

How to Count Music in Multiple Voices

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The ability to play multiple parts of a song at the same time is one of the distinctive strengths of the classical guitarist and fingerstyle guitarist. Other guitarists and musicians marvel at our ability to play a melody, accompaniment part, and bass line at the same time; and our ability to play counterpoint of two, three, and four parts or voices. But counting the rhythms of music written in multiple parts often confuses beginning and even intermediate guitarists.

Let's look at a simple example to understand the basics:

Example #1

Example #1 shows a musical score in 4/4 time. The top staff is a treble clef with a melody. The bottom staff is a guitar staff with three lines labeled T (Treble), A (Alto), and B (Bass). The melody is written on the top line of the guitar staff, and the bass line is written on the bottom line. The notation is shorthand, with notes connected by stems and fingerings indicated by numbers 1-3. The bass line consists of whole notes on the bottom line, while the melody consists of quarter notes on the top line.

The problem with this shorthand style of notation is that it doesn't make clear that the music is in two parts. It is not clear that the higher-range notes comprise the melody, the notes of which should be connected, and that the lower notes comprise the bass part.

Let's improve the notation a little bit by stemming the melody notes upward and the bass notes downward:

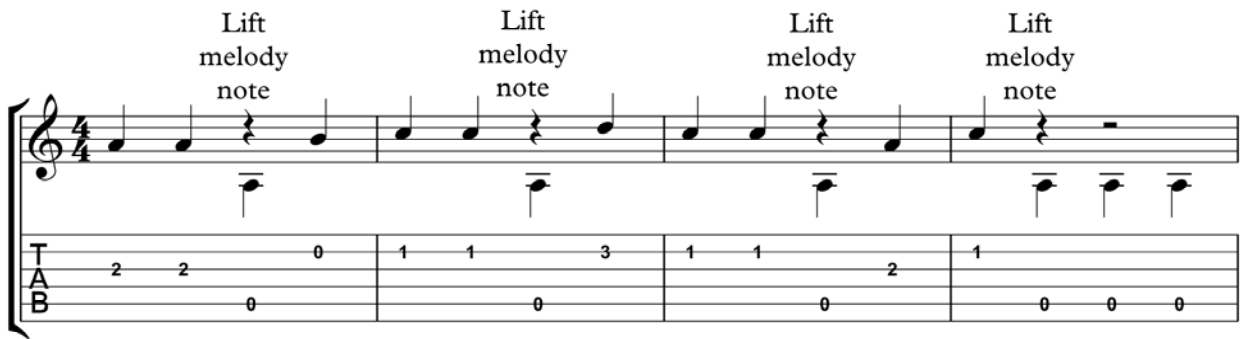
Example #2

Example #2 shows the same musical score as Example #1, but with stems for the melody notes pointing upward and stems for the bass notes pointing downward. This makes it clearer that there are two distinct parts: a melody and a bass line. The notation is still shorthand, with fingerings indicated by numbers 1-3. The bass line consists of whole notes on the bottom line, while the melody consists of quarter notes on the top line.

By stemming the melody notes upward and the bass notes downward, it is a little clearer that the music is in two parts. But it still isn't clear that the melody notes are to be connected. Some guitarists might lift each melody note when the bass note is played. It would sound disjointed like this:

