

# THE ABC OF READING MUSIC

These notes are designed for the simple purpose of helping non music readers learn the basics of reading music. They are essentially written for people who know absolutely nothing about music notation, with some sections, as you will notice, aimed particularly at people who sing in choirs.

The very first thing I'd like to say is that learning to read music isn't all that difficult - but please don't expect to take in all the information in these notes in five minutes! Let your knowledge build slowly and, if you're a choir member, test your progress at rehearsal each week and revisit the notes regularly until you are comfortable with reading and understanding the printed sheet music you sing from at choir. It won't take you too long.

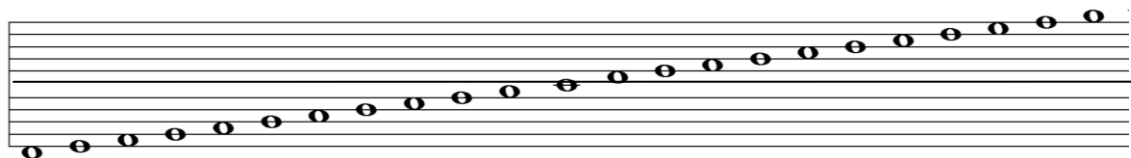


Having said all that, if you *are* a non music reader, then the mysterious collection of lines, dots, squiggles, signs and thingamejigs on a sheet of music is bound to look like some weird foreign language to you! And in a way it is! But simply the language of music - a way of representing musical sounds *visually* so that people can read them and reproduce the music exactly the way the composer intended. That's what it's all about.

OK then, what are some of the essentials? Well, to begin with, when a musical sound is represented on paper, two vital ideas have to be conveyed. The first is to tell the reader *how high* or *how low* the sound is (its *pitch*); and the second is to describe how long the sound *lasts* (its *duration*). Let's start with a look at the first of these.

## THE PITCH OF A SOUND - IS IT A LOW RUMBLE OR A HIGH SQUEAK?

What would be an easy way of representing on paper how high or how low a musical sound is? How about drawing a 'ladder' and making marks on it? The higher the mark the higher the sound? Not a bad idea! And that, in fact, is what our western system of musical notation does. It simply records musical sounds, or *notes*, on what's called a **staff** (below), which is nothing more than a musical *ladder*. The notes are written either on the **lines** of the staff or in the **spaces** between the lines in the order they are sung (we read them from left to right, like a book).



Each line and each space is like a step on the ladder - a note is placed on a line, the next higher note is placed in the space above, and so on. The higher the note appears on the staff, the higher it has to sound when you sing it! If a note is higher on the staff it's said to have a higher **pitch** than a note lower on the staff. You can see how this might work on the diagram above.

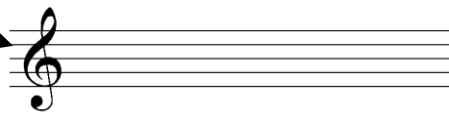
This 'ladder' has 11 lines and 10 spaces (not including the two 'spaces' just outside the lines) on which we can fit most of the notes we sing, from quite low to quite high.



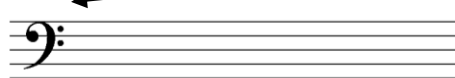
But this doesn't look like any sheet music I've ever seen, you say, and you're absolutely right. Printed music never looks like this. The reason is that this mega-staircase would be just too darn hard to read since the lines and spaces in the middle all look pretty much alike!

So, since high voices (female singers and higher musical instruments) all tend to cluster around the *top* of this big staff anyway, and since low voices (male singers and lower musical instruments) all tend to hang around the *bottom* of it, let's just remove the middle line and split the beast into two sections, one specifically for high voices and one for low voices. We then end up with *two* staves, each with only **5** lines and 4 spaces. Much easier to read!

One staff, as we said, is for high-pitched voices and has an interesting sign at the front called the **Treble Clef**.

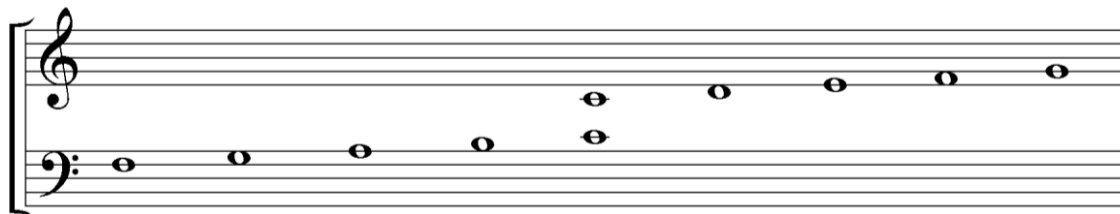


The second staff, for low-pitched voices has its own equally peculiar sign called the **Bass Clef** (sorry about that, tenors).



The **clefs** ('clef' is just a French word for 'key') are simply a key to tell us whether we're looking at the 'high voice' staff or the 'low voice' staff.

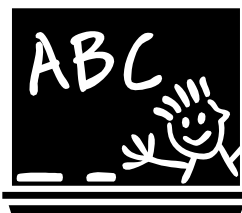
Put the two staves together and this is what we get:



Aha..... now it's beginning to look a bit more like the printed music we normally see.

## **GIVING THE NOTES A NAME**

So far so good? OK. Now, in order to tell them apart, musical notes written on these staves (or staves) need to have names. In fact, they are named after the first seven letters of the alphabet ie



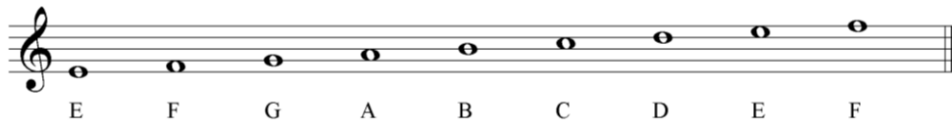
**A - B - C - D - E - F - G**

After **G**, note names start *again* at **A** and repeat over and over again eg

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

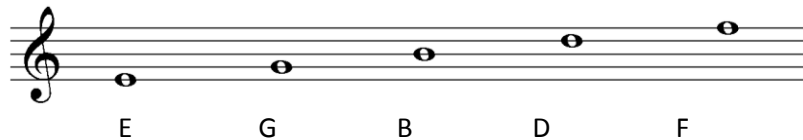
Why is this? Because every **eighth** note higher or lower is an **octave** and sounds the 'same' as other notes that are **8, 16, 24** notes etc higher or lower. So they're simply given the same name. The top E in the staff below, for example, is just a higher pitched version of the bottom E. Ask somebody to show you on a piano and listen to the 'similarity' of the sound.

These are the names and positions of the notes on the **Treble staff**:



The first line on the Treble staff, as you can see, is called '**E**' and the first space is called '**F**'.

