The Singers Guide to Reading Music.

Written for Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir, by Philip Gibbs.

The **OWMVC** don't audition prospective members and there isn't a requirement for choristers to be able to read music. This is because singing is natural and it is presumed that if you like singing, you probably have some degree of musicality. However, it can be useful to be able to understand what some of the symbols mean as it facilitates a more efficient learning process and it will be easier to understand what is meant if Helen tells you *"watch that F sharp in the 2nd time bar",* or uses some other technical term.

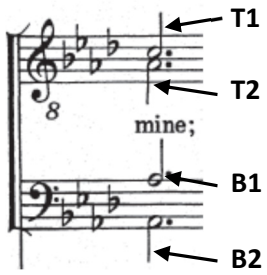
READING MUSIC is not as scary as it sounds. It's not about seeing a dot on a page and being able to pitch it automatically – that's "sight reading", which is a very different skill. Mostly, you just need to know these terms so you have the names for things that are being referred to, but this guide will try to point out a few things that will actually help your understanding of what the music is doing, and help your singing.

If your eyes have already glazed over and if you do nothing else, skip to the last page and try to understand the bit about "Repeat Marks" – otherwise you will be forever getting lost.

So let's start at the beginning as it's a very good place to start.

The Staff / Staves

These are the sets of 5 lines where the notes are shown. For our pieces they are usually presented in twos or fours.

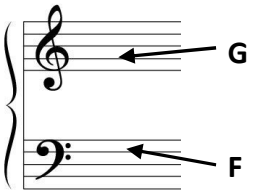


In twos, Top Tenor (T1) & Second Tenor (T2) would share the top staff and Baritones (B1) & Basses (B2) would share the bottom staff. In fours, the sections get a staff each – T1 at the top, then T2, then B1 and B2 at the bottom.
This presentation is called the **Grand Staff**, or a **System** for more staves.

Notice the two different signs within the lines and spaces? These are called Clefs, and the top one is called the **Treble Clef**, and the bottom one is called the **Bass Clef**.

The Clefs

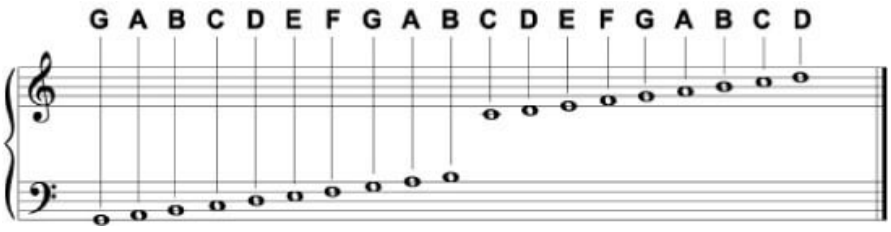
The two most common clefs are the **Treble Clef** (G Clef) and the **Bass Clef** (F Clef).



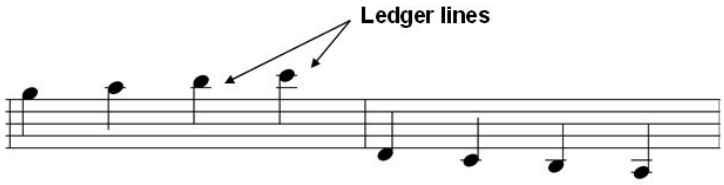
The notes in the **Treble Clef** (G Clef) are the middle and high notes. This clef shows where "**G**" is positioned on the staff – it's the second line from the bottom.

The notes in the **Bass Clef** are the middle and low notes. This clef shows where "**F**" is positioned on the staff – it's the second line from the top, in between the two dots.

All other notes are positioned on the staff relative to these notes.

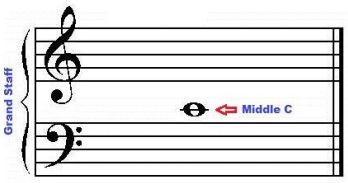


However, these aren't the only notes. They can extend above or below the staff but then you need help to work out how high or low they are; so someone invented Ledger lines.



Ledger Lines are lines for notes that occur outside of the normal range for the staff. They are in both the Treble and Bass Clefs, and you'll only see them when the piece requires you to sing notes that are above or below the staff.

