### Musical Symbols

**Staff:** A framework of five lines on which musical notation is written such that the higher the note sign on the staff, the higher its pitch.

**System:** Notation of a line of music including all the parts and voices involved, presented in a group of two or more staves which are joined together on the left hand side by a vertical bar (called a systemic barline) and a brace (the brace is not shown in this image).

**Barline:** A vertical line (or lines) drawn across a staff (or if there are many lines, across a number of staves) to mark off measures (or bars) of a particular length, i.e. containing a number of notes and/or rests whose total time value is given by the time signature.

**Dotted or auxiliary barline:** Used to mark divisions within a bar (measure), i.e. between two solid barlines, or to show that the barline is not necessarily marking periodic cappella sections in the music (as where unvarnished polyphonic music is edited with barlines, or the work employs mixed metres).

**Music start:** Barline placed at the beginning of a section of a piece of music.

**Music end:** Barline denoting the end of a piece of music.

**Bracket:** Used with a perpendicular line joining multiple staves, for example, as found in piano music.

**Clef:** A graphical symbol placed on the left of the staff which indicates the relationship between particular note names and their position on the staff lines and spaces (i.e. tells us which pitch class that staff belongs to).

- **Trebles (G):** G-clef
- **Bass (F):** F-clef
- **Alto (E):** E-clef
- **Soprano (C):** C-clef
- **Tenor (E):** E-clef
- **Baritone (D):** D-clef and subbaritone (B) in G-clef
- **French viola (E):** E-clef
- **Percussion or indefinite pitch c-f-c:** Not shown.

At the suggestion of Nick Metro, we show the relative pitch positions of the commonly used clefs:

- **G-clef (treble clef):** Marks G above middle C
- **C-clef (tenor clef):** Marks middle C
- **F-clef (bass clef):** Marks F below middle C
- **C-clef sign:** E, D, C, B, A, G, F, E, D, C

**Octave signs:**

- **G-clef ottava alta:** Octave signs.

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**Dictionary:**

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<td>semiteuca</td>
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<tr>
<td>128</td>
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<td>centesimoottavo (note)</td>
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<td>Hundertsiebzigstel(note)</td>
<td>garrapata</td>
<td>garrapata</td>
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Common time: the main elements of a musical score

Alle breve: also called "cut time" or "alla cappella time", marked with a large C with a vertical line through it, used for quick duple time in which the minim or half note is given one beat instead of two.

In music for stringed instruments, a single pitch to be played on two different strings, each appropriately fingered. A similar notation might also be found in a short score where two parts are being notated on a single line as a unison, in which case the upward stem will be of the higher or first part and the downward stem will be of the lower or second part.

Sprachgesang: speech-song, a term used by Arnold Schönböck (1874-1951) to describe a voice delivery midway between song and speech, although he preferred the terms sprechstimme speaking voice (which was used by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in Königskinder (1910)), sprechmelodisch (speech melody) or roation (recitation).
<table>
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</table>
| 1/2 breve rest                   | double-whole
rest                  | pausa di breve | pausa di breve | bilion
or
pausa de breve | pausa de breve | doppio
breve | pausa de breve |
| 1 semibreve rest                 | whole
rest                | pausa di
semibreve | pausa | pausa | pausa |
| 2 minim rest                     | half
rest                | pausa di minima | demi-pause | halbe
Pause | mittele
Pause |
| 4 crotchet rest                  | quarter
rest              | pausa di
semiminima | soubir | Viertelpause | quart de pausa |
|                                  |                    |           |       |       |       |         |
| 8 quaver rest                    | eighth
rest            | pausa di
croma | demi-soubir | Achtelpause | viertel
pause |
| 16 semiquaver rest               | sixteenth
rest         | pausa di
semicroma | quart de soubir | Sechzehntelpause | sechzehntel
pause |
| 32 demisemiquaver rest           | thirty-second
rest       | pausa di
biscroma | huitième de soubir | Zweitunddreißigtpause | zweisechzig
pause |
| 64 semidemisemiquaver rest       | sixty-fourth
rest      | pausa di
semisicroma | soltéme de soubir | Viertelundachtzehntelpause | viertel
undachtzehntel
pause |
| 129 semidemisemiquaver rest      | one hundred and twenty-
seventh rest  | pausa di
centventidottavo | cent-vingt-huitième
de soubir | Hundertundachtundsiebzehntelpause | hundertundachtundsiebzehntel
pause |

