How To Read Music 101

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Learning to read music is really not that difficult. It just requires a few key ingredients:

- Patience
- Don't ever give up
- Regular practice

But before we go any further we need to go over a few basics. It's kind of like; how would you learn to drive a car if you didn't know how to start the engine? Obviously, you have to know how to start the engine, find the steering wheel and stop the car with the brake pedal, once it gets rolling.

As soon as you've perfected the basic musical steps to 'Start your engine', you'll be well on your way toward trying something more complex. In the meantime, be patient with yourself. In other words, put that Beethoven and Bach aside for now and start with something simple. With enough practice, you'll have taken a major step toward learning to play, sing or write any music you want.

A lot of people think music is difficult to read--but it's not. It's actually the simplest written language there is. And once you get the basics down, the rewards will last a lifetime.

Whether it's rock, reggae, classical, hip hop, country, jazz, folk or anything else, music is written, recognized and played in the same way throughout most of the world.

Learning how to read music is a major step toward being able to play, sing or write any song you want. And while this eBook won't turn you into the next John Lennon overnight, it will provide the skills you need to get started.

Sheet Music

A good place to start is to get your hands on some beginner-level sheet music to use as a spring-board as you're getting off the ground. Go to your local music store. Tell them you are a beginner. Ask them to show where to find your favorite style of music in a beginner format. Search out a copy of a song you like. This will be a tremendous help in familiarizing yourself with the basic fundamentals I'll present.

Once you have a feel for what beginner level music looks like you may want to visit your local library. Most libraries have got great music libraries that don't cost you anything. If you are on a budget, this is a great way to get the ball rolling for very low cost.

Piano or Keyboard

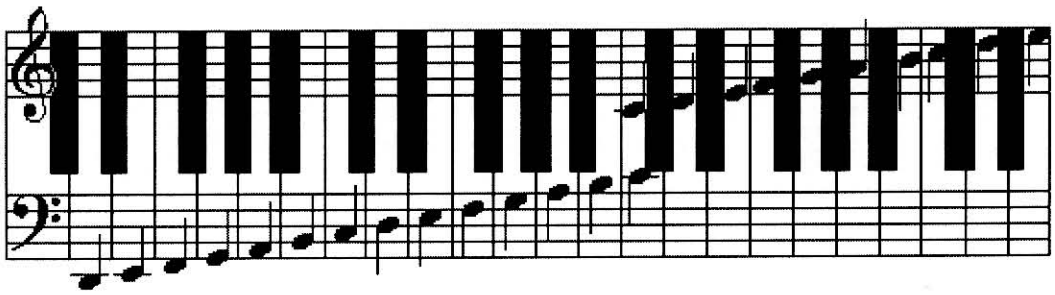
Another big help will be to acquire a piano or keyboard. Preferably one with 'weighted keys' that is 'touch sensitive'. Your local piano / keyboard store should know what this means. Even though you don't need one to read music in general, a keyboard will be invaluable when it comes to understanding how a note's sound relates to what appears on the page. Preferably, I recommend using keyboard instruments, such as the piano or organ. However,

music theory is generally universal, regardless of what instrument you're playing (including your voice).

Many out there don't have access to an instrument; if you don't have access to an instrument of your own; try renting or borrowing one from a friend. Sometimes local community colleges, community centers or churches have instruments (especially pianos or organs) that might be available for public use. Even if you're planning to sing the music you learn to read, it's important to know how it should sound and where to start.

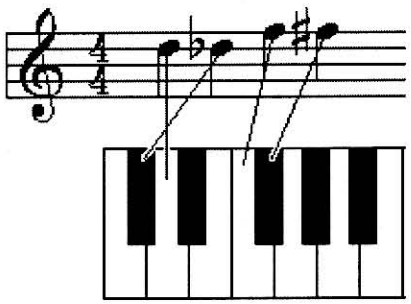
What does typical piano / keyboard music look like?

Here is a typical piano keyboard stave with the corresponding keys transposed on top of it.



