

Time Signatures

I was asked a few weeks ago the name of a particular tune I was playing, "*Poor Wayfaring Stranger*"; a tune I typically play into "*Brian Boru*." The tune is a well-known American spiritual/folk song likely originating in the early 19th century about a plaintive soul on the journey through life. It became one of Burl Ives's signature songs, included on his 1944 album *The Wayfaring Stranger*. Ives used it as the title of his early 1940s CBS radio show and his 1948 autobiography. He became known as "The Wayfaring Stranger".

Below and attached are the version I transcribed from a violin score. I tend to "bend" the "Es" as opposed to playing a doubleE as shown.

Poor Wayfaring Stranger

Slow Air

arr. P. Heineman

Omaha Pipes and Drums 11.2.12

I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger
I'm traveling through this world of woe
Yet there's no sickness, toil nor danger
In that bright land to which I go
I'm going there to see my mother/father
I'm going there no more to roam
I'm only going over Jordan
I'm only going over home

I know dark clouds will gather 'round me
I know my way is rough and steep
Yet golden fields lie just before me
Where God's redeemed shall ever sleep
I'm going there to see my father/mother
S/he said he'd/she'd meet me when I come
I'm only going over Jordan
I'm only going over home

I want to wear a crown of glory
When I get home to that good land
I want to shout salvation's story
In concert with the blood-washed band
I'm going there to meet my Savior
To sing his praise forever more
I'm just a going over Jordan
I'm just a going over home

Then the question came up of why I wrote the tune in 4/4 and not 3/4. Well...the simple answer is that I was transposing it from 4/4 and that happens to be the most popular. However, it could also be written in 3/4.

When I asked the question of Ian Macy at a composition workshop at Winter Storm a number of years ago of what time signature to use for different types of tunes, his response..."*It depends*." He didn't elaborate, but it was a wild party the night before.

As you know, or should by now, the time signature (also known as meter signature) is a notational convention used in Western culture to specify how many beats are in each measure and which note value constitutes one beat. There are various types of time signatures, depending on whether the music follows simple rhythms or involves unusual shifting tempos, including: simple (such as 2/4, 3/4 or 4/4), compound (6/8, 9/8 or 12/8), complex (5/4 or 7/8), additive, fractional, irrational, and other meters.

4/4 or *Common time* **C** is widely used in most forms of Western popular music; rock, blues, country, funk, and pop. 3/4 is used for waltzes, minuets, scherzi, country and western ballads, R&B, and sometimes pop.

So, Ian was correct, "*It depends.*" It depends on a lot of things. Most of all, it is important to remember that music notation is a guide. It is a platform on which the musician adds expression.