

# THE STAFF\*

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## Abstract

Western music is usually written on a staff.

People were talking long before they invented writing. People were also making music long before anyone wrote any music down. Some musicians still play "by ear" (without written music), and some music traditions rely more on improvisation and/or "by ear" learning. But written music is very useful, for many of the same reasons that written words are useful. Music is easier to study and share if it is written down. Western music<sup>1</sup> specializes in long, complex pieces for large groups of musicians singing or playing parts exactly as a composer intended. Without written music, this would be too difficult. Many different types of music notation have been invented, and some, such as tablature<sup>2</sup>, are still in use. By far the most widespread way to write music, however, is on a **staff**. In fact, this type of written music is so ubiquitous that it is called **common notation**.

## 1 The Staff

The **staff** (plural **staves**) is written as five horizontal parallel lines. Most of the notes<sup>3</sup> of the music are placed on one of these lines or in a space in between lines. Extra **ledger lines** may be added to show a note that is too high or too low to be on the staff. Vertical **bar lines** divide the staff into short sections called **measures** or **bars**. A **double bar line**, either heavy or light, is used to mark the ends of larger sections of music, including the very end of a piece, which is marked by a heavy double bar.

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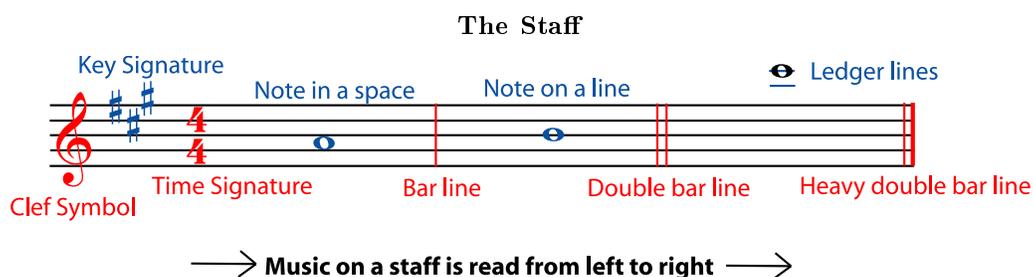
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<sup>1</sup>"What Kind of Music is That?" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11421/latest/>>

<sup>2</sup>"Reading Guitar Tablature" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11905/latest/>>

<sup>3</sup>"Duration: Note Lengths in Written Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10945/latest/>>



**Figure 1:** The five horizontal lines are the lines of the staff. In between the lines are the spaces. If a note is above or below the staff, ledger lines are added to show how far above or below. Shorter vertical lines are bar lines. The most important symbols on the staff, the clef symbol, key signature and time signature, appear at the beginning of the staff.

Many different kinds of symbols can appear on, above, and below the staff. The notes<sup>4</sup> and rests<sup>5</sup> are the actual written music. A note stands for a sound; a rest stands for a silence. Other symbols on the staff, like the clef<sup>6</sup> symbol, the key signature<sup>7</sup>, and the time signature<sup>8</sup>, tell you important information about the notes and measures. Symbols that appear above and below the music may tell you how fast it goes (tempo<sup>9</sup> markings), how loud it should be (dynamic<sup>10</sup> markings), where to go next (repeats<sup>11</sup>, for example) and even give directions for how to perform particular notes (accents<sup>12</sup>, for example).

<sup>4</sup>"Duration: Note Lengths in Written Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10945/latest/>>

<sup>5</sup>"Duration: Rest Length" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11887/latest/>>

<sup>6</sup>"Clef" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10941/latest/>>

<sup>7</sup>"Key Signature" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10881/latest/>>

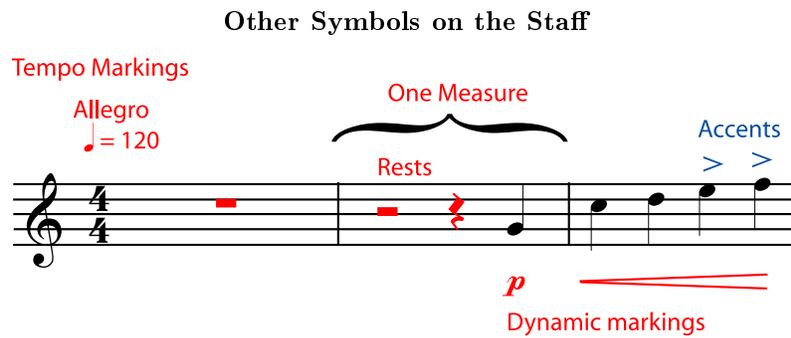
<sup>8</sup>"Time Signature" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10956/latest/>>

<sup>9</sup>"Tempo" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11648/latest/>>

<sup>10</sup>"Dynamics and Accents in Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11649/latest/>>

<sup>11</sup>"Repeats and Other Musical Road Map Signs" <<http://cnx.org/content/m12805/latest/>>

<sup>12</sup>"Dynamics and Accents in Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11649/latest/#p0d>>



**Figure 2:** The bar lines divide the staff into short sections called bars or measures. The notes (sounds) and rests (silences) are the written music. Many other symbols may appear on, above, or below the staff, giving directions for how to play the music.

## 2 Systems of staves

The staff is read from left to right. Staves (some musicians prefer the plural **staves**) are read, beginning at the top of the page, one staff at a time unless they are connected. If staves should be played at the same time (by the same person or by different people), they will be connected by a long vertical line at the left hand side, to create a **system**. They may also be connected by their bar lines. Staves played by similar instruments or voices, or staves that should be played by the same person (for example, the right hand and left hand of a piano part) may be grouped together by braces or brackets at the beginning of each line.

## Groups of Staves

Vocal line

Where have you been all the day,

The two staves of a piano part (left hand and right hand) are usually also connected by a brace.

Staves that are to be played at the same time are connected at least by a line at the left end. They may also be connected at each bar line.

(a)

(b)

**Figure 3:** (b) When many staves are to be played at the same time, as in this orchestral score, the lines for similar instruments - all the violins, for example, or all the strings - may be marked with braces or brackets.

NOTE: Thanks to everyone who participated in the survey! It was very useful to me, both as a researcher and as an author, to get a better picture of my readers' goals and needs. I hope to begin updating the survey results module<sup>13</sup> in April. I will also soon begin making some of the suggested additions, and emailed comments are still welcome as always.

<sup>13</sup>"A Survey of Users of Connexions Music Modules" <<http://cnx.org/content/m34234/latest/>>