One of the most common notes that we all learn in the beginning that is actually on a ledger line, is Middle C. Knowing where this is just makes it easier to navigate a keyboard. The black notes on a piano are arranged in twos and threes. You'll see there's a pair of black notes right in the centre and the white note just to the left of them is "Middle C". Take a look at where it is on the ledger lines here.



IMPORTANT.

At this point we need to explain something that's a bit strange. That's not a middle C for our Tenors. We all know that Tenors are a bit special and need to be different. Consequently, you chaps actually sing the notes you see an octave lower than the notation suggests. You may have noticed "*8va*" written next to your staff in some (but not all) copies of music (sometimes it's a small 8 below the treble clef). This is what it means. So your middle C is really the second space down from the top (or 3rd space up from the bottom, it doesn't matter).

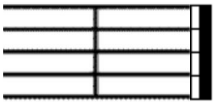
There are still more notes to contend with; Sharps ♯ and Flats ♭ (sometimes referred to as accidentals). These change the note they're next to by a semi-tone – up for a sharp and down for a flat. They are the black keys on a piano and if you look at one, you'll see that you could reach it by going up from one side, or down from the other. So, for instance, a G sharp is the same as an A flat. There's a number of equivalents, shown below. The reason you use one name instead of another is purely down to the key that the music is written in.

A#	same note as	Bb
B	same note as	Cb
B#	same note as	C (natural)
C#	same note as	Db
D#	same note as	Eb
E	same note as	Fb
E#	same note as	F
F#	same note as	Gb
G#	same note as	Ab

What's a semi-tone? I hear you say. Well it's half a tone – obviously! There are eight notes in an octave and if you've been singing for a while you will probably find that you can instinctively sing a scale starting from any note (i.e. in any key). The semi-tones are the halfway steps between these notes. (Some pairs of notes can't have halfway-steps between them because the interval is already a semi-tone – but I won't confuse you this early so let's move on).

One of the benefits of the old Tonic Sol-fa system of teaching music was that novices could learn a piece of music without needing to know what the note was called. Try singing Doh, Ray, Me, Fa, So, La, Tee, Doh, then do it again starting a bit higher or a bit lower. Without knowing it, you will have automatically sung the correct tonal intervals needed for those particular keys.

Bar Lines



These are the vertical lines that divide a staff into groups of notes to show the rhythm and beat of a piece of music. You will sometimes see a double line to indicate something has changed (key or timing, perhaps). A thin line followed by a thicker line indicates the end of the piece. *(Bars may also be referred to as measures – but I say that's what gets served in a bar.)*

Key Signatures

So maybe this is the time to talk about Keys, then. You can tell what key a piece of music is in by the Key signature at the beginning of the staff, after the clef symbol. Unless the piece is in C major (or A minor, but let's not complicate things), there will be a pattern of sharps or flats which tell you that all the notes on those lines in this piece are sharps or flats.



The left example has a sharp on the F line. That means it's in the key of G major. This guide isn't intended to cover all the complexities of the different keys, and you don't really need to know what they are. However, if you're interested, rather than learning what every pattern is called you can usually tell what the keys are. For the sharps, the key note (your "Doh") is the note above the line with the most extreme right sharp. For flats, the key is the note of the line with the penultimate flat from the right (so the right hand example is A flat).



Or you could just look at the "circle of fifths" graphic on the back of your afterglow books. You'll see that also has minor keys shown – but they're for another day.

In practise, this really doesn't matter to a singer because, as I said, you will naturally sing the right note anyway because your brain will attune to the key the piano is playing.

However, it's something you should be aware of because if you see this signature pattern change midway through a piece, it means the key has changed and you should let your brain attune to the new notes.



In this example, there's a double bar line to indicate a change and then two "natural" ♮ signs where the flats were in the preceding bars. The key is changing from B flat to C and you will usually hear the piano modulating to the new key by progressing through other keys.

You will come across sharps ♯ , flats ♭ and naturals ♮ in the body of the music (strictly speaking, only here are they called accidentals). These will modify what you've been told by the key signature but only last for the remainder of the bar in which they appear.

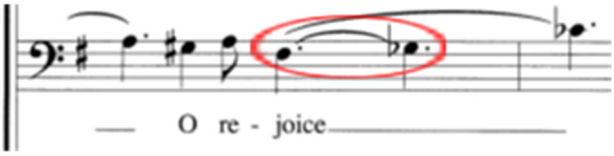
IMPORTANT.