How can you remember the names of notes on the **lines**? Easy -



**E - G - B - D - F** - '*Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit*'.



And the notes in the **spaces**? Even easier -

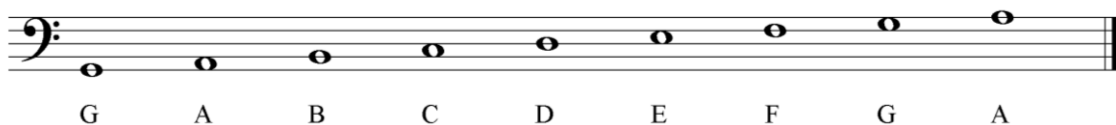


**F - A - C - E** - '*Face*'!!!

If you can remember the name of just *one* note you can work out all the others just by moving up or down the lines and spaces!

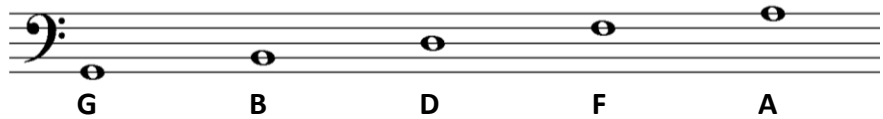
In the Bass staff, notes are also named **A-B-C-D-E-F-G** etc, but - **and this is very important** - *the lines and spaces don't have the same names as the Treble staff!!* (There's a very good reason for this.....but later!).

The bottom line in the **Bass staff** is called **G** (not E) and the first space is **A** (not F).



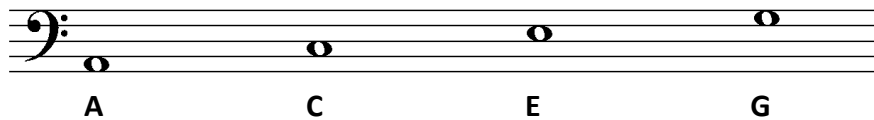
Again notes move upwards and downwards according to the first seven letters of the alphabet.

The notes on the lines are:

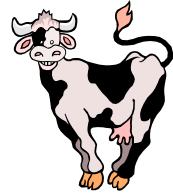


**G – B – D – F – A** - 'Good Boys Deserve Fruit Always'

.....and in the spaces:

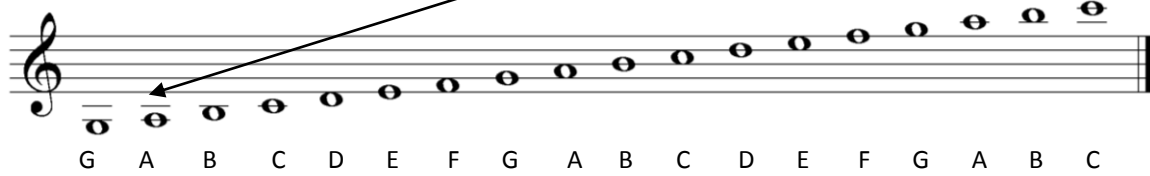


**A – C – E – G** - 'All Cows Eat Grass'

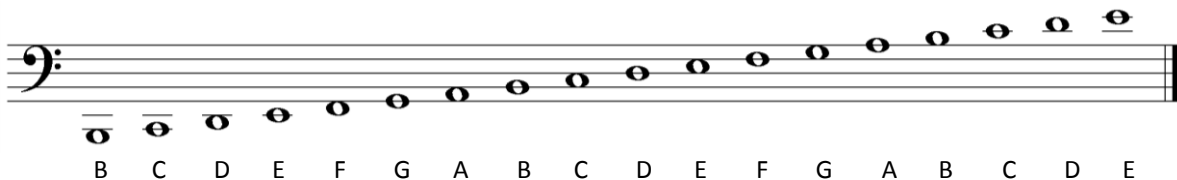


Oh dear, these traditional memory aids are corny, aren't they? Ah, well. Life goes on!

Notes often spill over the top and bottom of the staves because composers sometimes will want to include particularly high or low notes in their music that are within the range of an instrument or voice but outside the limit of the staff. These notes are written on lines called **leger** (or **ledger**) lines and look like this:



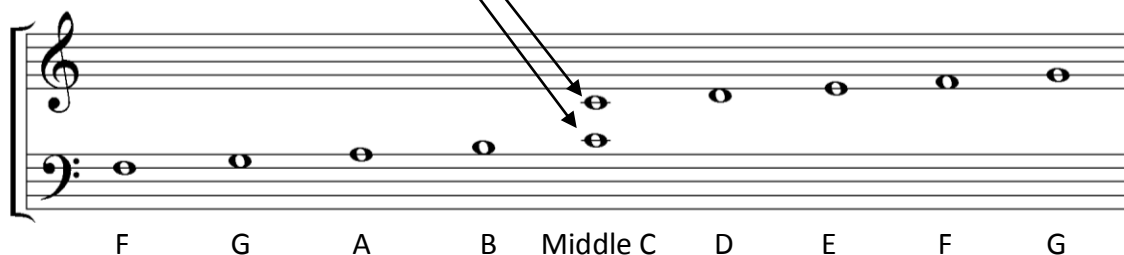
- and similarly in the Bass staff:



Leger lines are simply mini versions of staff lines and can extend even further than shown above.

Are you going OK so far?

Moving right along then - whenever the Treble staff and Bass staff are written together on a page of music, they share a *common note* that is written on the middle leger line between the two staves. No prizes for guessing that this is called '**Middle** C'. It's a good reference point. Although the first note arrowed is written above the Bass staff and the second is written below the Treble staff, they are in fact the same note.

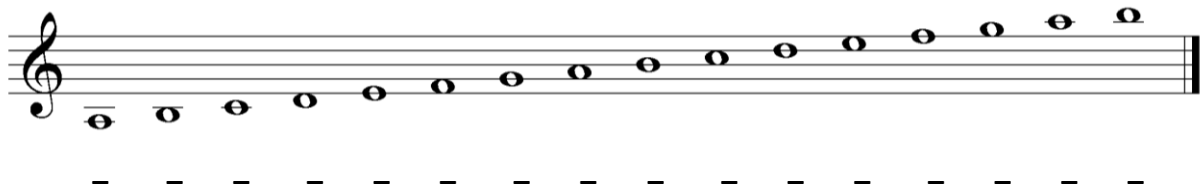


**Middle C** is also the note that sits on the middle line in the mega staff (see Page 1) that is 'deleted' to create the Treble and Bass staves. By 'reinstating' it on a leger line between the two, we effectively recreate a continuous sequence of notes from low to high.

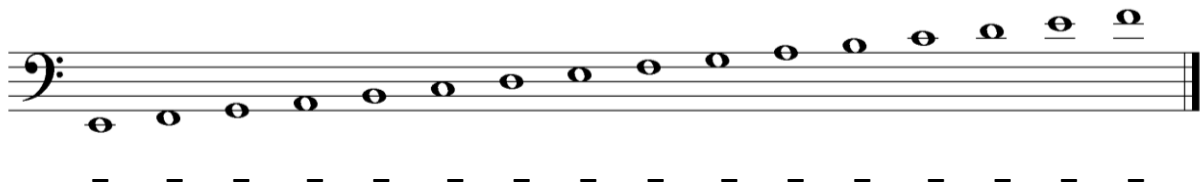
It now becomes clear why the lines and spaces in the Treble staff have different names to those in the Bass staff. If we continue downwards from Middle C, then the top line of the Bass staff has to be an **A** (not an F as in the Treble staff). Likewise, if we continue upwards from Middle C, the bottom line of the Treble staff has to be an **E** (not a G as in the Bass staff).

