

NOTATION: understanding it and using it in the KS1/2 classroom

Why is music notation useful?

- Notation is memory aid which helps people remember musical detail they might otherwise forget.
- With more complex music especially, it enables players to practice particular parts of the music without having to go through the whole piece.
- It can be very helpful for enabling a number of musicians to play / sing together accurately.

What does the KS1/KS2 national curriculum say about music notation?

- Under aims: ‘understand...appropriate musical notations.’
- Under KS2: ‘use and understand staff and other musical notations.’

What does that mean in practice?

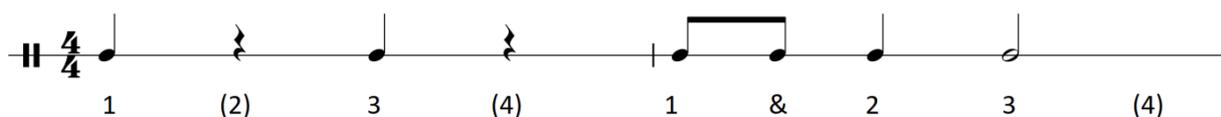
- Children should understand the *principles* of staff notation.
- Children do not need to be *fluent* readers of staff (European tradition) notation.
- Children should understand and use other forms of notation *appropriately*.

What are the main forms of notation we are likely to come across?

- ‘Stick’ notation (note values): a good way of learning rhythms and patterns accurately.
- Graphic notation: a useful tool for creative composition activity in the classroom.
- Staff (or stave) notation: for accurate, detailed re-creations of music written by other people.
- Chords symbols: a guide to accompanying music (usually songs) using a guitar or keyboard.

What are the principles of stick notation and how might it be used in the classroom?

- Stick notation is accessible for nearly all children and age groups because it uses recognisable symbols to represent notes of different lengths (duration). For example:



- There are three parts to a stick note: the stick (a vertical line), the note head (a black or hollow white dot) and sometimes, the tail (horizontal lines joining notes together).
- By combining these three parts in different ways we get all the different note values (lengths of note) that are needed to write down rhythms (musical patterns).

The most common note values:

Semibreve or 'whole' note 

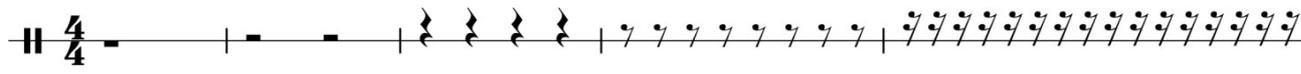
Minim or 'half' note 

Crotchet or 'quarter' note 

Quaver or 'eighth' note 

Semiquaver or 'sixteenth' note 

Each note value has an equivalent rest (silence) symbol:



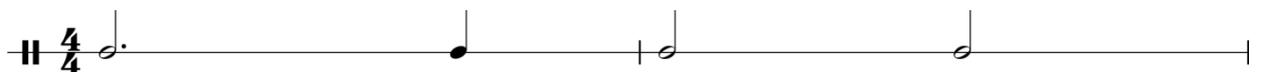
semibreve
minim
crotchet
quaver
semiquaver

Dotted notes:

- Dotted notes make it possible to notate more complex rhythms.
- A dot after a note makes it half as long again.
- For example, 1 crotchet (1/4 note) = 2 quavers (1/8 notes) and a dotted crotchet = 3 quavers.



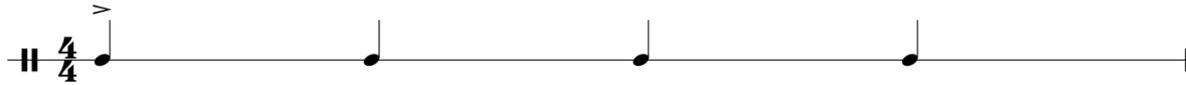

- Similarly 1 minim = 2 crotchets and a dotted minim = 3 crotchets.



Time-signatures, metre or 'beats-in-the-bar':

- Using stick notation is a good way to explain and understand time-signatures.