Example #3

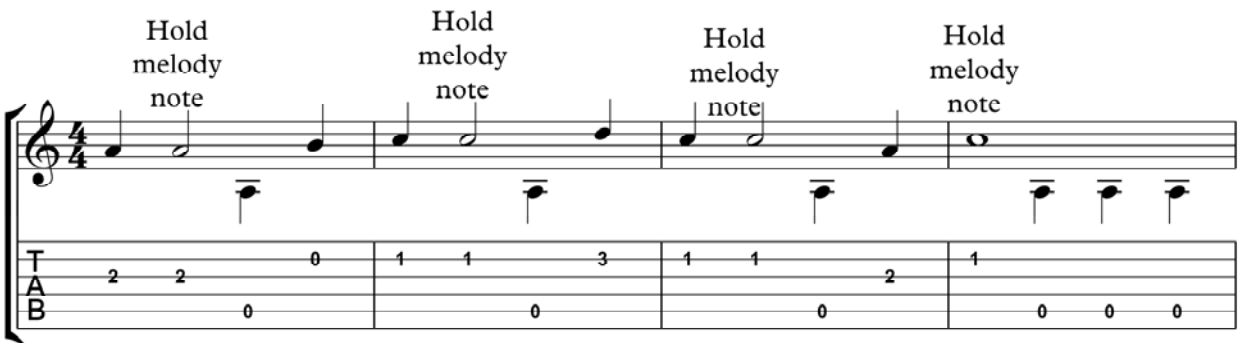
Diagram illustrating Example #3, a musical score in 4/4 time. The score consists of a treble clef staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains four measures, each with a melody note (quarter note) and a lift instruction above it. The bass staff contains four measures, each with a lift instruction above it. The notes are: Measure 1: G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter); Measure 2: C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter); Measure 3: F#3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), C3 (quarter); Measure 4: B2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter). The lift instructions are: Measure 1: Lift melody note; Measure 2: Lift melody note; Measure 3: Lift melody note; Measure 4: Lift melody note.



To make it clear the melody is be connected, I would notate it like this:

Example #4

Diagram illustrating Example #4, a musical score in 4/4 time. The score consists of a treble clef staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains four measures, each with a melody note (quarter note) and a hold instruction above it. The bass staff contains four measures, each with a hold instruction above it. The notes are: Measure 1: G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter); Measure 2: C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter); Measure 3: F#3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), C3 (quarter); Measure 4: B2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter). The hold instructions are: Measure 1: Hold melody note; Measure 2: Hold melody note; Measure 3: Hold melody note; Measure 4: Hold melody note.



Some of you may object that it looks like there are too many beats in each measure:

