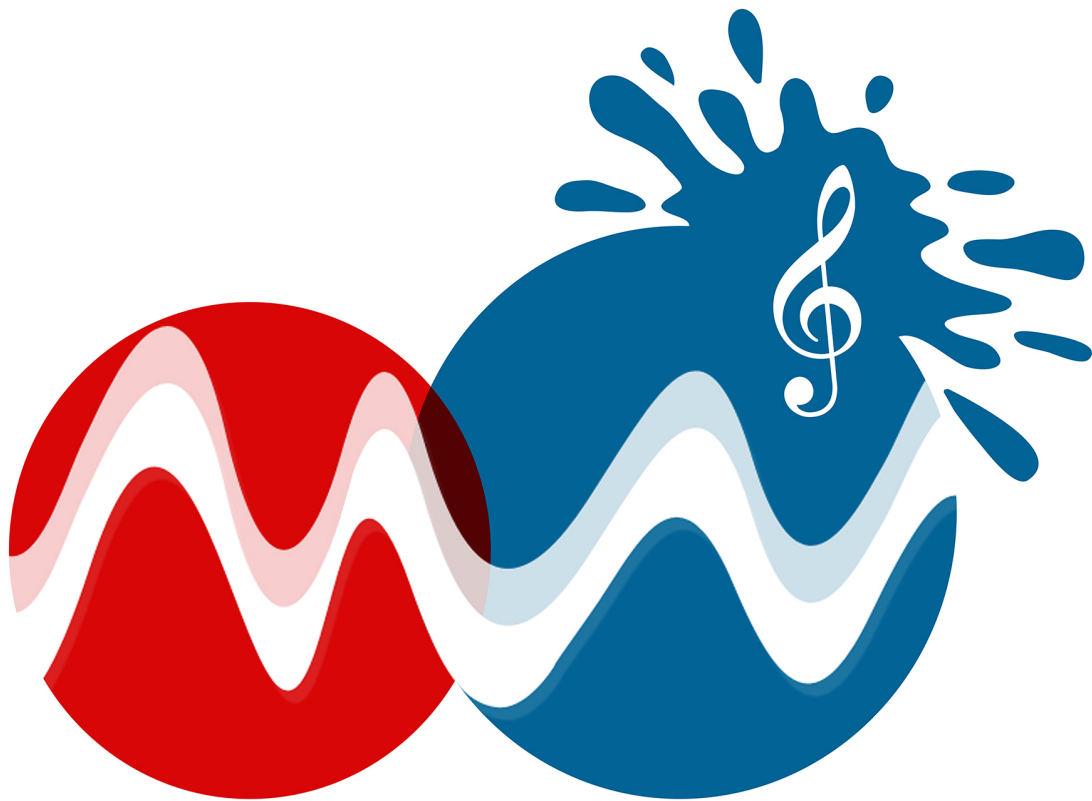


# Reading Choir music

for beginners



# Music Theory

## For beginner choristers Vol. 1

When first joining a community choir the priority is to start enjoying making music as soon as possible. This often means jumping in at the deep and learning to perform music by the most natural way possible: by ear. Many community choirs function entirely on teaching music by ear and relying on repetition in regular practises to allow the music to be absorbed. Whilst this way allows the group to learn together the speed this process is undertaken can be greatly increased by the understanding of some basic music notation to allow the chorister to follow their part on the printed page and understand where their part fits within the structure of a composition.

This document aims to get you up and running straight away and deals with elements in order of importance so you can cope with choir rehearsals. It is by no means a comprehensive and deals with elements of music theory unique to singing in a choir.

### **Voice Types, choir sections and the 'Staff'**

If you have joined a choir you may have been assigned a section. Each section depends on what type of voice you have and how high or low you can comfortably sing. Choirs are usually separated into some of the following common voice sections:

Soprano - High Female Voices

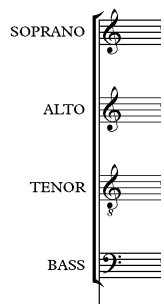
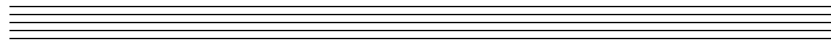
Alto - Low Female Voice

Tenor - High Male voice

Baritone - Medium Male Voice - often refers to a combine tenor and bass section

Bass - (Pronounced 'Bais') Low Male Voice

Each voice type is represented in musical notation by a 'staff' or 'stave'. Each staff contains 5 horizontal lines upon which the musical notes are placed to represent the pitch (how high or how low) the note is and how long the note should sound. The example below shows a blank staff.



