

Basic Music Theory

This document has been put together to assist those new to musical notation and choral singing. It is not meant to be a complete musical theory education, but if you come to rehearsal knowing absolutely nothing this may help you to make sense of some of the unusual terms and symbols you will come across. If your questions are not being answered by this document please feel free to ask the person sitting next to you for help, or speak to your section leader.

Staves (or Staffs) and Systems

When you first get your score you will see a confusing number of lines, each group of 5 lines is called a Staff (or Staff), usually they will be grouped together to create either a Grand Staff or a System.

In most Choral music you will usually find 4 Staves (for the choir) and a Grand Staff (a piano reduction of either the above staves for a cappella work or of the orchestral arrangement for accompanied works) grouped together as a System.

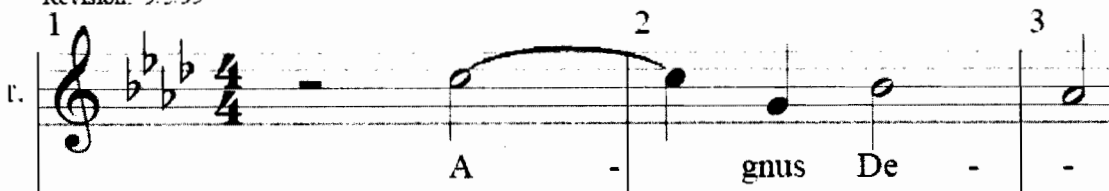
The diagram illustrates a musical system consisting of five staves. The top four staves are for the choir: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The bottom two staves form a Grand Staff for the piano reduction. The system is labeled "System" on the left. The score includes lyrics: "qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta" and "tol - lis pec - ca - ta mu". The system is numbered 4, 5, and 6 at the top.

You will need to work out which Staff in the System is yours and mark it so that you can find it quickly, as you become more familiar with the way Systems work you will be able to work it out on the fly, this is particularly easy for Sops and Bases, we get the top and bottom Staff respectively and it is usually quick and easy to find. Don't worry if sometimes you can easily just follow your line and in other movements of the same work you need to mark. It is particularly difficult if the number of Staves in a System changes from page to page as Soloists or other parts are introduced or stopped.

Usually there are 2 or 3 systems per page, but sometimes (when there are 2 choirs singing) there is only one so it is important to note when you have to go to the next page.

Bars

Each staff will be broken up into small sections, these are called bars and are usually numbered from the start of the movement or sometimes from the beginning of the work. The numbers can usually be found at the top of the System, sometimes they are in little boxes or circles, but sometimes they are just plain (as in the example below). Most of the time only the first bar of each System gets its number printed, sometimes it is every 5th or 10th bar.



Sometimes they can be a bit hard to find, if they aren't on the top staff, check the piano reduction or under the system. Sometimes (due to different versions) some people will have bar numbers and other won't, or they will be different, in those cases it is a good idea to number your bars the same as the score that most people are using.

Another useful landmark which is in some scores are rehearsal letters or numbers. At strategic points in the score there will be a large letter or number. Take note of where these are as the conductor may just say "from letter B" if you don't have them and the conductor does, try and take note of where they are and write them in your scores.

Note Pitch and Clefs

The Notes are labelled A to G they are placed on the Staves from the bottom to the top as follows, with lower notes at the bottom and higher notes at the top. The clef at the beginning of the staff will tell you which letters go with which lines.

The Treble clef (also sometimes known as the G clef as the curl in the middle circles around the G line)



The spaces are F A C E

The Lines are E G B D F (Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit)

The Bass Clef (also sometimes known as the F clef as the two dots are either side of the F line)



The spaces are A C E G (All Cows Eat Grass)

The Lines are G B D F A (Good Boys Deserve Fruit Always)

The tenors usually sing the notes on the Treble clef but an octave lower, the F at the top of their staff is the same note as the F near the bottom of the Alto/Soprano staff. This is usually indicated by a small 8 at the bottom of the clef, but sometimes it is just assumed.

There are occasionally notes which go above or below the stave, these are indicated with Ledger lines, or little dashes. The ledger lines are labelled using the same letters repeated over again.



