

Hemiola: Switching from 6/8 to 3/4 Meter

By Douglas Niedt

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I know. You are looking at the title of this technique tip and are thinking, "Why is this wonky guy giving me a dissertation on counting rhythm? I thought I was going to learn *technique* so I can play without making mistakes." Well, you are making a big mistake if you pass over this tip!

First, let's get the standard jokes out of the way. Yes, hemiola (pronounced "hem-ee-**oh**-luh") sounds like a disease. Or, it makes some people think of the medical condition called hemophilia where the blood does not clot properly.

Guitarist #1: "My guitar teacher says I have a bad hemiola!"

Guitarist #2: "Wow – that sounds serious!!!"

1. What do you call a musician or composer who really digs hemiola effects?
2. A hemiola-philiac.

What is a Hemiola?

Hemiola is a rhythmic effect produced by changing the grouping of beats. The most common is to change from groups of two to groups of three (or vice-versa). For guitar music, this corresponds most frequently to changing from 6/8 meter to 3/4 meter.

Higher Math

It takes advantage of the fact that $6=3+3$ and also that $6=2+2+2$.

This is How It Works

In music, there are 6 eighth notes (quavers) in each measure in 6/8 meter (Example #1):

Note to my American readers: "quaver" is the British term for our eighth note and "crochet" the term for our quarter note.

Example #1.

In 6/8 meter, there are six 8th notes (quavers) in each measure.



But there are also 6 eighth notes (quavers) in each measure in 3/4 meter (Example #2):

Example #2.

But in 3/4 meter, there are also six 8th notes (quavers) in each measure.



The difference is how they are grouped, accented, and counted. Notice that the notes are beamed into groups of 3 in 6/8. But they are beamed into groups of 2 in 3/4 (Example #3):

Example #3.

Both 6/8 and 3/4 meter contain six 8th notes (quavers) in each measure.

Only the grouping of the notes and which notes are accented change.

THE SPEED OF THE NOTES STAYS THE SAME.

The image shows a musical staff comparing 6/8 and 3/4 meters. In 6/8, the notes are beamed in groups of three, with accents on the first and fourth notes. In 3/4, the notes are beamed in groups of two, with accents on the first, second, and third notes. The text 'But the speed of the notes stays the same.' is written above the staff. Below the staff, red text explains: 'In 6/8 the notes are beamed and accented in groups of three.' and blue text explains: 'In 3/4 the notes are beamed and accented in groups of two.'

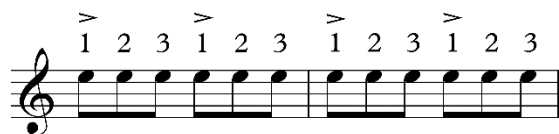
The 6/8 meter may be counted in different ways. Although the traditional way is most correct, when it comes to counting hemiola, do whatever is easiest for you (Example #4):

Example #4.

Traditionally, 6/8 is counted like this:



But it can also be counted like this as long as the notes are counted in groups of three:



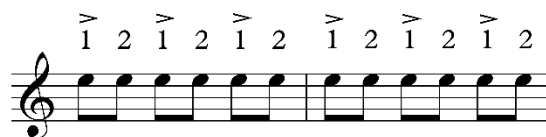
The 3/4 meter can also be counted in different ways (Example #5):

Example #5.

Traditionally, 3/4 is counted like this:



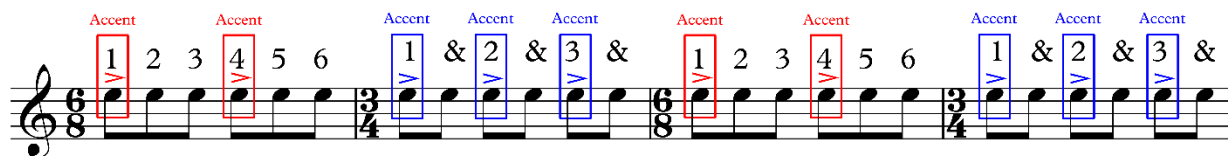
But it can also be counted like this as long as the notes are counted in groups of two:



When faced with a hemiola rhythm, (most commonly switching back and forth from 6/8 to 3/4), it can be counted in any of the following ways. Do whichever is least confusing to you (Example #6):

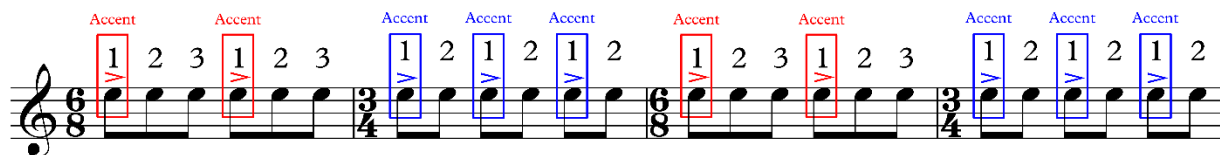
Example #6.

Therefore, the switch from 6/8 to 3/4 could be counted traditionally:



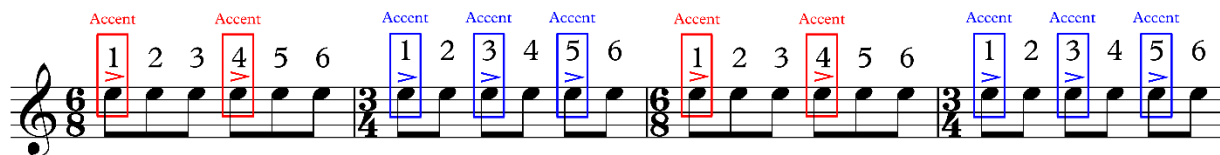
The speed of the notes stays the same.

Or, simplified into groups of 3 and 2:



The speed of the notes stays the same.

If counting different sets of numbers is confusing, both meters could even be counted in 6. But you must be certain to clearly differentiate the accents.



The speed of the notes stays the same.

Watch me demonstrate (Video #1):



Tech Tip Hemiola Video 1 Hemiola Basics

One of the most famous examples of the hemiola comes from Leonard Bernstein's song *America* from his Broadway musical, *West Side Story*. The primary rhythmic figure is (Example #7):

Example #7. *America* from *West Side Story* (Leonard Bernstein)

[illegible]

Watch this delightful clip from the movie version (Video #2):



Tech Tip Hemiola Video 2 America from West Side Story Movie Clip

Watch me play it on the guitar and explain the rhythm (Video #3):



Tech Tip Hemiola Video 3 America from West Side Story on Guitar

Horizontal and Vertical Hemiolas

There are two types of rhythmic hemiolas: **horizontal hemiola** and **vertical hemiola**.

In the horizontal hemiola the meter changes in successive measures as in the examples above. The meter can change every measure. Or it might stay in one meter for several measures and then change for one or more measures. Or, it might only change once in the entire song.

In the vertical hemiola two meters are present simultaneously. The upper voice could be in 6/8 and the lower voice in 3/4 or vice-versa. The vertical hemiola is not nearly as common as the horizontal hemiola.

This technique tip will focus only on the horizontal hemiola.