When you have more than one section in a choir the music will indicate the different sections by using more than one staff joined together by a vertical line. This creates a 'system' and this indicates that all the music on those joined staves are to be sung simultaneously.

The Example shown here has the start of a set of staves joined to create a system for 4 different choir sections; Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass and each is labeled accordingly.

## **Piano and other accompaniment.**

If musical instruments are rehearsing with you chances are they will also have a staff or pair of staves that will have written out an accompaniment to the choir music. This will usually involve an instrumental introduction too! This introduction may appear has a system on it's own with no text and no indication of voice type at the beginning of a score. To save space it is common practise for staves to disappear completely when those parts will be doing nothing. Notice in this example:

1. The first system is piano only - no singers will be singing
2. The choir staves are removed from this system to save space
3. The choir staves appear as they are needed. They can also be removed when they are not needed.

Gently (♩ = ca. 72)

PIANO

5

9

SOPRANO

ALTO

TENOR

BASS

SOLO *p* 11

One can - dle, one light, burn - ing

## Music and Words

Each syllable is clearly indicated in musical notation this is because each syllable needs at least one note for you to be able to sing it on. The words themselves don't indicate the pitch (how high or how low) you are to sing the note, nor does it indicate for how long you should sound each syllable - that is the job of the musical notation written as symbols on the staff.

Each sy - lla - ble needs at least one note but some use more

The word 'syllable' in the above example has itself three syllables each one separated with a hyphen and each sounding on it's own note. The words 'some' and 'use' contain one syllable but in this particular example they have been written to sound over several different notes. Notice how a line extends from those words, this indicates that the syllable it to extend over other notes.

That first example would have everyone singing the same music at the same time as everyone would be reading from that one staff. In a choir this isn't always the case and different sections of the choir often do their own thing. It becomes important to understand some elements of the layout of music notation in order to be able to follow

your part on the page and to be able to know which bits you should and shouldn't be singing at a glance.

Soprano  
Alto

In this example we have two staves joined together to create a system for two part choir for ladies voices; in this case the voice type 'Soprano' and 'Alto' is used. As there are no words written below the Alto staff we can assume the Alto section sing the same words at the same time. This saves space on the page and can make the music easier to read and interpret. Two separate staves are used on this occasion because the pitches each syllable land on are different between the Soprano and Alto part. This creates a harmony.

### Together in Harmony

When one section of your choir sings a pitch that is higher or lower than another a Harmony is created.

Soprano  
Alto

In this example the two sections of the choir sing at different times. First the Soprano section, followed by the Altos.

Notice how the lyrics for each section appear on a different level to each other. In this example the words sung by the Soprano appear below their notes, and the altos beneath theirs. You would follow the flow of the music from left to right so the Altos would have to wait until the Sopranos had finished before singing their part. Remember, words are written by syllable and that is why the two syllable word 'lyrics' is written as ly-rics just as with the three syllables of 'So-pra-no' (Soprano) and two syllables of 'Al-tos' (Altos).

4 part example. Illustrate a full page of music with multiple systems. Use numbers set to music to illustrate all the parts singing in order and together at the end!

This example contains a system set up for 4 part choir of the following voice types: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. This is Frequently abbreviated to SATB as indicated on the second system.

When the end of a line is reached the music continues on another system which is illustrated in this example by following the text which counts in order the numbers 1 to 14.

The image shows a musical score for a four-part choir (SATB) in 4/4 time, counting from 1 to 14. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 1 to 4. The Soprano and Alto parts (S. - A.) sing "One two three four" in the first measure, then "five six se - ven" in the second measure. The Tenor and Bass parts (T. - B.) are silent in the first measure and enter in the second measure. The second system covers measures 5 to 8. The Soprano and Alto parts (S. - A.) are silent in measures 5 and 6, then sing "four - teen" in measure 7. The Tenor and Bass parts (T. - B.) sing "eight nine ten e - le - ven" in measure 5, "twelve thir - teen" in measure 6, and "four - teen" in measure 7. The score ends with a double bar line in measure 8.

