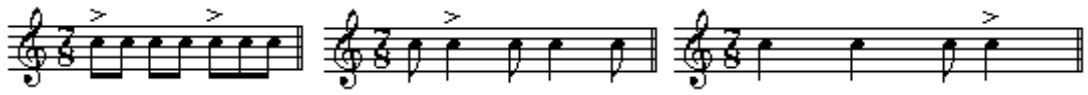
Visualizing time in space - "Up" "Down" motion:

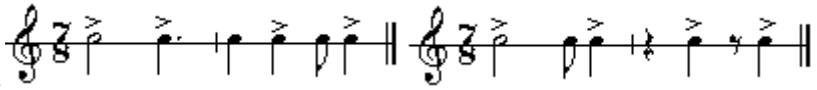


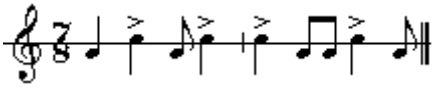
Typical syncopation and 2 bar patterns

In the Bulgarian folk music tradition, there are unique rhythmic patterns associated with the different styles and ethnographical regions, which make Bulgarian odd meters different than the

odd-meters found in the neighboring countries. Many of these patterns were introduced and developed by the wedding bands in the late 70s and 80s. Here are some of the most typical ones:

One bar 

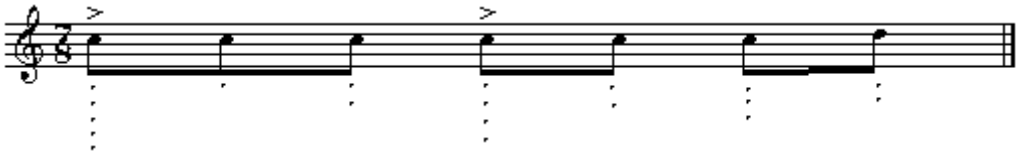
Two bars 



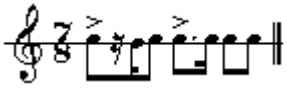
The second variation of the 7/8 used in the Bulgarian folk music (also known as Macedonian seven) is:

2. **7/8 b = 3 + 2 + 2**

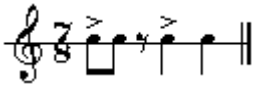
One - Two - **And** **One** - Two **One** - Two



The most characteristic dances in this meter are:

Pravo Makedonsko Horo (Право Македонско Хоро) – typical for the Pirin region, usually performed in medium tempos 

Mazhko Horo (Мъжко Хоро) 

Chetvorno Horo (Четворно Хоро) – dance from the Shop region 

Layers of counting 7/8b:

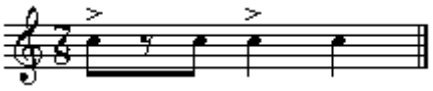
One two Three - **Four** five - Six seven

One two Three - **One** two - **One** two

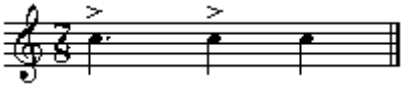
One two And - **One** two - **One** two

Ta Ka **Ta** - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka / **Ta** Ka **Ta** - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka / **Ta** Ka **Ta** - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka / **etc.**

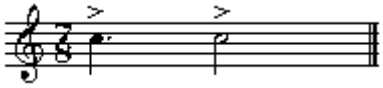
One - And **One** two



Lo-ong Short Short



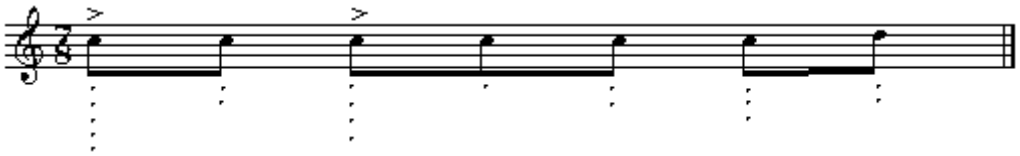
One Two



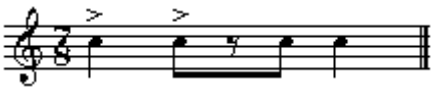
The last version of the 7/8 is not used as independent meter in the folk context. However, it is used as a compound element in other meters and in mixed meters called heterometric rows.

3. 7/8 c = 2 + 3 + 2

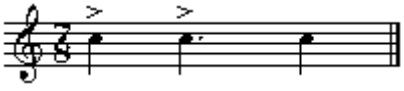
One - Two **One** - Two - **And** **One** - Two



One **Two** – And **One**



Short Lo-ong Short



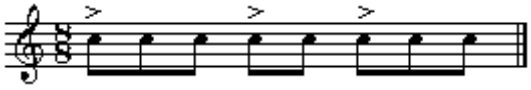
Ta Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta - Ta** Ka / **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta - Ta** Ka / **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka **Ta - Ta** Ka / est.

Getting used to the sound and the feel of the 5/8 and the 7/8 meters is essential for understanding the more complex meters discussed further on.

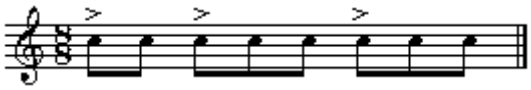
Eight beat heterometres

The eight beat heterometer is a combination of two triple and one duple meter.

