

Special Report

How to Read Just Enough Music Notation to Get by in Pop Music

THE NEW SCHOOL OF AMERICAN MUSIC

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Mastering music notation takes years of tedious study and practice. But that's okay, because there will always be those who are willing to do it. But the good news for the casual musician is that a mastery of music notation is really not necessary.

Professional pop piano players as well as amateurs in the know use a shortcut system that even neophytes can learn in a short amount of time. In this report we will cover virtually all the casual pop piano student needs to know in order to...have fun.

But let's get our values straight right now. Classical music is different. It revolves around precision in note reading--the kind of precision that takes years of tedious study and practice. Traditional piano studies erroneously assume the student needs the rigorous training of the career track classical pianist. The fact is the amateur pianist/hobbyist/enthusiast needs just a minimum of notation indoctrination in order to succeed.

Many accomplished professional pianists cannot read a single note. Why should you have to suffer through the classical process when it's just not necessary?

Pop pianists still rely on sheet music, but they read it selectively. Most of the information on sheet music is not only superfluous, but counter productive as well. So instead of years of tedium, just take an evening at your piano or keyboard, shut off the interruptions, and absorb the basics you'll need to start having fun immediately with pop music.


Understanding Melodies

The first thing to learn about reading music is that you can ignore most of what's written on the page. The only part you really need to learn is called the "treble clef." This is the symbol for the treble clef:



Usually the treble clef sign is associated with the five horizontal lines in music notation called the staff. It looks like this:



The bass clef symbol looks like this  and represents what the pianist plays with the left hand. Contrary to common belief and practice the bass clef is for use by classical pianists only. It is completely inappropriate for pop piano playing. At least for now.

The treble clef reveals the *melody* of the song, which by definition can be only one note at a time. Thus as a pop pianist, you will only need to play one note at a time when you play. On the piano the melody is almost always played with the right hand.

The information contained in the treble clef tells you two things about a note:

- 1) Its pitch (how high or low)
- 2) Its duration (how long it's held)

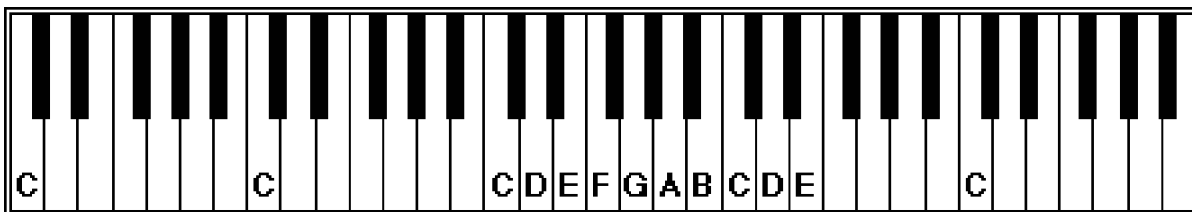
As you sit at the keyboard, to your left are the lower pitched notes and to the right the higher.

The Piano Keyboard

We will look at the white keys first. All the notes in music are named after the first seven letters of the alphabet:

A B C D E F G

Note that there are only seven different names for keys in our example. On the piano the musical universe centers around middle C. Here is a partial section of a keyboard.



Notice what all the C notes have in common. They are always white keys that fall just to the left of each grouping of two black keys. By picturing the C keys relative to their juxtaposition with black keys, you can quickly identify each C note by sight.

Practice finding and playing C notes up and down your keyboard now. Do you notice yet a similarity in their sounds?

There are 8 different C's on a full piano keyboard. The one closest to the center of the keyboard is called *middle C*.

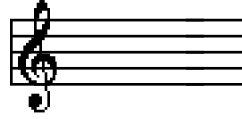
Once you locate a C, you can then figure out the rest of the white keys by applying the first seven letters of the alphabet to them. A basic kindergarten education is all that's necessary. Take some time to memorize these seven different notes by name, and learn to identify them on the keyboard without hesitation. Use the patterns of the black keys (groupings of three and two) as a guide to help you locate these notes. The quicker you can identify these notes by name, the faster you learn songs and the sooner the fun begins.

If music is based on the alphabet, though, why do we begin with C and not A? I really don't know. In actuality, music "starts" neither with C nor A. It's cyclical and repetitive. You will mislead yourself if you get it in your mind that music must start on any particular note.

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The Staff

The treble clef *staff* looks like this:

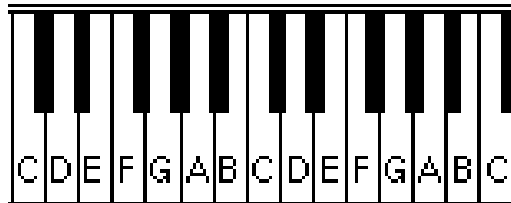


This staff has five lines and four spaces. The lines and spaces correspond to letter names--in fact they correspond to the names of the notes in music. From bottom to top the lines are named E G B D F and the spaces are named F A C E. Thus the lines and the spaces together read (from bottom to top) E F G A B C D E F. Music uses the letters of the alphabet from A through G in a repeating pattern. A musical note is represented by a dot or small circle on the staff, and it takes on the name of the line or space upon which it is placed and represents the corresponding musical note. Thus, these notes on the staff...