OK, shall we see if all this has made any sense so far?

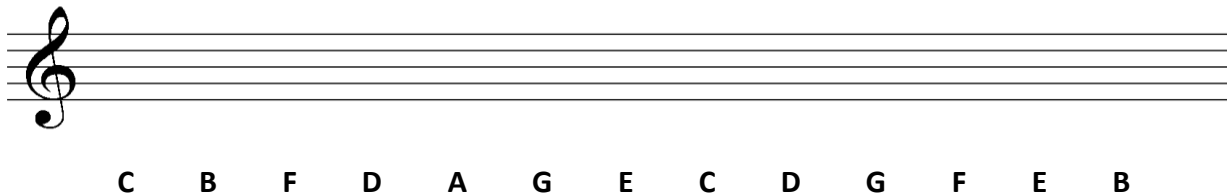
In the spaces below, see if you can fill in the names of the notes in the Treble staff -



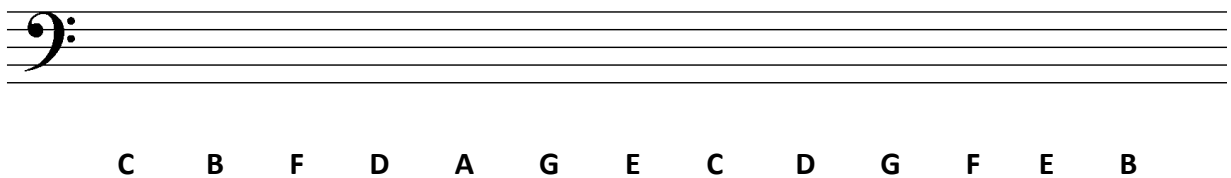
- and in the Bass staff:



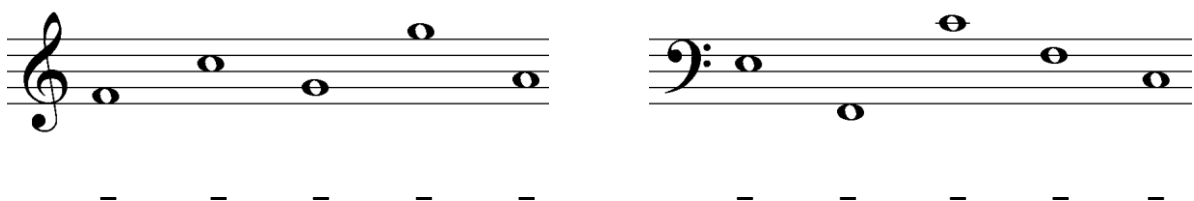
Now, write in the notes to go with the letters on the staff below (don't worry about *exact* positions ie if you're asked to write in an A, write in any A, as long as it's an A).



See how you get on with the Bass staff -



And finally, can you name the notes below?

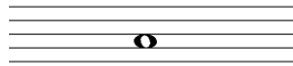


## **DURATION - HOW LONG OR HOW SHORT IS THE NOTE?**

Now for the second of the two essential concepts mentioned on page 1. We've seen how a note's **position** on the staff tells us how *high* or how *low* it is, but its *duration* ie whether it's short and sharp or long and drawn out, is determined by what the note **looks like** as it sits on the staff. Here are the 5 types of notes we're most likely to come across in a choir:

### **SEMIBREVE (or 'WHOLE NOTE')**

Looks a bit like an egg on its side. It's the longest note we generally use. Normally lasts for **4** beats



Da-a-a-a

### **MINIM ('HALF NOTE')**

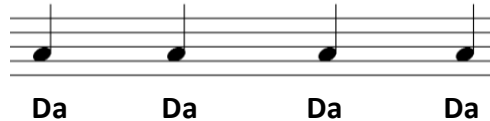
Like a semibreve with a stem (stems can point either up or down). Normally lasts for **2** beats ie half as long as a semibreve.



Da-a      Da-a

### **CROTCHET ('QUARTER NOTE')**

Just like a minim but with the circle filled in black. Normally lasts for **1** beat ie half as long as a minim.



Da      Da      Da      Da

### **QUAVER ('EIGHTH NOTE')**

Looks like a crotchet with a curly tail stuck to the stem. If there is a sequence of quavers, the notes comprising *one beat* are usually connected with a line called a *beam* for ease of reading. A quaver is a fairly fast note. Shorter than the beat - normally lasts for  $\frac{1}{2}$  a beat (ie there are **2 notes per beat**).



Da - da    Da - da    Da - da    Da - da

### **SEMI-QUAVER ('SIXTEENTH NOTE')**

Like a crotchet with *two* curly tails stuck to the stem. As with quavers, a group of semi-quavers comprising one beat is usually connected with a beam. This is the fastest note we generally sing. Normally lasts for  $\frac{1}{4}$  a beat (ie there are four notes per beat).



Da - da - da - da    Da - da - da - da    Da - da - da - da    Da - da - da - da

Notes are related to each other like this:

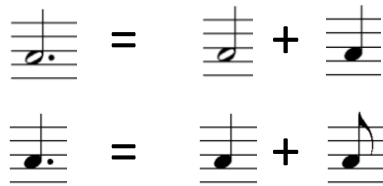
**1 semibreve** (whole note) = **2 minims** (half-notes) = **4 crotchets** (quarter-notes) = **8 quavers** (eighth-notes) = **16 semi-quavers** (sixteenth-notes).

### DOTTED NOTES

Now, just to be difficult, you'll sometimes see a note with a dot after it, e.g.



What does the dot do? It extends the value of the note **by half its value again** eg



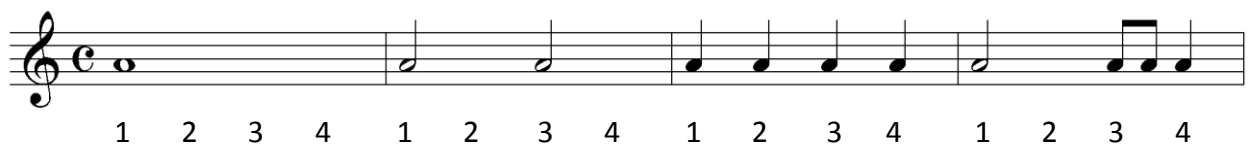
So, while you count **2** for a minim, you would count **3** for a dotted minim. Count **1** beat for a crotchet and **1½** beats for a dotted crotchet. No problems with that?

To make counting and reading easier, written music is divided into **bars** (or **measures**). These are simply 'compartments' that contain the same number of beats. They are separated by vertical *bar-lines*. If there are 4 beats to the bar, the note values within each bar *must* add up to 4 beats. If there are 3 beats to the bar, the note values within each bar must add up to 3 beats.

