NYU STEINHARDT
MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS PRACTICES

MUSICAL NOTATION PRIMER

Musical notation is a visual symbol system used to represent sound. It can range from simple scribbles to complex systems that have developed over thousands of years.

In Europe, the precursor to notation emerged around 800 AD and eventually developed into the staff notation system we often call "music notation." However, this is not the only musical notation system in the world, nor the oldest, nor the most widely used.

Knowing how to read music does not make you a good musician. At the same time, *not* knowing how to read music does not make you a bad musician.

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§1. FUNCTIONS OF MUSICAL NOTATION

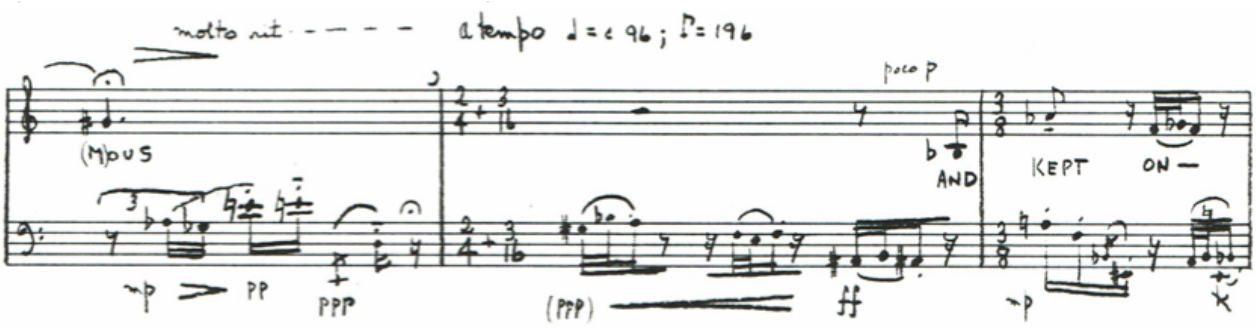
Musical notations can serve multiple **functions.** For example:

- As memory aids
- As historical or ethnographic records
- As ways to communicate how something sounds
- As ways to communicate how to perform something

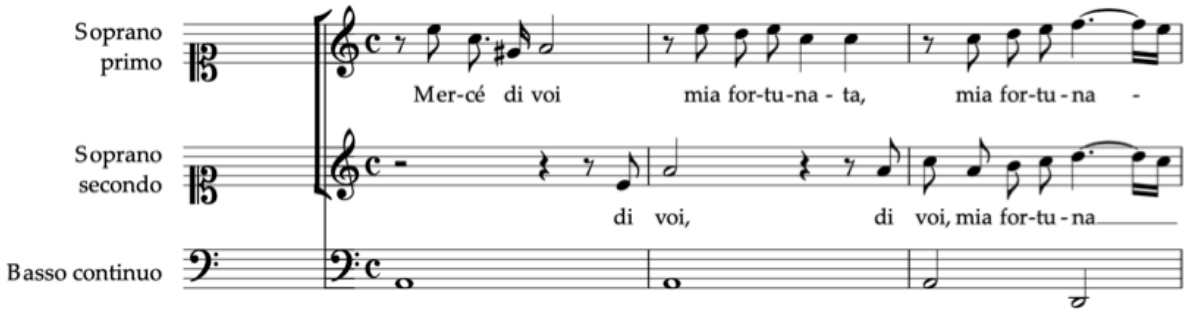
The function will often determine the specificity of the symbol system: A notation to serve as a memory aid might be less specific than something serving as a historical or ethnographic record.

Think about some of the different types of notations you have seen. There are extremely complex notations that use very specific markings including articulations, instructions (in English, Italian, French, etc.), dynamics. There are others that simply include notes and rhythms.

Clear dynamics, articulations, and phrasing marks - From A. Blank: *Don't Let that Horse Eat that Violin*



No dynamics, articulations, phrasing marks. The basso continuo is meant to be improvised over (only the bass note is given) - From B. Strozzi: *Sonetto promo dell'opera*, mm. 1-3



What you need as an ***interpreter*** to bring to the notation will be different: the more complex notation is often meant to be closely followed but the simpler notation might require you to use your musicality to shape the musical phrase.

Think about a piece of music you like. How would you notate it in the following scenarios?
Would your notation differ?

