Anyone can sing, and can sing very happily in a choir without knowing anything about music notation. However, although you could learn Russian or Turkish without knowing their alphabets, your appreciation of the language would be much greater if you could read it. The information in this document won’t make you a sight-reader (that takes practice and/or the accident of inheritance), but it will clear up much of the confusion that can occur if a choir is score-based (uses printed music extensively) by setting out the basic information for understanding the whats, hows, and whys of printed music. If a conductor barks out, “Tenors, I want a fortissimo on the G double flat, then a diminuendo until the staccato wedge,” that will no longer be a confusing fog of technicalities.
Finding and Keeping Your Place in the Music (the Score)

Notes are written on a **STAFF** or **STAVE**.

This shows if they are **HIGH** or **LOW**.

Notes can be written on the lines or in the spaces.

Very high or low notes are written on **LEGER LINES**.

Several staves may be performed at the same time. They are then grouped together with a bracket or brace at the left margin. A group of staves is commonly called a **LINE** (GB) or **SYSTEM** (US).

The most common division of voices in a choir is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOPRANO</th>
<th>ALTO</th>
<th>TENOR</th>
<th>BASS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>High</em></td>
<td><em>Low</em></td>
<td><em>Lower</em></td>
<td><em>Lowest</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These may be subdivided

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOPRANO 1</th>
<th>SOPRANO 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Higher</em></td>
<td><em>Lower</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes, to save space, the Sopranos and the Altos, and the Tenors and the Basses will share a stave. Then if the note **TAILS** point **upwards**, they are soprano or tenor notes, and if the note tails points **downwards**, they are alto or bass notes.
On a stave, **barlines** divide it into smaller units. The gap between two barlines is called **bar**.

We can orientate ourselves on a page by **bar numbers**, **rehearsal letters/numbers** (landmarks on the page), or **line/bar** references.

- **Bar 1**, or the 1st bar after A, or the 1st line, 1st bar tenor part.
- **Bar 5**, or the 5th bar before A, or the 1st line, 2nd bar alto part.
- **Bar 9**, or the 3rd bar after A, or the 3rd line, 1st bar tenor part.
Bars between **REPEAT MARKS** are sung twice, thus:

```
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
```

Sometimes, there are different endings for the first time a section is sung (**1ST TIME BAR**) and the second time it is sung (**2ND TIME BAR**). Thus:

```
| 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4 |
```

At the end of a piece **D.C. al Fine** tells you to go back to the beginning and sing through to *Fine* in the **3RD TIME BAR**. Thus:

```
| 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1, 2, 4 |
```

At the end of a piece **D.S. al Fine** tells you to go back to the **distinctive sign** and sing through to *Fine* in the **THIRD TIME BAR**. Thus:

```
| 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 2, 4 |
```

At the end of a piece **D.S. al Coda** tells you to go back to the D.S.sign, sing through to the **3RD TIME BAR**, then jump to the **CODA**. Thus:

```
| 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 2, 4 |
```

There are many possibilities, but they all use the same basic methods.
Beats and Time Signatures

Most music has accented or louder beats at regular intervals. We normally count the accented beats as 1 and the lesser beats as 2, 3, 4, etc.

GOD save our GRACIOUS Queen, LONG live our NOBLE Queen, GOD save the QUEEN.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 1 \\
2 & 3 & 1 & 2 \\
3 & 1 & 2 & 3 \\
\end{array}
\]

GOOD King WENCESLAS looked out ON the feast of STEPHEN

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 1 \\
3 & 1 & 2 & 3 \\
4 & 1 & 2 & 3 \\
\end{array}
\]

NB!! You will notice that some notes last longer than one beat, and some shorter than one beat, but the counting is kept ABSOLUTELY REGULAR.

On a stave, the barlines are placed immediately before the accented beats.

God Save Our Gracious Queen has THREE BEATS IN A BAR, and Good King Wenceslas has FOUR BEATS IN A BAR.

Usually, there is a TIME SIGNATURE at the beginning of the music (as in the examples above). The UPPER NUMBER tells you how many beats there are in a bar. For the time being, we can ignore the LOWER NUMBER.

Sometimes, the time signature will change during the course of a piece.

For the sake of convenience, in FAST music, a conductor may decide to count some beats as just parts of other beats.