The sopranos would sing: "One, two, three, four"; then the altos take over with: "five, six, seven"; then moving onto the lower system the tenors sing: "eight, nine, ten, eleven"; with the basses following by singing: "twelve and thirteen". For the final word 'fourteen' all the parts sing together at the same time.

In this example the Alto section in this example. The piece would begin with the Sopranos singing and the Altos wait. Then then sing the words "Five, six, seven" and then wait until the basses sing thirteen and then they sing "fourteen"

The following example contains exactly the same music as the previous one only written out in 'divisi' form which is often used to save space in SATB sheet music. In this style of writing for choir the female voices (Soprano and Alto) are written on the same staff and the male voices (Tenor and Bass) on another. The main indicator of who should be singing what is the note stem.

Soprano  
One two three four

Alto  
five six se - ven

Tenor

Bass

S.  
four - teen

A.  
four - teen

T.  
eight nine ten e - le - ven four - teen

B.  
twelve thir - teen four - teen

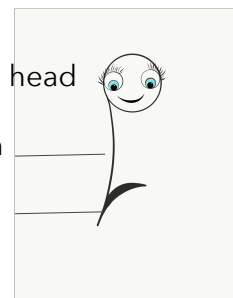
A note stem is a vertical line that begins at a note head.

When writing for two separate voices on one staff, the note stem is key to clarifying which voice should be singing the note. When the stems point down the lower voice should sing.

Note head

Stem

Flag



## Beats and Time signatures

When a conductor waves their arms in the air chances are they will be indicating specific moments when events should occur.

Coordination between the parts and making each note you sing is the correct length is a great way to make the performance instantly sound more polished. We achieve this by aligning all musical events to the pulse (or beat) of the music with follows an even regular pattern throughout the music.

The important thing to remember for a person singing in a choir is to realise that each note lasts for a number of beats or a fraction of one and each musical symbol represents



Each note is one beat

this value - this value is defined by the 'time signature' which appears at the beginning of each piece of music and whenever this value changes throughout the music.



Each note is one beat

A time signature is the key to counting beats and consists of two numbers. Without it none of our musical notes mean anything.

In this example we see the time signature near the beginning of the staff. It is usually two numbers written one above the other. The two numbers here are 4 and 4 which is a very common time signature. First we will deal with the bottom number. This code-breaker means that each note, with its filled black note-head and stem last for one beat. Below you will find a table for all the most common note types and how many beats they last for and the names they are often called.

Appearance	Beat value	Name
	4 Beats	Semi-Breve
	2 Beats	Minim
	1 Beat	Crotchet
	Half beat	Quaver
	Quarter beat	Semi-Quaver

Now look at this example. To perform, this example would sound exactly the same as the previous one even though it looks very different. If we used the above table we could say that each note lasts for 2 beats as it has a hollow note-head with a stem - a 'minim'. But



notice we have changed the time signature! Notice the lower number is now 2. This means that every note still lasts for one beat.

Here is a table for all note values when the bottom number of the time signature is 2.

Appearance	Beat value	Name
	2 Beats	Semi-Breve
	1 Beats	Minim
	Half Beat	Crotchet
	Quarter beat	Quaver
	Eighth beat	Semi-Quaver

You will notice that the lower number in the time signature has halved and so has the value of each note. A one beat note in '4 time' is worth only half a beat in '2 time'. This also works if the number the time signature doubles. In '8 time' a quaver is worth one beat and a crotchet two beats!

**Time Signatures**

**4** — The top number tells us how many of those beats fit into 1 bar

**4** — the bottom number tells us what note type = 1 beat.

## Bars and emphasis

A bar is a horizontal line that goes from the top of a staff to the bottom as is a method of dividing up the music which is useful for referencing sections of the music which is particularly useful in rehearsals. They also serve a musical function by



Each note is one beat

illustrating where emphasis should be placed. The first beat of each bar is usually the strongest and where an emphasis should be placed. We return to the time signature to determine how many weak beats follow the strong first one. This is illustrated by the top number.

In this example, we already know that 1 beat is represented by a solid dot with a stem - a 'crotchet'! Because the top number is also 4 this means we can fit 4 of these one beat notes in each bar. As you can see in this example 4 crotchets are written followed by a bar line then another crotchet.