Example #5

Example #5 shows a musical score with a melody line (treble clef) and a bass line (bass clef). The melody line has four measures of music. The first three measures each contain three eighth notes, and the fourth measure contains a half note. The notes are G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F#6, G6, A6, B6, C7, D7, E7, F#7, G7, A7, B7, C8, D8, E8, F#8, G8, A8, B8, C9, D9, E9, F#9, G9, A9, B9, C10, D10, E10, F#10, G10, A10, B10, C11, D11, E11, F#11, G11, A11, B11, C12, D12, E12, F#12, G12, A12, B12, C13, D13, E13, F#13, G13, A13, B13, C14, D14, E14, F#14, G14, A14, B14, C15, D15, E15, F#15, G15, A15, B15, C16, D16, E16, F#16, G16, A16, B16, C17, D17, E17, F#17, G17, A17, B17, C18, D18, E18, F#18, G18, A18, B18, C19, D19, E19, F#19, G19, A19, B19, C20, D20, E20, F#20, G20, A20, B20, C21, D21, E21, F#21, G21, A21, B21, C22, D22, E22, F#22, G22, A22, B22, C23, D23, E23, F#23, G23, A23, B23, C24, D24, E24, F#24, G24, A24, B24, C25, D25, E25, F#25, G25, A25, B25, C26, D26, E26, F#26, G26, A26, B26, C27, D27, E27, F#27, G27, A27, B27, C28, D28, E28, F#28, G28, A28, B28, C29, D29, E29, F#29, G29, A29, B29, C30, D30, E30, F#30, G30, A30, B30, C31, D31, E31, F#31, G31, A31, B31, C32, D32, E32, F#32, G32, A32, B32, 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G299, A299, B299, C300, D300, E300, F#300, G300, A300, B300, C301, D301, E301, F#301, G301, A301, B301, C302, D302, E302, F#302, G302, A302, B302, C303, D303, E303, F#303, G303, A303, B303, C304, D304, E304, F#304, G304, A304, B304, C305, D305, E305, F#305, G305, A305, B305, C306, D306, E306, F#306, G306, A306, B306, C307, D307, E307, F#307, G307, A307, B307, C308, D308, E308, F#308, G308, A308, B308, C309, D309, E309, F#309, G309, A309, B309, C310, D310, E310, F#310, G310, A310, B310, C311, D311, E311, F#311, G311, A311, B311, C312, D312, E312, F#312, G312, A312, B312, C313, D313, E313, F#313, G313, A313, B313, C314, D314, E314, F#314, G314, A314, B314, C315, D315, E315, F#315, G315, A315, B315, C316, D316, E316, F#316, G316, A316, B316, C317, D317, E317, F#317, G317, A317, B317, C318, D318, E318, F#318, G318, A318, B318, C319, D319, E319, F#319, G319, A319, B319, C320, D320, E320, F#320, G320, A320, B320, C321, D321, E321, F#321, G321, A321, B321, C322, D322, E322, F#322, G322, A322, B322, C323, D323, E323, F#323, G323, A323, B323, C324, D324, E324, F#324, G324, A324, B324, C325, D325, E325, F#325, G325, A325, B325, C326, D326, E326, F#326, G326, A326, B326, C327, D327, E327, F#327, G327, A327, B327, C328, D328, E328, F#328, G328, A328, B328, C329, D329, E329, F#329, G329, A329, B329, C330, D330, E330, F#330, G330, A330, B330, C331, D331, E331, F#331, G331, A331, B331, C332, D332, E332, F#332, G332, A332, B332, C333, D333, E333, F#333, G333, A333, B333, C334, D334, E334, F#334, G334, A334, B334, C335, D335, E335, F#335, G335, A335, B335, C336, D336, E336, F#336, G336, A336, B336, C337, D337, E337, F#337, G337, A337, B337, C338, D338, E338, F#338, G338, A338, B338, C339, D339, E339, F#339, G339, A339, B339, C340, D340, E340, F#340, G340, A340, B340, C341, D341, E341, F#341, G341, A341, B341, C342, D342, E342, F#342, G342, A342, B342, C343, D343, E343, F#343, G343, A343, B343, C344, D344, E344, F#344, G344, A344, B344, C345, D345, E345, F#345, G345, A345, B345, C346, D346, E346, F#346, G346, A346, B346, C347, D347, E347, F#347, G347, A347, B347, C348, D348, E348, F#348, G348, A348, B348, C349, D349, E349, F#349, G349, A349, B349, C350, D350, E350, F#350, G350, A350, B350, C351, D351, E351, F#351, G351, A351, B351, C352, D352, E352, F#352, G352, A352, B352, C353, D353, E353, F#353, G353, A353, B353, C354, D354, E354, F#354, G354, A354, B354, C355, D355, E355, F#355, G355, A355, B355, C356, D356, E356, F#356, G356, A356, B356, C357, D357, E357, F#357, G357, A357, B357, C358, D358, E358, F#358, G358, A358, B358, C359, D359, E359, F#359, G359, A359, B359, C360, D360, E360, F#360, G360, A360, B360, C361, D361, E361, F#361, G361, A361, B361, C362, D362, E362, F#362, G362, A362, B362, C363,

The reason for this is that guitar composers and arrangers sometimes use shorthand notation to make the page look less cluttered. In this example, the spacing of the notes makes it clear on which beats the bass notes are played. What is not clear is the intended duration of those bass notes. The basses are notated as quarter notes. If one decides the bass notes are to be played literally as quarter notes, they must be damped or muted as indicated by the rests in this example:

Example #7

Example #7 shows a musical score for guitar in 4/4 time. The treble staff contains a sequence of quarter notes with fingerings 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4. The bass staff contains a sequence of quarter notes with fingerings 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4. The bass notes are marked with 'Damp A' and 'Damp A' below them, indicating they should be damped or muted. The notation is shorthand, with the bass notes being quarter notes.

But I think most guitarists would interpret the shorthand notation in example #6 as meaning the composer wanted the bass notes to ring freely. They wouldn't bother with all the string damping. But the fact is, it could be interpreted either way. If the composer wanted to make it very clear that he wanted the basses to ring to their full extent, he would have to notate it like this:

Example #8

Example #8 shows a musical score for guitar in 4/4 time. The treble staff contains a sequence of quarter notes with fingerings 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4. The bass staff contains a sequence of quarter notes with fingerings 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4. The bass notes are marked with 'Damp A' and 'Damp A' below them, indicating they should be damped or muted. The notation is shorthand, with the bass notes being quarter notes.