Notice that as you go from the lower pitch notes on the left of the piano to the higher pitch notes on the right side of the piano the notes are written on the staffs in ascending order. As you can see from the diagram above we sometimes write notes that are below or above the lines on the staff, these notes appear on extra small lines called ledger lines.

You may also notice that there is one note (middle C) which can be written as either one ledger line above the bass clef or as one ledger line below the treble clef. The diagram above shows all of the white notes on the piano written on the staffs, but you are probably wondering about the black notes, how are they written? Well, this can be answered by viewing the diagram below:



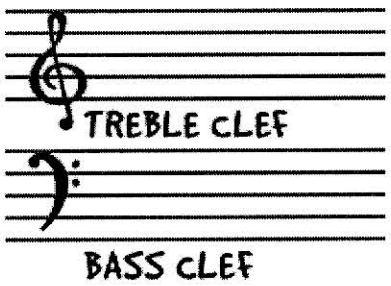
What are the names of notes and clefs?

There are seven note names which correspond with the first seven letters of the alphabet: A, B, C, D, E, F and G.

If you play or sing the notes in order, beginning with A, then counting up following the order of the alphabet up to letter 'G'. Following, you would restart with "A" again, but this time

starting at a higher pitch. For example: **A**, B, C, D, E, F, G, **A**, B, C and so on. Eight notes in a row (in this case, from "A" to "A") is called an **octave**.

Since notes can range in tone from a deep bass (very low) to a high soprano, they're separated in the music by two different clefs: The Treble Clef (or 'G' Clef) and the Bass Clef (or 'F' Clef) ** Note how the Treble Clef, also called a G Clef, encircles the G line.



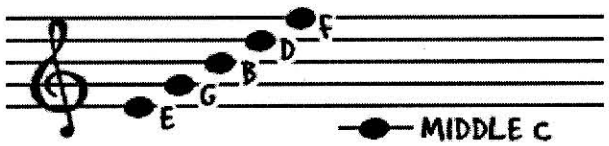
** Note that the Bass Clef, also called the F Clef, has dots surrounding the F line.

Where Do The Notes Fall On The Staves?

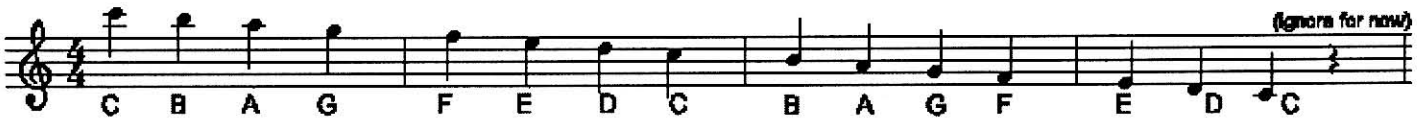
Each Clef has a stave. Staves are made up of five lines and four spaces. Each line and space represents where a particular note might fall.

What Are The Names Of The Notes Of The Treble Stave?

Starting from bottom to top, the lines on the treble stave read: E, G, B, D, F (one note for each line). A well-known acronym for remembering this is "**E**very **G**ood **B**oy **D**oes **F**ine" or another popular acronym is "**E**very **G**ood **B**oy **D**eserves **F**udge." The spaces in between the lines follow the same order, and the notes are **F**, **A**, **C**, **E**, spelling the word: "Face".

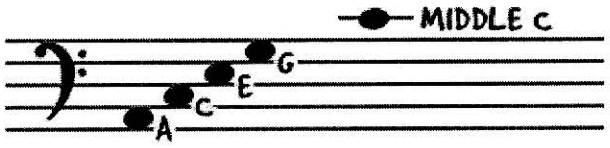


The treble clef:

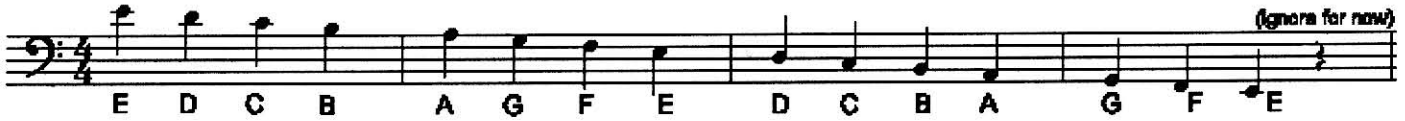


What Are The Names Of The Notes Of The Bass Stave?