In this first bar the emphasis would be placed on the first beat in this manner:

**One** two three four | **One** two three four

With the lyrics we would sing:

**Each** note is one **beat**.

Say this line out loud and make sure each note lasts for the same amount of time but with an emphasis on the **bold** type words

Consider the same phrase in 3/4 time:



The emphasis falls on the first beat still in this manner

**One** two three | **One** two three

With the lyrics we would sing:

**Each** note is **one** beat

All the words would last for one beat as before but because we have changed the time signature, the emphasised words are different.

This example is a little unnatural, you wouldn't normally want to emphasise those words in that sentence. A better way would be:



Which would sound as: Each **note** is one **beat**

We have now placed the emphasis on the important words and to do this we needed an extra beat at the beginning. The note where we now have the word 'Each' is contained within extra incomplete bar and any spare beats used here must be taken from the end of the piece! We would call that beat an 'upbeat' which means an unemphasised beat preceding an emphasised one as we don't always want a phrase of music to start with an emphasis.

Of course it is the composers job to get the lyrics and strong beats lined up! You just need to make sure you emphasise those first beats however it is written!

## Dotted Notes

Extending a note by half its normal value which is common musical device so it has been given it's own symbol. Writing a dot to the right of a note is a quick and clear way to indicate this.



In the above example the note on the left lasts for 2 beats whereas the note on the right is worth 3 because the dot extends the note by half its original length. Simple!

## Common rhythmic groupings (in Simple time)

In modern musical notation subdivisions of the beat can often be grouped together with beams to form rhythm groups. It is helpful to be familiar with the common variants from the outset. Notes are most commonly grouped in beats and this provides at a glance a clear indication of notes landing on the beat and those off it. Notes are grouped by joining the 'flags' of the notes together



## Compound time

So far we have used what is known as simple time. This is where each note can be split into two. For example: one crotchet can be split into two quavers, One beat can become two half beats. Sometimes a composer wishes to give a different feel to the music and split each note into 3. In this case we use compound time.



These are one beat so we can split them in three!

In this example we have used the 6/8 time signature so we can fit 6 quaver notes in one bar. We can divide those 6 quavers into two groups to make two beats in a bar with each beat being split into 3 notes rather than two.

Compound time fits between two 'simple' time signatures and one beat it is always a dotted note. So in the above example we would sing:

**These**    *are*        **one**        *beat*            **so** we can *split* them in **three!**  
**one**        *two*        | **one**        *two*            | **one**        *two*            | **one**

## Rests

Musical notation indicates the music we should sing and for how long and it is also very precise over the music we shouldn't. It is particularly useful for a choir member to be able to know how long you should wait between phrases and between sections. You can still count the number of beats of silence when you are not singing and on the sheet music this is indicated by rests.

These symbols represent an amount of time and each one has a corresponding note with the same value, and like notes this is determined by the time signature.

## Breathing

An important part of singing correctly is learning to breath at appropriate places. In many cases this can be a matter of interpretation and you should always follow the musical directors instructions. If it is unclear where you should breath it is always a good idea to ask but rests always give the opportunity to breath. A few other clues are given on the printed music that might help too!

## Clefs and Pitch

A clef appears at the beginning of each staff. It is the key to our musical notation code and actually the name clef is french for key! When starting to read music in a choir it isn't too important to understand exactly what each symbol represents but it is useful to be able to recognise them as they can help you follow your line.



Treble Clef. Used for High voices and the high sounding instruments.

Soprano & Alto



Octave clef. Identical to the treble clef except an 8 is added below. This means that every note placed on the staff sounds exactly 8 notes lower than the treble clef. Annoyingly, sometimes the 8 is missing making it identical to the treble clef however if written for tenor it will sound 8 notes lower regardless.

Tenor



Bass clef. Used for Low voices and low sounding instruments.

Bass voices or Bass and tenor in a Divisi Score

Once one of these clefs has been placed on one of the lines of the stave, the other lines and spaces can be read in relation to it. Typically Soprano and Alto use the treble clef even when written out separately, tenor uses the octave clef, and Bass uses the Bass clef. When using the divisi style of writing for choir Soprano and Alto will share a stave using the treble clef, with Tenor and Bass voices reading from a stave using the Bass clef. If the tenor appears on a treble clef stave you can assume the 8 is just missing and that all the notes will sound 8 lower than written on the Soprano and Alto parts.