This certainly makes it clear which melody notes are to be held and which bass notes are to ring. But compare this example with the shorthand version (example #6). Many people prefer the shorthand version because it is less cluttered. Others prefer the fully-notated version for its precision.

To confuse things a bit more, some composers/arrangers use *semi-shorthand notation* such as this:

Example #9

Example #9 shows a musical score in 4/4 time. The top staff is a treble clef with a melody. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with three lines labeled T (Treble), A (Alto), and B (Bass). The melody consists of four measures. The first measure has a whole rest on the treble staff and three eighth notes on the bass staff. The second measure has a half note on the treble staff and two eighth notes on the bass staff. The third measure has a half note on the treble staff and two eighth notes on the bass staff. The fourth measure has a half note on the treble staff and two eighth notes on the bass staff. The tablature uses numbers 0, 1, 2, 3 to indicate fret positions.

Here, the notation for the melody is clear. The bass, while it appears to be precise, is not intended to be played as notated! This example comes from a beginning guitar method. The author clearly did not intend the beginning student to damp the bass notes on the first beat of each measure. The rests are shorthand or a notational convenience to avoid cluttering the score with ties.

Sometimes a composer will use shorthand notation and a more precise notation in the same score. Here are two measures from Fernando Sor's *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises*, Op. 35 No. 1:

Example #10

Example #10 shows two measures of music in 2/4 time. The top staff is a treble clef with a melody. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with three lines labeled T (Treble), A (Alto), and B (Bass). The first measure has a half note on the treble staff and two eighth notes on the bass staff. The second measure has a half note on the treble staff and two eighth notes on the bass staff. The tablature uses numbers 0, 1, 2, 3 to indicate fret positions.

The intention is certainly to hold the low B and C in the first measure as half notes and to hold the D in the second measure as a whole note:

Example #11

It could have been notated more precisely like this:

Example #12

Which is exactly what he does five measures later in a similar passage:

Example #13

But now we are dealing with three voices. However, regardless of how many voices are in a passage, use the same guiding principle: **count the rhythmic values of each voice separately and independently from the others.**

I have color coded the voices to make it easier to understand. The melody (red notes) is counted like this:

Example #14

Example #14 shows a musical score with three voices. The melody (red notes) is counted 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4. The bass (green notes) is counted 3 0 0 1 0 3 0. The middle voice (purple notes) is counted 2 0 3 0 0 2 0.

The bass voice (green notes) is counted the same way as the melody since both are a series of half notes:

Example #15

Example #15 shows a musical score with three voices. The melody (red notes) is counted 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4. The bass (green notes) is counted 3 0 0 1 0 3 0. The middle voice (purple notes) is counted 2 0 3 0 0 2 0.

The middle voice which could be called the accompaniment or alto or tenor voice (purple notes) is counted like this:

Example #16

3 0 0 0 1 0 3 0

T A B

The first count is the purple quarter rest. Then, the first G is played on beat 2. Next, the second G is played on beat 4. The same counting pattern is present in the second measure.

When you put all three parts together into an ultimate shorthand version, you end up with:

Example #17

3 0 0 0 1 0 3 0

T A B

Here is an example of a passage in three voices in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. This is from Fernando Sor's *Twenty Four Progressive Lessons*, Op. 31, No. 1:

Example #18

Example #18 shows a musical score in 3/4 time. The treble staff contains four measures of music. The first measure has a red note on the first line (F4), a purple note on the second line (G4), and a green note on the first space (E4). The second measure has a red note on the second line (G4), a purple note on the second space (A4), and a green note on the first space (E4). The third measure has a red note on the second space (A4), a purple note on the third line (B4), and a green note on the first space (E4). The fourth measure has a red note on the third line (B4), a purple note on the third space (C5), and a green note on the first space (E4). The bass staff contains four measures of TAB notation. The first measure has a 1 on the first string and a 1 on the second string. The second measure has a 0 on the first string and a 0 on the second string. The third measure has a 3 on the first string and a 3 on the second string. The fourth measure has a 1 on the first string and a 1 on the second string.

Again I have color coded the notes so you can easily see the melody (red), accompaniment (purple), and bass (green). Once again, we must count the rhythm of each voice separately before we can understand how they fit together.