multi-rest or multiple measure rest: where a number of bars contain only rests; in instrumental parts (and sometimes in scores), the bars are 'collected' together and shown as a single bar. a rest together with the number of consecutive bars given by a large number placed centrally above the staff over the single bar.

various note heads listed left to right:
top row: plus, circle x, square white, square black, triangle up white, triangle up black, triangle left up white, triangle left up black, triangle right up white
middle row: triangle right up black, triangle down white, triangle down black, triangle right down white, triangle right down black, moon white, moon black, string-round down white, string-round down black
bottom row: parenthesis, white, black, cluster white, cluster black, x, 

certain note heads have specific meaning, for example:
diamond: special playing modes or notes such as half-valve, tablature for string harmonics, falsetto voice, silent depression of keys, held keys
X: indeterminate pitches, spoken voice and unvoiced sounds, release of certain held notes, noises, ...
round pierced by stems: sounds of air blown through an instrument
vertical arrow: highest or lowest pitches possible on an instrument
triangular: for triangles

as a notehead: indeterminate pitches, spoken voice and unvoiced sounds, release of certain held notes, noises, ...

in jazz notation for wind instruments or string instruments, a 'ghost note' is indicated by using an "x" for the notehead rather than the usual oval. a ghost note is one that is to be played less strongly than the notes around it, the effect is also called "anti-accent"
nebenstimme, (German) subsidiary or secondary voice or line

(octava alta, play notes one octave higher than written)

(octava bassa, play notes two octaves lower than written)

(coro or chorus)

(quindicessima alta, play notes two octaves higher than written)

(quindicessima bassa, play notes two octaves lower than written)

(barline that marks the beginning of a passage that is to be repeated, also called 'open repeat', 'begin-repeat' or 'repeat start')

(barline that marks the end of a passage that is to be repeated, also called 'close repeat', 'end-repeat' or 'repeat end')

(repeat: the 'repetition' signs indicates that a section of a piece of music is to be played a second time - where this is the first section of the piece the left hand sign may be absent - however, where the repeat is of a later section, the left and right hand signs mark the extent of the section)

• repeated sections

an example of volta brackets, also called 'first ending' and 'second ending'. In this case, a section performed only the first time it is reached otherwise the performer plays a later section usually marked in a similar way but with a 2 and with no vertical line at the end of the section

(abbreviation: one of a number of abbreviations used in musical notation, in this case for repeated notes, which can be marked as individuals or marked as chords)

(note the angled line or lines, also called slashes, passing through the note stems)

(sometimes a horizontal array of dots may be placed over the note (instead of or additional to the slashes) indicating the number of notes to be played through the duration of each 'blacked' note)

Note: in drum or timpani parts, notes with their stems crossed diagonally by two or, more commonly three, lines usually indicate a roll

(abbreviation: a particular interval to be used or repeated)

(note the angled line or lines lying between pairs of notes)

(do not confuse with the caesura the lines of which pass through the top line of the staff and are steeper)

Note: where the two principal notes have stems, and there is no likelihood of confusion, the beams may actually connect to them: see bar 2, bass staff, in the example below

(same marks, used to show repeated groups or bars (see immediately below for more information))

(repeated passage using same marks)

(do not confuse with the caesura the lines of which pass through the top line of the staff)

(repeated bars using same marks)

