

Chapter 1

Basic Concepts of Music and Notation

Chapter Summary

Music notation is a language all its own. It uses prescribed and unique symbols to convey this language. Even music's basic concepts may seem complex. To learn about music in a short amount of time is to study and understand what has evolved over centuries and through many musical eras. This chapter highlights common music notation and concepts dancers should know such as staves, clefs, pitch, notes and rests, tonality, plus dynamic and articulation markings. This information provides a basic foundation for understanding music notation.

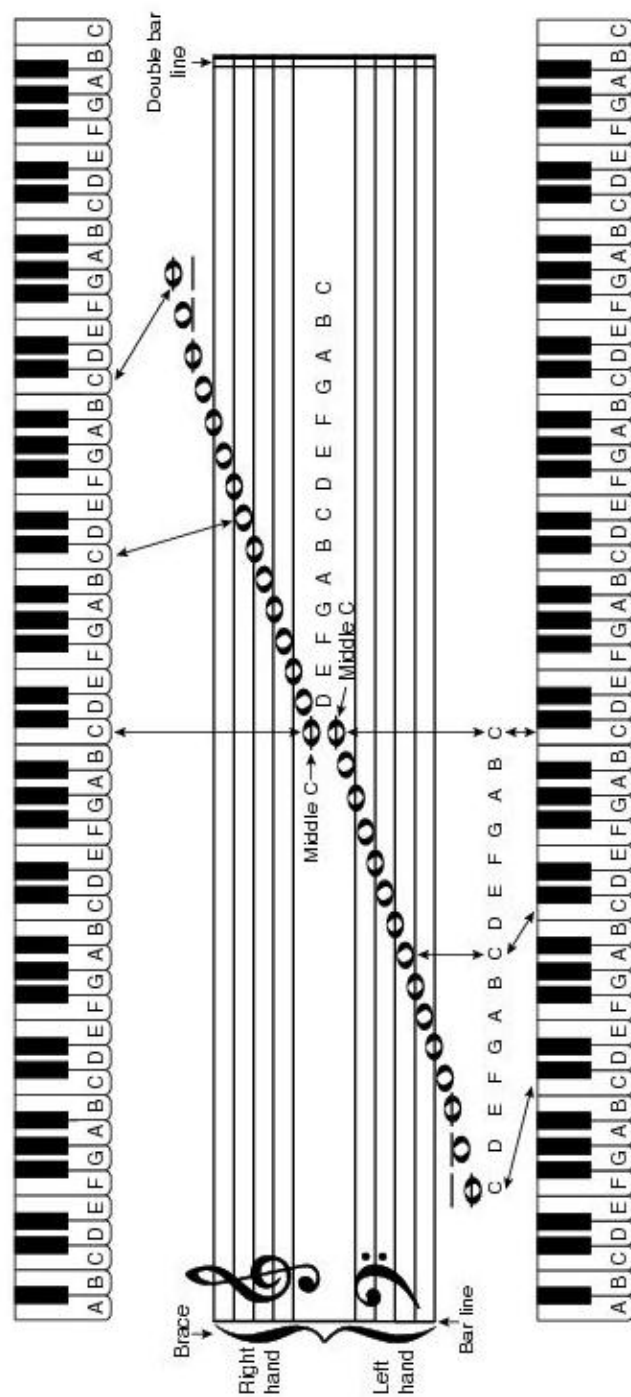


Figure 1.11 A grand staff with pitches shown as they relate to the piano keyboard.

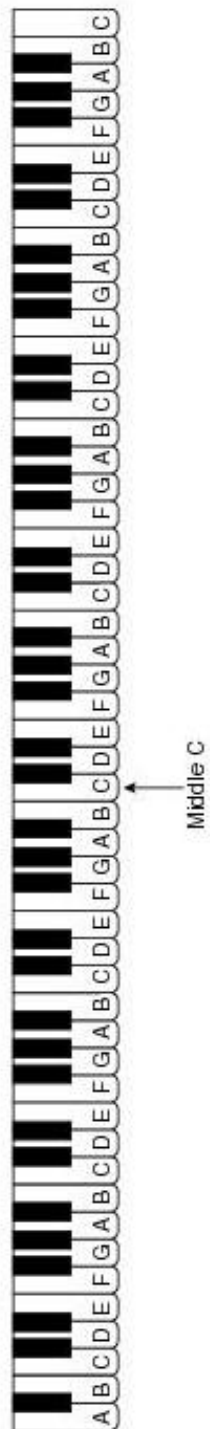


Figure 1.12 Middle C delineated on the piano keyboard and the names of the piano keys' pitches.

