How to Read and Write Music Notation

KS3 Ages 11-14 ⏰ 4 min read

What is Music Notation?

Music notation is a special language that musicians use to write down music. Instead of using words, it uses symbols and marks to show what notes to play, how loud or soft to play them, and how long each note should last. Think of it like writing instructions for someone to recreate the exact sounds you're hearing in your head.

Think of it like a recipe for a cake — instead of ingredients, you have musical notes, and instead of baking instructions, you have timing and volume instructions.

The Staff and Clef

All music is written on a **staff**, which is made of **5 horizontal lines**. Notes sit on these lines or in the spaces between them. At the very beginning of each staff is a **clef**, which is a curly symbol that tells musicians which notes are which. The most common clef is the **treble clef**, which looks like a fancy letter G.

The notes on a treble clef staff, from bottom to top, are: **E, G, B, D, F** on the lines, and **F, A, C, E** in the spaces. Musicians remember these with sayings like "Every Good Boy Does Fine" and "FACE".

Notes and Their Time Values

Notes are oval shapes on the staff that tell you which pitch to play. Different note shapes tell you **how long** to hold each note. A **whole note** (empty oval with a stem) lasts for **4 beats**. A **half note** (empty oval) lasts for **2 beats**. A **quarter note** (filled oval) lasts for **1 beat**. A **eighth note** (filled oval with a flag) lasts for **half a beat**.

Think of it like different sized containers at an ice-cream shop — some hold more, some hold less. A whole note is a giant bowl, a quarter note is a small cup.

Rests, Tempo and Dynamics

Rests are symbols that mean "don't play" — they're silences. Just like notes, different rests last different amounts of time. A **whole rest** looks like a box hanging from a line

and lasts **4 beats** of silence.

At the top of a piece of music, you'll see a **tempo marking** like "Allegro" (fast) or "Adagio" (slow), which tells musicians how quickly to play. **Dynamic markings** like **forte (f)** mean "play loud" and **piano (p)** mean "play soft". There's also **mezzo-forte (mf)** for medium-loud and **mezzo-piano (mp)** for medium-soft.

Why Learn Music Notation?

Learning to read and write music notation is like learning a universal language. A musician in Japan can look at the same sheet music as a musician in Brazil and both will play the same song. It's one of humanity's greatest inventions for sharing music across time and space!

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