Starting from bottom to top, the bass stave is: **A**, **C**, **E**, **G** (one note for each space rather than each line). A popular way to remember this is to say "**A**ll **C**ars **E**at **G**as" or "**A**ll **C**ows **E**at **G**rass." The corresponding lines from bottom to top are **G**, **B**, **D**, **F**, **A**, respectively.

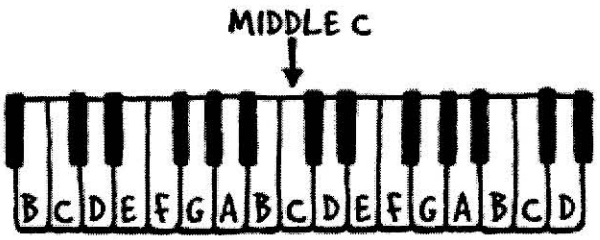


The bass clef:



Where Do The Notes Fall On The Keyboard?

Here is an easy to read picture (snapshot) of the center of a keyboard where the notes (along with their names) are located: **Note: Middle C is typically in the center of the piano located just under the 'Brand Name' of the Piano.



Key Signatures

The next thing you will typically see immediately to the right of the Clef is the 'Key' of the song. The key of the song is indicated by Sharps or Flats; indicating the "**Key Signature**".

 Sharp

 Flat

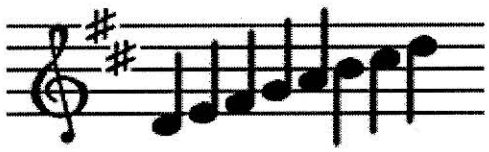
When sharps and flats are written into music as needed (next to the notes), they're called accidentals. But sometimes they are shown at the beginning of a stave, right after the clef. In the case of the song written in the key of 'C' there are no sharps or flats indicated after the Clef. In all cases, they indicate the **key signature**.

If you see a #(Sharp) next to a note it should be played ½ step higher than the natural note. If you see a b(Flat) next to a note it should be played ½ step lower than the natural note.

Key signatures show which notes are to be played or sung as sharps or flats throughout the song. So if there's a sharp sign on "F" and one on "C", every "F" and "C" note throughout the song should be played as a sharp. There will be no "F" or "C" natural unless specifically indicated by a natural symbol:

♮ Natural

Here Is An Example Of How A Key Signature Is Written In A Sharp Key:



D MAJOR SCALE

Key signatures (in this case, D Major) indicate the general tone of a song, as well as where its basic scale begins and ends. For example, a song in the key of D is based on the D Major scale, which begins and ends with "D" -- with "F" and "C" played sharp throughout.

Time Signatures

The next thing you will see immediately to the right of the "Key Signature" is the **Time Signature**. It tells you how many notes there are in each measure and what kind of note gets one count. The number on top is the number of counts (beats) per measure, and the bottom number is what kind of note gets one count (beat). Here is a little more on that:

Let us take for example the most popular time signature, 4/4.
This means there is **4 quarter notes per measure**. How is this so?

Looking at 4/4, you saw the 4 on top. You already knew that meant there were 4 beat's per measure. The bottom number can be 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, etc. Look at this chart.

Bottom Number	Value
1	Whole note
2	Half note
4	Quarter note
8	Eighth note
16	Sixteenth note

For example:
3/4 is **3 quarter notes per measure.**
5/2 is **5 half notes per measure.**
6/8 is **6 eighth notes per measure.**

There are also 2 other common things you might see where the time signature should be.