Glossary Terms With Definitions

accent marks—Staccato, staccatissimo, marcato, martelato, and tenuto. Dynamic accent marks give an extra emphasis to notes in varying degrees depending on which accent is used.

accidental—An intentional alteration of pitch within a piece of music. It is a half-step pitch change depending on the use of a natural, flat, or sharp. A natural cancels a flat or sharp. A flat lowers a note's pitch by a half step. A sharp raises a note's pitch by a half step. Accidentals produce chromatic alterations in music.

alto clef—See also *C clef*. The alto clef is used in music for the viola.

articulation—The attack, release, and accent a note receives.

articulation markings—Indications of how to begin and end the playing or singing of a musical tone.

Asian tonality—Music based on a variety of tone systems depending upon the country's music era. Twelve-tone, five-tone (pentatonic), or seven-tone systems and scales are found in the music of China, Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

attack—A sound's beginning or how to play or sing a sound's beginning.

bass clef—See also *F clef*. The bass clef designates staves for lower-pitched brass instruments, the cello and double bass in the string family, baritone and bass men's voices, and keyboard music for the left hand.

beaming—The musical practice of connecting notes into groups designated by beams.

beams—Thick horizontal lines that connect repeated eighth, sixteenth, thirty-second notes, and so on. For groups of notes of the same value, beams serve the same time denotation as flags. For example, one beam is used for eighth notes, two beams for sixteenth notes, and so on.

brace—The first symbol at the beginning of a grand staff composition. It resembles a left curly bracket and links the treble and bass staves, indicating that the music notated on each staff should be played simultaneously.

bracket—The heavier vertical line that groups instruments together such as strings in an orchestral score.

C clef—Also known as the alto clef. The C clef is a moveable clef that was used primarily in classical-era vocal and instrumental music, meaning music of the baroque, classical, and romantic periods. It is also used in the modern and contemporary periods for the instruments that require it. It is used in music for the viola, cello, bassoon, and trombone.

clef—A symbol placed at the beginning of a staff that assigns specific pitches to the lines and spaces of the staff.

consonance—Sound created by intervals or chords that is harmonious or pleasant to the ear.

dynamics—The intensity variances in the loudness or softness of music.

eighth note—Looks like a quarter note with a flag.

expression terms and symbols—Used in music to indicate the expressiveness that musicians should use when playing. They can indicate a general mood or tempo or a change of mood, tempo, volume, or quality.

F clef—Also known as the bass clef and so named because it was derived from an old-fashioned letter F. On the bass staff, the two dots that follow the clef and which look like a colon appear above and below the F line, which is the fourth-highest line of the staff. The F clef designates staves for lower-pitched brass instruments, cello, double bass, baritone and bass men’s voices, and the left hand on keyboard music. It also moves to the D and A bass staff lines when used as the baritone and sub-bass clefs, respectively.

flags—Symbols that are placed at the top of stems that are on the right side of a note head or on the bottom of stems that descend from the left side of note heads. They indicate note values. For example, an eighth note has one flag, a sixteenth note has two flags, a thirty-second note has three flags, a sixty-fourth note has four flags, and so on, to a one-hundred twenty-eighth note.

flat—Symbol that lowers a pitch or tone by a half step and which looks similar to a lowercase letter b.



Flat symbol.

French violin clef—Looks identical to the G, or treble, clef except that the clef moves to become centered on the E line, the lowest line of the treble staff.

gagaku—Classical Japanese court music dating to c. 800 C.E. It is still performed today and is called bugaku when it accompanies the Japanese classical court dance of the same name. Gagaku was not heard in the West until after World War II. For first-time listeners, it might be challenging to listen to because of its Asian tonality.