(D.C. (Italian: from the beginning) an abbreviation of da capo, indicating that the player should start from or go back to the beginning of the piece of music)

(D.S. (Italian: from the sign) an abbreviation of dal segno, term indicating a place from which a section of a piece is to be played, that place marked with a segno)

(Dal segno, D.S. (abbrev): (Italian: from the sign)

• da capo

(D.C. al Fine (Italian: from the beginning to the end) an abbreviation of da capo al fine, indicating that the player should go back to the beginning and then end at the fine mark)

(Fine (Italian: the end) a term placed where a piece or a section of a piece of music is to end)

(Sign that the player is to jump to the next section of a piece of music (or a new section))
Fermata (It.), Fermata (Ger.): a musical symbol placed over a note or rest to be extended beyond its normal duration, and occasionally printed above rests or barlines, indicating a pause of indefinite duration. The word longa (shortened form of the Italian lange pause, meaning “long pause”) is sometimes added above a fermata to indicate a longer duration. Some modern composers (including Frans Paulus, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Luigi Nono) have expanded the symbol’s usage to indicate approximate duration, incorporating formats of different sizes, square- and triangle-shaped formats, and so on, to indicate holds of different lengths. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fermata)

crescendo (Italian, literally ‘growing’) increasingly louder

crescendo from silence: starting from silence, the note should become increasingly louder

Information provided by Adam Glyn.

diminuendo, decrescendo, diminuendo (Italian) increasingly softer

swell, closed headpins (over a phrase), or closed accent (over a single note): to increase volume and then die away in the duration of a single note or short phrase. Also called massa di voce (Italian) or masse de voix (French)

In Russian, the typical markings of the ‘closed accent’ and the ‘closed headpins’ appear frequently but they were also commonly used by his contemporaries. They signify, in the case of the ‘closed accent’, a more marked and longer accent than the norm; in the case of the ‘closed crescendo’, a crescendo that ends abruptly in a diminish emphatically; in the case of the ‘closed diminuendo’, a sforzato that immediately trails off into a diminuendo

Notation | English | French | German | Italian | Spanish | Catalan
---|---|---|---|---|---|---
# | double sharp | double dièse | Doppelterkreuz | doppio dièse | doble sostenido, elevación de dos semitonos | doble diez, elevación de dos semitonos
| sharp | dièse | Kreuz | dièse | sostenido, elevación de un semitono | dièse, sostituito

A note about notating accidentals in ornaments: If any of the auxiliary notes in an ornament include accidentals, for instance a C sharp in the key of G major, this is shown by writing an accidental, In this case a sharp sign, above or below the ornament sign. In the case of an F natural in the key of G major, the sign would be a natural. The convention is that if the indication applies to a note lying above the principal note then the accidental is written above the sign for the ornament. If the indicated auxiliary note lies below the principal note, the accidental sign also lies below the sign for the ornament. Obviously, if the principal note itself is affected then the accidental is placed to the immediate left of the note head and not on the sign for the ornament.

A double accidental that completely cancels the effect of a double sharp or double flat sign

A double accidental that restores a double flattened note to a single flattened note (and sometimes to change a sharp to a flat)

A double accidental that restores a double sharpened note to a single sharpened note (and sometimes to change a flat to a sharp)

Microtonal ‘flat up’ sign

Microtonal ‘flat down’ sign

Microtonal ‘natural up’ sign

Microtonal ‘natural down’ sign

Microtonal ‘sharp up’ sign

Microtonal ‘sharp down’ sign

Quartertone accidental signs (there are other sign conventions)

-1/4 tone flat
-1/4 tone flat

1/4 tone sharp
1/4 tone sharp
quarter tone sharp sign, a sign to show that a note should be raised one quarter tone in pitch

quarter tone flat sign, a sign to show that a note should be lowered one quarter tone in pitch

Bach's own table of ornaments. The use of ornament symbols was never standardised. Please refer to Chapter 23 - Music Theory Online for more information on the use of and notation of 18th-century ornaments.