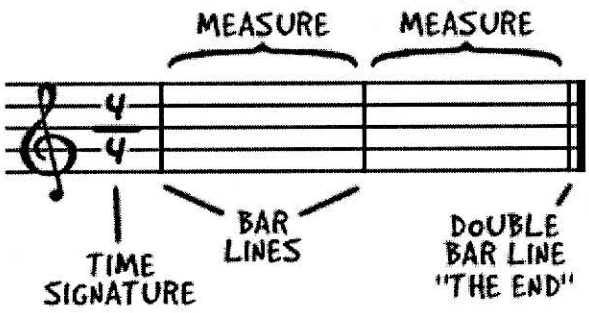
C	Common Time Same as 4/4 time
¢	Cut Time Same as 4/4 but everything is cut in half.

Example: a half note = 1 quarter note, a whole note = 1 half note.

What Comes After The Time Signature?

Bar lines are vertical lines that intersect the entire stave at regular intervals. The end of a piece of music is indicated by a double bar line.

Here is an easy to read picture of most of what we just talked about:

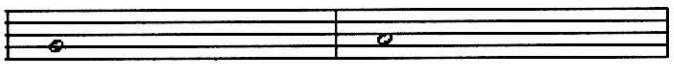


What Symbols Are Used To Indicate Notes or Music / Sounds?

One of the most important parts of music is learning the types and values of notes. Here you will gain some understanding of how the notes look and sound.

The whole note:

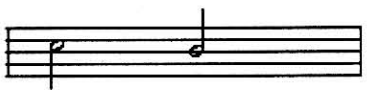
Looks like:



It's written as an oval shape

The half note:

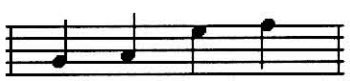
Looks like:



The same as a whole not but with a vertical line, called a 'Stem' attached to it. The line can point up or down(doesn't make a difference in how it is sung or played)

The quarter note:

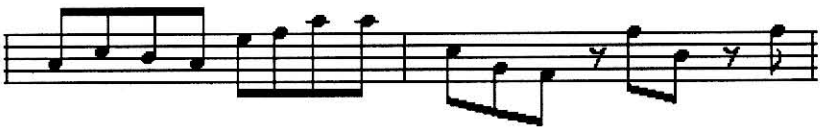
Looks like:



the same as a half note except the circle is filled in.

The eighth note:

Looks like:



The same as quarter notes but with a horizontal lines attached to the stems. They can also be put in groups of 4, 3, or 2.

The sixteenth note:

Looks like:

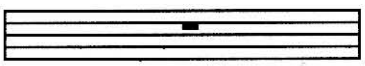
The same as eighth notes but with double horizontal lines attached to the stems. Can also be grouped in 4, 3 or 2 but are joined by a double line.

Space Between Notes:

For each type of note you learned above there is a corresponding rest (No sound or music – called a "Rest")

The whole rest:

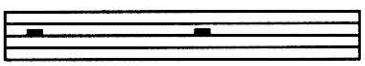
Looks like:



A dark rectangle attached to a bar line, facing downwards. *(1 shown)*

The half rest:

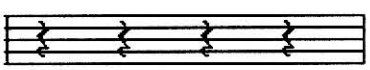
Looks like:



A dark rectangle attached to a bar line, facing upwards. *(2 shown)*

The quarter rest:

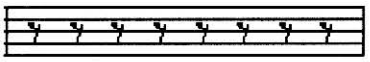
Looks like:



A squiggly line. *(4 shown)*

The eighth rest:

Looks like:



A slanted line with a single flag. *(8 shown)*

The sixteenth rest:

Looks like:

A slanted line with a double flag. *(16 shown)*

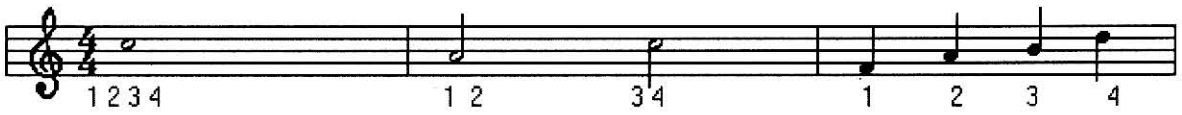
How Do Musicians Know When To Play Or Sing?