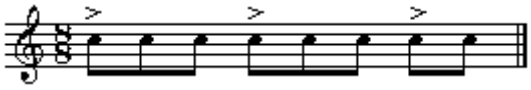
1. **8/8a= 3 + 2 + 3**
   Dances in this meter are: **Dospatsko Horo, Ihtimansko Horo**



2. **8/8b = 2 + 3 + 3**



3. **8/8c = 3 + 3 + 2**



Considering the metric accent hierarchy we could think of these meters as a combination of 5/8 compound and a simple triple meter (5/8+3/8), or in the case of 8/8b and 8/8c: six beat bipartite meter plus one duple meter (6/8 + 2/8).

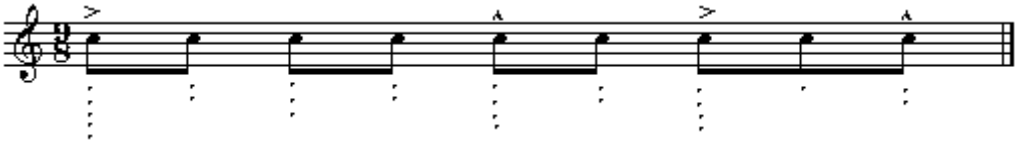
Complex Four - partite heterometres

Nine beat four partite heterometres

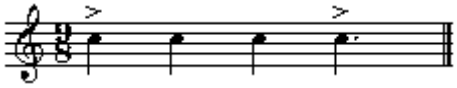
One of the most popular dances in Bulgaria and especially in the Northern Region is the **Daychovo horo** (Дайчово хоро). It is based on the 9/8a meter, constructed of three duple and one triple meter with the triple being on the last place.

1. **9/8 a = 2 + 2 + 2 + 3**

One - Two One - Two **One** - Two **One** - Two - **And**

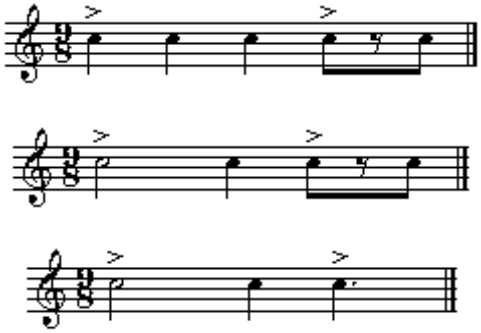


One Two **Three Fo-our**



Short - short - short - lo-ong

One Two Three **Four** - and

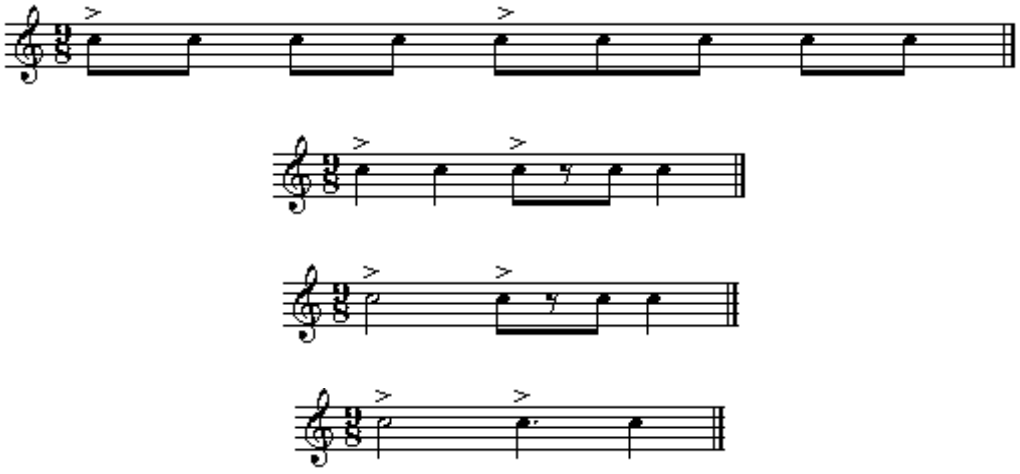


Ta Ka - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka -**Ta** Ka **Ta** / **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka - **Ta** Ka -**Ta** Ka **Ta / etc.**