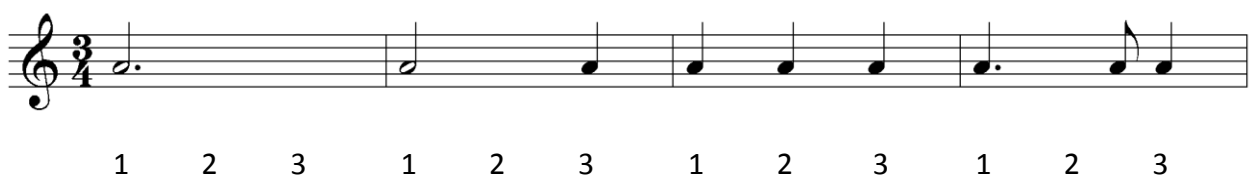
(There has to be one confusing exception, of course - sometimes the very first bar leading in to a song may have less than the required number of notes in it. If that happens, the bar *at the very end* of the song will also be 'short' to balance things up. See p.10 for an example.)

Here are some examples of bars containing the necessary note values.

First, 4 beats to the bar:



Now, 3 beats to the bar:



And speaking of beats, why don't we count some?

## COUNTING THE BEAT



Let's clear our throats and see if we can put the time values of notes into the sort of context we come across as singers. We can start with **semi-breves**:

1 2 3 4      1 2 3 4      1 2 3 4  
Ah - h - h - h    Ah - h - h - h    Ah - h - h - h

Since semi-breves have a time value of **4** beats to the bar there will only be one of these to each 4-beat bar. So, if we were singing 'Ah' in each of the bars above, we would sing *one* 'Ah' at the start of each bar and hold it for 4 beats ie the full the length of the bar.

**Minims**, though, have only half the time value of semi-breves so we would count them like this:

1 2 3 4      1 2 3 4      1 2 3 4  
Ah - h    Ah - h    Ah - h    Ah - h    Ah - h    Ah - h

We would sing *two* 'Ahs' in each bar above and hold them for 2 beats each.

**Crotchets** have half the time value of minims, so we would count them:

1 2 3 4      1 2 3 4      1 2 3 4  
Ah Ah Ah Ah    Ah Ah Ah Ah    Ah Ah Ah Ah

We would sing *four* 'Ahs' in each bar above and hold them for just 1 beat each

Now for some **quavers** -

1      &      2      &      3      &      4      &  
**Ah**    Ah    **Ah**    Ah    **Ah**    Ah    **Ah**    Ah

Because quavers are shorter than the beat we have to slip in an '**and**' between each note as we count, with the beat on every *second* note. So we simply count these as "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and..." etc. We'd sing 8 rather quick 'Ahs' in the bar above (with the 4 beats in bold).

And **semiquavers** - well, these are pretty slick - but if the tempo is slow enough, you can count them as

1 e & a    2 e & a    3 e & a    4 e & a

ie "One ee-and-ah, two ee-and-ah, three ee-and-ah....." etc with the beat on every fourth note.



The music we sing, of course, is never quite as simple as this, so how about we mingle some notes together and count (or sing) them. First off, 4 beats to the bar:

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 & 1 2 3 & 4  
 Ah - h Ah Ah Ah Ah - h - h Ah Ah - h Ah a-a Ah Ah a-a Ah

Now, 3 beats to the bar:

1 2 3 1 2 3 & 1 & 2 3 1 & 2 3 &




Ah - h Ah Ah Ah a - a a - a Ah - h Ah - h a - a-a

Were you able to handle those OK? Like to go back over them once more for practice?

## TIME SIGNATURES



Always at the beginning of music (and often a number of times throughout it) we find either 2 numbers, one on top of the other, or instead, a sign like a large letter C. They might look like:


 or
 
 or maybe
 

These are known as **time signatures**. The top number tells us *how many* beats there are in a bar and the bottom number tells us the *time value* of the beat.

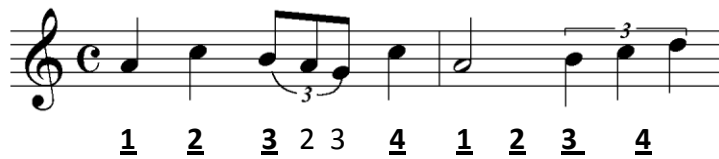
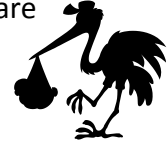
**4/4 time** (the large letter **C** - which stands for 'Common Time' - is usually written instead of **4/4**) means there are 4 crotchet (quarter note) beats to the bar. (This actually *is* the most common timing - 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4 etc). **3/4 time** tells us there are 3 crotchet beats to the bar (1-2-3, 1-2-3 ie waltz time). **6/8 time** = 6 quaver beats to the bar, **2/2 time** = 2 minim beats to the bar and so on. A time signature always stays in force until the *next* time signature appears. Here are some examples of time signatures and some note combinations:

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the song 'The Rose Tree'. The first staff is in common time (C) and features a melody with eighth and quarter notes. The second staff is in 3/4 time and provides a harmonic accompaniment with quarter and eighth notes. The third staff is in 6/8 time and offers a different rhythmic accompaniment using eighth and sixteenth notes. All three staves conclude with a final whole note chord.

One more thing about counting - you might sometimes hear the MD say "I'll be beating this in two". Does this mean he's going to whack his music stand so hard it's likely to fall in half? No, he's just saying that although the music is, for example, in **4/4** time, he'll be counting **2** beats to the bar and not **4**. This might happen if the tempo is particularly fast and the rhythm lends itself to a '1, 2' beat rather than '1,2,3,4'. Music in **6/8** time is a particular case in point. The 6 quavers in each bar are treated as two groups of three notes rather than three groups of two notes, so with a **6/8** tempo, the MD will beat the music 'in two'.

### TRIPLETS

Triplets do not originate from wild choir parties! They appear when 3 notes are squeezed into the time normally taken by a lesser number of notes. In Bar 1 below, 3 quavers are sung in the musical 'space' of 2 quavers (or 1 crotchet) [underlined notes show the beat] and in Bar 2 three crotchets are fitted into the 'space' of two crotchets (or 1 minim).



Triplets are grouped together with the number '3' and often, but not always, with a curved line or straight bracket. All the notes of a triplet are of equal length.

An example of the use of triplets is in *Getting To Know You* from the *King And I*. Three quavers take the 'space' of one crotchet. (Notice how the first bar only has **1** beat (the triplet) in it. That means the bar at the very end of the song will only have **3** beats to compensate).



### QUIZ TIME - WHAT MELODY IS THIS?

Using note positions and values, see if you can work out what the following melodies are:

(1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(Having trouble working them out? See p.24 for answers and then try to follow the tunes.)

## RESTS

As well as needing *sound* to make music, we also need occasional moments of *silence*!



These silent moments - ie when we're not supposed to sing (unless you're really keen to do a solo) - are called *rests* (what a good name!).

Like notes, rests can vary in length and in fact are given the same names and values as notes. That is, a **crotchet rest** has the same value as a **crotchet note**, a **quaver rest** has the same value as a **quaver note** etc.

