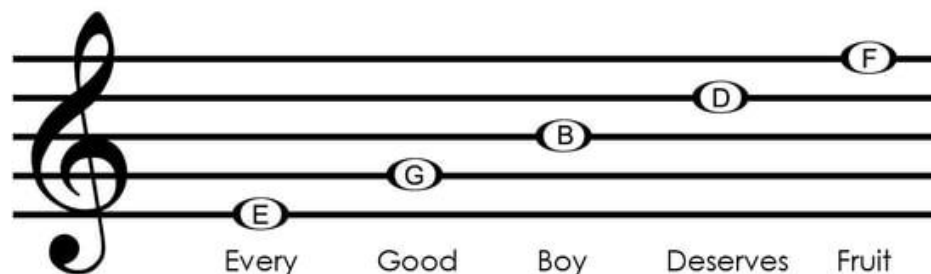


Why Good Boys Don't Deserve Fruit: Notation Reading and Understanding the Music Staff

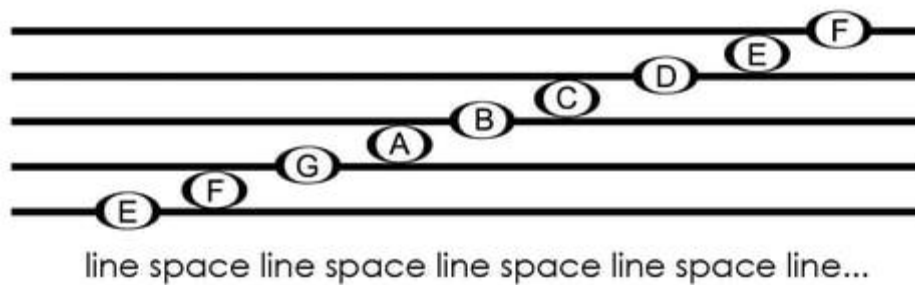
Michela A. Pinner | www.michelapinner.com.au | November, 2022



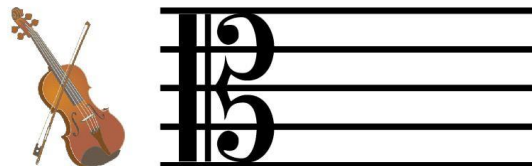
Nearly every child learning music in the last half century learned that “Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit”. Sometimes they “do fine” or “deserve fudge” but regardless, these are mnemonics for recalling the notes which appear on the lines of the treble music staff. A mnemonic is memory aid which can be used to support recall by associating new information with knowledge already stored in your long-term memory (Johnson & Weber, 2006, as cited in Gibson, 2009). A 2013 study of learning strategies from Dunlosky et al., found that use of mnemonics was of “low-utility” for learning. The “mnemonic [strategy] ...appears to benefit students for a limited number of materials and for short retention intervals” (Dunlosky et al., 2013). Another study from Putnam (2015) found that mnemonics “may not lead to long-term retention without support from other techniques, and may not work with complex material”. This highlights the true problem with mnemonics: *mnemonics make you feel like you know things for a short time, but they can actually inhibit true understanding and long-term retention of learning.*

Now, to apply mnemonics for reading music notation, rather than using the alphabet, learners must instead constantly count up the lines and spaces with abstract phrases in order to identify which letter it is. The learner must use this strategy over, and depend on the strategy. Mnemonics also presents a problem when the notes move beyond the staff on leger lines (as the mnemonic doesn't cover these notes) and the alphabet must be reverted to anyway yet the skill of using it forwards and backwards hasn't been reinforced.

Using mnemonics for reading music notation does not use the staff in the way it is designed: as a detailed picture of the sound to be produced. The notes of the music staff move on the staff as a representation of how the sound is moving higher and lower. This is especially relevant to students learning the piano, as the musical alphabet is already in place moving forwards from left to right up the white keys. This is brilliant for beginners as it correlates with the staff to use the pattern “line note, space note, line note, space note...” going up the staff, consist with the musical alphabet.

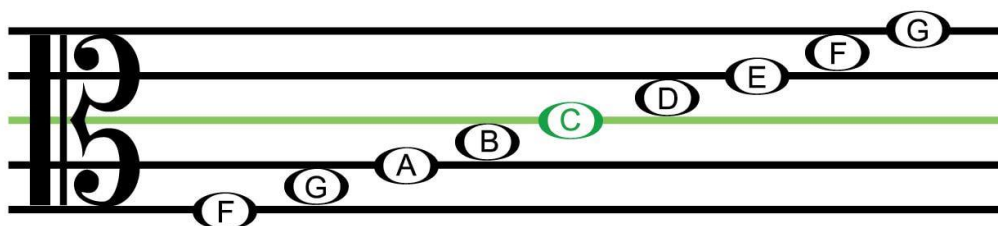


As an example of how directional reading works, we are going to learn to read the alto clef.



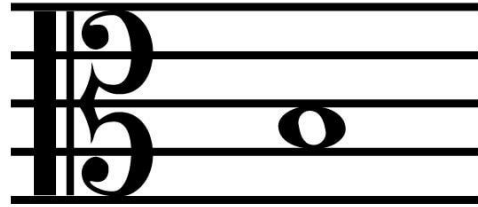
Unknown to many people, the alto clef is a real clef used for some instruments including the viola. It was originally used instead of treble clef to reduce the need for ledger lines when writing out the music for alto singers in choirs (who sing mainly around Middle-C range).