Accidentals

The notes are made a half a tone higher (sharper) or lower (flatter) by using the following symbols. The symbols can be placed at the beginning of a stave, as a Key Signature (see intermediate document) in which case all notes on that line will be flat or sharp as directed, unless there is a natural (or other) symbol next to it


An A \sharp is the same pitch as a B \flat

| | | |
|------------|---------|--------------------------------|
| # | Sharp | The note goes up half a tone |
| \flat | Flat | The note goes down half a tone |
| \natural | Natural | The note is the normal tone |

Note Length

| Note Symbol – all the examples below are of equivalent length (eg 4 crotchets = 1 semibreve) | Name European and USA notation | Description | Equivalent Rest |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| | Semibreve or whole note | The longest note in general use. The rest hangs from the fourth line of the stave. | |
| | Minim or half note | Half the length of a semibreve The stem can either go up or down. The rest sits on the third line of the stave. | |
| | Crotchet or quarter note | Quarter the length of a Semibreve Half the length of a Minim The stem can either go up or down. | |
| | Quaver or eighth note | There are eight in a semibreve, four in a minim and two in a crotchet The tail turns to the right no matter whether the stem goes up or down Quavers can be grouped together with a beam in place of tails. | |

You also get Semi-Quavers and even smaller notes, they have two or more tails and each tail halves the length of the note again.

There is also an even longer note than the Semibreve, it is called the Breve. It looks like a Semibreve with short lines down each side (), or a small box. Composers usually use it at the ends of movements to indicate that the choir is to hold the note as long as the conductor tells them to. You also occasionally find them in the middle of a score, when they generally mean that you are to hold the note for twice as long as a Semibreve.

Composers will also want you to sing a note which is half as long again than normal, this is indicated with a dot (.) after the note. Another way the composer can do this is to write out the individual notes and put a tie or slur between them, particularly if they wish you to hold a note across a bar line.



There is also double dotting which means half and half again. So a double dotted crotchet is the same length as a crotchet, plus a quaver, plus a semi-quaver.

You will also see three notes with a little 3 above or below them, this means that the composer would like you to sing these notes in the space it would normally take to sing two, in other words a little bit quicker. This is called a triplet.



Volume

There are several things which tell you how loud you need to sing. The most common ones are; *pp*, *p*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*, also known as *pianissimo*, *piano*, *mezzo piano*, *mezzo forte*, *forte* and *fortissimo*. The volume range is from *pp* (very soft) to *ff* (very loud). You will also find multiples of *p* and *f* EG. *pppp* which means very, very, very soft.

You will also be told when to move gradually louder or softer. This is usually written as *cresc.* (*Crescendo*) and *decresc.* (*Decrescendo*) they can also be written as symbols above the notes.



You may also see *dim.* (*Diminuendo*) this means to fade away completely.

Time Signatures

The time signature tells you how many beats there are in each bar, and how long each beat is.

A time signature is made up of 2 numbers, one written above the other. E.g.



The lower number tells you **what value** of note to count.

The most common numbers you will find in the lower position are:

2 = Minim

4 = Crotchet


8 = Quaver

The upper number tells you **how many** of these beats you need. So, $\frac{2}{4}$ means we have 2 crotchets per bar, $\frac{6}{8}$ means we have 6 quavers per bar, and $\frac{4}{2}$ means we have 4 minims per bar.

The conductor will usually beat the number on the bottom of the time signature this way you can (hopefully) count how many bars before you come in.

There are also some C (or C) time signatures, which stand for Common Time. It is usually used where the beats are 4 crotchets to a bar (4/4) if there is a line through it then it is 2 minims

Glossary

| Word | Abbreviation | Description |
|-------------|--|---|
| a tempo | | Back to the previous Tempo |
| Accelerando | Accel. | Gradually become faster |
| Adagio | | Slowly |
| Allegro | | Lively and fast |
| Andante | | At an easy walking pace |
| Andantino | | At an brisk walking pace |
| Bass | | The lower male singing voice |
| Col canto | | With the singing |
| Contralto | Alto | The lower female singing voice |
| Diminuendo | Dim. | fade away completely |
| Largo | | Slow and stately |
| Legato | | Smoothly, well connected, shown by a slur over the notes |
| Moderato | | At a moderate speed |
| Morendo | | Dying away |
| Piu lento | | Little slower |
| Poco-a-poco | | A little bit at a time |
| Presto | | Very fast |
| Rallentando | Rall. | Gradually become slower |
| Ritenuto | Rit.  | Immediately slower, held back |
| SATB | | Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass – IE the whole choir |
| Smorzando | Smorz. | Dying away |
| Solo | | One singer, chosen for the quality of voice |
| Soprano | | The higher female singing voice |
| Sotto voce | | As quietly as you can, whisper on pitch |
| Staccato | Stacc. | Detached, short, shown by a dot above or below the note |
| Tenor | | The higher male singing voice |
| Tutta forza | | Everybody with force |
| Tutti | | The whole choir or all the singers in a particular voice part |

NOTE: Most words (in a foreign language or English) and symbols written on the score describing the speed, volume or other instruction about how to sing the music can easily be translated as “Watch The Conductor” they will usually indicate what needs changing by their gestures and facial expressions.