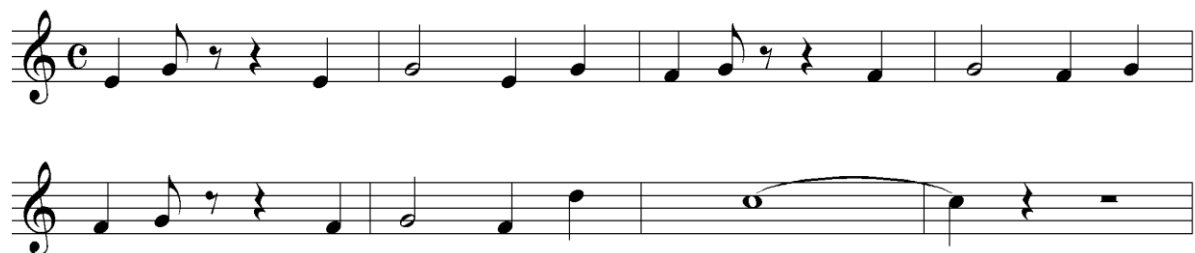
This is what the rests and their equivalent notes look like:

	=	
Semi-breve rest		Semi-breve note
	=	
Minim rest		Minim note
	=	
Crotchet rest		Crotchet note
	=	
Quaver rest		Quaver note
	=	
Semi-quaver rest		Semi-quaver note

Now, have a look at the staff below to see how the rests (silences) fit in with the notes (sounds). Notice how the combined values of notes and rests must still add to the number of beats in each bar.



Here's a real example of rests in music. See if you can work out the tune.



## TIED NOTES

Speaking of note values, you'll notice that the last two notes of the melody above (it's actually *I Want To Be Happy*) are connected with a curved line. This is known as a **tie** and joins the two notes into one longer note. The note in the second last bar above effectively has a value of **5 beats**. The second note is *not* sung separately as it would be if there were no tie. Ties are nearly always used to connect notes across bar-lines. They can only be used between notes with the *same name* and *same position* on the staff. We can't tie an F to a G, for example, or a top F to a bottom F.

## SLURS

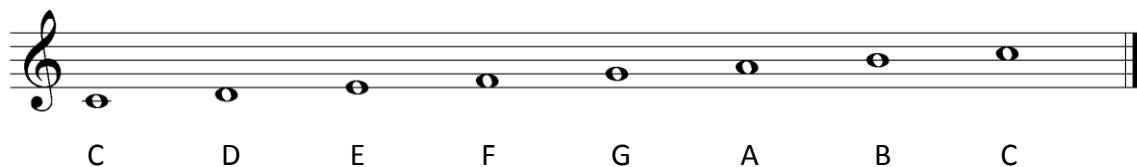
These are not musical insults! They are curved lines that look a bit like ties, but they don't connect notes together in the same way as a tie does. This is what a slur looks like.



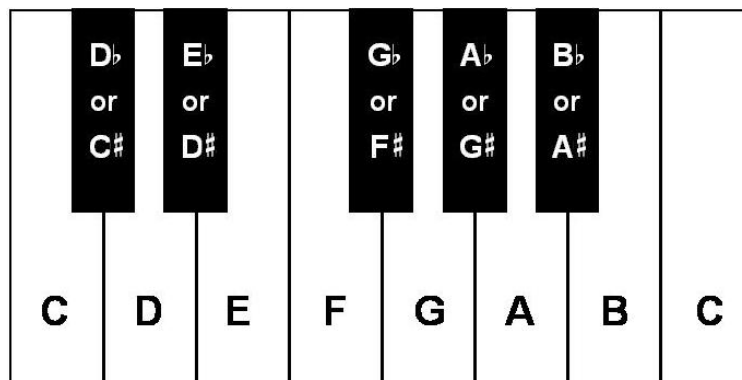
It tells us that the notes within the curved line should be sung smoothly (*legato*). A slur can also be used to indicate a musical 'phrase' or sentence, which will help give expression to a part of the music or it might indicate 'no breathing'.

## SHARPS, FLATS AND NATURALS




In the earlier section about **pitch**, we talked about notes being written on the lines of a staff or in the spaces between the lines eg



You can see that the octave above contains **8** notes written either on the lines or in the spaces. But that doesn't mean, in warbling our way from Middle C to the C an octave above, we only get to sing 8 notes! This is because there is a full *tone* interval between most of the notes on the staff above and its neighbours. BUT, the smallest distance between musical sounds that we can hear and sing easily is actually a *semitone* or half a tone - and if we write all these in, there would be **13** notes in an octave. You can see where the 'missing' notes are if you look at a keyboard - they are the *black* notes.



If you're sitting at a keyboard (it might be just a little easier to understand all this if you can get to one for a moment) you can find a semitone easily - it's the *interval* between any note (black or white) and the one either side of it. The keyboard diagram on p.12 shows us that there are notes *between* C & D, D & E, F & G, G & A and A & B. None, though between E & F and B & C because the intervals between these notes are semitones anyway. The 'between' notes are called **sharps** or **flats** while other notes (the white notes on a piano) are known as **naturals**. [There are exceptions to this. The white note C is also B Sharp, E is F Flat etc but let's keep things simple at this stage!]

 is a sign for a sharp;  is a sign for a flat;  is a sign for a natural.

A 'sharp' sign in front of a note on a staff *raises* its pitch by one semitone; a 'flat' sign in front of a note *lowers* its pitch by one semitone; a 'natural' sign in front of a note restores it to its original 'white note' pitch.

So C sharp is one semitone higher than C and is written as **C#**

D flat is one semitone lower than D and is written as **Db**

C natural is one semitone lower than C sharp and is written as **Cn**

D natural is one semitone higher than D flat and is written as **Dn**

But hang on - it looks from the keyboard diagram, that C sharp and D flat are the same note!! And in fact they are. Starting with C natural and singing up a semitone will give you exactly the same sound as starting with D natural and singing down one semitone. It's just that the notes can be called *sharps* or *flats* depending on what **key** the music is written in (more about this below).

Semitones (sharps or flats) are written on a staff in this way -



## **KEY SIGNATURES**

You've probably wondered why, at the beginning of a staff, you'll often see clusters of sharp signs or flat signs e.g.



These are called **key signatures**. Why are they there? Well, generally, sharps and flats can be stuck in the music any old place the composer wants. When this happens, they are

called *accidentals*. But sometimes *all* the notes of the *same pitch* in a piece of music will need to have, for example, a flat sign in front (e.g. all the Bs in the music need to be read as B flat). This happens when music is written in a particular **key**. What does this mean? Well, let's look at the opening bars of *Puff, The Magic Dragon*.



This arrangement is written in the **key of C Major**. How do we know? Because it uses notes found in the scale of C Major (an ascending or descending sequence of 8 notes starting and finishing on C) and ends on a C. Since the scale of C Major has no sharps or flats in it (it runs straight up the white notes from C to C), there is no repetition of notes throughout the music above that need to have sharps or flats (black notes) assigned.

OK, but let's assume the key of C doesn't suit the soprano soloist. She's fussy and wants the tune written with higher notes to suit her voice. So, to keep her happy (we always try to keep our sopranos happy), we'll arrange the whole tune several tones higher so it starts and finishes on E flat. Here it is:



This means we now have exactly the same tune but written in a different key, ie the **key of E flat Major**. Since the scale of E flat major has a **B flat**, an **E flat** and an **A flat** in it, every single B, E and A in the new arrangement now need to be sung as flats (otherwise it will sound like *Puff, The Horribly-Out-Of-Tune Dragon*).

