



Musical notation - The Basics

Introduction

In the first lesson of this Progressive course, we'll deal with the basics of musical notation. How is notation compiled and how does one go about reading it? We assume that you've completed our Basic course, or that you possess the appropriate knowledge of the piano.



First of all, watch the video 'Musical notation – The Basics'.



Chapter 1 - – The basics of musical notation

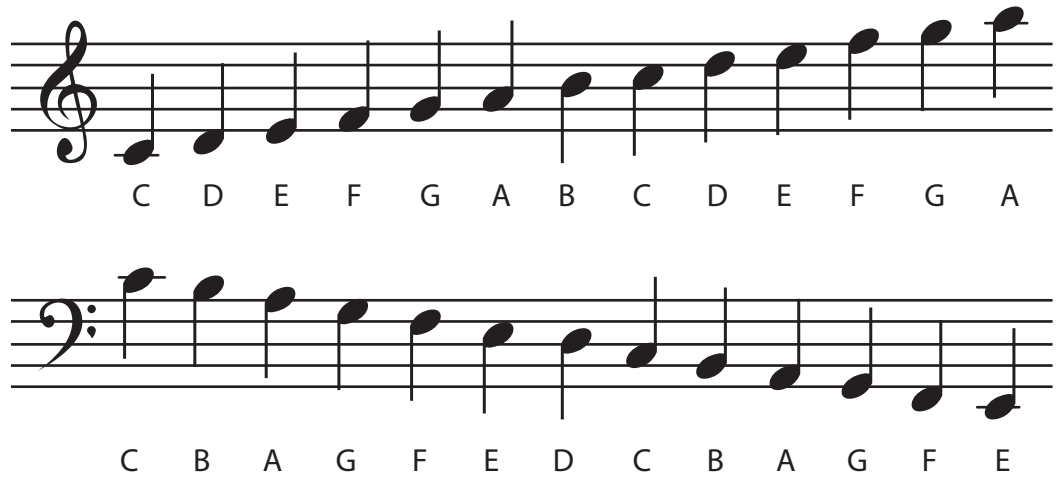
Musical notation is simply defined as music, as you hear it, printed on paper. At school you learnt how to read and to understand what you read. The same counts when reading music. The printed notes simply indicate to you which keys to play on the piano.



The horizontal lines in the diagram are called the staff and the black dots are the notes. We'll explain the little tails on the notes shortly. The higher a note is on the staff, the higher that note is played on the keyboard and thus, the higher its pitch. Since you play with both hands, you'll need to read the notes on two staves. One staff is for your left hand and the other is for your right. The top staff is always for the right hand and the bottom one for the left.



Each of the staves has its own symbol. The treble clef ($\text{tr}\text{e}\text{b}\text{l}\text{e}$) and the bass clef ($\text{b}\text{a}\text{s}\text{s}$). You'll notice a C on both the staves in the diagram. This is middle C. All notes higher than middle C are located in the treble clef and all notes lower than middle C are located in the bass clef. There are compositions with both staves in the treble clef. These are very high-pitched pieces!



Let's have another look at the diagram. You'll notice a ledger line through the middle C note. The ledger lines assist the reader in finding the position of the notes. All the notes in the diagram are played with white keys. Black keys are indicated by a sharp symbol (#) or a flat symbol (b). More about this later. Notes on the five-line staff may be written on or between the lines. On the top staff, D follows C (one key higher) and is placed one step higher between the lines of the staff. After D comes E which is a further step higher on the line. And so it carries on. If one needed to play the highest note in the diagram (A) even higher, the note would be written above the staff using ledger lines. We'll deal with these later in the course.

For the bass clef, the opposite applies. A step lower than C is B, placed between the lines. A is one more step lower and is placed on the line, and so on.

If you completed the online pianoles basic course, you might be wondering what the advantages of musical notation are, besides showing you which notes to play. The great thing about notation is that it not only tells you which notes to play, but also tells you how long those notes should be played for.

Semibreve



Minim



Crotchet



Quaver



Semiquaver



The actual played length of a semibreve or a minim depends on the time signature placed at the beginning of the staff. In most cases, a bar consists of four beats. This means that a semibreve should be played for the full four counts and a minim half of that.



The top 4 indicates 4 beats to the bar. The lower 4 indicates that a semibreve should last for 4 beats. Furthermore, a crotchet should last 1 beat, a quaver half a beat and a semiquaver a quarter of a beat. Every marked section of the staff is called a bar or a measure. This system tells the musician exactly what notes to play and for how long to play those notes.



Hint: *If you're going to play a piece well, you'll need to keep a constant rhythm. A metronome, a machine which supplies a rhythmic ticking or beeping sound, can be a great aid. The speed of the metronome can be adjusted so that you may practice a piece slowly at first and then gradually faster. One beep or tick is equal to one beat.*



Exercise 1

On the score below, you'll notice that the quavers (♪) are connected (♫). This doesn't change the way they are played, it just the way they are often written. These quavers remain separate notes.

At the end of the score there are two notes that are placed below the staff. Ledger lines are used to clearly indicate the position of those notes.

Under normal circumstances piano scores always contain two staves, one for each hand. Because you're still learning we'll only use one staff so that you may play a simple piece using only your right hand. So, on the musical notation, you'll find only one staff instead of the customary two.

To play this piece you'll use the treble clef and start from middle C. If you were using the bass clef, you would have started from F. Check the diagram on page 2!

Play the song using your right hand.

The musical score consists of three staves in 4/4 time, all using a treble clef. The first staff contains a sequence of notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The second staff contains: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The third staff contains: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The notes are written as quarter notes, with some pairs of quarter notes beamed together to represent eighth notes.



Exercise 2

Chords are also indicated in musical notation. This is done by writing a number of notes directly below one another, indicating that these notes should be played simultaneously. If you completed our Basic course, you'll know about the different chord variants. A musical score, however, doesn't allow the person reading it the freedom to choose from those variants. The way the chords should be played is indicated by the score.

Because of the bass clef on the staff, we know that this series of chords begins with a C-chord.

Play the random chords below (C, Amin, F and G) using your left hand. Pay attention to the duration of each chord.

Chords

The image shows two staves of musical notation in bass clef, 4/4 time. The first staff contains four measures, each with a single chord: C major (C4, E3, G3), A minor (A2, C3, E3), F major (F2, A2, C3), and G major (G2, B2, D3). The second staff contains eight measures: C major, A minor, F major, G major, C major, A minor, F major, and G major. Each chord is represented by a vertical line with circles indicating the notes to be played simultaneously.



Hint: *The length of the chords doesn't affect the tempo at which the piece is played. Above piece may be played at a high or low tempo. A beat isn't necessarily a second long. You might count fast and play at a high tempo or count slowly and play at a lower tempo. The correct speed at which to play sheet music will be discussed at a later stage.*