Alto clef has the note Middle-C placed on the middle line of the staff where the round parts of the clef shape meet. The musical alphabet moves up and down the staff in standard order, going from line note, to space note, to line, to space, line, space, line, space...



So, without looking at the above picture, let's work out some note names using the centre point C and the music alphabet.

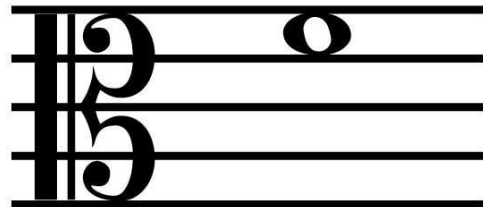
Can you identify what this note is?



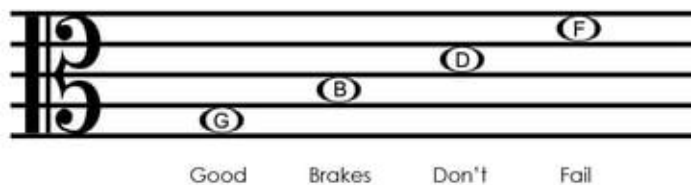
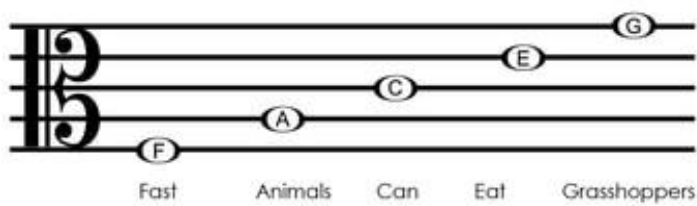
From C, go backwards 1 letter. One note below C = B

Now try this note:

Counting up from C it's 4 notes higher: line, space, line, space, CDEF, the interval of a 4th = F.

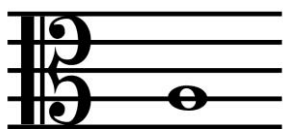


Now, if we to use mnemonics for reading the alto clef we could make up something like “Fast Animals Can Eat Grasshoppers” for the lines, and “Good Brakes Don’t Fail” for the spaces.



So, now, by remembering these mnemonics (and not just by looking at the above diagrams!), let's work out some alto note names.

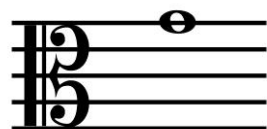
Try naming this note using our new mnemonics:



Your thinking will likely go something like this:

“Right, it’s on a line so I need the line note one. What was that again?” (you check the previous paragraph) “Yes, right now, Fast Animals Can Eat Grasshoppers... got it, it’s A.”

Now try this one:



Your thinking may have unfolded: “Right, it’s on a line again so I need the line note one. I remember, Fast Animals Eat Grasshoppers... hang on that’s not right. Fast Animals Can Eat Grasshoppers. It’s G.”

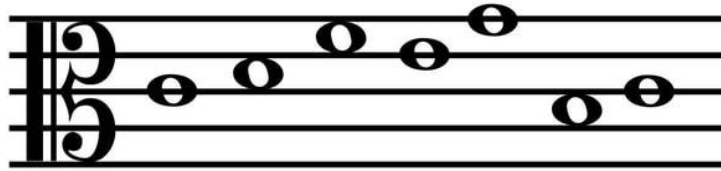
Now try this note using the space mnemonics:



Remember that you haven’t learned that middle C is the middle line; you need to use the mnemonic: “Okay right. What was it again? (you check up the previous paragraph to remember what it was). Good Brakes Don’t Fail. Good Brakes Don’t... it’s D.”

A common problem for students using mnemonics is that they cannot remember the mnemonic correctly or even use the wrong mnemonic. This is even more the case for piano students who are often introduced to 2 different clefs at the same time, giving them 4 different mnemonics to remember!

Furthermore, you must remember that when we read music we don't just identify one single note; we play collections of notes in musical sentences (phrases). The notes on the staff *look like* the sound being played. So try naming these notes using our directional approach:



Just imagine trying to work out each note using the mnemonics instead... very slow and quite meaningless to the picture of the sound that is being portrayed. The intervals between the notes on the staff show how far apart the sounds are in the music and therefore determine what the “tune” sounds like. The correct answer is CDFEGBC if you wanted to check.

In conclusion, compared to mnemonics, it is much more coherent to use the alphabet (which has likely been memorised in early childhood) and apply that directionally like a number line to the lines and spaces of the staff. As previously mentioned, this is especially the case with piano students as the piano keyboard provides a clear way to visual alphabet moving forwards and backwards. Moving backwards is obviously a lot more challenging as that's not something we've learned in school, but it connects more easily to our prior knowledge than a random mnemonics. Mnemonics often seem very simple to adults teaching them to a young student because the adult has been teaching/using them for such a long time. In reality for the student however, it's very new information that doesn't connect well with their prior knowledge. Even whilst writing this article across the span of a few weeks, I failed to remember the mnemonics that I had made for the alto clef and had to keep checking what they were...

A true understanding of how the staff works allows students to begin to “hear” what is being represented on the page. It gives them the skills to read and *understand* written music notation in a way that mnemonics cannot.

References

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