Having said you don't need to worry about this too much because you will naturally sing in the right key. When you're looking at the dots on the page you can sometimes be tempted to sing the wrong note because it looks like it's on a different line, therefore you think it must be a whole tone different. Not necessarily the case! It might just be half a tone different or a tone and a half, depending on what was shown in the key signature. It can sometimes be helpful to write the relevant signs in next to critical intervals (but use a PENCIL).

In the example below, which is in the key of D (C# and F#), the G is now sharpened so you have to sing higher than you probably expected to.



The Easter Hymn is in G, so the F for "*-joice*" is sharp, but then there's a flattened G which you'll recall from page 2 is the same as an F sharp. Although the dot is on a higher line, you don't actually change pitch!



Note and Rest lengths


Semibreve – 4 beats

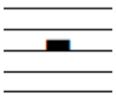

Minim – 2 beats


Crotchet – 1 beat


Quaver – ½ beat


Semi-quaver – ¼ beat


4 beats rest

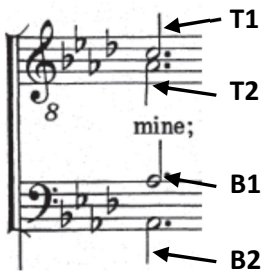

2 beats rest



1 beat rest


½ beat rest

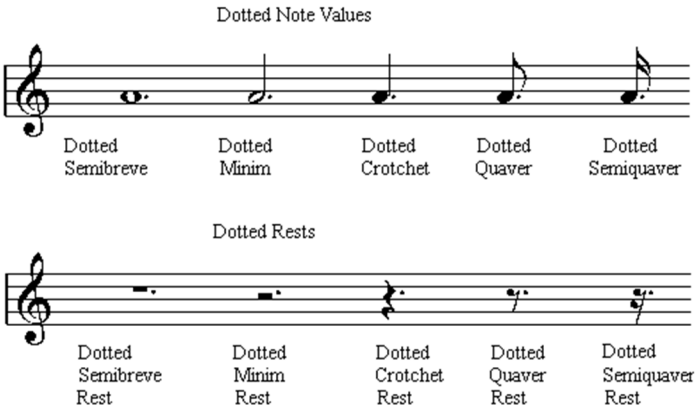

¼ beat rest



The tails on the notes can point up or down, depending on whether they might protrude too far from the staff. However, in our music, where two voice parts might share the same staff, the usual convention is that the tails point **upwards** for the higher voice and **downwards** for the lower voice.

Dotted notes

A dot after a note or a rest indicates that its length should be increased by half. For instance, a normal crotchet is equivalent to two quavers but a dotted crotchet is equivalent to three quavers. Or, a minim is two crotchets but a dotted minim is three crotchets. Got it?



Triplet  When you see a triplet, the three notes shown actually take the time of two of that note value. (try saying "pineapple" and you should get the rhythm).

Slurs  Slurs are used to denote that the notes should be elided together

Ties  Ties literally tie the two notes together to extend their value, so you sing them together.

Phrasing  Phrase marks are used to show how the music should flow. You wouldn't normally breath within a phrase.

Time Signature

Following the key signature is the **Time Signature**. It's the two numbers that look like a fraction (but it's not).



The top number tells you how many beats are in each bar.
The bottom number tells you what kind of beat they are: **2 = Minim, 4 = Crotchet, 8 = Quaver.**

In this example, each bar has 4 beats, and the beats are made up of crotchets.

4:4 is also known as "Common time" and can be shown as a stylised **C** instead of numbers: 

Examples of other time signatures might be as follows:



3 crotchet beats per bar



4 minim beats per bar



6 quaver beats per bar

Counting

Helen is there to lead the beat and control the speed of the music. She will usually indicate when you should start and stop singing too, but not always – she only has two hands! So if you really want to show off, then it's worth counting the beat yourself – especially when there are long rests before you come in, or if you have to hold a note for any length of time.

If there are several bars of rests that you need to count, you could count the total number of beats but the more "correct" way would be to count the beat for each bar separately but restarting the count with the bar number. So, if you have 4 bars of 4 beats each then you count "1 2 3 4, 2 2 3 4, 3 2 3 4, 4 2 3 4".