But it looks awfully *messy* with all those flat signs cluttering up the music. So, to get rid of them, flat signs for B, E and A are written at the beginning of every staff to tell us that although all the B's, E's and A's throughout the music are written without flat signs, they should all, nevertheless, be read and sung as B flat, E flat and A flat. This is what the 'less cluttered' arrangement looks like:



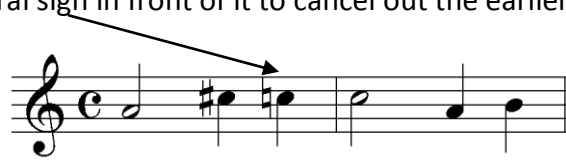
Much tidier. Now, two more important things about sharps, flats and naturals.

First, **accidentals work for one bar and one bar ONLY**, after which the note changed by the accidental reverts back to what it normally is. Check the bars below:



There is no key signature at the beginning of the staff so there will be no 'consistent' sharps or flats in the music. The second note of Bar 1 is therefore an **accidental** because it has a sharp sign in front of it. But even though the third note has no sharp sign, it is still sung as C sharp because the sharp sign on the *second* note stays in force for the remainder of Bar 1. But because the second bar is a new bar, the accidental from Bar 1 has no influence, so the first note of Bar 2 reverts back to C *natural*.

Second, **natural signs cancel sharps and flats**. Let's say, for example, that the composer wanted the third note in Bar 1 above to be a C natural, not a C sharp. To do that, he would need to put a natural sign in front of it to cancel out the earlier sharp sign e.g.



Likewise, if there is a key signature with sharps and flats, they are 'cancelled out' by a natural sign e.g.



There is a B flat and E flat in the key signature, so all B's and E's throughout the music should be read as B flat and E flat. But in Bar 2, the effect of the key signature is cancelled by the natural signs in front of the B and E. In Bar 3, these notes revert to what they were before, i.e. B flat and E flat.

By the way, you'll hear the terms 'major' and 'minor' popping up from time to time eg "We've got a key change from C *major* to E flat *minor*" or "I love that F major chord - play it again, Sam". This is something choir members don't really have to worry about, but it might be useful to know that a major key has a straightforward 'happy' sound to it. Music in a minor key sounds 'gloomy', 'sad' or even a bit 'darker'. You'll recognize the difference when you hear it.

## **SHAPING THE MUSIC**



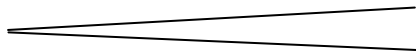
### **Soft Or Loud?**

For music to have real feeling or expression it's clearly going to need different levels of volume (sometimes called *dynamics*). Composers usually tell us what they have in mind by writing into the music some Italian shorthand for volume levels. Why Italian? It's long been accepted as the universal language of western musical notation. Here are some of the most common terms for volume:

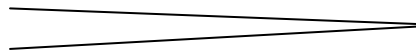
<b><i>ppp</i></b>	Pianississimo	Ssshh! As softly as you can
<b><i>pp</i></b>	Pianissimo	Very softly
<b><i>p</i></b>	Piano	Softly
<b><i>mp</i></b>	Mezzo-Piano	Moderately softly
<b><i>mf</i></b>	Mezzo-Forte	Moderately loudly
<b><i>f</i></b>	Forte	Loudly
<b><i>ff</i></b>	Fortissimo	Very loudly
<b><i>fff</i></b>	Fortississimo	Give it all you've got!!
<b><i>fp</i></b>	Fortepiano	Change <u>suddenly</u> from loud to soft

Mezzo forte is generally regarded as a middling average singing volume, neither too soft nor too loud.

**Changes in volume** are indicated by 'hair-pin' signs ie



= getting louder



= getting softer

Or by words written into the music:

**Crescendo** (often written as **cresc.**) = getting louder

**Decrescendo** or **diminuendo** (or **decresc.** or **dim.**) = getting softer

## Fast Or Slow?

Different speeds in music (musos don't like the word 'speed' much, they prefer to talk about '**tempo**' - but it means the same thing) are also indicated in the music in Italian words.

Here are some terms we come across fairly often:

Largo or Lento	Very slowly
Adagio	Slowly
Andante	An easy walking pace
Moderato	At a moderate speed
Allegretto	Fast, but slower than Allegro
Allegro	Lively and fast
Vivace	Vivacious, lively
Presto	Very fast
Prestissimo	Whoosh!

**Changes in tempo** are indicated by:

Accelerando (accel.)	Accelerating
Rallentando (rall.)	Gradually slowing
Ritardando (ritard.)	Gradually slowing
Ritenuto (rit.)	Slowing quickly
A tempo	Return to former speed



Pause (or fermata) - you'll *really* have to watch the MD when you see a 'pause' sign because these have no set duration - it's entirely up to the MD.

You might also come across:

Agitato	With agitation
Con brio	With spirit
Con moto	With movement
Dolce	Sweetly, gently
Espressivo	Expressively
Legato	Smoothly
Marcato	Marked



Molto	Very (eg molto allegro – very fast)
Piu	More (eg piu allegro - more quickly)
Poco	A little (eg poco animato - a little animated)
Risoluto	Resolutely
Sempre	Always
Staccato	Sharply separated
Tranquillo	Tranquilly

And there are plenty of others!!!

## **MORE SIGNS WHICH AFFECT NOTES**

Here are a few more common musical signs which affect the way a note is sung.

**Staccato** - Dots above notes means the note has to be sung 'staccato' – short and sharp with a distinct silent space between notes



(The opposite of *staccato* is *legato*. An MD will often ask a choir to sing this way. When a passage of music is marked 'legato' the notes are sung very smoothly with no marked separation between the notes).

**Accent** - Notes marked with a 'V' either vertically or on its side means the note is accented. It should be sung strongly.



**Firmly** - A 'hyphen' over the note means it must be sung firmly but not *fully* accented.



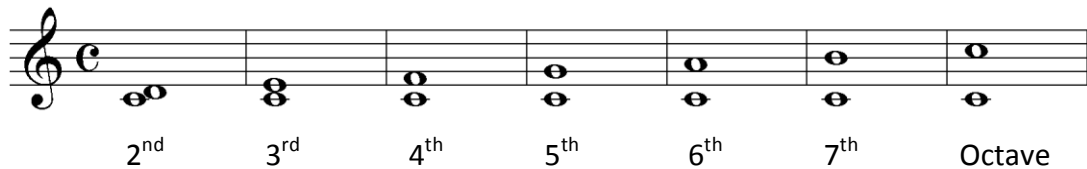
**Grace notes** - A small note before an ordinary note is known as a 'grace note'. It should be sung as quickly as possible. The notes below would be sung 'd'd-a-ah, d'd-a-ah'



## **INTERVALS**

You'll sometimes hear an MD say something like "The basses are singing a third too high" (as if they ever would!) or "Sops, you'll have to drop down a fifth when the key changes". Here we are simply talking about *intervals* between notes and there's no rocket science involved in this. It simply means the vertical 'distance' between notes. To work out an interval, start with the bottom note below and count up.