- As a personal memory aid to remember how the melody goes
- As a way to show another person how to perform it just like you (on the same instrument)
- As a way to show another person how to perform it just like you (but who does not know how to play your instrument)
- As a way to show a musician from 300 years ago how to perform it on an instrument that they are not familiar with
- As the sole historical record of this piece
- As a way to illustrate the most important features of the sounds
- As a way to illustrate what music of this genre represents to our culture
- As a way to illustrate what music is to an extraterrestrial culture

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§2. ETIC VS. EMIC NOTATIONS

Anthropologists often consider how their insider and/or outsider perspective can influence their approach to the study of a culture. The following are two terms are often used when talking about insider vs. outsider perspectives in the study of culture:

> **Emic:** A perspective of someone from within the group (usually seen as meaningful to the "actor" or person who engages in a culture or behavior). This is often considered to contain cultural context and is important for communication within the culture.
>
> **Etic:** A perspective of someone from outside the group (usually seen as meaningful to the "observer" or person who is from outside the culture/watching a behavior). This is often considered to be clearer to various outside observers since it does not necessitate contextualization to be understood. It is important for cross-cultural comparison.

As NYU students, we would have an emic perspective of studying in New York University. We, however,

have an etic perspective of, say, studying in Texas Tech. Describing our daily life to another NYU student versus a Texas Tech student would require different framing. The things we consider to be important to us in describing our day may be superfluous to someone from outside of our local context, or might not even make sense.

In much the same way, we can assess how our use of musical notation can influence how we annotate music.

Having only an **etic** perspective, it's hard to understand other musics. If you notate the music, you will be biased as to what you find important in the music. You might focus on accurately notating pitch or meter when that's not really the most culturally important aspect of the music (as much as form or texture, for instance).

Once you spend some time with the culture, you develop an **emic** perspective. You might understand what behaviors or sounds are important - the notation system you develop might emphasize the musical features that matter to the group who made the music.

You could notate music in a way that describes to Western musicians how to recreate the sound. Or you could also create a notation that requires lots of cultural explanation in order to properly perform the music, requiring training and cultural immersion for proper interpretation. This all depends on your perspective and the end of goal (the *function*) of the notation.

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§3. PRESCRIPTIVE VS. DESCRIPTIVE NOTATION

A prevalent use for notation is to annotate music from various traditions for historical or ethnographic study. On this topic, ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger wrote:

> "Conventional (western) notation is still a mixed symbolic-linear music-writing in which the symbolic element is the more highly organized and therefore dominates. It is entirely prescriptive in character. Emphasis is upon structures - principally of pitch and meter....*It does not tell us as much about how music sounds as how to make it sound. Yet no one can make it sound as the writer of the notation intended unless in addition to a knowledge of the tradition of writing, he also has a knowledge of the oral/aural tradition associated with it.*"

Seeger was concerned about the use of Western staff notation since it highly emphasizes specific pitch and meter structures, which are central features in much Western European music. But this notation system fails to capture the nuances of certain musical structures due to underdeveloped symbols for things like texture, pitch systems with more than 12 notes, complex metrical structures, or timbre. For instance, the main way we differentiate between the sonic qualities of two instruments is by simply writing "clarinet" or "trumpet" on the score.

Further, there are a lot of assumptions required when using a notation system. For the use of Western staff notation, one must assume knowledge of specific instruments (by name and tone), the use of a specific tuning system, or simply, the use of only 12 pitches, how to read note heads and rhythms, etc.

Seeger distinguishes between two types of notational practices: *prescriptive* vs. *descriptive* notation.

Description is the account of how something is done, played, used, etc. How something *is*

done in actual practice.

Prescription defines structures or sets of rules that govern a behavior. How something *should* be done according to some grammar or rule system.

Therefore, a **descriptive** notational system defines behavioral actions required to create the music. It can also be flexible in its interpretation as it is not defining how something should be, but a general description of how something should be done. Guitar tablature is an example of descriptive notation: the notation clearly shows what frets to put your fingers on, focusing on the behavior needed to create a sound.

A **prescriptive** notation, on the other hand, transcribes sounds using more concretized structural symbols, or creates some idealized version of the sound less prone to interpretative nuance. For instance, using Western staff notation defines a clear 12-note octave, and the practice of reading this type of notation usually requires you to "stick to the score."

Not all notations are prescriptive vs. descriptive: there can be facets of a notation system that fit one category or the other. Function of the notation can also come into play as a jazz lead sheet may be notated using Western staff notation (prescriptive) but is meant to be more of a general guideline that is loosely followed (descriptive interpretation).