

Musical Notation

Pitch through time, or What Pitch & When

Musical notation was developed by church musicians in the early centuries of its history. Originally, choir directors composed or learned all the parts for the choir to sing and taught them to the singers by rote. Gradually the desire to be able to provide code or system of describing pitch over time that could be written down and preserved provided the stimulus to create the notation system.



Simply put, the location of a note on the lines or spaces of the staff indicates *what* pitch should be sounded and whether the note is open or filled in, has a stem and/or flags or beams determines *when* (how long or short) it should be played.

This system is independent of instruments so it can be used for all instruments, including the voice.

The Treble Clef and the Bass Clef each contain 5 lines and 4 spaces which indicate what the note name of each note will be. (What pitch) (We'll explore this in more depth in Lesson 7 on The Staff.)

Musical Notation

Treble Clef

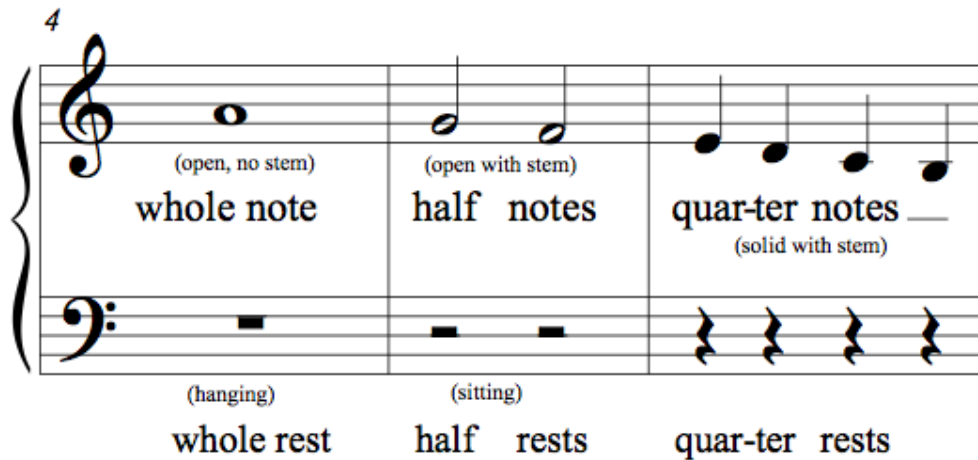
The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef on the left. The staff is divided into three measures. The first measure contains four notes on the lines and spaces: C (line 1), D (space 1), E (line 2), and F (space 2). The second measure contains four notes: G (line 2), A (space 2), B (line 3), and C (space 3). The third measure contains four notes: D (line 3), E (space 3), F (line 4), and G (space 4). Below the staff, the note names are listed: C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C. The letters F, A, and C in the first measure are in bold. Below the first measure, it says 'Space names in BOLD'. Below the staff, the bass clef is shown with the notes F G A B C D E F G A B C.

Space names in **BOLD**

Bass Clef

F G **A** B C D E F **G** A B C

When, or how long the pitch is held, or “pitch through time” is determined by the note’s “value”.



Whole notes, open with no stem, are counted for 4 counts or beats (e.g. play and then hold it while counting: “1-2-3-4”)

Half Notes, open with a stem, are counted for 2 counts or beats (e.g. play and then hold the note while counting: “1-2”)

Quarter notes, solid centers with a stem, are counted for 1 count or beats (e.g. play and count “1”).

As you can see, each type of note is half of the length of the one before it. (We’ll explore this in more depth in Lesson 8).

The benefit of this system of musical notation is that, once a musician learns the names of the notes on the lines and spaces of the staff and the note values of the types of notes, with one glance he or she can tell what pitch is to be played and how long to play it. On instruments (like keyboards) where each key is the one, unique place that the note can be sounded on the instrument, musical notation is all that is needed to inform the musician how to play the piece of music.

The limitation of this system is that when playing an instrument (like a mountain or hammered dulcimer) which has several different locations to sound the exact same pitch, musical notation will not prescribe *where* on the instrument to finger the frets to play the note that is described on the staff. This is the case with all fretted stringed instruments (as well as fretless instruments in the string orchestra family).

For these instruments *tablature* was developed. (More about this in Lesson 9).