In some ways playing music is not that different from dance. As long as you can count, you'll probably be fine. Good dancers follow their counting with their steps. Likewise, good musicians follow their count with music notes. One of the most obvious questions is how musicians know when to play. Well, its easy... they learn to count the beats.

First let me present you with this.

1 whole note = 2 half notes = 4 quarter notes = 8 eighth notes = 16 sixteenth notes. Keep that in mind while looking at these examples.

Lets start with this example.



First off, looking at the time signature you know that there are **4 quarter notes per measure.**

In the first measure the whole note gets all the beats (1, 2, 3 and 4) because 1 whole note = 4 quarter notes, and there is a total of 4 quarter notes per measure.

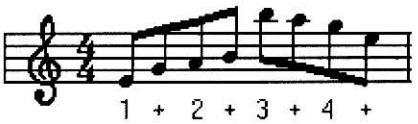
In the second example, each half note gets 2 beats because 2 quarter notes = 1 half note.

In the third example, each quarter note gets its own beat because there are 4 quarter notes per measure (time signature).

Let's intermingle the 2 quarter notes and a half note.

The half note get the first 2 beats, and each quarter its own beat. This makes sense because the 4/4 time signature means there is **4 quarter notes per measure**. 2 quarter notes + 1 half note (which is really 2 quarters) = 4 quarter notes, the total number of quarter notes for that measure (time signature).

Lets add in the eighth notes.



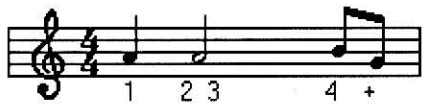
In this example there is something new. The + sign. It just means "and". If you said 1 + 2 + ... out loud it would sound like this.

1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and

Each eighth note is 1/2 of a quarter note, therefore it takes **2** eighth notes to equal **1** quarter note.
Think of it like this: the **1** and the **"and"** are both half of one quarter note and together they form 1 quarter note and from the time signature we know there are 4 quarters per measure.

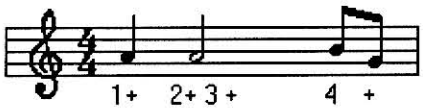
This may seem a little confusing now, but all of the sudden it will click. You will hit yourself in the head and wonder how you never understood it.

Let's introduce a mixed example.



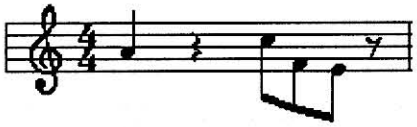
The quarter note is obviously beat 1 because from the time signature you know there are 4 quarter notes per measure. You also already know one half note = 2 quarter notes therefore the half note must be beats 2 and 3. Finally, you know that two eighth notes = 1 quarter note so they must be the "4 +".

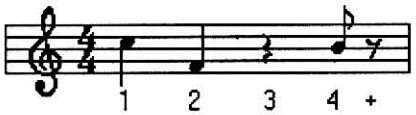
When many different kinds of notes are intermingled, it starts to become tricky to count. Musicians will sometimes subdivide the notes so the counting flows more easily. Let's use the above example, but this time sub divide it.



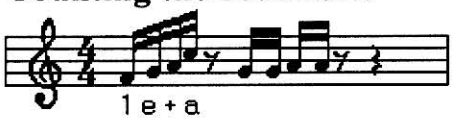
Here every note in the measure is subdivided into 8th notes thus making it a lot more "fluid" to count. Its pretty easy to understand too... one quarter note is two 8th notes, so it gets "1 +". The half note is really four eighth notes so it get "2 + 3 +". And the each 8th note get a half so one is "4" and the other is the "and" of 4.

Here would also be a good place to throw in a few examples with rests. These will just show the counting and will not explain them. Just think of the rests in terms of their corresponding notes and you'll have no problem!