Here is the melody (red notes):

Example #19

Example #19 shows a musical score in 3/4 time. The treble staff contains four measures of music. The first measure has a red note on the first line (F4) highlighted by a red box with the number 1, a purple note on the second line (G4), and a green note on the first space (E4). The second measure has a red note on the second line (G4) highlighted by a red box with the number 2, a purple note on the second space (A4), and a green note on the first space (E4). The third measure has a red note on the second space (A4) highlighted by a red box with the number 3, a purple note on the third line (B4), and a green note on the first space (E4). The fourth measure has a red note on the third line (B4) highlighted by a red box with the number 1, a purple note on the third space (C5), and a green note on the first space (E4). The bass staff contains four measures of TAB notation. The first measure has a 1 on the first string and a 1 on the second string. The second measure has a 0 on the first string and a 0 on the second string. The third measure has a 3 on the first string and a 3 on the second string. The fourth measure has a 1 on the first string and a 1 on the second string.

Here is the bass part (green notes):

Example #20

Example #20 shows a musical score in 3/4 time. The treble staff contains four measures of music. The first measure has a green box around the first note with a '1' below it. The second measure has a green box around the first note with a '1' below it. The third measure has a green box around the first note with a '1' below it. The fourth measure has a green box around the first note with a '1' below it. The bass staff has four measures of TAB notation: 1 0 1, 0 0 0, 3 0 3, 1 0 1.

And finally the middle voice or accompaniment:

Example #21

Example #21 shows a musical score in 3/4 time. The treble staff contains four measures of music. The first measure has a purple box around the second note with a '2' below it. The second measure has a purple box around the second note with a '2' below it. The third measure has a purple box around the second note with a '2' below it. The fourth measure has a purple box around the second note with a '2' below it. The bass staff has four measures of TAB notation: 1 0 1, 0 0 0, 3 0 3, 1 0 1.

Put them all together into shorthand notation and you end up with:

Example #22

Example #22 shows a musical score in 3/4 time. The treble staff contains four measures of music. The first measure has a purple box around the second note with a '2' below it. The second measure has a purple box around the second note with a '2' below it. The third measure has a purple box around the second note with a '2' below it. The fourth measure has a purple box around the second note with a '2' below it. The bass staff has four measures of TAB notation: 1 0 1, 0 0 0, 3 0 3, 1 0 1.

You will notice that when three voices are present, two of the voices will be stemmed the same direction. In examples #18-21 above, the accompaniment and bass voices are both stemmed downwards.

But of course things are never simple. Sometimes notes or chords in a voice are not stemmed the same direction. Check out this measure from Francisco Tárrega's *Adelita*:

Example #23

Accompaniment notes with different stem directions

Melody notes with different stem directions

T
A
B

0 0 2
6 9 2 4
0 0

At first is difficult to tell where the melody is and where the accompaniment notes are. Here is my color coded version to help you out:

Example #24

T
A
B

0 0 2
6 9 2 4
0 0

Again, the melody is the red notes. But this time the melody is in the middle voice. The highest notes comprise the accompaniment (purple notes). The lowest notes still belong to the bass part (green). But not all the melody notes are stemmed the same direction. And the two accompaniment chords are stemmed opposite.

Personally, I would have notated it like this:

Example #25

Example #25 shows a musical score with a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written in red notes, the accompaniment in purple notes, and the bass part in green notes. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps, and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written in red notes, the accompaniment in purple notes, and the bass part in green notes. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps, and a 3/4 time signature.

Here it is without the color coding:

Example #26

Example #26 shows a musical score with a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written in black notes, the accompaniment in black notes, and the bass part in black notes. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps, and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written in black notes, the accompaniment in black notes, and the bass part in black notes. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps, and a 3/4 time signature.

Another anomaly you will run across is voices suddenly dropping out or unaccounted for. Let's look at *Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega. The accompaniment (or rhythm guitar part) which is the middle voice, consistently drops out on the third beat of several measures:

Example #27

What happened to the middle voice?

What happened to the middle voice?

What happened to the middle voice?

What happened to the middle voice?