Middle C

...correspond to these keys on the keyboard:



"Middle C" is the C note at the center of the keyboard

Sometimes we need to add little lines above or below the staff to indicate certain notes. For example, this is how middle C looks in notation form:



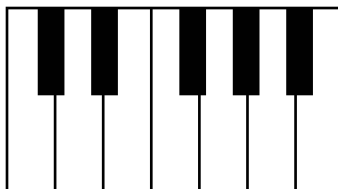
Memorize the names of the lines and spaces of the written staff. Learn to correlate the notes of the staff with the keys of the keyboard.

This takes care of the white notes.

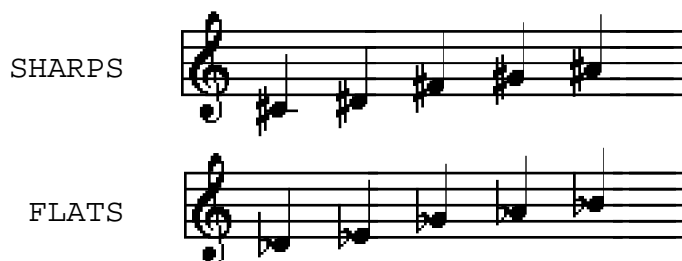
Sharps and Flats (The Black Keys)

Sooner or later you will need to learn the black keys on the keyboard. These are called the *sharps* and the *flats*. Whereas all the white keys only have one specific name each, the black keys all have two names. Each one can be designated either as a sharp (symbolized by #) or flat (symbolized by *b*). For example, the black key immediately to the right of a C is called alternatively C sharp (C#) or (Db). Eventually you must learn the names of these black keys, and you must learn them both ways. This is what they look like on the keyboard:

AS SHARPS: C# D# F# G# A#
AS FLATS: Db Eb Gb Ab Bb



And this is what they look like correspondingly in music notation:



Notice that each of the black keys is named after one of the seven white keys. We're still using just A through G of the alphabet.

One way to learn the sharps and flats is to remember that the term *sharp* means "higher" and the term *flat* means "lower." Thus, F# is the black key that is immediately higher than (to the right of) the white key F. This same note could be called G *b* because it is simultaneously just lower than (to the left of) the white key G.


That takes care of the five black notes. We have now covered all the notes in music. There are 12 of them, seven white ones and five black ones.


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Note Duration (Rhythm)


There is more to a melody than the pitch of the notes involved. Each note of a melody, in addition to having a certain pitch, must last a certain length of time. Music notation takes this concept of note length into account, but it is considered by many to be the most difficult aspect of learning to read music. With popular music, however, rhythmic precision is much less an issue than most traditional teachers will let on.


While classical music dictates that rhythm must be precise, in popular music it can be approximate. In fact the greatest pop pianists will vary a song's rhythm every time they play it. What does this mean to you? It means that if you can clap the rhythm to a melody, you can play it without having to learn the nomenclature of rhythm in music notation. As far as rhythm goes, close enough is close enough. In pop music we are less concerned with accuracy and more concerned with expression, feeling, and creativity. In fact, if you are obsessed with accuracy; your expression, feeling, and creativity will suffer for it. You can learn to count by approximation and avoid learning rhythm notation if you play melodies that are already familiar to you. But just for the record, these are the note values and their corresponding symbols. Just remember that there is no set length of time specified for any note value. Everything is relative.


This is a whole note:  It's held a relatively long time.

This is a half note:  It's held half as long as a whole note.

The quarter note  is held half as long as a half note.





The eighth note  is held half as long as a quarter note.

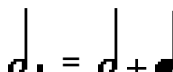
The sixteenth note  is held half as long as an eighth note.

The stems of the notes can go either up or down.  It makes no difference.

Successive eighth or sixteenth notes are sometimes written like this.



Thus, the time values of:  =  =  = 

A dot after a note increases its value by half again. 

Take the Next Step

What you just read summarizes the basics of music notation. Yes, it may seem a little technical if this is brand new to you. But here's the good news:

- 1) **This is all the technical stuff you really need to know to get started.**
- 2) **You don't even have to become an expert at it.**
- 3) **The next step is even easier, more fun, and will have you playing your favorite songs with both hands in record time.**

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So here's what to do next.

- 1) If you have not had experience with chords yet, order *Popular Chord Style Piano*, the workbook with CD or cassette course for beginners.
- 2) Otherwise, if you already understand the basics of the chord system, you can explore this fascinating world in more depth with our numerous supplementary programs.

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