- Most music is counted in 'four' time.
- This means each group (bar) of beats amounts to four and beat one is usually 'strong' (slightly louder).
- The top-number of a time signature is the number of beats in the bar.
- The bottom number is the value of the beat. So 4/4 = 4 crotchet (quarter) notes in each bar.



- Whatever combination of note values and rests are used in a bar they must **always** add up to the total required by (equivalent to) the time-signature.



- Sometimes music has a different time-signature to 4/4. The waltz time-signature of 3/4 is very recognisable.



- Most nursery rhymes are in 6/8 time.



Some uses for stick notation in the classroom:

- To support composition / improvisation based around set rhythms and patterns.
- As an introduction to the rhythm element of staff notation.
- Helping children to play or sing particular passages / songs / pieces more easily / accurately.
- As a 'maths in music' activity: e.g. counting beats and fractions of beats.

What are the principles of graphic notation and how might it be used in the classroom?

- Graphic notation uses signs and symbols in informal ways to represent sounds.
- It is most commonly used as a way of getting children to record and then play back pieces they have composed themselves.
- Because there are no fixed rules for graphic notation you can use a mixture of 'formal' (borrowed from staff notation) and 'informal' symbols.

Some examples of 'formal' symbols you might use or suggest to your children:

<i>p</i> <i>mp</i> <i>f</i>		

Some examples of 'informal' symbols you might use or suggest to your children:

Wavy lines = slides (glissando)	Exclamation mark = sudden, loud sound	Clusters of small dots = repeated, soft notes
Symbols moving high to low on page = pitch going down in steps	Symbols moving low to high on page = pitch going up in steps	Long lines = long duration notes
Large symbols next to small symbols = loud then soft	A box grid with symbols inside each box = sounds following a pulse / steady beat	Several symbols on top of each other = texture (layers of simultaneous sound)

Some uses for graphic notation in the classroom:

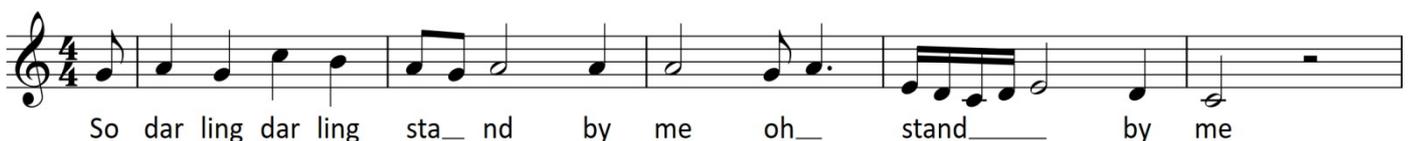
- Give a large sheet to each group and ask them to write down the sounds of their group composition using symbols and words.
- Use graphic symbols in a box grid to represent sounds in body percussion games e.g. a picture of a hand and foot alternating = clap-stamp-clap-stamp etc.
- Compose a class piece (e.g. made by the teacher for all to play) and use a mixture of formal and informal symbols to agree how it should sound.

What are the principles of staff notation and how might it be used in the classroom?

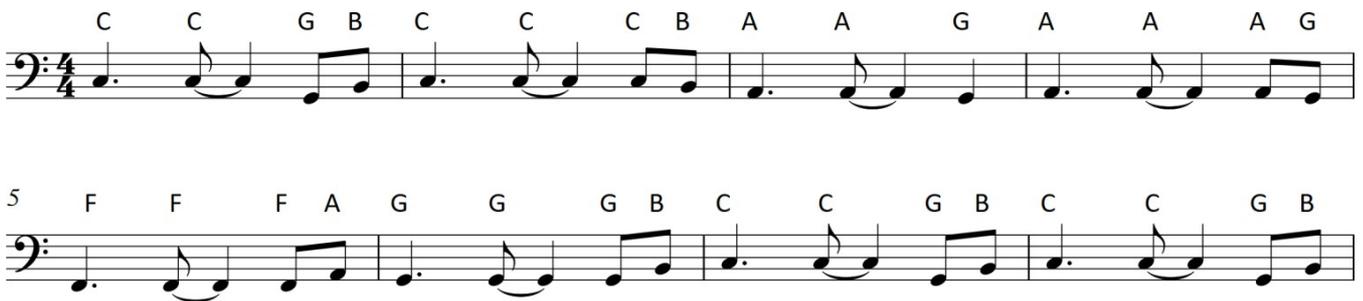
- Traditional European notation uses a staff (or stave) of 5 lines to indicate pitch (high and low).
- Each line and space between the line is 'home' to a note of a particular pitch.