Dum - Ta ka - Dum - Ta ka ta

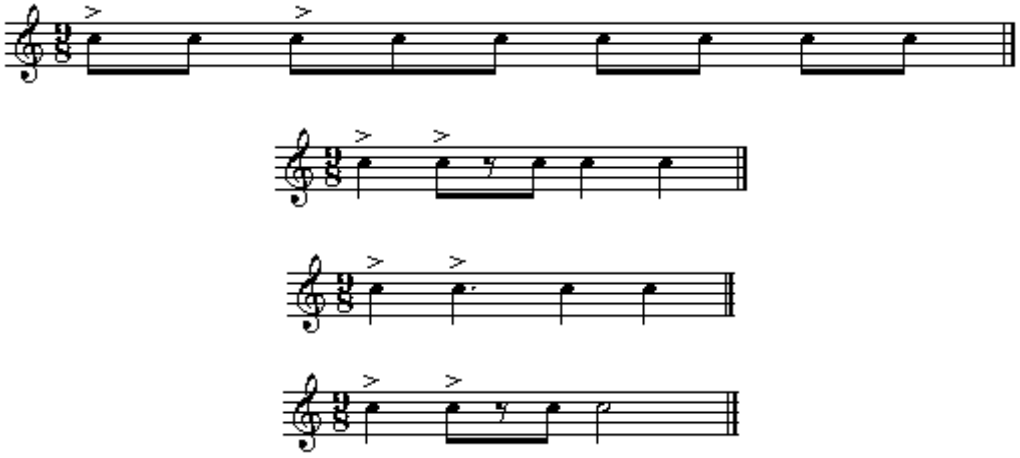
2. **9/8 b = 2 + 2 + 3 + 2**

One - Two One - Two **One** - Two - **And** One - Two

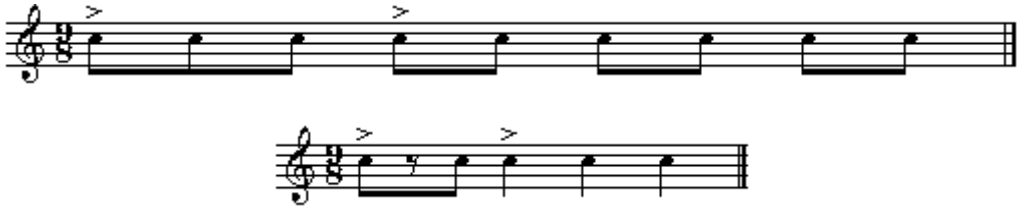


3. **9/8 c = 2 + 3 + 2 + 2**

Grancharsko horo

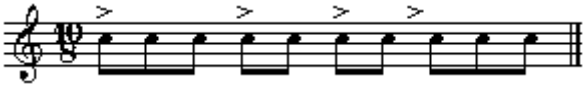


4. **9/8 d = 3 + 2 + 2 + 2**

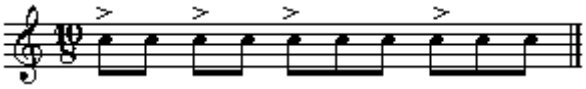


Ten beat four partite heterometres

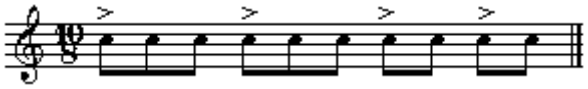
1. 10/8= 3 + 2 + 2 + 3



2. 10/8= 2 + 2 + 3 + 3

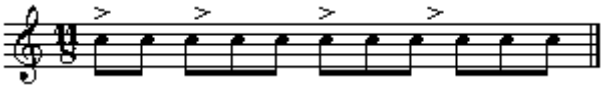


3. 10/8= 3 + 3 + 2 + 2