So FOUR beats in a bar could be counted as TWO beats like this: | 1 and 2 and | 1 and 2 and |

Or SIX beats could be counted as TWO beats: | 1 and a 2 and a | 1 and a 2 and a |

Or THREE beats could be counted as ONE beat; | 1 and a | 1 and a | 1 and a |

But the counting stays regular.

On the other hand, in SLOW music, the beat may be divided into shorter beats.

FOUR beats may be counted like this: | 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and | or even: | 1 2, 3 4, 5 6, 7 8 |

THREE beats may become: | 1 and 2 and 3 and | or: | 1 2, 3 4, 5 6 |
Notes, Rests and Time Values

The appearance of a note tells **HOW LONG IT LASTS** compared to other notes (**ITS TIME VALUE**).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note</th>
<th>Equivalent 1</th>
<th>Equivalent 2</th>
<th>Equivalent 3</th>
<th>Equivalent 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US: whole note</td>
<td>2 1/2 notes</td>
<td>2 minim</td>
<td>2 1/4 notes</td>
<td>2 crotchet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK: semibreve</td>
<td>2 1/4 notes</td>
<td>2 crotchet</td>
<td>2 1/8 notes</td>
<td>2 quaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US: 1/2 note</td>
<td>2 1/4 notes</td>
<td>2 crotchet</td>
<td>2 1/8 notes</td>
<td>2 quaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK: minim</td>
<td>2 1/4 notes</td>
<td>2 crotchet</td>
<td>2 1/8 notes</td>
<td>2 quaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US: 1/4 note</td>
<td>2 1/8 notes</td>
<td>2 quaver</td>
<td>2 1/16 notes</td>
<td>2 semiquaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK: crotchet</td>
<td>2 1/8 notes</td>
<td>2 quaver</td>
<td>2 1/16 notes</td>
<td>2 semiquaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US: 1/8 note</td>
<td>2 1/16 notes</td>
<td>2 semiquaver</td>
<td>2 1/32 notes</td>
<td>2 demisemiquaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK: quaver</td>
<td>2 1/16 notes</td>
<td>2 semiquaver</td>
<td>2 1/32 notes</td>
<td>2 demisemiquaver</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total

Short notes fit exactly into the time value of longer notes. Above: 1/2 = (2 x 1/8) + (4 x 1/16).

And, below: 1/4 = 1/16 + 1/8 + 1/16.

It makes **no difference** to the **time value** whether the **tails point up or down** or whether they are **joined or not**.

More on Time Signatures: the **LOWER NUMBER** says what we are counting as the beat.

- \( \frac{3}{2} \) = 2 beats in the bar, counting in 1/2 notes (minims).
- \( \frac{3}{4} \) = 4 beats in the bar, counting in 1/4 notes (crotchets).
- \( \frac{3}{4} \) = 3 beats in the bar, counting in 1/4 notes (crotchets).
- \( \frac{6}{8} \) = 6 beats in the bar, counting in 1/8 notes (quavers).

The sound of a note may be **clipped by STACCATO dots or wedges**, or may be **lengthened by a PAUSE**.

Old fashioned, but still used.

Some pieces begin with a **short bar**; that is, an **UP-BEAT** or **ANACRUSIS**.
There are RESTS, which tell you when NOT to sing. These also have time values.

Note can be TIED together to make one longer note IF THEY ARE AT THE SAME PITCH (on the same line or space).

If the notes ARE NOT AT THE SAME PITCH, the curved lines are SLURS, which mean, “sing smoothly.”

A DOT after a note (or rest) makes it 50% LONGER.

A DOUBLE DOT after a note (or rest) makes it 75% LONGER.

Even More About Time Signatures - Using Dotted Notes

If the UPPER number of a time signature is a 6, 9, or 12, it’s POSSIBLE that the basic beat divides into 3.

To find what that beat is, imagine that the beat suggested by the LOWER figure is tied together in groups of 3, OR is a dotted note. (This is a confusing complication - but it’s what happens)

This is called COMPOUND TIME.

Music without this complication is said to be in SIMPLE TIME.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Signature</th>
<th>Beats in a Bar</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4/3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>dotted 1/4 notes or crotchets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>dotted whole notes or semibreves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>dotted 1/8 notes or quavers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Last bit about note values - using TUPLETS

If a beat is divided into an unusual number of smaller notes, a *bracket* or *little number* is used to alert the performer.

7 in the time of 4. A septuplet.

3 in the time of 2. A triplet.

3 in the time of 2. A triplet.