A clef provides a point of reference as to where we place our notes. For example, the treble clef references where a specific note 'G' is to be so on the next available space below we can place a note 'F' which will sound one note lower when we sing it. Originally each voice type had their own clef but over time the treble and bass clefs have taken over and as they are the most commonly used clefs for most instruments it allows for quick comparison and ease of learning. This leads to the question, why do we use more than one clef? Why can all the notes have the same point of reference? This is due to the number of lines we have to work with and the range of all our voice types. It would quickly look very complicated if we used the same point of reference for a Bass singer's bottom note and a soprano's top! So we use different points of reference to allow for

the different ranges. Just as the Bass clef allows us to write out Bass singer parts out clearly it is also suitable for the low notes on the piano.

As a singer in a choir, you don't really need to know exactly what note is represented where to get started - it is a great skill to develop but most choir singers manage without it. What is more crucial is being able to differentiate between notes written on the staff and use them as a guide to how high or how low a note is approximately.

## Representing Differences in Pitch

All the different pitches available are written as filled dots and empty dots on the lines (where the line of a staff goes through the middle of the note) or on a space (where the note head sits in the empty space between two lines).



The position on the staff, either higher or lower represents how high or how low the note should sound. We can represent lots of different pitches using those 5 lines but sometimes we need more and this can be achieved two ways.

Half steps. These are represented by symbols before the note heads that raise the pitch by a half step which is the smallest change in pitch possible.



In this example the first five notes are all different and raise each time by a half step, this is despite some of the notes appearing on the same line or space, this is because the **sharp** symbol (#) *raises* the note by a half step. The **flat** symbols in the next bar *lower* a note by a half step. With the use of all available half steps we can fit 14 different notes on the staff, which in most cases is still not enough.

We can add extra notes above and below the staff by adding small temporary lines that are called **ledger lines**.



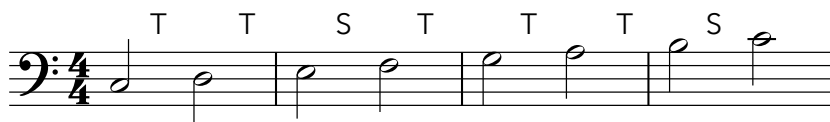
## Scales

We have already discovered that some beats within a bar of music tend to have more emphasis than others in order to give the music a sense of rhythm by providing patterns for the listener to latch on to. The same commonly occurs with pitch too and is provided by a musical **scale** or **mode**. In this section we will deal with the musical scale, its function and how we can use knowledge of the musical scale to help our sight-reading skills from within a choir.

A scale is a collection of changes in pitch ascending or descending - called **tones** and **semi-tones**. It is the order of tones and semi-tones that create each scale's characteristic sound.

A semi-tone is the smallest distance between two notes in this system and a tone is the distance of two semi-tones combined.

In this illustration 'T' and 'S' means the distance between the two notes is a Tone and Semi-tone respectively.



## Keys and Key Signatures

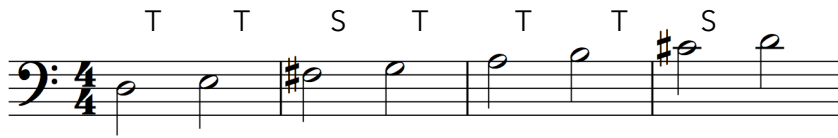
For each scale we have a keynote or 'tonic'. From this note the scale is constructed and when a chorister is familiar with singing scales aurally it can be a great advantage to be able to recognise what key the music is written in.

In the following example the tonic is 1 tone higher. Because the starting note has changed the order of tones and semitones has changed by default and so this would not sound like a normal scale.





To make this sound like a normal scale we need to modify the third and seventh notes and make them a semi-tone higher. This restores the scale pattern we need.



Rather than writing the 'sharp' (or flat) next to each of these notes in on every occasion they appear in the music it is summarised by placing the sharp (or flat) just once at the start of every staff forming a 'Key Signature'



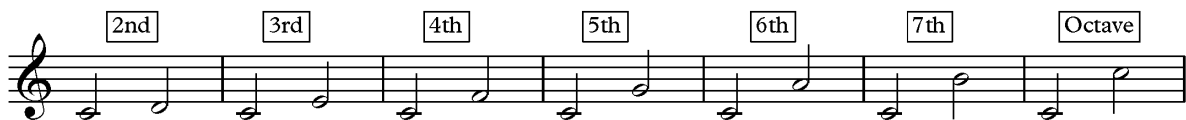
In this example the first sharp on the fourth line is copied to the key signature. However a lower version of the second sharp is placed on the key signature for neatness. Key signatures are always written in the same way using the same order of notes. For this reason it is possible to memories the different signatures and what tonic note goes with them