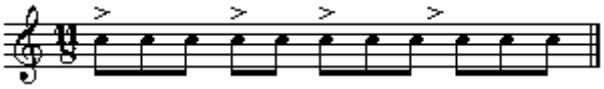


Eleven beat four partite

1. 11/8 = 2 + 3 + 3 + 3



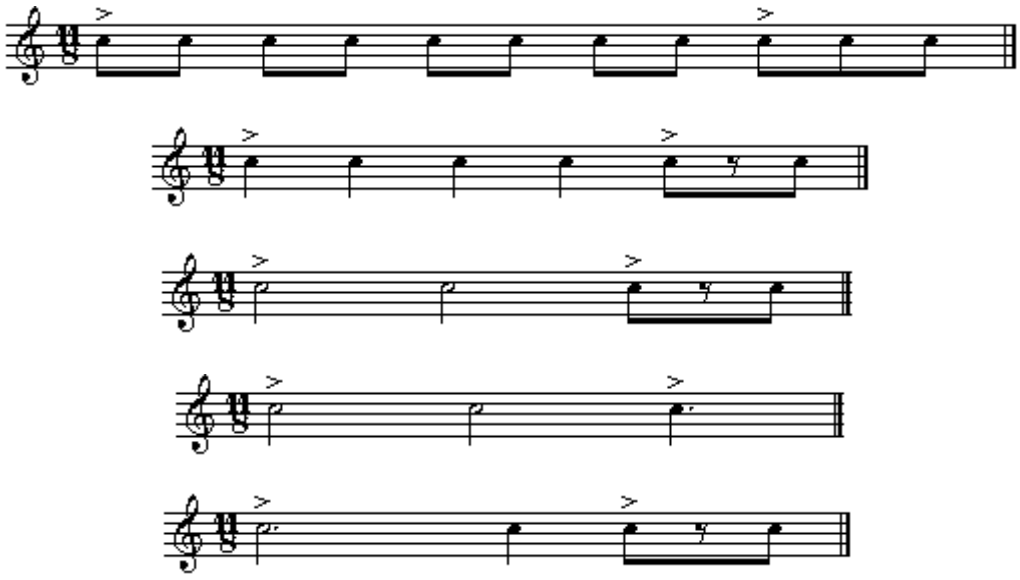
2. 11/8 = 3 + 2 + 3 + 3



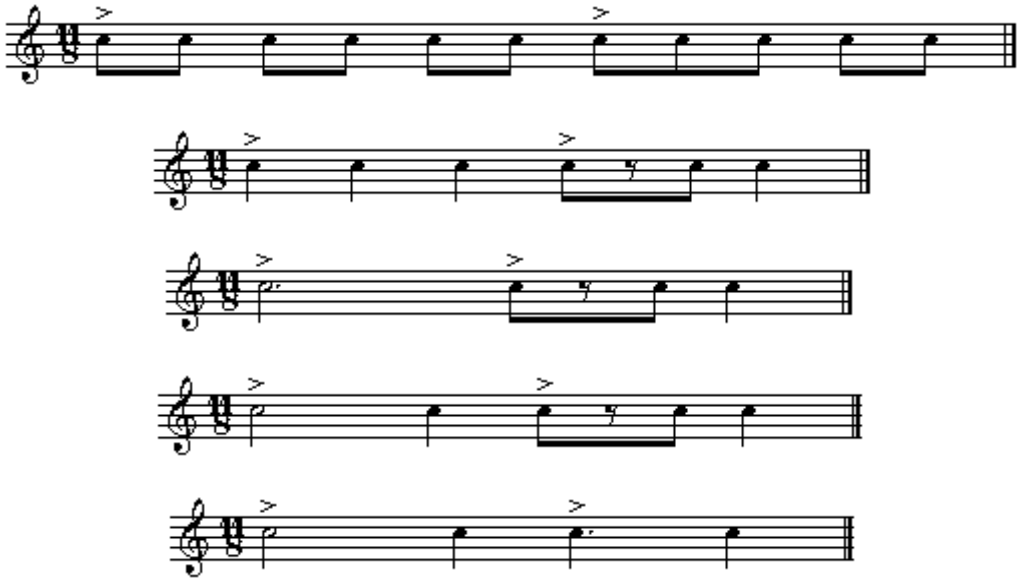
Complex five - partite heterometres

Eleven beat five partite heterometres

1. 11/8 a = 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3



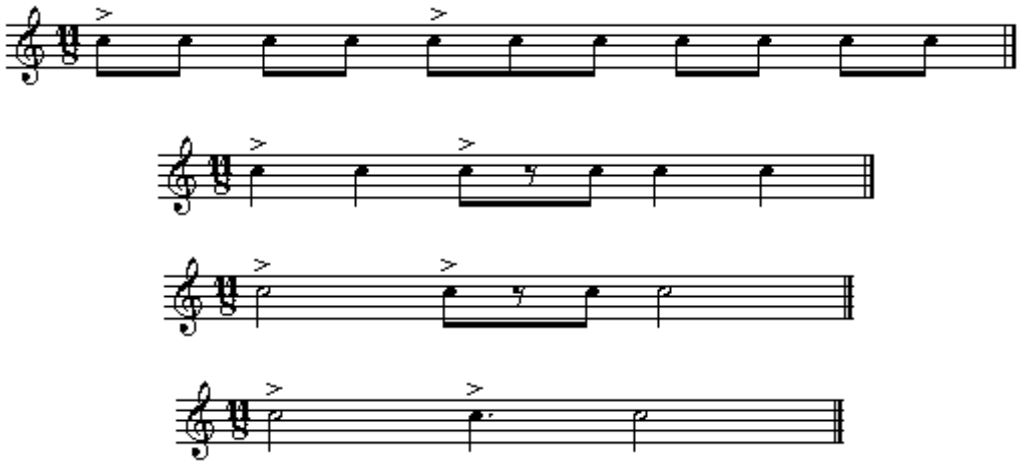
2. 11/8 b = 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2



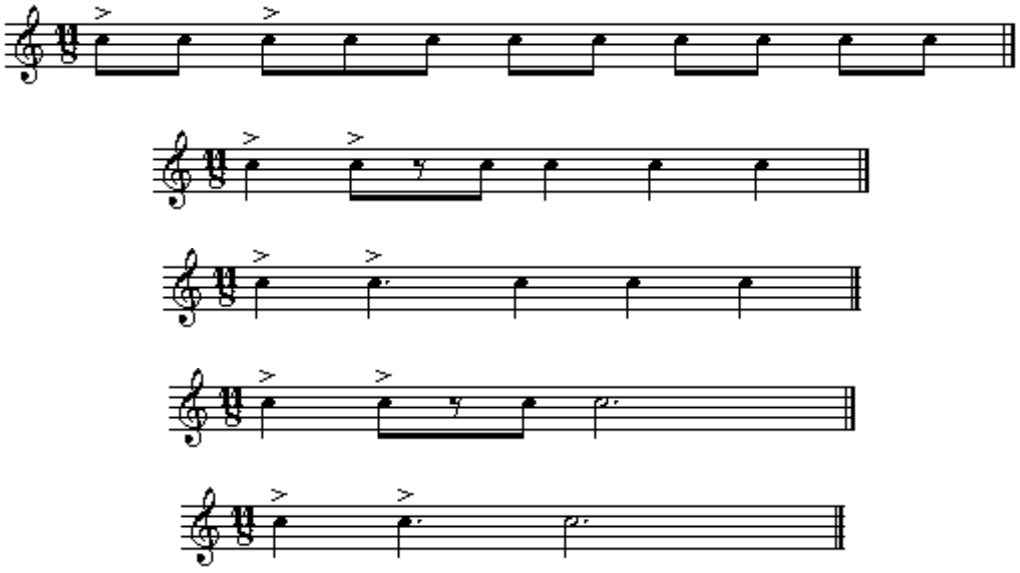
3. **11/8 c = 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 2**

