



Bluffers' Guide to Reading Music

This is a simple guide on what the various symbols mean on a musical score and on how to interpret them. It is not intended to be comprehensive: it's just enough to get a beginner started.

There are three important components to music: volume, pitch, and rhythm. Let's look at each in turn.

Volume

Probably the simplest to decipher, there are a couple of main indications on how loudly or softly the music should sound.

- Letters: there are three main ones
 - 'p' means quiet, 'pp' means quieter still and 'ppp' means really very quiet indeed.
 - 'f' means loud, 'ff' means louder still and 'fff' means really very loud indeed!
 - 'm' means medium, so 'mp' means a little quieter than usual but not as much as 'p', and 'mf' means a little louder than usual but not as much as 'f'
- Symbols: music is read from left to right so...
 -  Get quieter (also may be written as dim.)
 -  Get louder (also may be written as cresc.)

There are also other annotations on individual notes which denote stress, or staccato.

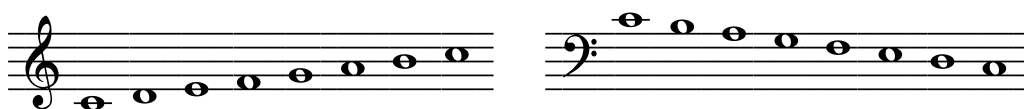
Pitch

Music is written on a staff: a set of five parallel lines running across the page, as you go up the staff, the pitch rises and vice versa. Each line and space has a name corresponding to the note it represents so a blob, or blob with a tail, written on the staff represents the note itself. Generally, music scores will have a staff which represents a higher set of notes and another for the lower set.

Here's the symbol for the higher staff:  (the treble clef) and for the lower: 

(the bass clef).

So here's the simple series of notes in the scale of 'C major' on both staves, starting at middle 'C', one going up, and one going down:



There are eight notes in each scale... and without going into reams of complex music theory, the sequence to achieve an octave (where you get back to the same note essentially, just higher or lower) consists of little steps of whole tones and semi-tones. This is possible wherever you start – but when it's written down, you start to see other symbols – sharps and flats – to tell you that you need to raise or lower the note by half a tone relative to the place where it's written on the stave.


So, here's a sequence of semi-tones: first a 'C', then a bit higher to a 'C' sharp, then the next note, a 'D':



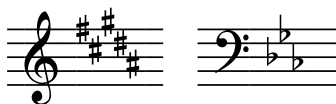
Likewise, we can represent a note which is half a tone lower by using the flat symbol:



These two series of notes are **exactly the same!** The black notes on a keyboard can be written as **either** the sharp of the white note immediately before it, **or** the flat of the white note immediately afterwards.

There is also a symbol to cancel out a sharp or flat back to the note's natural state: 

The last thing we need to mention is key signatures: often a piece of music will be written 'in the key of G' or maybe 'in the key of F sharp minor' or something equally confusing. However, we don't need to worry about this too much, we just need to note that at the beginning of each stave, just after the clef, there will be a little collection of sharps or flats and this means that every note falling on the same line/space is **always** affected by the symbol. They look like this for example:



Rhythm

A piece of music is generally divided into small chunks with a fixed number of beats in each little chunk. These chunks are called bars and are separated on the stave by vertical lines, and the number of beats and their length is given at the start by the time signature: this is

usually written as two numbers, one on top of the other. The top number indicates how many beats there are in each bar, the bottom number is the size of the beat. For example:



Two beats in each bar, each of a half note



Three half notes in a bar







Three quarter notes in a bar






Six eighth notes in a bar

Note that a **time signature** of 4/4 does not mean that each bar has only four quarter notes. It means each bar has only four beats, and it may be made up of any number of notes as long as their total is equivalent to four quarter notes.

So what do we mean by half notes and quarter notes?

A whole note looks like this , a half note like this  or this , a quarter note like this 

or this , an eighth note like this  or this  and so on. If you see a little dot after the note, it adds 50% to its duration.

Summary

So let's look at a simple tune:

Treble clef, so this piece starts on the 'C' above middle 'C'.

4 1 2 3 & 4 1 & 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 & 2 3 rest

4 quarter notes per bar

this little hat means a slight pause

this longer line means the notes should be slurred

Detailed description: The image shows a musical staff in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. The staff contains eight measures of music. Above the staff, fingerings are indicated: 4, 1, 2, 3, &, 4, 1, &, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, &, 2, 3, and a rest. The first measure has four quarter notes. The second measure has a quarter note, a half note with a fermata (the 'little hat'), and two quarter notes. The third measure has a quarter note, a half note with a fermata, and two quarter notes. The fourth measure has a quarter note, a half note with a fermata, and two quarter notes. The fifth measure has a quarter note, a half note with a fermata, and two quarter notes. The sixth measure has a quarter note, a half note with a fermata, and two quarter notes. The seventh measure has a quarter note, a half note with a fermata, and two quarter notes. The eighth measure has a quarter note, a half note with a fermata, and two quarter notes. Red arrows point from the annotations to the corresponding musical symbols: the treble clef, the 4/4 time signature, the first measure, the fermata in the second measure, and the slur in the seventh measure.

You could do worse than check out <http://www.dummies.com/how-to/music-creative-arts/music.html> too.