

Getting started with sheet music

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in collaboration with Making Music

This guide will help you begin reading sheet music in a choir.

In written music, all the symbols contain information about what to sing and how to sing it. There is a lot of information on the page - over time all of this will be useful but don't worry if it takes time to get the hang of it.

One of the great things about being in a choir is that you'll be grouped with other people singing the same thing as you. Listening to them in rehearsals will really help. In time, you'll get to know how the notes on the page connect to the sounds you hear and the feeling of singing them.

The score

The musical score shows what everyone is singing at any one moment so it can look busy. Don't worry! Your notes are just one part of this. See below an extract from the 'Hallelujah' chorus from Handel's Messiah – this is what music on a page often looks like:

The image shows a musical score for the 'Hallelujah' chorus. It consists of five staves: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and Piano accompaniment. Each staff has musical notation and the lyrics 'Hal - le - lu - jah!'. Above the staves, a bracket labeled 'Bar lines' spans three measures, which are individually labeled 'Bar 1', 'Bar 2', and 'Bar 3'. On the left side, a vertical line is labeled 'Line'. On the right side, each staff is labeled with its voice part: 'Soprano stave', 'Alto stave', 'Tenor stave', 'Bass stave', and 'Piano accompaniment'.

Listen to a recording of this extract here: on.soundcloud.com/tfqsfuyCZADmtLQz9

A lot of choral music is written for four voice parts. Every part is essential for creating the harmony. You will join one of these parts depending on how high or low your voice is.

The group of five lines that the notes are placed on is called a staff. In the extract above, you can see that each staff is labelled with its voice part. Use this to work out which notes apply to you.

The voice parts are:

- Soprano: the highest part, often gets the tune.
- Alto: the next highest, helps to fill out the harmony.
- Tenor: the third highest, also helps to fill out the harmony.
- Bass: the lowest part, provides the foundation to the harmony.

Below are the soprano and bass staves from the extract, with links to recordings of the isolated parts - have a listen to see what they sound like.

Soprano



Listen to the soprano part here: on.soundcloud.com/okAEzsxjxcSaMbrp7

Bass



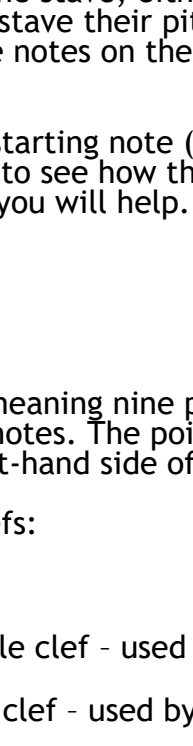
Listen to the bass part here: on.soundcloud.com/bVzyh4kp6rG7W2tY9

When you're reading music, you'll only need to look at the staff for your voice part. The score tells you the two key things you need to know for singing in a choir: the pitch of the notes and their rhythm.

Discovering the pitch

The pitch of a note is:

- how high or low it is, and
- how it relates to the notes before and/or after it.



All the notes are written on the five-line staff, either between the lines or with a line through the middle. As the notes go up on the staff their pitch gets higher, and as they go down it gets lower. The larger the gap between the notes on the staff, the larger the interval in pitch between them.

In rehearsals, someone will play your starting note (often on a piano) so you can hear its pitch. You can then follow the written notes to see how the music goes up and down, and by how much. Listening to the people around you will help.

Reading the pitch

On a staff, there are only five lines (meaning nine places to put a note). However, across all the voice parts singers use around 40 notes. The point of reference in finding them is called the clef. You can see these on the left-hand side of each staff in the Messiah extract.

In choral music there are two main clefs:



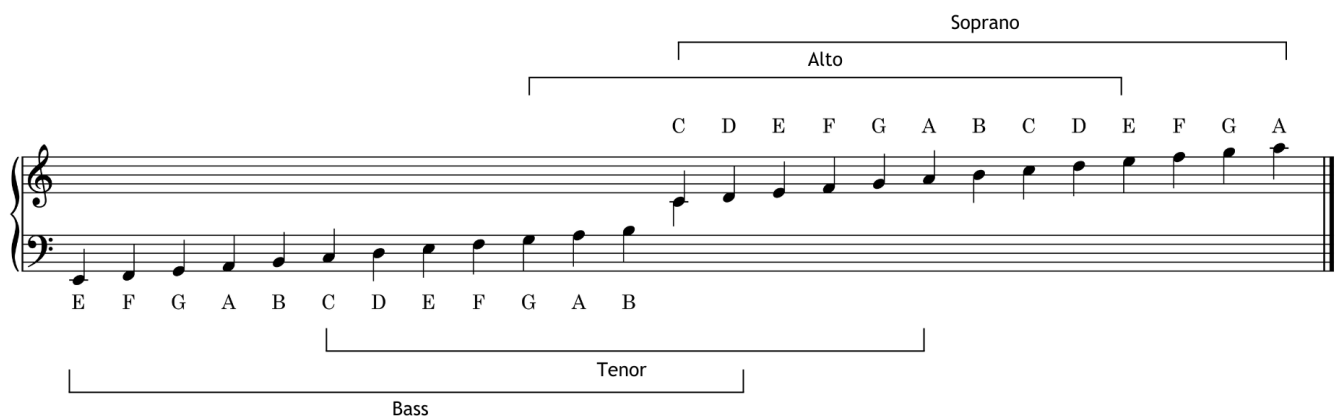
- Treble clef - used by sopranos, altos and sometimes tenors.
- Bass clef - used by basses and sometimes tenors.

You may see a treble clef with a small '8' underneath. This means the notes sound an octave (eight notes) lower than they look. You will usually see this in the tenor part - there is one in the Messiah extract.



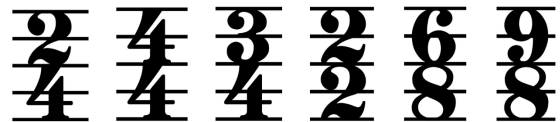
These symbols are called sharps (#) and flats (b). They indicate that a note is in between two others: a sharp is a bit higher in pitch, and a flat is a bit lower.

The notes in music are named using letters (going up) – A B C D E F G (and back to A).



The rhythm

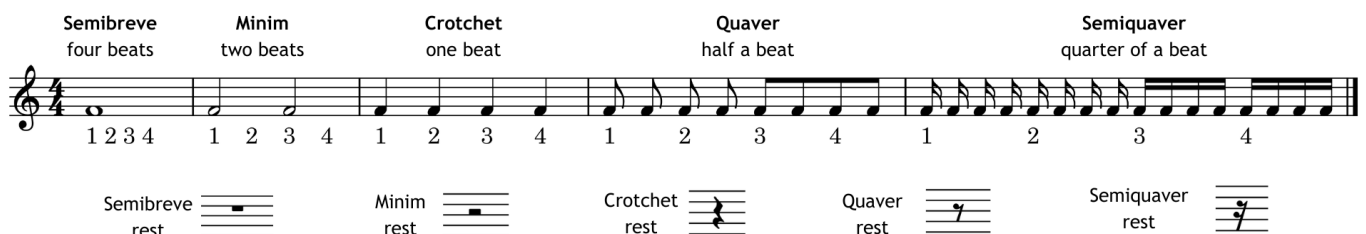
Music has a regular beat or pulse that runs throughout. These beats are grouped into bars, shown by lines going down across all five horizontal lines of the staff.



At the start of a piece is the time signature. These two numbers tell you how many beats are in a bar. The top number is (usually) the number of beats in a bar and the bottom shows the type of beat (4 = crotchet beats, 2 = minim beats etc.). Follow the conductor for the beat of the music; if it is not exactly what the score says don't worry - there are various reasons why that might happen.

Rhythms are made up of notes and silences of different lengths. You can tell the duration of each note by how it looks: whether it's filled-in (black) or empty (white) and what its stem is like. The white notes last longer than the black notes, and the more 'flags' there are on each stem, the shorter the note is. The rests show when to be silent.

Each type of note has a name (minim, crotchet, quaver, etc.) Here are some of the most common notes, and how their durations relate to each other when there are four crotchet beats in a bar (4/4).



In rehearsals

In rehearsals the conductor will tell you where on the page to start from. They may use different reference points, such as:

- lyrics
- a bar number (usually small numbers written at the start of lines)
- a rehearsal letter or number (these will be larger than bar numbers)
- page number - line - bar (e.g. “page 36, second line, first bar”).

The conductor may make alterations to the written music and indicate specifics about how they would like it performed. Use a soft pencil (easier to erase) to mark these in your music so that you can remember and fit in with the choir.

Going to rehearsals is the best way to get used to singing from a score. Learn from the people around you and don't be afraid to ask if there's something you don't understand. You're learning a new skill and that takes time - be patient and you'll improve!

Further reading

- Reading sheet music in a choir: a beginner's guide: makingmusic.org.uk/reading-sheet-music-choir
- A more accessible version of this guide (clickable links, embedded sound files and larger images) is available online: makingmusic.org.uk/getting-started-sheet-music

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