Kopanitsa, Gankino Horo

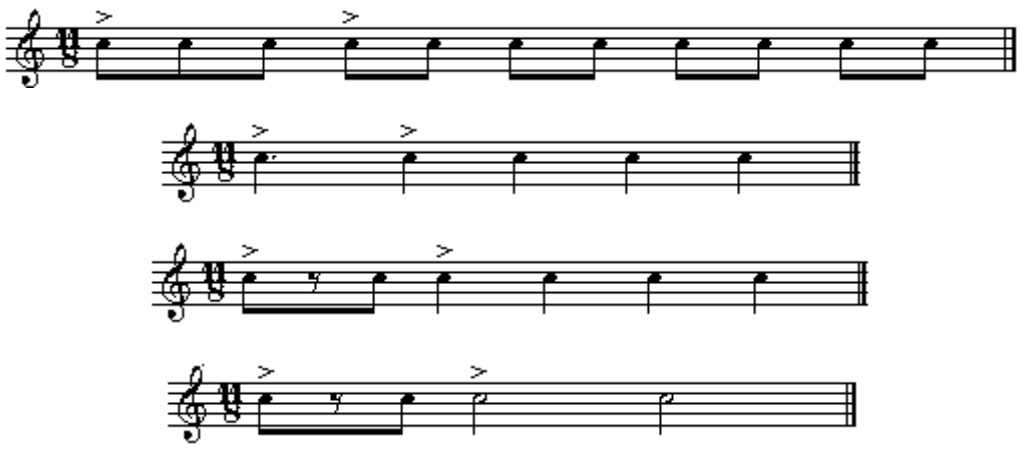
The name is derived from the verb "kopam" which means to "dig" or to "hoe" and probably refers to the sharp kick-like down and up motions often found in the dance. The term Kopanica seems to be especially used in the Sopluk (Sop) region of West Bulgaria, Western Thrace and Sredna Gora regions East of Sofia. Folk dancers are often confused by trying to figure out the difference between Kopanica and Gankino Horo, as these dances are both in 11/8 meter. Gankino (Ganka's dance) seems to be used mostly in Northern Bulgaria.



4. **11/8 d = 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2**

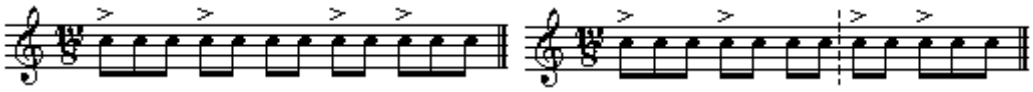


5. **11/8 e = 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2**

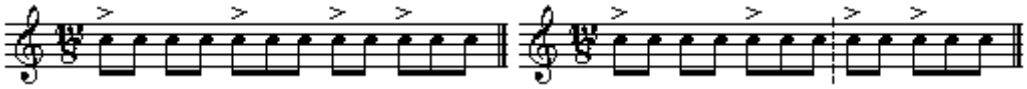


Twelve beat five partite heterometres

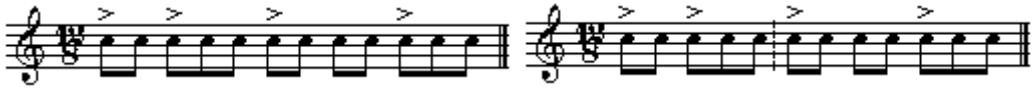
1. 12/8 = 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 (Cigansko horo),Petrunino horo



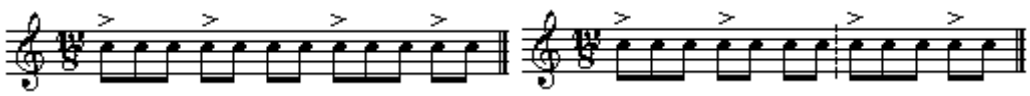
2. 12/8 = 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 3



3. 12/8 = 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 3

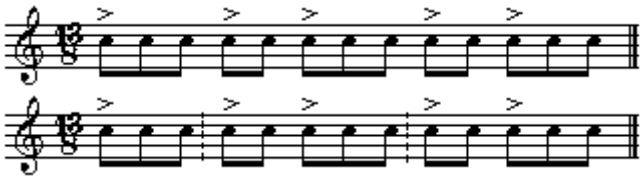


4. 12/8 = 3 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2

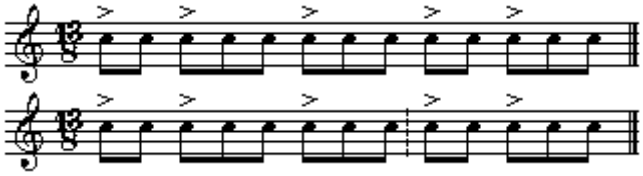


Thirteen beat five partite heterometres

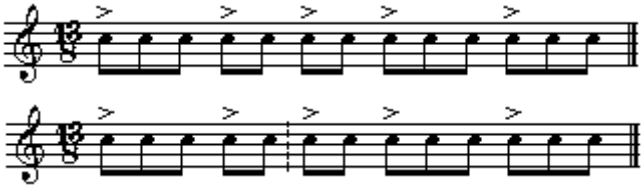
1. 13/8 = 3 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 3



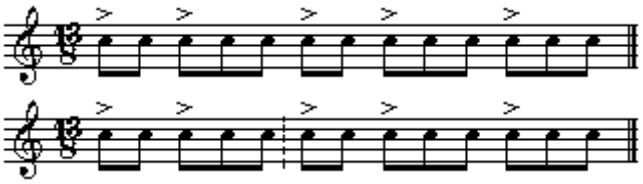
2. 13/8 = 2 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 3