2 in the time of 3. A duplet.

**NOTE NAMES, PITCHES AND INTERVALS**

Notes are given letter names from A - G, which are then repeated for many different notes. This is because notes of the same letter name, although higher or lower, sound very similar and go together (harmonise) very well.

The distance between two notes of the same name is called an **OCTAVE**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distance between two notes is called an **INTERVAL**, counting the starting note as 1 and then the notes in between.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

a 5th a 6th a 2nd a 9th

**CLEFS** are used to define the letter names of the lines and spaces of the stave. The most usual are the TREBLE clef for high notes and the BASS clef for low notes.

If you know the names of the **spaces**, it’s easy to work out name of the **lines**.

Treble Clef

Bass Clef
ACCIDENTALS (SHARPS AND FLATS)

The basic notes A - G can be found as the white notes on a piano keyboard. To get to the equivalent of the black notes, we need to use SHARPS (#) and FLATS (b). These are placed in front of notes. A sharp RAISES a note by a SEMITONE (moves it to the key immediately to the right), and a flat LOWERS a note by a SEMITONE, (moves it to the key immediately to the left).

With a 2-stave line, the Sopranos and Altos sing from the Treble Clef and the Tenors and Basses from the Bass Clef. With a 4-stave line, it’s not uncommon to use a Treble Clef for the Tenors, but everyone knows that they sing an octave lower.

You will notice, for instance, that G# and Ab are the same note. We use both names, though, to keep the music spelling and grammar correct. For example, although the following sounds correct, you wouldn’t write it:

Wen eye hert mie nee, ei treyed not two kri.

So, it’s similar with music.

These are also equivalent pairs

The effect of an accidental lasts until the next barline.

An accidental can be CANCELLED by using a NATURAL.

G sharp                             G natural
If a piece uses the same accidentals many times, they are often gathered together at the beginning to form a **KEY SIGNATURE**. These accidentals in the key signature then **AFFECT EVERY NOTE OF THE SAME LETTER NAME**, unless cancelled by a natural.

- **EVERY F**, whether high or low, is **SHARPENED**.
- **EVERY F and C**, whether high or low, is **SHARPENED**.
- **EVERY B**, whether high or low, is **FLATTENED**.
- **EVERY B, E, and A**, whether high or low, is **FLATTENED**.

To meet the dictates of musical grammar, there are also **DOUBLE SHARPS** (which raise a note **TWO** semitones), and **DOUBLE FLATS** (which lower a note **TWO** semitones).

**LOUDNESS**

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{pppp} \quad \text{pp} \quad p \quad mp \quad mf \quad f \quad ff \quad fff \\
&\text{Very quiet} \quad > > > > > > > > > \text{Middle quiet/loud} \quad > > > > > > > > > \text{Very loud}
\end{align*}
\]

Also: pianissimo, piano, mezzo-piano, mezzo-forte, forte, fortissimo

- **Getting louder**
  - Crescendo
  - Cresc.
- **Getting quieter**
  - Diminuendo
  - Dim.
  - Decrescend
  - Decresc.

These signs (accents) make a note **LOUDER** than those immediately surrounding it.
Breathing

We have all been breathing for a long time, so we know how our body feels when the lungs are full/empty. We use this knowledge to control our breathing and, if we have to sing for a long time without taking a breath, we conserve the air we have and don’t let it all out in the first few seconds.

There is a discipline about breathing and singing which is different from normal speech. Before starting to sing, take a good breath during the beats running up to the start time. For instance: 1, 2, 3, 4, SING, becomes 1, 2, deep breath, SING.

In the best circumstances, we only breathe where there is a rest or a punctuation mark in the text:

There was a young girl in the choir, (breath) whose voice arose higher and higher, (breath) ‘til one Sunday night, (breath if needed) ...

In emergencies, we may have to breathe between words: There was a young girl (breath) in the choir, ...

We (normally) NEVER breathe in the middle of a word: ‘til one Sun-(breath)-day night, ... (but see the example below).

In emergencies, we may also breathe after a tied note, or between the repetitions of little bits of the same melody (a sequence).

Placing Consonants

Consonants are placed as late as possible in a note. For instance, if the word “cat” is sung on a 4 beat note, the “t” comes just before the next note, NOT on beat 4: Ca - 2 - 3 - 4 - T, NOT Ca - 2 - 3 - T - .