From Middle C to D is 2 notes (we have to count the number of letters involved), so the interval from C to D is a 'second'. From C to E is a 'third' and so on.



Sometimes it's useful to remember some easily recognized intervals:

2 <sup>nd</sup>	Happy <b>B</b> irthday To You
3 <sup>rd</sup>	While <b>S</b> hepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night
4 <sup>th</sup>	Should <b>A</b> uld Acquaintance Be Forgot
5 <sup>th</sup>	God Rest <b>Y</b> e Merry, Gentlemen
6 <sup>th</sup>	My <b>B</b> on-nie Lies Over The Ocean
7 <sup>th</sup>	This is that <i>horribly</i> discordant note just below an octave.
Octave	Hi- <b>H</b> o! Hi- <b>H</b> o!    Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go.

## **OTHER MUSICAL ODDS AND ENDS FOR CHOIR MEMBERS**

### **The different choir 'voices'**

Most mixed choirs are SATB choirs. That is, they consist of four types of voices

- ☐ Soprano (high female voice)
- ☐ Alto (low female voice)
- ☐ Tenor (high male voice)
- ☐ Bass (low male voice).

If the music requires, these can be further divided into Soprano I, Soprano II; Tenor I, Tenor II etc. Music is frequently written for different combinations of these voices eg SATB, SSA, TTBB etc. Sometimes each voice will be given its own staff eg

**Valse moderato**

The image shows a musical score for a Valse moderato. It features four staves for the choir: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The music is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piano accompaniment is shown at the bottom, with dynamic markings *f* *tutti* and *sempre f*. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and bar lines.

More commonly, to save space, there will be only two staves for the whole choir. Sopranos and Altos will have the top one to themselves (with a Treble clef), while Tenors and Basses will occupy the bottom staff (with a Bass clef). When this happens, the voices are usually differentiated by the direction of the stems. In the top staff, Sopranos sing the notes with stems pointing upwards and Altos have the notes with downward pointing stems. In the bottom staff Tenors have the 'stems up' notes and Basses sing the notes with stems down. Here's an example:

The image shows a musical score for a choir and piano. The choir part consists of four staves: Soprano and Alto on the top staff, and Tenor and Bass on the bottom staff. A straight bracket groups the four staves together. The piano part consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) grouped by a curly bracket. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The Soprano and Alto parts have notes with upward-pointing stems, while the Tenor and Bass parts have notes with downward-pointing stems. The Tenor and Bass parts are labeled 'Unison' for the first five notes. The piano part provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines.

Notice how the voice staves are bound together by a **straight** bracket. This shows they have to be sung together. The piano part has two staves bound together by a **curly** bracket. Notice too the instruction for Tenors and Basses to sing in unison for 5 notes before they separate again.

The four staves above constitute a 'system'. There are usually several of these on one page. So if you hear the MD say "We'll start from the second bar of the third system" you'll know exactly what he means. Sometimes bars are numbered anyway, so he might simply say "Go back to Bar 59".

MD's are also prone to say something like "Let's start from the upbeat to Bar 3". This derives from the fact that conductors generally move their hand or baton *downwards* on the first beat of a bar, *sideways* on intermediate beats (eg the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> beats of a 4 beat bar) and *upwards* on the last beat. So the last beat of a bar is an 'up-beat' and leads into the next bar. The MD is saying, in effect, let's start from the last beat of Bar 2 - the beat (ie nearly always the note) that leads into Bar 3.

The image shows a single staff of music in common time (C). It contains five measures. The first measure has a whole note. The second measure has a half note followed by a quarter note. The third measure has a quarter note followed by a half note. The fourth measure has a quarter note followed by a half note. The fifth measure has a whole note. An arrow points to the last beat of the fourth measure, which is a quarter note, and is labeled "Upbeat to Bar 3".

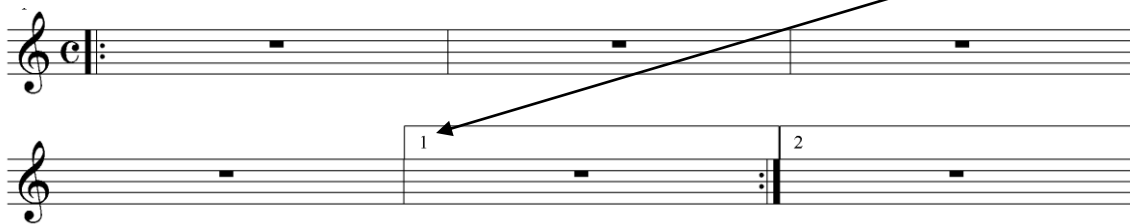
## REPEATING PASSAGES OF MUSIC

Composers will quite often want a passage of music repeated. To save reprinting a heap of unnecessary pages, they have a shorthand way of telling us where to stop the first time we sing it, where to go back to and where to go when we've done it the second time.

The 'repeat' sign is a double bar with two dots. It tells us to go back until we find a similar sign (but facing the other way) and repeat the music in between the signs - then keep going on. If there's no earlier sign we go right back to the beginning and then repeat.




The repeat sign is often at the end of a bar with a bracket and a number '1' over it.



This is called a 'first time' bar and we sing the notes in it *first time* through. After repeating the passage from Bar 1, we get to the end of Bar 4, ignore Bar 5 and leap straight to Bar 6. You have probably worked out that Bar 6 is called the 'second time' bar and the notes in it are sung the *second time* through!

There are two other common ways to repeat a passage of music. They involve either:

- 1) going right back to the *beginning* before repeating (the instruction in the music is **Da Capo**, or **D.C.** - which means 'from the beginning'); or
- 2) going back to a *sign* (**Dal Segno** or **D.S.** - which means 'from the sign').

This is the dal segno sign -  - please don't ask me where it came from!

Here are some examples of **D.C.** and **D.S.** repeats:

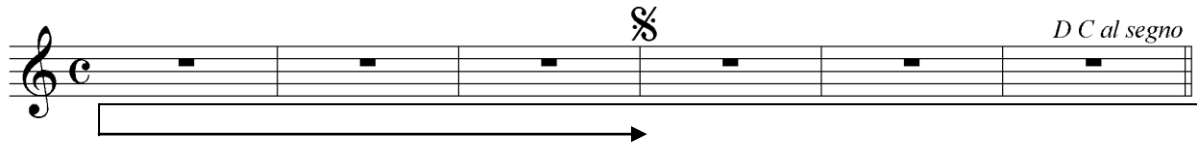
A simple **D.C.** at the end (go back to the beginning and repeat through to the end.)




**D.C. al fine** (go back to the beginning and repeat through to the word '**fine**' later in the music ('fine' is Italian for 'finish')).