Acciaccatura: (Italian) 'crushed' note, grace note (written with a diagonal line through the note stem)
- grace notes

Appoggiatura: (Italian) 'leading' note, ornamental note (written without a diagonal line through the note stem)
- appoggiatura

Turn: musical ornament
- turn

A symbol found above note heads in The Boy Fancier's Delight which is explained in the original publication thus: "The marks & rules for gracing are these: Wt. a close shake thus —".

The turn-with-a-line-through it is a mystery ornament that occurs in Haydn's piano music. He once called it a 'half mordent' but did not explain the way it was to be played. Adding to the confusion is the fact that he was inconsistent in using it so that in parallel phrases he sometimes substitutes the normal turn as a symbol or written out. Players now play it as a normal turn or as a mordent since it is often indistinguishable from a mordent in his manuscripts. You can read about this strange ornament in the profile of the Weiler Urtext Edition of Haydn's Piano Sonatas.

Trill: musical ornament
- trill

Mordent: musical ornament
- mordent

Arpeggio (it.), arpeggio (fr.), arpeggio (it. plural): (Italian, meaning 'in the manner of a harp') a spread chord played from the top down or from the bottom up indicated by a vertical wavy line, a vertical square bracket or a curved bracket (the letter two signs are now uncommon)
- arpeggio

The also called a 'bond', a sign that indicates that the note being played or sung sustained, unbroken, through the total time value of the notes under the tie

Stair: a mark used to show where a group of notes are played either under a single bow stroke, or on a wind instrument without retouching or when singing, in one breath, so that the notes move smoothly one to the other with no perceptible break.

In keyboard playing, and, to a large extent, in wind playing the use of a slur usually seems to have meant simply that the notes should be less distinctly separated (though in wind playing there may also have been implications for breathing). In string playing the slur is specifically a bowing instruction, but the end effect is much the same. Where (accent markings) appear over successive notes under a slur, however, their function is as much articulation as accent..." Brown (we thank Ron Evans for bringing the reference Signs as Accents Markings to our attention. We have drawn our information from that reference)

Sometimes an extended slur mark may have less extended slur marks within its scope. In such a situation the less extended mark is a slur while the more extended is called a 'phrase mark' or 'grooping'. A phrase mark indicates the 'shape' of the musical line, not that all the notes below it should be slurred. Sometimes, the context of the marking may be the only way to tell those two marks apart.
hocket, triplet: a group of three notes of equal time value performed in the time of two of them; however, (i) one or two of the notes may be rests of equivalent value, and (ii) a consecutive pair may be replaced by a note of double value

glissando, portamento: (Italian) a continuous movement in pitch from the lower to the higher note

left hand sign shows a rising glissando – the right hand sign shows a falling glissando

placed over or under a note-head, accent
in a part for a drummer, indicates a medium stroke
also called the accent hairpin, together with the staccato, it was the one of the earliest musical signs to be used. It was invented by J. S. Bach. P.M. and R. Verdi having proposed something similar. In several decades before it first appeared in the 18th century, even so few composers used it until the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries but then as synonyms of n and to indicate something more subtle.

(we thank Ron Evans for bringing the reference Signs as Accent Markings to our attention. We have drawn our information from that reference)

• variety of accents

placed over or under a note-head, staccato: (Italian) note sustained for half the written length, the remaining half silent

the staccato mark was the first sign to come into common use, usually appearing as a stroke, dot, or wedge. It indicates a note that is intended to be played as an accent as well as separation, but by the late-nineteenth century the mark was used to show a lightening as well as separation.

