

FROM EARS TO EYES – BASICS OF MUSIC NOTATION

by Ginger Dean



“The human need for beauty in music is what drives most of us to become better musicians and performers.”

— JAMES JORDAN

Music starts with the ears, not the eyes. Your ears are your eyes so LISTEN to read music. The priority with music notation and reading it is to promote the sound of music.

Audiation is a word that describes really listening to music. Listening so you are able to understand the pulse, line, and harmony of the music. Listening so you can replicate the music in your head and it makes sense.

When you learn music through someone else’s ears or just singing by rote, you are not learning the language of music. That is imitation. Have you ever tried to learn a foreign language and could say the syllables, words, and pronunciation, yet couldn’t speak the language because you didn’t know how to put it together to make any meaningful context? That is imitation.

Audiation or learning to hear for yourself, is different than imitation. You begin to understand what you are hearing and can actually hear the music in your head before any sound is made. Audition is also retention; to be able to think about what you’ve heard for weeks afterwards. In other words, the music is not forgotten.

“It is audition-and only audition-that can bring real meaning to notation ... The most potent and long-term music learning takes place within the oral/aural level of music learning.”

— James Jordan

“Developing speech vocabulary is expected, developing listening vocabulary is in decline and not expected. There is a false notion of getting that vocabulary by recorded music, we are drowning in a sea of recorded music. It is imitation. It alone does not develop music vocabulary.”

—James Jordan

“Notation, far from being the final goal of musical science, is not even a part of it.”

— Aristoxnes from Dom Daniel Sulnier,
GREGORIAN CHANT p.117

Teach the children! Children need to audiate or listen first before singing so you must sing to them especially from infancy to age 9 when most of their musical aptitude skills are developed. Give them music lessons as they enter school age. If you haven’t found your own voice yet, have someone else sing to them and play good music. Mr. Rogers is a great example using song to communicate with children. He makes up operas with puppets in a magical kingdom with a school bus — sing to your children in the bathtub, car, etc and make up little songs, operas about their life, their day, their likes, their activities, their family, etc.

“Teach your children to love the hymns. Sing them on the Sabbath, in home evening, during scripture study, at prayer time. Sing as you work, as you play, and as you travel together. Sing hymns as lullabies to build faith and testimony in your young ones.”

— First Presidency Preface, HYMNS, 1985

MUSIC NOTATION

Reading Music is power and freedom — to a certain extent. It is power to understand and perform music quickly and freedom to understand and perform complex music. ... It can be fun! BUT reading music is not a guarantee of musicianship.

Reading music allows for the potential to learn more music faster with sound being our first teacher. Sound teaches faster than any book, words, or notation. The notation of music; notes, staff, meters, etc. are to music making as the ABC's are to reading. The symbols in and of themselves don't make music or literature until they are understood with context.

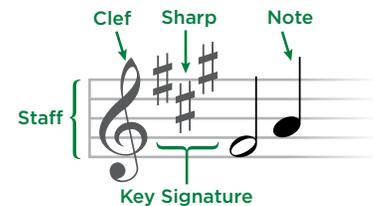
Reading music doesn't necessarily mean you're making good music, it means you're practicing reading with your eyes. Music reading is theoretical. When you use your ears first and afterwards, you practice listening, which is **key** to making good music.

Ultimately we want to be able to audiate or hear the written music in our heads — to have sound rather than notation. Think Beethoven.

NOTES - MODES - SCALES - CHORDS

Notes are little ovals with sticks, maybe. Just as words alone have limited meaning so notes alone have limited meaning. It is in phrasing that comprehensive meaning takes place. Words together form sentences, paragraphs, stories, forming context. Notes together form phrases, sections, songs. Tonality and meter are context in music. Pitch, letter names, time values are like the ABC's for music. In and of themselves they have no content, they are keys only and are tools for opening doors. They only have value because they notate the bigger picture or concept.

Notes are identified by their placement on staff paper of five lines with a clef and key signature. A clef tells exactly where the musical alphabet exists. Key signature helps establish the modality of a piece with sharps or flats.



Modes are specific patterns of intervals in eight note runs that create tonality. The run of notes is called a **Scale**. We sometimes only hear the Major (Ionian) tonality because it is currently popular. There is a modality associated with every white key on a keyboard. It all has to do with the distance of the sounds in relationship to each other and how they are used. These modes are defined in theory by their pattern of steps and half steps. Modes establish the tonality of a piece of music. Tonality is aurally established with the tonic (resting tone) and the dominant or fifth of a scale.

Chords are vertically stacked notes with specific distances between the notes, depending on mode. The Ionian or Major mode will use the following notation for chords in progression of it's scale: I ii iii IV V vi vii°

Note that Capital Roman numerals indicate a Major chord and small numerals are minor chords. ° indicates a diminished chord or two stacked minor thirds.

PULSES - RHYTHM - METER

Pulse & Rhythm are motion in music. Written rhythm notation is just a guide to actual musical rhythm. Phrase, rather than meter or note duration is the real rhythm.

Think of the rhythm of the beach, the waves, the surf. There is rhythm in the moon, the rotation of the earth, the seasons.

“Rhythm is the total consequence of pulse patterns . . . and that almost all our day-by-day life turns on this wheel: four seasons per year, two high tides per day, thirteen full moons every twelve months-breakfast lunch dinner bed . . .”