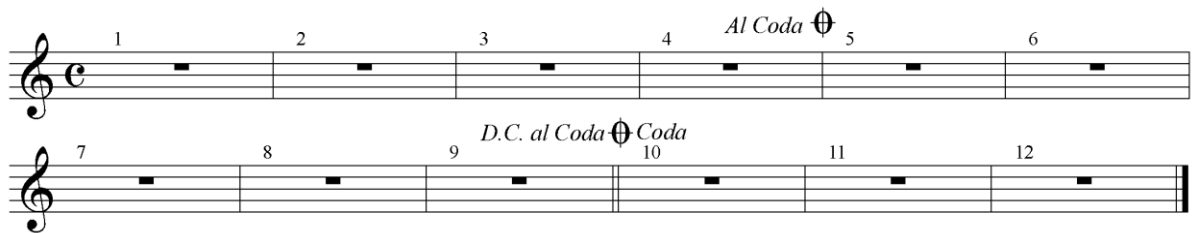


**D.C. al segno** (go back to the beginning and repeat through to the dal segno sign)



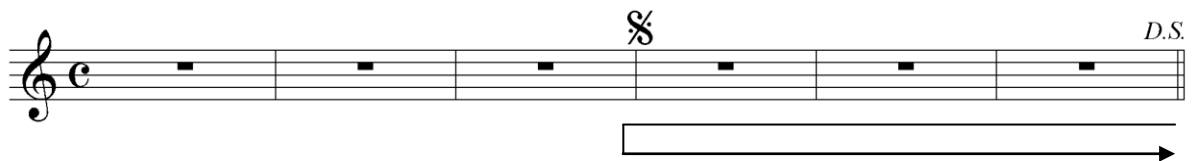
**D.C. al coda** - go back to the beginning and repeat until we get to the 'al coda' sign and then leapfrog straight to the **coda** (Italian for 'tail') which means a final passage of music added on at the end.

The coda sign looks like this:  Modern music might just have the direction 'To Coda' written in to save confusion.



In this example, we would sing from the beginning through to the end of Bar 9 where we are told to go back to Bar 1, repeat to the Al Coda sign at the end of Bar 4, leapfrog Bars 5 to 9 and sing from the Coda sign at Bar 10 to the end.

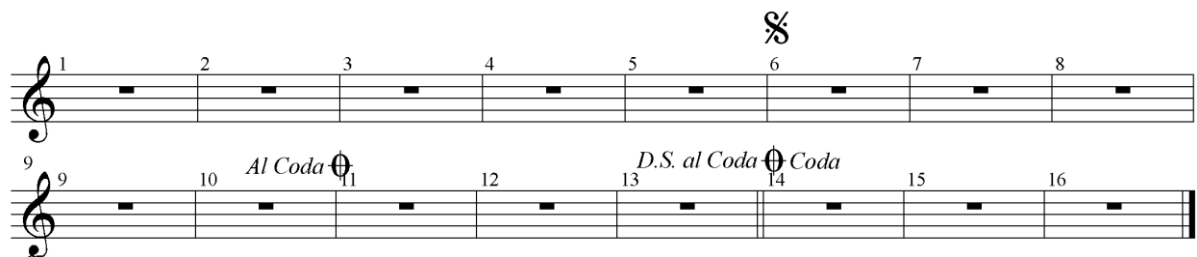
A simple **D.S.** (go back to the sign and repeat from the sign through to the end).



**D.S al fine** (go back to the sign and repeat through to the word 'fine').



**D.S. al coda** - repeat from the sign to the 'al coda' sign and then leapfrog to the coda.



In this example, we would sing from the beginning through to the end of Bar 13 where we are told to go back to the dal segno sign at Bar 6, repeat through to the Al Coda sign at the end of Bar 10, leapfrog Bars 11 to 13 and sing from the Coda sign at Bar 14 to the end.

## NOW.....HOW MUCH CAN YOU REMEMBER?

To finish, here's a short test on some of the things we've covered. If you have any problems, sneak a look back in the notes and then check your answers on page 24.

First, copy out the following passage of music onto the blank staves below (just for practice) and then see if you can answer the questions that follow.

The musical score is written on two staves. The first staff is marked 'Largo e molto espressivo' and begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. It contains a half note G, a quarter note A, a quarter note B, a quarter note C, a quarter note D, a quarter note E, a quarter note F#, and a half note G. The second staff is marked 'rit.' (ritardando), 'a tempo' (return to tempo), and 'mf' (mezzo-forte). It contains a half note G, a quarter note A, a quarter note B, a quarter note C, a quarter note D, a quarter note E, a quarter note F#, and a half note G. The piece ends with a double bar line and the marking 'D.C.' (Da Capo). Below the score are two blank staves for copying.

1. The time signature has been omitted. What should it be?.....
2. What does 'Largo e molto espressivo' mean?.....
3. Name the *types* of notes that appear in this passage?.....  
.....
4. What do the 'hairpins' above bars 2 and 6 tell us?.....
5. What do the letters 'D.C.' signify?.....
6. Does the music start softly or loudly?.....
7. There is a line connecting the last note in bar 1 with the first note in bar 2.  
What is it called and what does it do ? .....  
.....
8. Is it the same as the line connecting the last note in bar 7 with the first note in bar 8? If not, what is the difference?.....  
.....

9. What are the alphabetical names of the notes in bars 1,2 and 3?.....
10. There is a sign over the first note in bar 3. What is it and what does it mean?  
.....
11. What does ***mf*** stand for in bar 7? What does it mean in English?.....  
.....
12. In bar 3 there is a quaver with a dot after it. What is the effect of the dot?  
.....
13. In bar 4 there are two quavers with dots above them. What is the Italian word for notes marked like this and how should we sing them?.....  
.....
14. What is the name of the rests in bars 1 and 8?.....
15. What is meant by the terms 'rit.' and 'a tempo'?.....  
.....
16. What is the sign over the last bar?.....

**Answers to questions:**

1. 3/4
2. Very slowly and very expressively
3. Minim, crotchet, quaver, semiquaver (plus dotted crotchet and dotted quaver)
4. Bar 2 - *Decrescendo* ie 'getting softer'; Bar 6 - *Crescendo* ie 'getting louder'
5. They stand for *Da Capo* and mean 'go back to the beginning and repeat'.
6. Softly. There is a pianissimo sign at bar 1.
7. The line is a *slur*. It indicates the notes should be sung smoothly.
8. No. The second line is a *tie*. It joins the two notes into one long note. The second note is not sung separately.
9. B C, C, C, B, A A, G, G, E.
10. It's an accent mark. The note is to be sung strongly.
11. Mezzo forte, or 'moderately loudly'.
12. It extends the length of the quaver by half its value again ie = to a quaver + a semi-quaver.
13. The dots are *staccato* marks. The notes are sung short and sharp with a distinct interval between the two.
14. Crotchet rests.
15. *Rit* is short for *ritenuto* and means 'slowing suddenly'. *A tempo* means to return to the former speed.
16. It's a 'pause' sign.

**Answers to mystery tunes p.10:** (1) Three Blind Mice (2) Silent Night (3) Frere Jacques (4) Ode To Joy

Well, there are some of the basics! Hopefully you now know a little more about reading music. Don't be disappointed if it doesn't all fall into place in a blinding flash! Written music is certain to seem a touch complicated and daunting to start with but in time it will become a lot easier. Good luck and good singing!

---

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Grant Taylor

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