3. 13/8 = 3 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 3

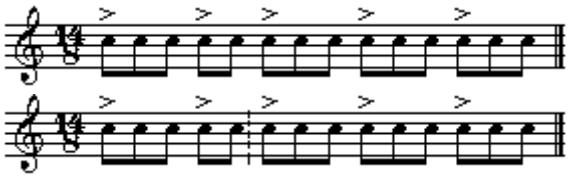


4. 13/8 = 2 + 3 + 2 + 3 + 3

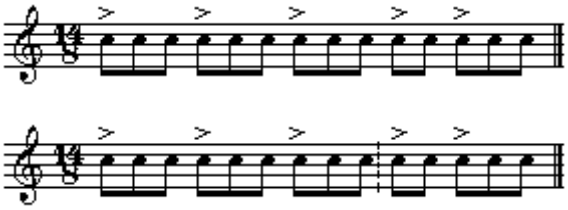


Fourteen beat five partite heterometres

1. 14/8 = 3 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 3



2. 14/8= 3 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 3 (Rodopi)

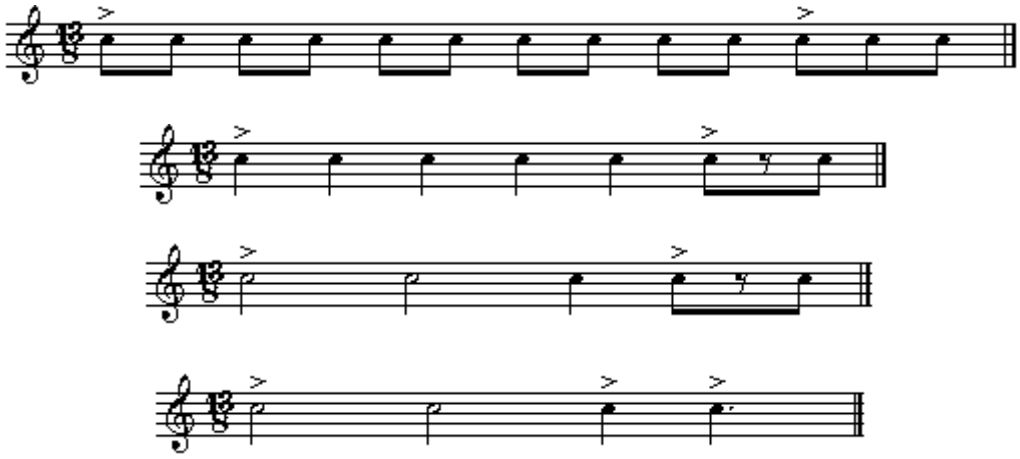


Complex six - partite heterometres

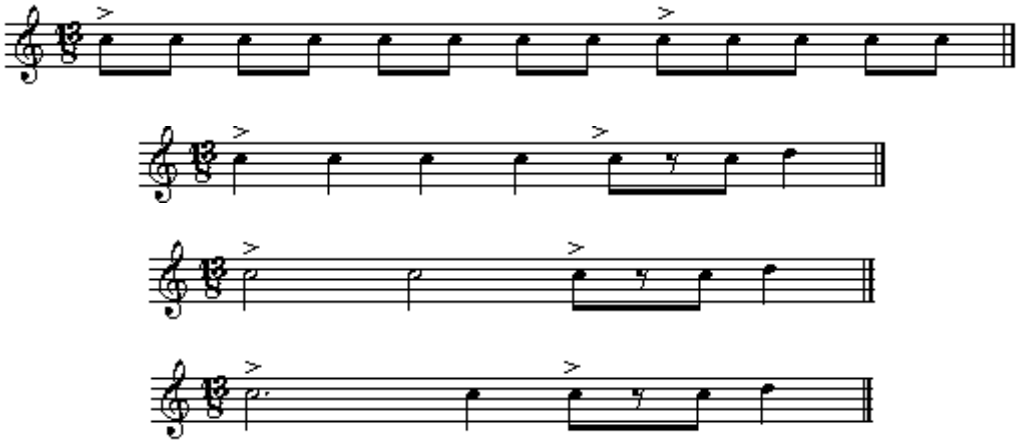
Thirteen beat six partite heterometres

1. **13/8 a = 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3**

Elenino Horo, Petrunino Horo

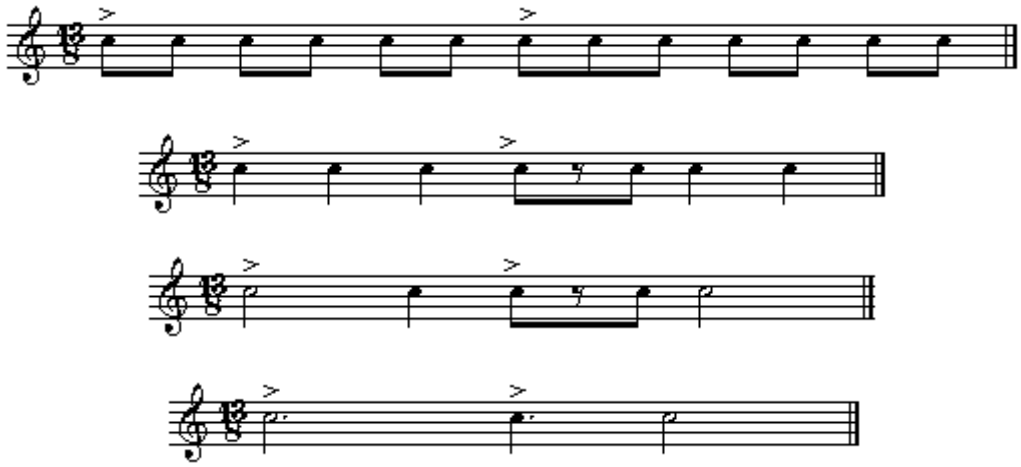


2. **13/8 b = 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2**

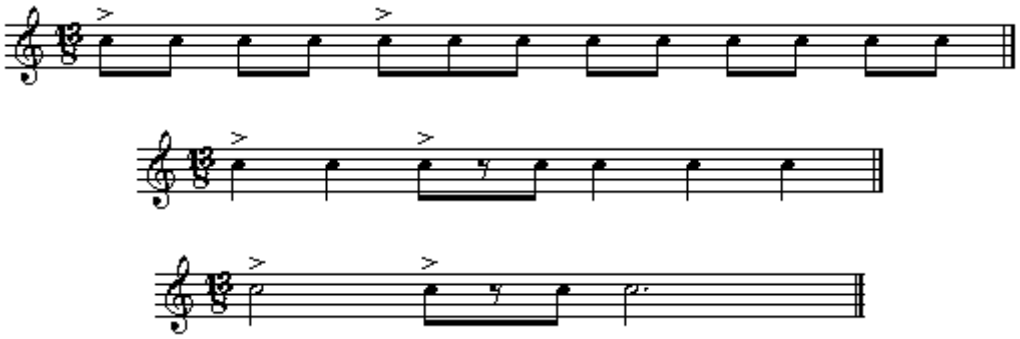


