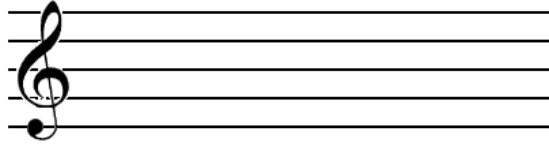


Reading music from a staff – a quick introduction



The diagram above shows an example of a music staff. The symbol at the left is called the “treble clef” symbol; its role will be described below.

We’ll start by covering one of the most basic principles of reading music – the meaning of “notes” that appear. In particular, we’ll focus on how to interpret notes based on where they appear *horizontally* (relative to one another), and where they appear *vertically* (relative to the staff).

Horizontal placement: music is read left-to-right, just like text. As you read from left to right on a music staff, the notes appear in the order in which they are to be heard. If there are multiple staves, then the top one is read first, then the next one down, and so on – again, this is just like lines of text on a page. The horizontal placement of notes tells us the order (or “sequence”) in which the notes are to be heard.

Vertical placement: a note’s vertical placement (relative to the staff) indicates the pitch of that note – that is, which note on the keyboard one would play to hear that note. Each line of the staff corresponds to a specific pitch; the higher the line, the higher the pitch. The specific meaning of each line depends on the “clef” symbol; for our purposes, we’ll usually stick with “treble clef” (mentioned earlier; shown above). Under this “clef,” the lines of the staff correspond to the following notes:

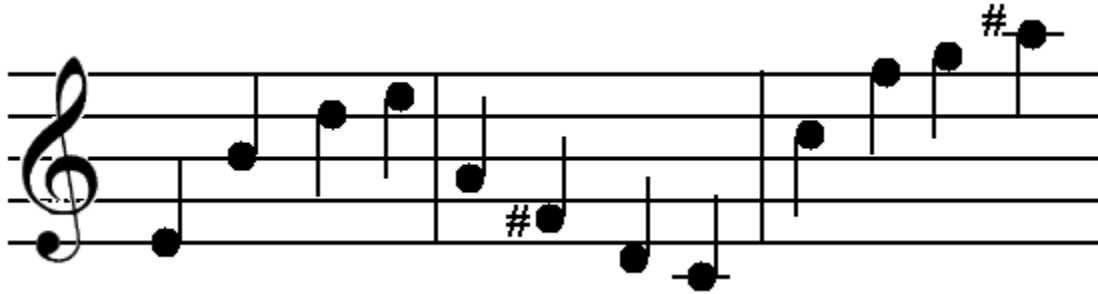


(The mnemonic “Every Good Boy Does Fine” is an easy way to memorize these notes in order.)

Notice that each line represents one of the “white key” pitches – E, G, etc., no “sharps.” Notice also that they are not consecutive; this is because each “gap” between lines is also assigned a specific pitch – specifically, the pitch that comes between the two pitches assigned to the lines above and below the gap. So for example, F comes between E and G, A comes between G and B, and so on.

Practice Question (answer on the next page): what are the four notes in the above diagram?

Practice Question Answer: the notes are, in order: E, B, D, E. The last E is an octave above the first E, since it is the higher (relative to the staff) of the two notes. Let's look at a longer "melody" (that is, sequence of notes):



The first four notes are E, B, D, E. The next four are A, F#, D and C. Notice that we label sharp notes with the “#” symbol, which is already familiar to us; the notation is the same on sheet music as when writing the note name. (The literal meaning of “#” is that the note is to be raised by a half-step, or semitone.) Notice also that for pitches that are too low (or too high) to fit on the staff, we may add temporary lines above/below the staff to accommodate them; e.g., the C at the end of the second group of four notes.

(Side comment: it's a common practice to collect notes into groups of four, as shown above. This may change when we consider notes whose durations are different – i.e., some are longer than others – but for now we're ignoring this detail, so groups of four will be our standard for now.)

The third group of four notes, in order, are: C, F, G and A#.

A few more comments: first, be aware that the pitch represented by a note depends only on the location of the “dot,” not on the “stem.” Also, the direction of the “stem” (up or down) has no meaning; usually it's directed toward the staff (down for high notes, up for low notes) to save space above/below the staff, but this isn't a universal rule. Later on we'll see notes with differently shaped stems, and/or dots which are left open rather than filled in; these variations affect the *duration* of a note, but that's something we won't tackle until later. For now, all of our notes have the same duration, which is referred to as a “count” or a “beat.”

Now that we've covered the order (left-to-right) of the notes and the pitch (vertical placement) that each note represents, we're ready to talk about melodies and variations as covered in Chapter 4 of the text.