G clef—Also known as the treble clef. It is called the G clef because it resembles an old-fashioned letter G and crosses the staff’s G line four times. It is used in music for higher-pitched voices and instruments

such as violins, woodwinds, and the right hand on keyboard instruments. For the French violin, the G clef moves to become centered on the lowest line of the treble staff, E, and is called the French violin clef.

grand staff—Two staves linked by a brace and bar line. It is the format of notation for keyboard music. Music for the piano, organ, harpsichord, clavichord, and electric and digital keyboards is notated on grand staves.

half note—An open note head that is an oval-shaped, empty circle. The stem may ascend from the right side of the note head or descend from the left side of the note head.

half step—From one key to the very next on a piano keyboard (white note to white note, black note to white note, or white note to black note depending on the first note).

hertz—Taken from the name of the 19th-century physicist (Heinrich Hertz), who discovered the existence of sound wavelengths. Each pitch has a specified number of Hertz, abbreviated Hz, per second. The pitch of A above middle C, for example, vibrates at 440 Hz.

interval—The distance from a lower tone to a higher tone or from a higher tone to a lower tone; the distance between two pitches. Musicians count the first and last tone in an interval.

key signatures—Specific groupings of sharps or flats on the staff head or the beginning of each staff in a composition with the exception of the key of C, which has no sharps or flats. A key signature, therefore, might have no sharps or flats or up to seven sharps or flats.

ledger lines—Indicate pitches that are lower or higher than those represented on the five lines and four spaces of the staff. They are short lines that appear to extend to the right and left of the note when in actuality the note is placed on the short line above or below the staff.

legato—Literally means “bound” in Italian. It is the norm for musicians and refers to smooth movement from one note to the next.

major—Literally means “greater” in Latin. It refers to one of the two modes of Western music and the tonality or relationship of pitch patterns of the tones of the major scales. Music written in the major mode sounds happy or cheerful. The major scales are represented in the major keys for which they are named and also represent the harmonic relationship of the seven pitches of the major scales. The key of C is a major key. The naming of the key of C centers on the fact that the C scale begins and ends on the pitch of C. The seven pitches of the key of C are based on the harmonic relationship of the C-scale pitches.

major scale—The specified series of pitches of any of the major keys. Any scale following the step pattern of two whole steps, a half step, three whole steps, and a half step is a major scale. The first pitch of the scale names the scale.

marcato—Literally means “marked.” As a dynamic accent symbol, marcato looks like a mathematical greater-than symbol. Marcato symbols are placed above or below the note head to indicate that the playing of the note is louder and more stressed than usual.



Marcato symbol.

martelato—A dynamic accent mark that literally means “hammered” and is indicated by an inverted-V symbol. Martelato indicates that a note should be played forcefully.



Martelato symbol.

middle C—Denotes the center of the grand staff and is the most central C on the piano keyboard. It is the fourth C pitch on the piano keyboard (counting from the left end of the keyboard).

minor—Literally means “lesser” or “smaller” in Latin. Minor refers to one of the two modes in Western music and the tonality or relationship of pitch patterns of minor scale tones. Minor mode music sounds melancholy or brooding. There are three minor modes in Western music: natural, harmonic, and melodic. Each minor mode has a specified pattern of whole and half steps, based on the natural, harmonic, or melodic minor scales.

minor scale—All minor scales have a lowered third pitch. The minor keys refer to any scale following a minor mode step pattern. There are three minor scales, the natural, the melodic, and the harmonic. The natural minor scale has half steps between the second and third notes and the fifth and sixth notes. The harmonic minor raises the seventh note. The melodic minor raises the sixth and seventh notes when ascending and lowers them (returning to natural minor) when descending.

natural—A symbol that is placed in front of a particular note and cancels any previous sharp or flat for that pitch in a particular measure. It may also cancel a key-signature sharp or flat in any measure of a composition.



Natural symbol.

notation—A combination of terms, symbols (including notes), and signs that enables musicians to reproduce music as the composer wrote it and in the way that he or she wished for it to be heard.

note—A symbol used to designate the pitch and time value of a tone. The time value is based on the time signature.

octave—Means “eight.” From one C to the next is eight tones; an interval of eight tones is an octave.

pentatonic scale—A musical scale of five tones in which the octave is reached at the sixth tone; a scale in which the tones are arranged like a major scale with its fourth and seventh tones omitted.

phrase—An element of a melody; similar to a sentence in language. Phrases vary in length depending on the musical composition.

phrasing—Notes of a melody linked as a musical thought and played or sung as a grouping.

pitch—Refers to the highness or lowness of tones determined by their frequency.

quarter note—A black note head (filled-in oval circle) with a stem ascending from the right side or descending from the left side.

release—The ending of a tone.

scale—A series of eight alphabetically named pitches, which usually progress by specified steps and half steps. The name of the scale is determined by the name of its beginning pitch. For example, a C scale begins on the pitch of C.

sharp—A symbol that looks similar to the pound or number sign and indicates a pitch should be raised by a half step.