3. **13/8 c = 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 2**

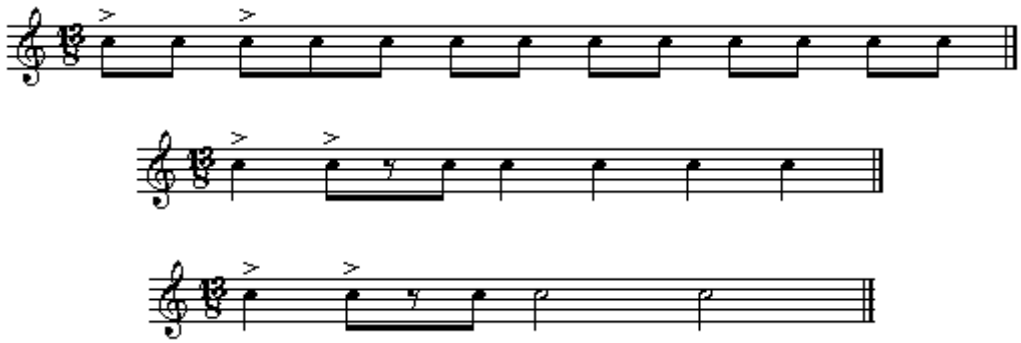
Krivo Sadovsko Horo



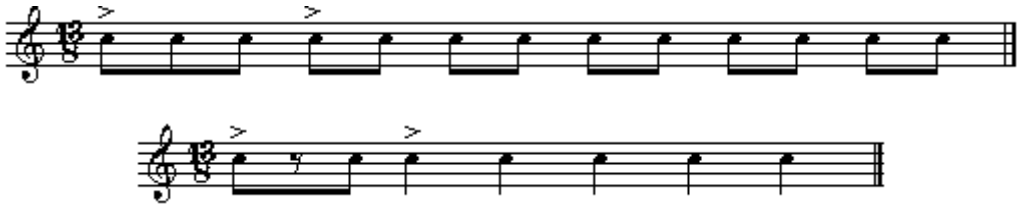
4. **13/8 d = 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2**



5. **13/8 e = 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2**

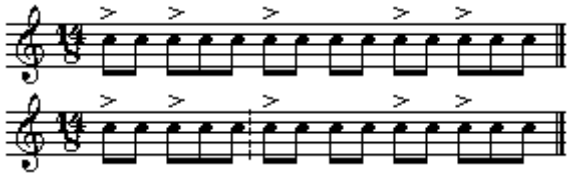


6. **13/8 f = 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2**

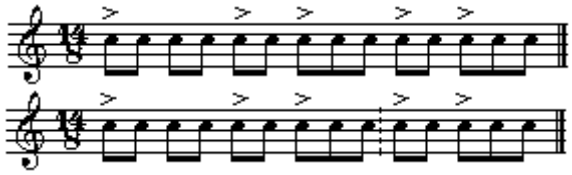


Fourteen beat six partite heterometres

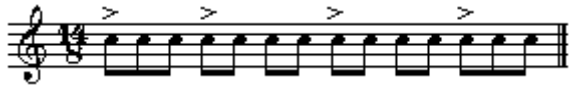
1. 14/8= 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 povtorno shopsko horo



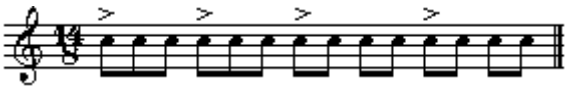
2. 14/8 = 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 3