(we thank Ron Evans for bringing the reference Signs as Accent Markings to our attention. We have drawn our information from that reference)

• variety of accents

placed after a note, a dot indicates that the note is to be held longer - for details see 'dot' in the music dictionary

placed over or under the note-head, staccatissimo: (Italian) note sustained for three-quarters the written length, the remaining three-quarters silent - also called a 'wedge'

• variety of accents

placed above or below the note-head, marcato: (Italian) marking, marked, accented
in a part for a drummer, marcato denotes a heavy strike

• variety of accents

placed above or below the note-head, marcato/a staccato/a staccato duro: (Italian) more forceful marking, more forcefully accented

• variety of accents

placed above or below the note-head, accented marcato/a staccato

• variety of accents

the caret, when used as an accent or stress mark, also called le pont choppeau. In the eighteenth-century this mark was used to denote expressive stress and for such purposes the sign continued to be used into the nineteenth-century. There is good evidence that in terms of its strength le pont choppeau lies between the light • and the heavier st and stre. By the middle of the eighteenth-century le pont choppeau was used synonymously with • or even to indicate a somewhat heavier stress than •.

(we thank Ron Evans for bringing the reference Signs as Accent Markings to our attention. We have drawn our information from that reference)

small triangle lying above or below the note-head, strongly accented then immediate diminuendo

[kossitt example: Overture to Die Fledermaus (Metz) supplied by David Hering]

placed above or below the note-head, tenuto: (Italian) note held to its written length, i.e., not detached
in a part for a drummer, the tenuto indicates a light stroke

• variety of accents

the horizontal line (—) sign, with or without a dot above or below the line, was rarely used before the mid-nineteenth-century although some earlier instruction books refer to its use. Without a dot, the horizontal line mark in piano music indicates that the "...keys must be struck with more than the usual emphasis, and the notes must be held for almost more than their usual value" (Dye). Most nineteenth-century commentators follow this definition, with Wagner suggesting, where applicable, the use of a discrete vibraphone
[we thank Ron Evans for bringing the reference Signs as Accent Markings to our attention. We have drawn our information from that reference.]

- placed above or below the note-head, slurred: In string playing the bow motion is slurred, but with slight separation of the notes. It is performed with several notes in one bow direction, each note receiving a gentle /push/ to separate it.
  • variety of slurs

- placed above or below the note head, manticato: (Italian) strongly marked,hammered
  • variety of accents

- on a bowed instrument: down-bow, as when the bow, held below the hand, is pulled across the string on a member of the violin family, or conversely, as when the bow, held above the hand, is pushed across the string on a member of the viol family; the reverse manoeuvre is called the "up-bow" on the guitar: down-stroke, the string is plucked with the hand moving downwards

- on a bowed instrument: up-bow, as when the bow, held below the hand, is pushed across the string on a member of the violin family, or conversely, as when the bow, held above the hand, is pushed across the string on a member of the viol family; the reverse manoeuvre is called "down-bow" on the guitar: up-stroke, the string is plucked with the hand moving upwards

- in string parts: written over or under the note-head, meaning: play a natural harmonic
  
  referring to percussion notation the Percussion Information Homepage + Problems page author writes: "one very annoying side effect of different setups is the fact the most method books that indicate which hand to use for a certain passage, are difficult to use for players who are learning the other way! So, my advice to publishers and writers: Never indicate hands. And if you have to, use symbols like an open and closed small circle or square above the notes. In that way we just have to change the definition of the symbols and explain that to the student. But it’s very unnatural to have to play a note with your left hand when there is a big R above or below it. Especially when these very letters mean the same hands in another language."

- in string parts: written over or under the note-head, meaning: play a natural harmonic.
  
  Notes: the position of the diamond-shaped notehead indicates where the finger is placed, and not the sounding note. If the sounding note is also given it would be placed above the diamond-shaped notehead, in cue-size and in parentheses. See also "Artificial harmonics".

