

UNIT 1: NOTATION

The communication of music by the printed page depends on a set of symbols placed in proper sequence and with precision. Conventions of notation are continually in the process of evolution, and thus are subject to change as the need requires. In addition, since each instrument requires its own idiomatic notation, the outline below can only cover the most basic points. It is intended to offer guidance as you or your student write your own music or theory exercises.

A. PITCH NOTATION

1. Clefs

The staff gives no indication of specific pitch without the use of clefs. The choice of the clef to be used is dependent on the instrument used and its general range.

Example 1.1



The note "C" is the same pitch written on each clef.

2. Accidentals

Accidentals are placed to the left of the notehead and alter pitch by half steps as listed below. A half step, defined in terms of the keyboard, is the distance between two adjacent notes on the piano.

- Sharp (#) - raises the pitch one half step
- Flat (b) - lowers the pitch one half step
- Natural (♮) - returns the pitch to the original
- Double Sharp (X) - raises the pitch two half steps
- Double Flat (bb) - lowers the pitch two half steps

3. Notation Practices

- a. Stems are usually one octave in length
- b. In a melody line the direction of the stems is determined by the position on the staff. Above the middle line, stems go down; below the middle line, stems go up. Notes on the middle line usually go down unless adjacent notes have stems up.

- c. Notes on ledger lines have stems drawn to the middle line of the staff.
- d. When two melodies are written on the same staff, upper melody has the stems drawn up, and the lower melody has stems down.

B. RHYTHM NOTATION

1. Rhythm and Meter

The terms rhythm and meter are not interchangeable. Rhythm is a succession of note values which may form a musical unit. Meter is the organization of rhythm into beats and its subdivisions, and is indicated by the time signature.

The meter signature or time signature contains two numbers. The upper number designates the number of beats per measure. There can be any number of beats per measure. The lower number represents the kind of note value which receives one beat. For example,

4 means  8 means  16 means  2 means  1 means  , etc.

$\frac{4}{4}$ means the same as $\frac{4}{4}$ 4 beats in a measure
Quarter note gets one beat

2. Simple and Compound Time

Music may be in simple or compound time. In simple time the upper number of the meter signature is frequently 1, 2, 3, or 4. In addition the beat can be divided into groups of two (or four).

Example 1.2

$\frac{4}{4}$  The beat
Division of 2 or 4

Other simple meters are $\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{2}{8}$, $\frac{2}{16}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{3}{8}$, $\frac{3}{16}$, $\frac{4}{4}$, or $\frac{4}{16}$.

In compound time a dotted note value is used for the basic beat and it is divided into groups of three. Because our notational system does not provide numbers representing dotted notes to be used as the bottom number of the meter signature, we then must express the number and note value of the divisions rather than the beats. Therefore, the meter signatures below are synonymous.

Example 1.3

$$\frac{2}{4} = \frac{6}{8} \quad \frac{3}{4} = \frac{9}{8} \quad \frac{4}{4} = \frac{12}{8}$$

The next example illustrates the basic beat with divisions.

Example 1.4

| | | |
|---------|--|----------------------------|
| 12 8 | | The beat Divisions of 3 |
|---------|--|----------------------------|

Note that Example 1.2 and 1.4 both contain four beats per measure. It is the number of divisions of the beat that determines if the music is in simple or compound time.

Meter signatures in compound time usually have a 6,9, or 12 for the top number. The bottom number can be any value you choose.

3. Notation

The notation of rhythm should clearly delineate the beat and its various divisions.

Example 1.5

| | |
|---|---|
| Simple | Compound |
| 3 4 | 6 8 |
| | |
| Through the beaming of the eighth notes, the rhythm is clearly 3 beats with divisions of 2. | Because $\frac{6}{8}$ often implies <u>2</u> beats per measure, the beaming clarifies divisions of 3. |

The following examples may help to clarify the relationship of notation to the ease with which a rhythm may be read.

Example 1.6

| | | | | | | |
|--------|--|--|-----------|--------|--|--|
| 6 8 | | | Preferred | 6 8 | | |
| 3 4 | | | Preferred | 3 4 | | |

Asymmetrical Meters include those meter signatures which indicate that the pulse cannot be divided into equal groups of two or three.

Example 1.7

| | | | |
|--------|--|---------|--|
| 7 8 | | 5 16 | |
|--------|--|---------|--|

4. Rhythm Transcription

A rhythm may be rewritten from one set of note values to another without changing the sound of it. Maintain the same top number, and change only the bottom note value.

Example 1.8

| | | |
|--------|--|--|
| 3 4 | | |
| 3 2 | | |
| 3 8 | | |

Drill 1.1

Transcribe the rhythm to the meters specified.

4
4

4
8

4
2

6
8

6
16

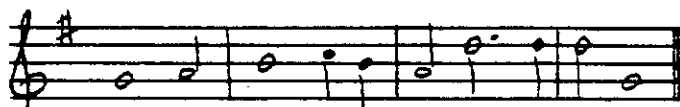
6
4

Drill 1.2

Correct the notation.

Drill 1.3

Place the meter signature appropriate to each melody.



5. Suggestion for Further Reading

Read, Gardner. Music Notation. Crescendo Publishing Co., 1979.

This book addresses the subject of notation in detail and includes a discussion of idiomatic practices for most instruments.