Sharp symbol.

sixteenth note—Looks like a quarter note with two flags.

slur—An articulation term and symbol that reminds musicians or singers to play or sing in a legato manner. Specifically it is a slightly curved line above or below two or more notes. In vocal music, a slur indicates that the slurred notes should be sung with one breath.

staccatissimo—Means “most staccato.” Staccatissimo symbols look similar to a straight apostrophe. They are placed above or below but not touching the note head. Staccatissimo notes are played or sung as extremely detached or separated from each other.



Staccatissimo symbol.

staccato—Means “detached.” The symbol for staccato is a dot above or below the note head. Staccato notes are played or sung with a sense of detachment from each other.



Staccato symbol.

staff—A horizontal grouping of five lines and the resultant four spaces between the five lines.

stem—A short, straight line attached to the right or left side of a note head.

tenuto—Means “to hold.” It is a dynamic accent symbol that looks like a dash above or below a note head. Unlike the other dynamic accent marks, tenuto is a pressure accent. When applied to the playing or singing of a note, the musician or singer gives the note a slight stress and holds the note to its full value.



Tenuto symbol.

time signature—Tells musicians how many beats are in a measure and what type of note receives one beat.

tonality—Refers to the key center of a piece of music. In Western music it refers to the use of major and minor keys, which are based on the major and minor scales.

treble clef—See *G clef*.

whole note—A note that looks like a small, empty, slightly oval circle known as an open note head.

whole step—A skipping of one key on a piano keyboard.

whole-tone scale—A musical scale progressing by whole steps.

Glossary Terms Without Definitions

accent mark—

accidental—

alto clef—

articulation—

articulation markings—

Asian tonality—

attack—

bass clef—

beaming—

beams—

brace—

bracket—

C clef—

clef—

consonance—

dynamics—

eighth note—

expression terms and symbols—

F clef—

flags—

flat—

French violin clef—

Gagaku—

G clef—

grand staff—

half note—

half step—

hertz—

interval—

key signatures—

ledger lines—

legato—

major—

major scale—

marcato—

martelato—

middle C—

minor—

minor scale—

natural—

notation—

note—

octave—

pentatonic scale—

phrase—

phrasing—

pitch—

quarter note—

release—

sharp—

sixteenth note—

slur—

staccatissimo—

staccato—

scale—

staff—

stem—

tenuto—

time signature—

tonality—

treble clef—

whole note—

whole step—

whole-tone scale—

Web Links

- Dolmetsch Online contains illustrations, explanations, and definitions of music terminology, symbols, and concepts. www.dolmetsch.com
- Oxford Music Online is a subscription database. If your school library subscribes to this, it's a great dictionary and encyclopedia of music. www.oxfordmusiconline.com
- Amazon.com has excerpts of baroque music played by period ensembles. www.Amazon.com
- YouTube.com has many videos of baroque music pieces played by period ensembles.

Extended Learning Activities

1. On the staff paper provided (worksheet 1.1), practice drawing G clefs and F clefs as shown.
2. Using worksheet 1.2, or on a piano or synthesizer keyboard, locate middle C and then A, B, D, E, F, and G. Next, locate octaves for the pitches of A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. Count how many notes are between each A, including the As. If you count the white and black keys, there should be 13 keys. Next, count how many white notes are from one C to the next C. There should be 8. It is the same from any A, B, C, D, E, F, or G. This is why the distance or interval from one pitch to its higher- or lower-pitch equivalent is termed an octave. How many As, Bs, Cs, Ds, Es, Fs, and Gs are on a piano keyboard? Using worksheet 1.2, locate the respective octaves for each pitch: A, B, C, D, E, F, and G.
3. Use the music excerpt in worksheet 1.3 to answer the questions on the worksheet. If your instructor provides additional examples of music, circle each note or term that you recognize. For example, how many quarter notes do you see? How many half notes? Find and circle three

sixteenth notes. As a class, discuss where the music notations occur in the music and why (you may also review the excerpts in table 1.4 and figure 1.18).

4. Using a music dictionary or online music resource, find terms or symbols for expression and terms or symbols for dynamics that are not listed in this chapter. Are the additional terms in the Italian language as well? Why are so many terms necessary?

Forms, Worksheets, and Other Materials for Student Work

- Worksheet 1.1
- Worksheet 1.2
- Worksheet 1.2 Answer Key
- Worksheet 1.3
- Worksheet 1.3 Answer Key