

Writing Down the Bones

Our western tradition of written music—what you're about to learn—has only been around a thousand years or so, not very long at all in the grand scheme of things.

There are older traditions of written music. Ancient Hindus and then the Greeks made use of the letters of their alphabet to write out music; the Persians used numbers and a kind of staff with nine lines between which the numbers were written; the Chinese used special signs for their pentatonic scales.

But it wasn't until around 500 AD that we see the first glimmer of written western music.

Around this time lived *Boethius*, a Roman poet and philosopher who wrote a famous Latin treatise on music which was studied throughout the Middle Ages. In it was the first use of Latin letters to represent musical sounds.

Monks in the monasteries of the Catholic Church studied this treatise by Boethius and improved upon his ideas for their own system.

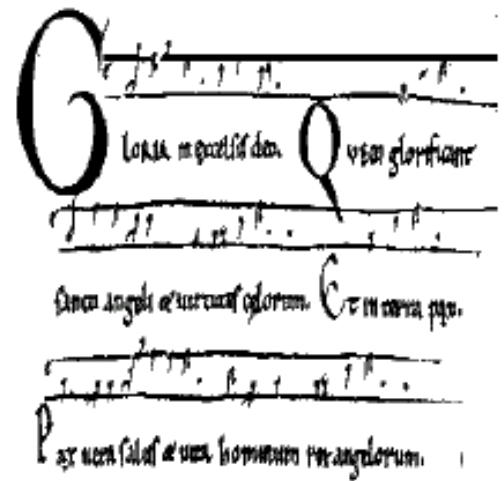
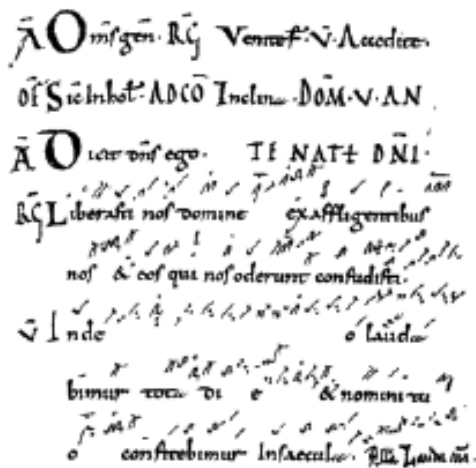
After a few hundred years, in addition to letter names for notes, a system of *neumes* (pronounced *nooms*, from the Greek word for *sign*) were invented. Neumes are signs written above the text of a song which show note length, pitch, and movement from one note to the next.

After a while, neumes began to be written on, above, or below a single line. The line represented a specific pitch. A neume written above the line was higher in pitch than a neume written below the line.

Around 1,000 AD many innovations in written music came to be. Though it isn't clear who invented them, *Guido di Arezzo* is given most of the credit. He was a Benedictine monk who was thrown out of his monastery for his radical innovations in music. It's believed that he didn't actually invent the staff, but increased the lines from two to four.

We're lucky he got kicked out of the monastery because it caused his ideas to be spread more widely. After he had an audience with the Pope who recognized Guido's skill, his monastery wanted him back.

Figure 1.4 LEFT: 9th Century manuscript with neumes written above text. RIGHT: 12th Century manuscript with two lines, neumes, and text.



Guido di Arezzo was definitely responsible for adding more lines to the staff, and he was also thought to have invented the *Guidonian Hand*, a system for singing together. He would point to specific places on his upraised hand which indicated a specific note. This allowed a large number of monks to sing together. The following example on the right shows the notes from low to high, starting with the thumb.

Figure 1.5 Two versions of the Guidonian Hand. Notice the 4-line staves on the left example.



Up until this time most music was *monophonic*, which means it had only one part, usually vocal. All of the musical examples which survive from this time come from the church. There *were* popular secular (non-religious) musicians around at the time, but they weren't writing down what they played and so there is almost no record of it.