– Robert Shaw

“Rhythm is the unifying, binding element and the governing principle in music . . . there is no means which is so suitable for thoroughly fusing a group of individualists into a unified musical group as rhythmic training . . . rhythm measures time. All of life is spanned between the rhythmic alternation of day and night, the rotation of the seasons, between activity and rest.”

– James Jordan

“Choir singers in general, as well as all music students, are encouraged to ‘keep time’ through counting. The metrical organization in music is a means of mechanical time measurement, and counting is a logical procedure. However, in music we are concerned with a unity of being; singing and playing are not logical musical phenomena, and so that it is possible that in spite of ‘correct counting’ one can certainly ‘count oneself right out of time!’”

– Wilhelm Ehmann

We acquire rhythm skills with our ears by listening.

The dilemma with notation in a lot of today’s popular music is that the aural rhythm exists in catchy, multiple instrumental, broken fragments which is not truly replicatable in written notation. Another trap is the newly developed ability to play music on a keyboard and have a music writing program interpret the rhythm for you, often as poorly written notation which only confuses the intent of the music.

“Popular music helps you to forget and great music helps you to remember.”

– Robert Shaw

Meter is “a recurring pattern of stresses or accents that provide the pulse or beat of music. Meter is notated at the beginning of a composition with a time signature.” <https://dictionary.onmusic.org/appendix/topics/meters>. Meter can be felt as free, in duples, triples or combinations of pulses.

Meter is also found in poetic lyric, such as found in our hymnbook. The original LDS hymnal compiled by Emma Smith had no notes, only lyrics. People would sing the words to familiar hymn tunes of the day but the meters had to coordinate. Hymn #66 *Rejoice the Lord is King* was in the hymnal and was often sung to the tune DARWALL hymn #265. Another tune and lyric change up is to sing lyrics of #26 *Joseph Smith’s First Prayer* to the tune of hymn #102.

“I wonder sometimes if we realize the importance of music. I wonder if we know that the Lord himself is concerned about it. He has given us the information that the song of praise is a prayer unto him. . . . It [is] our privilege, yea, our blessing, to sing and . . . our songs should be sung in righteousness.”

– President George Albert Smith,
CHURCH NEWS, Feb. 16, 1946

BREATH - PHRASES - BAR LINES

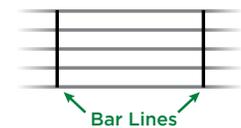
Phrasing & Breath — Breath is essential to notation. Phrasing is essential to notation. Phrasing is the musical line and phrases are connected with breath. Phrase is the smallest independent piece of musical design or thought.

“...one’s ability to hear patterns in a musical context is acquired through smaller fragments of music that are analogous to words in language.”

– James Jordan, DISCOVERING CHANT

Rise and fall, ebb and flow, internal pulse, ascent and descent, up and down impulses are all ways to describe musical phrase and breath.

Bar Lines — a line placed in a score to mark measurements of meter or time.



“Perhaps the most restrictive visual that has been created in our notational system is the bar line. . . . The printing of bar lines provides a subliminal visual barrier to the forward movement of sound.”

– James Jordan

INTERVALS & SOLFEGE

Intervals are the musical distance between notes. You can learn to recognize and sing all the intervals. Solfège is putting a syllable of; DO, RE, MI, FA, SO, LA, TI, to each note in a mode.

The use of **harmonic solfège** will help you HEAR what you SEE on a music page. The brain processes music and text separately.

“...Music literacy and the ability to read and perform music is based on our ability to make relationships between individual notes...”

– James Jordan

DISCOVERING CHANT, p88.

“I read a score with difficulty. I have to solfège every note. And I don’t have keyboard skills, and so it’s a real chore to learn a new, major work. I think that if I’d had the skills that those men had in my generation, Lukas Foss and Mr. Bernstein, I’d obviously been better prepared to handle some of these things, some of these situations that picked me up by my ears, and said, Boy, now can you swim here?”

– Robert Shaw

talking about his lack of skills

LAYERS OF LEARNING

Learn Line Upon Line and Make a System

- Limit what music or aspect of music you are learning
- Learn thoroughly your concept before moving on
- Be patient – learn completely
- Use great persistence — 5 minutes of every hour; everyday. This is practice.
- Practice correctly

In your pursuit of learning music notation, consider doing any of the following:

- Buy or download a sight singing book, spending 3 minutes a day singing solfège.
- Sing familiar & new hymns or other songs in solfège or by note names.
- Buy a soprano or tenor recorder with a beginner book & use it.
- Sight read Bach on the piano. If you mess up, go slower but be persistent.
- Take music lessons or use an online sight singing program that makes sense to you.
- Find a recording of a song you like, buy the exact sheet music & sing along.

“...Every human being at every stage of life, hopes for some positive response from other human beings. No one wants to be harmed by others or live in fear of them. Everyone hopes for a helping hand in time of danger or more trouble than he or she can handle alone. Everyone wants enough respect to maintain at least minimal dignity.”

– Nel Noddings, EDUCATING MORAL PEOPLE, p148

The image shows a musical score for the hymn "A mighty fortress is our God, A tower of strength ne'er". The score is written on two staves: Treble Clef (top) and Bass Clef (bottom). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked "With dignity" and "♩ = 60-80". A bracket labeled "Measure" spans the first four measures of the music. The lyrics are written below the staves: "A might - y for - tress is our God, A tower of strength ne'er". The first four measures are numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4.