- There are three simple principles of staff notation that all children can learn and understand:
 - a) Read the staff left to right, like a book.
 - b) Read the staff line by line, like a book.
 - c) Higher pitched notes are higher up the staff (page) and lower pitched notes are lower on the staff (page).
- A good way to develop understanding is to use song music, in which children can follow the 'shape' of the melody on the staff along with the words.



- They don't need to 'read' the music (i.e. be fluent staff readers), when doing this but they will pick up the principles with practice.
- If you have previously used stick notation, then the only new learning will be the use of the five-line staff.
- A sign called the clef is used to house different ranges of pitches on the staff: 
- Most music the children are likely to see will use the treble clef, as in the examples used above. Sometimes it will be bass clef (for lower pitched notes): 



- The piano is one of the few instruments that uses both treble and bass clef to show its music. This is because it has a wide compass, or range, of pitched notes, from very low to very high.

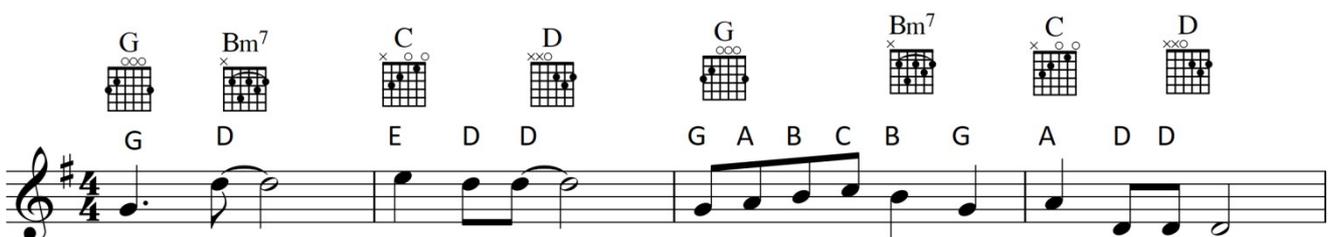


Some uses for staff notation in the classroom:

- When children are learning / playing on a pitched instrument e.g. recorder or glockenspiel.
- Following the line of a song they are singing.

What are the principles of chord symbols and how might they be used in the classroom?

- A chord is a group of different notes played at the same time. A chord is a form of harmony.
- Chord symbols come in two forms and usually appear above the musical staff.
 - a) Letters and numbers representing different chords (harmonies).
 - b) A grid diagram representing the strings and frets of a guitar.



- Unless your children play guitar * or piano, it's less likely you will use these. However the letter / number method of chord symbols can be useful a shorthand to represent a group of notes.

- (* By the way, guitarists sometimes use another form of notation called ‘tablature.’ This is a diagrammatic method in which each of the guitar’s 6 strings is shown as a horizontal line, with symbols appearing on them representing notes.)

Some uses for chord symbols in the classroom:

- Most song music will have chord symbols above the staff / words. The children don’t need to be able to ‘read’ these, but you should explain what they are. This would help to make music notation look a little less mysterious at first sight!
- For older children using tuned percussion in their composition work, simple chord symbols can be useful.
- If by any chance the class teacher or TA plays guitar or keyboard, this can be a good way of accompanying and enhancing class singing and composition.

Useful vocabulary

Melody: single notes, phrased	Notation: written down sounds / music
Pitch: how high or low a note is	Duration: length of notes
Rhythm: note values (duration) & patterns	Chord/ Harmony: two or more notes together
Staff / Stave: pitched notation using 5 lines	Graphic notation: using symbols for sounds
Texture: layers of music	Dynamics: volume (loud / soft)
Improvise: make-up on the spot	Compose: create original music
Stick notation: note values without pitch	Time-signature: beats in the bar