Also, be careful not to sizzle the letters “s” or “z”. Bu - 2 - 3 - 4 - s, NOT Bu - 2 - s - s - s.

TEMPO (Fast or Slow)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slow</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Fast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adagio</td>
<td>Moderato</td>
<td>Allegro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largo</td>
<td>Andante</td>
<td>Presto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lento</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vivace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Getting Faster</th>
<th>Getting Slower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accelerando</td>
<td>Rallentando (rall.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accel.</td>
<td>Ritenuto (rit.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Italian words above are relative and have no absolute value. The indications below, although appearing to be absolute, are often varied according to how many performers there are and/or how much acoustic (echo) there is.

\[ \text{\textbullet} = 100: \text{100 crotchet beats in a minute.} \quad \text{\textbullet} = 50: \text{50 semiquaver beats in a minute.} \quad \text{\textbullet} = 72: \text{72 minim beats in a minute.} \]
**Diphthongs**

English is full of compound vowel sounds (diphthongs). Say these words *out loud and slowly*, and note how, mid-way through, the vowel sound changes: **Gate, Time, Toy**. You may notice something like this: G-a-a-a-e-e-t, T-a-a-a-a-e-e-m, and T-o-o-o-e-e.

When singing diphthongs, we save up the second vowel sound until as **late as possible**:

G-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-e-e-t, T-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-e-e-m, T-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-e-e.

We NEVER start the second vowel sound early:


**Can't Sing - Tone Deaf?**

Everybody can sing. Well, 99.999% of people can as *tone deafness* is very, very rare. Singing is just an extension of normal speech. If you can hear how other people modulate and inflect the way they talk (how their voice goes up and down) and you do the same, you are not tone deaf. However, if talking is a stroll in the park, singing in a concert is like running a marathon; it requires stamina, muscle tone, and an understanding of how to use your whole body to the best effect. For example, you may give an occasional squeak of surprise but, in normal life, you won’t be using those upper notes time and again and be expected to hold on to them.

Singing is a combination of muscle control (especially, what you do with you vocal cords and lungs), the ear (listening to what you are doing and what is going on around you), the brain (checking up on the previous two points and anticipating what’s coming up).

Singing in a choir is also a team effort, so you have to be prepared to use your voice at the extreme ends of its abilities when the situation requires.

**HITTING THE RIGHT NOTES:** This depends on practice. If you have done no more than sing in the bath, or hum as you weed the garden, you are likely to have just been using those notes which come most comfortably to you. Singing in a choir demands a much wider range of notes and finding these takes practice and (just as it’s easy to miss scoring 180 in darts without putting in some hours of preparation) it’s easy, initially, to miss the note, especially if it’s a high one (requiring much more physical effort). This is when it’s important to listen to yourself and others. If you hear that you are higher (but probably lower) than the voices around you, make some adjustment to what you are singing. If you still can’t find the note, stop and listen until notes within your range return. Your range (the number of notes you can sing) will extend as your voice adapts to the extra demands being made upon it.

**BREATHING WELL:** In normal life, you can take a breath when you want to, not just when some external circumstance allows. Assuming that you are standing or sitting in a good position (not hunched up with the chest and stomach compressed but with the back straight and your shoulders back) you should be able to take enough breath to avoid breathing in the wrong places. This does, however, depend upon noting in rehearsals where breaths should be taken and, in performance, conserving or managing your breath until you get to these places.

**SINGING IN TUNE:** If you are breathing well and listening, this becomes easier with practice. However, beware of top notes (it’s easy to shave the peak off a melody and then be under pitch), long notes (as not much seems to be happening, they tend to sag), and last notes (you may be running out of breath or the concentration lapses).

**Useful Practical Tips**

Always take a pencil to rehearsal. A conductor may give a thousand performance instructions during a term and you won’t be able to remember them all. Write down what he or she says in the score to remind yourself (use a soft pencil if it’s a hired printed score, some other conductor with another choir may have other ideas).

If online or on-disk rehearsal tracks become available, use them. They are a valuable resource for reinforcing your knowledge of the notes between rehearsals.

Try to be on time for rehearsals. During the course of a term, the equivalent of a whole rehearsal can be lost waiting to get everyone assembled or, if you always miss the warm-up period, valuable time when you could be improving your technique and knowledge is lost. Ask questions when in doubt, either of your singing colleagues** or the conductor.

** But discreetly, please. A welter of personal consultations going on can wreck the progress of a rehearsal.