An example of monophonic music is a type of song called a *plain chant*. Some of the first examples of written western music are plain chants. They sound more like inflection than singing and are still used in Roman Catholic churches today. Eventually all those monks got bored with singing one-line music and began to add other parts. Music was becoming more complex.

Music with more than one part is called *polyphonic* music. Polyphonic music soon became popular in the monasteries, but was difficult to write out.

Because polyphonic music is more complex than monophonic music, it was necessary to add more lines to show the other voices. This is where *Guido d'Arezzo* comes in. He expanded the staff to four lines. Soon after that a fifth line was added.

Over the next five hundred years, composers experimented with different systems of writing music. It was written in elaborate shapes and some times with a six-line staff. By about 1500 we arrived at a system which has remained nearly unchanged until today.

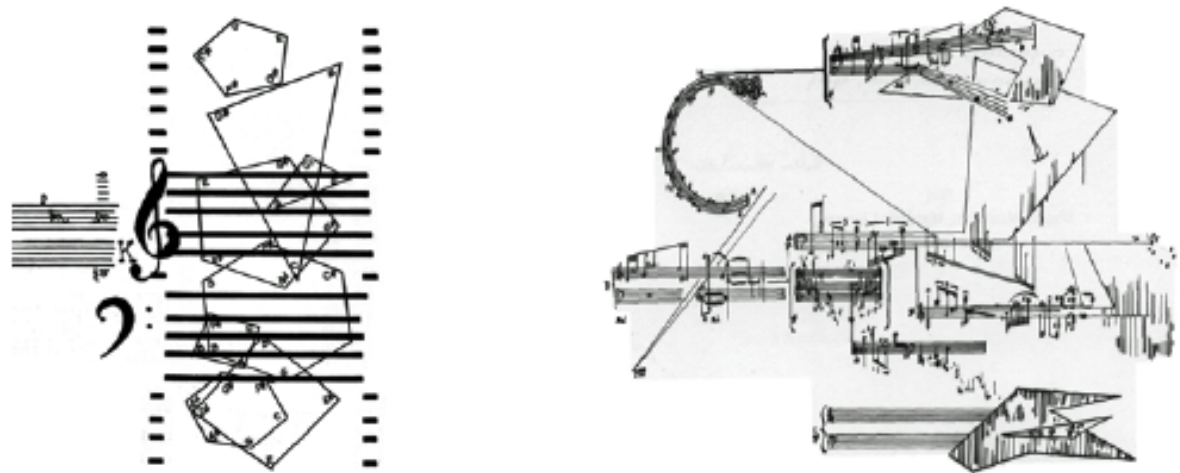
Figure 1.6 LEFT: 4-line staff. MIDDLE: Heart-shaped staff. RIGHT: 6-line staff.



The Future

The spirit of experimentation with written music still exists. Modern composers like John Cage or Stephen Reich use notation which is radically different from what you'll learn in this book.

Figure 1.7 LEFT: Part of John Cage's *Piano Concerto*. RIGHT: *Extension No. 1* by William R. Maginnis, 1964.



Music, like any language, evolves over time. Maybe in another thousand years we'll be reading music based on smells. Who knows? What do *you* think music will look like and sound like in another thousand years?

Basic Music Theory: How to Read, Write, and Understand Written Music

Published by Sol-Ut Press
A Music Education Business
www.sol-ut.com

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send E-mail regarding this book to BMT@QuestionsInk.com

LCCN: 2001086279

ISBN: 0-9707512-9-X

For general information about this book or Sol-Ut Press, visit our web site at www.QuestionsInk.com or www.sol-ut.com.

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication
(Provided by Quality Books, Inc.)

Harnum, Jonathan.

Basic music theory : how to read, write, and understand written music / Jonathan Harnum. -- 1st ed.

p. cm.
Includes index.
LCCN 2001086279
ISBN 0-9707512-9-X

1. Music Theory. 2. Conducting. 3. Musical notation. I. Title.

MT6.H37 2001

781
QBI01-700378