Notice that in each measure the purple 8th rests and 8th notes only add up to two beats. Two beats are unaccounted for in each measure. Personally, I would have added half rests on the third beat of each measure to account for those missing beats.

Sometimes a note may serve as a member of two voices. In Fernando Sor's *Twenty-Four Very Easy Pieces*, Op. 35 No. 2 the low C's serve both as half-note bass notes and as part of the arpeggiated accompaniment pattern:

Example #28

In other words, each C is not only a half note in the bass voice (the stem going downwards) but is also a 16th note (stem going upwards and connected to the 16th note beam) in the accompaniment or middle voice.

In the well-known *Study No. 5* (as numbered by Segovia in “The 20 Studies” by Fernando Sor) things get complicated. At first glance, it is difficult to understand which notes belong to which voice.

Example #29

The image shows a musical score for a guitar piece. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. Below the staff is a guitar tablature with three staves labeled T (Treble), A (Alto), and B (Bass). The tablature shows fret numbers (0-4) corresponding to the notes in the melody. A bracket under the first two measures of the tablature indicates a specific fingering or technique.

The piece has multiple voices. But how many voices are present? And which notes belong to which voice? You must unravel all that before you will be able to figure out the counting. This one I will have to explain with a video. Watch:

Example #29b

The musical score for Example #29b is written on a single staff with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The score consists of a single melodic line. The guitar tablature below the staff has three staves labeled T, A, and B. The tablature shows fingerings for the strings: T (Treble), A (A), and B (B). The first measure of the tablature shows fingerings 3, 4, 4, 4, 3, 4 for the T staff and 2 for the A and B staves. The second measure shows fingerings 2, 3, 3, 2, 3 for the T staff and 2 for the A and B staves. The third measure shows fingerings 0, 2, 2, 0, 2 for the T staff and 4 for the A and B staves. The fourth measure shows fingerings 3, 4, 4, 3, 4 for the T staff and 4 for the A and B staves.

How to Count Music in Multiple Voices Sor Study 5

As you see from the video, depending on how the composer has chosen to notate the music, it can take quite a bit of investigation to figure out how many voices are present and which notes belong to which voice. Once you figure that out, it is a simple matter of counting the note values of each voice separately and then combining them all together.

If you are dealing with counterpoint, the same counting principles apply. Count each voice separately, and then put them together. Here are the first six measures of the *Prelude* from Bach's *Lute Suite* BWV 995. I have changed the meter from 2/2 to 4/4 to make it easier to count. I have also omitted ornaments.

Example #30

The musical score for Example #30 is presented in two systems, each with a treble clef staff and a three-line tablature system below it. The first system contains measures 1 through 3, and the second system contains measures 4 through 6. The upper voice (red) is present in all measures, with fingerings indicated by red numbers 1-4. The middle voice (purple) enters in measure 4, and the bass voice (green) enters in measure 4 as well. The tablature system below the staff uses numbers 0-4 to indicate fret positions for each voice. The first system shows measures 1, 2, and 3, while the second system shows measures 4, 5, and 6. The score is in 4/4 time and features three voices: upper voice (red), middle voice (purple), and bass voice (green). Each measure is numbered 1 through 6. The upper voice is consistently present, while the middle and bass voices enter in measure 4. The score includes fingerings and a tablature system below the staff.

Measures one and two are straightforward. You only need to focus on counting the upper voice (red). Measure three is a little more complex because the bass part becomes more active. In the fourth measure, notice that the bass voice (green) drops out and the middle voice enters (purple). Finally all three voices are present in measures five and six.

Once again, to figure out how the passage is to be played, it is essential to determine the counting within each individual voice first. Then, combine them.

Summary

The first step in figuring out how to count a passage written in multiple voices is to analyze the voices. First, figure out how many voices are present. Then figure out which notes belong to which voice. For each voice, try to account for all the beats in each measure. Remember, the composer may have taken notation shortcuts. If you can't decipher it visually, play the passage as best you can to try to hear the composer's intentions. If you look at what's on the page with your eyes and listen to the music with your ears, you will be able to sort the notes into their proper voices, count the rhythms of each voice individually, and finally combine them accurately into a whole.