## Recognising intervals

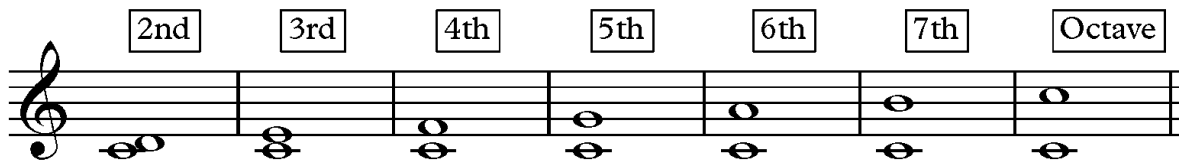
An interval is the distance between two notes. The name of the interval counts the starting note and the target note and all those between. An 8th is usually called an Octave.

A melodic interval is where the two notes sound individually. This is notated by showing the note heads following each other in sequence

Below is a sequence of melodic intervals

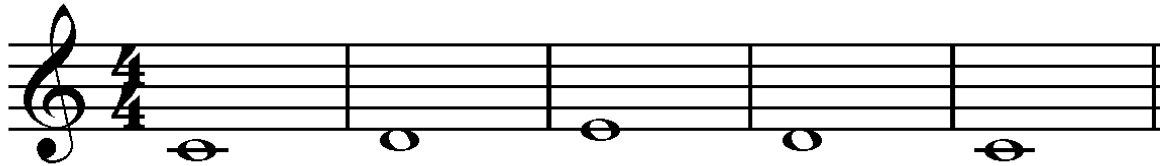


Harmonic intervals sounds both notes simultaneously and require two or more voices to interpret. Harmonic intervals are notated by stacking the note heads on top of each other as shown below.



## Singing at sight melodies using the Major scale

Below are several exercises using the major scale combining many elements included so far. After been given the first note it should be possible to sing each exercise without hearing it played or sung first!



Simple melody each melodic interval is a 2nd - this is also called moving by step. Each note last for 4 beats. Use any vowel sound so you are able to sustain the note for the correct length.



Four, three, and one beat notes used. Also moving in thirds

If male voices are singing an octave lower the above exercise will actually be sounding as shown below:



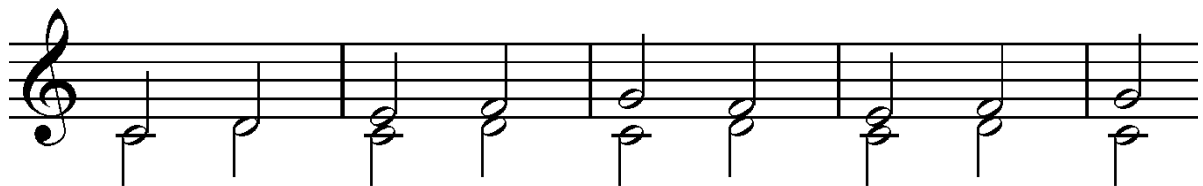
If everyone is singing at the same pitch (fairly high for the men!) it will sound as notated below:



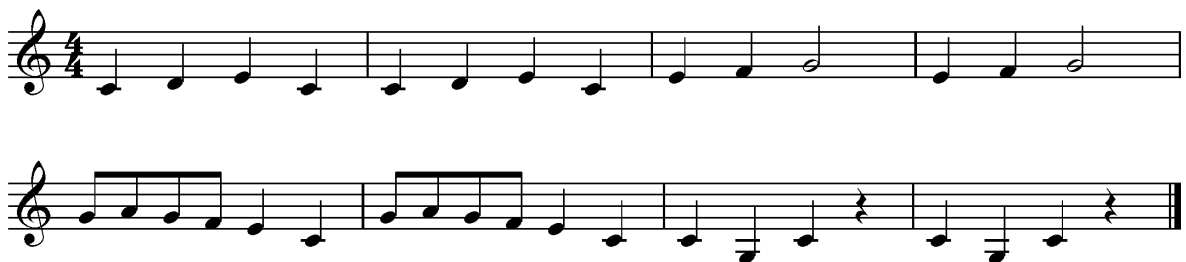
Notice the difference in position of the note heads in the two examples above. They appear much higher on the staff using ledger lines so male voices and female sing the same pitch. Try performing these two examples in 4/4 time and 2/2 time to explore the differences



Exercise for two parts. Both parts move in step using the major scale but change direction towards the end. Notice how the harmonic intervals are notated in combination with the melodic intervals of each part. Being able to recognise both is a great advantage when singing in harmony.