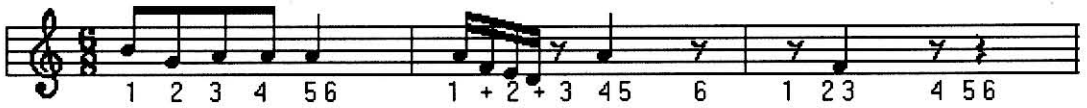
Counting the 16th note.



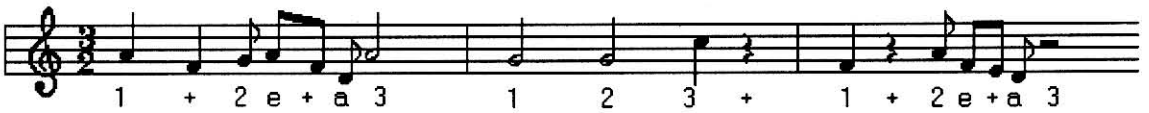
Basically counting 16th notes is similar to 8th notes except that you need to add more things to count with. I was taught using "e" and "a", but feel free to use what you want. Each part, the "1", "e", "+", "a" are all 1/4 of 1 quarter note. Together they add up to 1 beat according to the time sig. (4 sixteenths = 1 quarter)

Different time signatures and different notes.

Here you are.. the top of the note hill. Just look at these and the counting section is over!



Remember.. from this time signature you are counting the half notes.



Remember you are counting half notes, and therefore you have to subdivide the eighth notes and quarter notes accordingly.

Volume – Attack

Every good musical performance provides a variety of volumes (Dynamics) throughout the piece of music; including Loud Sections / Quiet / Various Tempos; Fast / Slow / Variety of Attack including: Sharp Attack of the notes / Gradual Attack, all as indicated on the music, if not, experiment. What sounds good to you, what makes the music more interesting to you?

Many of the markings you see below will be found throughout sheet music you will find. Sometimes not, that is why I suggest you experiment and make the music part of you.

Volume of notes	
F	Loud
Ff	Loud Loud
Fff	As loud as possible
P	Quiet
Mp	Medium Quiet
Mf	Medium Loud
Pp	Quiet Quiet
Cresc	Louder

Stuff that affects notes	
Sfz	Hit note then back way off and build back up
Tr	Trill
Vibrato	Add waves to sound
Legato	Smooth and connected

Stuff that affects speed of notes	
poco.	Gradually
accel.	Faster
rit.	Slower
dim.	Diminish
Soli	Shared solo in section
Solo	1 person solo

Other Tips

- Use a metronome to help when you begin to read sheet music, it will help you with the beats and make sure you carry out a note for the right amount of time. Metronomes are usually cheap and can be purchased at music stores. Adopt an early habit of counting while reading through music.
- The tempo or speed at which the music should be played is usually given above the staff, and appears as an Italian word such as allegro (lively, or quickly) or andante (at

a walking pace). The tempo may also be given by the number of beats per minute. Metronomes typically accommodate this standard.

- I AWAYS recommend you sight read with the metronome set to a tempo that is just above the tempo you can comfortably play. Always push yourself when attempting to improve your sight reading skills and abilities. You must first be uncomfortable before you will be comfortable.
- Start reading easy sheet music, gradually working yourself up to more advanced pieces. Reading music can initially be quite laborious and frustrating. Starting with simple music will help you learn and if you keep at it, you will see quick progress.
- Keep practicing. Once you have the basics down and can recognize the notes without thinking about them, you can gradually move on to more complicated musical notation.
- It is easier to read sheet music if you have either played an instrument or already have a basic knowledge of the notes and scales in music.

Well, that's basically all there is to reading pitch and rhythms of notes in music. There are a few things I have left out for simplicity which I will mention in later lessons. This should be enough to get you started at reading pieces of music. Of course music is not simply about pitch and rhythm, there are expressive devises such as dynamics (changes in volume (loudness) of sound), articulations (the style of what types of sound you make) and many more musical devices which I will get to you in a later lesson. For now best advice I can give is to practice every day by reading new music as much as possible along with your metronome. Thanks so much for your business. Any feedback is much appreciated

Mark Ripley

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