- for string parts: snap pizzicato

- for string parts: use the mute

- for string parts: written under a note to indicate the string to be used (in this case string number 2)

- in string parts: written over or under the note-head, meaning: play a left-hand pizzicato

- applied to chord names or numbers: A, Aug., or "+": an augmented interval

- applied to chord names or numbers: A, Aug., or "+": an augmented interval

- in percussion parts: a dead stroke, achieved by holding the mallet on the instrument after the attack to dampen the vibration. Dead strokes are commonly notated with a plus sign (+) over the note. Ringing notes in a passage with dead strokes can be indicated with a circle (o) over them; this is not necessary but can help to clarify. (D.S., or staccato dots are other common indicators for dead strokes. These notations are not standard and should be explained at the top of the score and part.

- in early music, particularly that for wind instruments: the "plus" sign indicates a musical ornament, usually a trill

  • Trills

- in French horn parts: a "4" above notes to be stopped, followed by a "5" above notes that are open

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<th>open</th>
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<td>offen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>chiuso</td>
<td>acceso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>bouché</td>
<td>ouvert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- applied to chord names or numbers: d, dim. or "6": a diminished interval

- applied to chord names or numbers: a half-diminished interval

- applied to chord names or numbers: indicates a triad, for example the notes G, B, D, G7 means a G major 7th chord. While A is usually not needed with the triad chord, with the 7th chord it indicates that the complete triad should be included in the 7th chord

- applied to chord names or numbers: indicates a minor triad, for example the notes C, Eb, G, C7 means a C minor 7th chord

- for wind parts: double tongue

- for wind parts: triple tongue

- for other tonguing, flatter tonguing (German), trémolo dental (French), trémolo en résonant le longue (French): extremely rapid, tongued articulation on a wind instrument

- use the fingers
The use of half pedal and flutter pedal is very effective in creating a variety of tonal colours. People learn it as a sustain device and most teachers do not teach that it is used to give shades and colours to your tonal palette. Just like an artist has a variety of shades of reds, blues and yellows, a pianist can use the pedal to create those tones. Now this only works on an acoustic piano, not a digital keyboard because the digital instrument even if it is slightly depressed tells the computer to "sustain notes". Half and flutter pedal can only be done on a real instrument. By lifting up the dampers a touch part of the string vibrates, or possibly 2 out of the 3 strings in the upper register and 3 out of 3 strings vibrate and sustains in the middle. This type of pedaling is very effective for all music! I tend to flutter pedal a lot in scale and running passages. I would never hold the pedal down because the sound would be cut, but using half pedal catches some tones and allows for a touch of harmonic colour while maintaining clarity in the passage work.

[Source provided by Charles Whitman: antismells@yahoo.com]
part played on an organ pedal-board - use the toe (to indicate that the right foot should be used, symbols are written above the staff); to indicate that the left foot should be used, symbols are written below the staff.

part played on an organ pedal-board - use the heel (to indicate that the right foot should be used, symbols are written above the staff); to indicate that the left foot should be used, symbols are written below the staff.

part played on an organ pedal-board - indicate a change of toe and heel, the 2 symbols are placed next to each other, with a slur above or below them (to indicate that the right foot should be used, symbols are written above the staff; to indicate that the left foot should be used, symbols are written below the staff)

part played on an organ pedal-board - indicate a change of foot, the 2 symbols are placed above and below the notes.

symbol that means 'copyright' (not strictly a musical symbol, but frequently found on a musical score)

symbol called ‘guide’ (Italian) or ‘arco’ (Italian) employed to show in a canon or fugue the entry points of other parts, the start of the subject or antecedent, and so on.

symbol called ‘rest’ (Latin), ‘Wagner’ (German), ‘pauze’ (Italian), ‘gavotte’ (French) or ‘ diretto’, placed at the end of a line to indicate the pitch of the first note on the next line.

a variety of symbols used to indicate which instrument a percussionist should be playing (most are self-explanatory).

a variety of symbols used to indicate when to use a particular mallet or the hands when playing any particular percussion instrument (most are self-explanatory).