3. 14/8= 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3

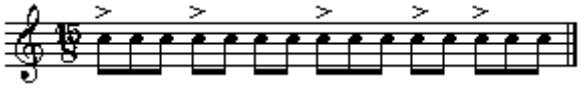


4. 14/8= 3 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2

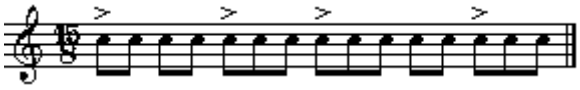


Fifteen beat six partite heterometres

1. 15/8 = 3 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 3



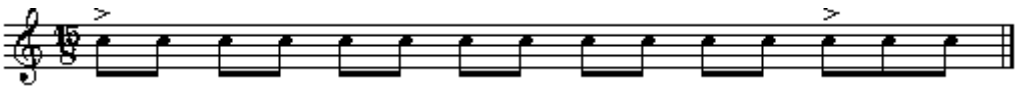
2. 15/8 = 2 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 3



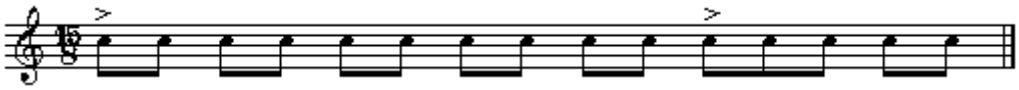
Complex multi - partite heterometres

Fifteen beat seven partite heterometres

1. **15/8 a = 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3**

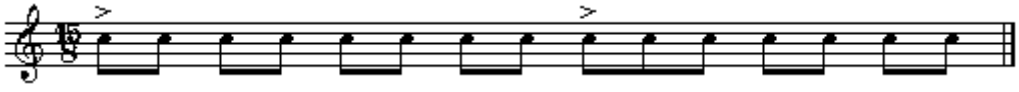


2. **15/8 b = 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2**

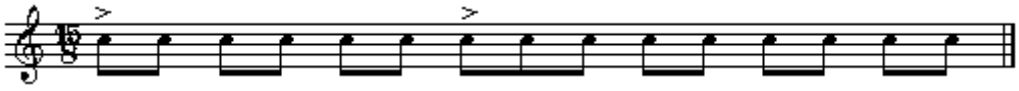


3. **15/8 c = 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 2**

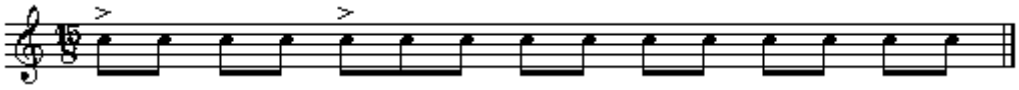
Buchemish



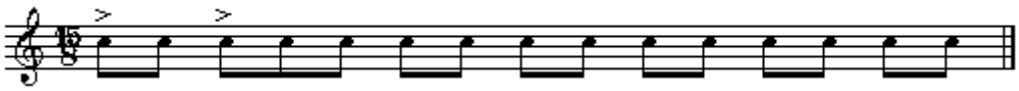
4. **15/8 d = 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2**



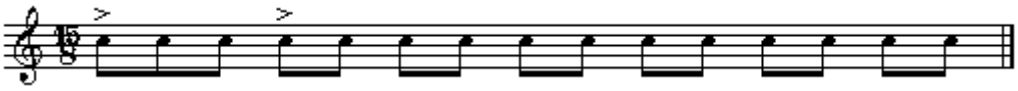
5. **15/8 e = 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2**



6. **15/8 f = 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2**

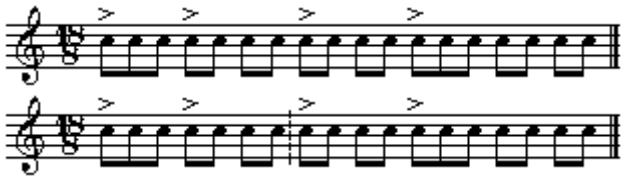


7. **15/8 g = 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2**

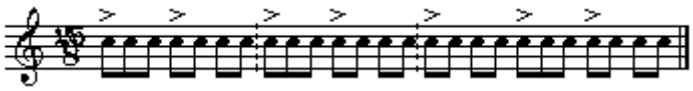


Multi - partite heterometres (heterometric rows – (more than 15 beats) combination of heterometres which don't repeat periodically)

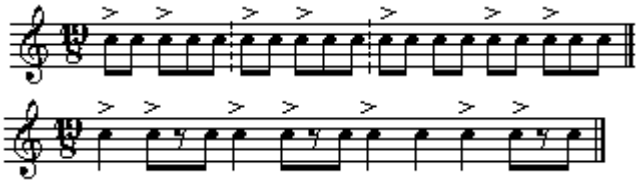
1. Jove Malai Mome
   18/8 = 7/8 + 11/8

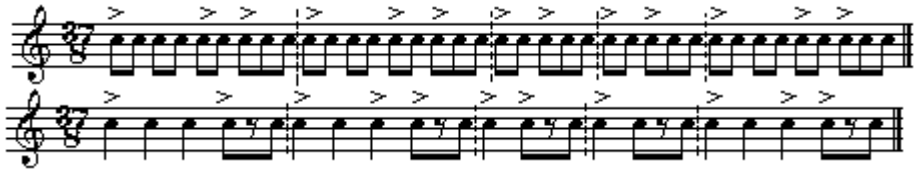


2. Sedi Donka, Iztursi Kalci
   25/8 = 7/8 + 7/8 + 11/8



3. Minah dvaj trij
   19/8 = 5/8 + 5/8 + 9/8 37/8 = 9/8 + 9/8 + 5/8 + 5/8 + 9/8





4. Nanjovo Horo
   22/8 = 13/8 + 9/8