It can be difficult to work out the rhythm sometimes so it can be helpful to write in the count. When there's a note or rest lasting less than a whole beat value, you have to get creative. Put an "and" for the half beats and an "a" for the quarter beats. So *Yfory,* which is in 4:4*,* might look like this:



Dynamics

This is essentially how quiet or loud something should be sung in order to evoke the intended feeling of the piece. They usually appear at several places through a piece of music as the shape and drama unfolds.

pp	**Pianissimo**	Sing as quietly as you can without whispering. You should be barely audible – the sum of everyone singing will be heard.
p	**Piano**	A little louder than pp but don't over-do it!
mp	**Mezzo-piano**	"Moderately Piano" - perhaps a "normal" indoor speaking voice
mf	**Mezzo-forte**	"Moderately Forte" – Close to an outdoor speaking voice
f	**Forte**	Forte means Strong, so give it a bit of effort – make yourself heard.
ff	**Fortissimo**	This is pretty much all you can give – a lot of "welly", but no shouting! But if you see ***fff*** give even more!

Crescendo



Gradually get louder through the hairpin.

Decrescendo (or **"Diminuendo"**)



Gradually get softer through the hairpin

Tempo (speed)

At the beginning of a piece you might see Italian or French words such as ***Lento*** (slow), **Andante** (moderate) or ***Allegro*** (quick) or you might see something like ♩ = 60, meaning 60 crotchet beats in a minute.

We don't normally need to worry about this as Helen sets the speed.

However, the pace of the piece can change through it and so you should lookout for terms such as:

Accelerando (*Accel.*)	Get faster
Rallentando (*Rall.*) or Ritardando (*Rit.*)	Get slower
A Tempo	Back to original speed

Others Signs

There are many other marks but this wasn't intended to teach you Grade 5 Music Theory.

Some to watch for, though, include:

𝄐 **Pause** (or hold). Can be applied to notes or rests. Helen would control how long it is held for.



Staccato (a dot immediately above or below a note) – Sing each note "detached" from the other. The opposite to ***Legato*** (which means smooth).

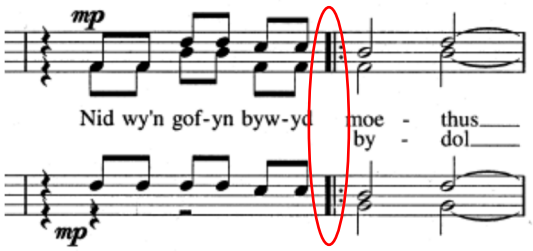


D.S. **Dal Segno** – Go back to the sign. 𝄋 The sign that you go back to (sorry – to which you go back).

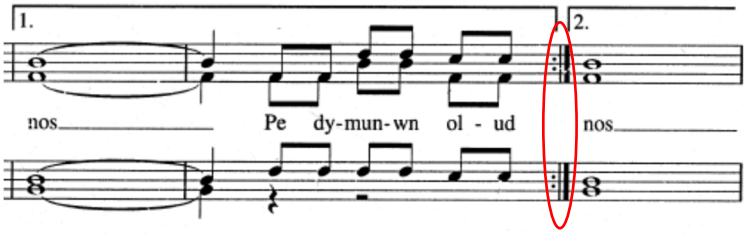
Repeat Marks

If you forget everything else, at least try to remember these. The first time you see a 𝄆 sing past it but put your thumb in that page. Then look for a similar sign facing the opposite direction 𝄇 That means go back to the first sign and sing from there again. However, when you reach the second sign again, either sing through it or obey the 1st / 2nd time bar instructions.

To use *Pokarekare Ana* as an example. You see the first mark almost right at the beginning.



Just carry on until you see the second mark facing the opposite way.



You'll see that there are 1st and 2nd time bars marked here. So the first time you get here, after "nos" you sing "Pe dymunwyn olud" and then back to sing "bydol" at the top. You carry on (in this case singing the second verse) but then when you get the horizontal square bracket with number 1 next to it, you ignore it and jump to the bracket with number 2, as you're doing it the second time. So you just sing "nos" and then go on to the third verse. Simples!

Please do try to get your head around this. If you've been singing for more than a couple of years it's not unreasonable to expect you to have mastered some of the basics to make your life easier. I hope this is useful and helps you achieve that. If you have any questions or you think I've missed anything please let me know so I can add it into the next edition. Equally, let me know if anything is confusing or too technical.

Philip Gibbs – February 2019.

(Edits July 2020).