This example is similar to the previous one but with the lower part providing more harmony with the first.



The example below notates four sections of a choir of Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass voices. All singers pitch the notes and sing a single 'Ah' vowel sound. For this reason slurs are used along with a single line following the chosen vowel sound.

Musical notation for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass voices in 4/4 time. The Soprano and Alto parts are on a treble clef staff, and the Tenor and Bass parts are on a bass clef staff. A single slur covers the entire melody in each part, with the label 'Ah' written below the staff.

Compare this to the following example which uses two vowel sounds and notice how the use of slurs changes.

Musical notation for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass voices in 4/4 time. The Soprano and Alto parts are on a treble clef staff, and the Tenor and Bass parts are on a bass clef staff. The first slur covers the 'Ah' part, and the second slur covers the 'Oo' part.

The same music is now presented below in a higher key. All of the notes appear higher on the staff although their relative position to each other note remains the same. This is called transposition.

Musical notation for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass voices in 4/4 time, transposed to a higher key (one sharp). The Soprano and Alto parts are on a treble clef staff, and the Tenor and Bass parts are on a bass clef staff. The first slur covers the 'Ah' part, and the second slur covers the 'Oo' part.

Notice how a sharp (#) symbol has now been added after the clefs, this is called the 'Key Signature' and it means all the notes appearing on that line and every octave 'version' of that note half a tone higher therefore maintaining the pattern of tones and semitones we need without having to write each sharp (#) or flat (b) on each instance of that note.

In the first example we use the following scale:

Musical notation for a scale in C major. The Soprano/Alto staff uses a treble clef and the Tenor/Bass staff uses a bass clef. The scale consists of eight notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, and C. The notes are written as quarter notes in a single line.

In the second 'transposed' version we use this scale:

Musical notation for a scale in D major. The Soprano/Alto staff uses a treble clef and the Tenor/Bass staff uses a bass clef. A sharp symbol (#) is placed after the clefs. The scale consists of eight notes: D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, and D. The notes are written as quarter notes in a single line.

The second scale should just sound like a higher version of the first, this is because all the notes are the same distance apart.

Here is an example using the same scale and using 3/4 time to give an emphasis on each 3rd note.

Musical notation for a scale in D major with lyrics. The Soprano/Alto staff uses a treble clef and the Tenor/Bass staff uses a bass clef. A sharp symbol (#) is placed after the clefs. The time signature is 3/4. The scale consists of eight notes: D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, and D. The notes are written as quarter notes in a single line. The lyrics are: "This is in three four time and should feel more like a dance."

The following example shows the Soprano and Alto parts singing in harmony and the Tenors and Basses singing in unison with each other, but also in harmony with the Sopranos and Altos.

Musical score for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts. The Soprano and Alto parts are in harmony, and the Tenor and Bass parts are in unison. The lyrics are "Three part music three four time".

The next example uses slightly more complex rhythms but all voices are in unison.

Musical score for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts. All voices are in unison. The lyrics are "Tea coffee, tea coffee tea".

Below is an example of a simple melody that does not begin on the first note of the scale - also known as the Tonic or 'Do'

Musical score for a simple melody in G major, 2/4 time. The melody starts on the second note of the scale (Mi) and ends on the tonic (Do). The lyrics are "Mi Re Do Re Mi Mi Mi".

## Dynamics

How loud you should be singing a phrase or section of music is determined by symbols amongst the music. Dynamic markings are generally relative to one another and largely determined by the Musical Director in the choral setting but understanding the symbols and words can act as useful memory prompts. Dynamic markings mostly use terms derived from the Italian language. Below is some of the basics along with their general English meaning.

*p* = Piano = Soft

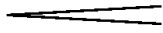
*f* = Forte = loud

*mf* = mezzo forte = moderately loud

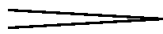
*mp* = mezzo piano = moderately soft

an addition of each f or p increases the dynamic. For example: *ff* is louder than *f*

*pp* is softer than *p*



or *cresc.* Means gradually increase the dynamic



or *Dim.* Means gradually decrease the dynamic