

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT for the ARTS

And the National Alliance for Musical Theatre



MUSICAL THEATER
SONGWRITING
CHALLENGE

In collaboration with Concord Theatricals, Disney Theatrical Productions,
and NMPA S.O.N.G.S. Foundation

MODULE 5: MUSIC NOTATION

How do you translate your music onto the page?
Music notation is the key to communicating your ideas clearly.
Take the first steps in reading, writing and formatting sheet
music so your song can truly sing.

WHAT IS MUSIC NOTATION?

The system of writing down music using **symbols** to represent pitch, rhythm, dynamics and articulation. This typically refers to standard notation (staff notation), but can include alternative systems, like tablature for guitar.

WHAT IS SHEET MUSIC?

A printed or digital version of the notation for a musical composition. It can range from being for a single instrument to a full orchestral score.

TYPES OF SHEET MUSIC



LEAD SHEET: Simplified sheet music that includes the **melody**, **lyrics** and **chord symbols**. It does not have full accompaniment and is commonly used in jazz, pop and contemporary music for improvisation or quick reference.

PIANO/VOCAL: Sheet music that includes the **vocal melody**, **lyrics** and a **fully notated piano accompaniment**. Often used for musical theater, pop songs, and choral arrangements where the piano supports the singer. The term “**Piano/Conductor**” is sometimes used interchangeably with “Piano/Vocal” but the former typically contains additional information such as when other instruments enter.

CHARTS: A blanket term for sheet music, but is most often used when talking about parts for individual instruments. (e.g. “Violin,” “Piano/Vocal,” “Guitar,” “Bass,” “Drums,” etc.)

FULL SCORE: Sheet music that includes **all instrumental** and **vocal parts on separate staves**. Used by conductors and composers to oversee complex arrangements, such as orchestral, choir or musical theater scores.

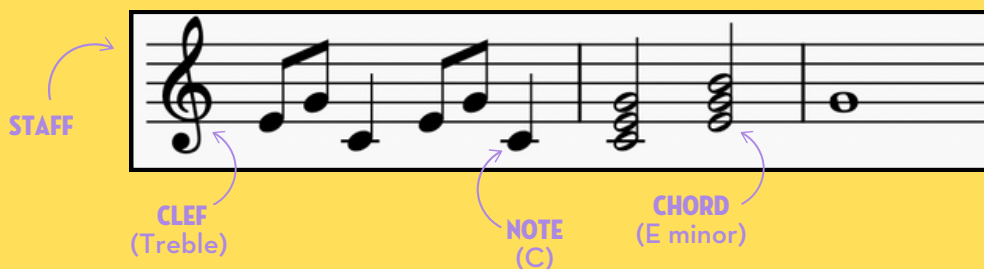
SYMBOLS IN SHEET MUSIC

STAFF (or STAVES): A set of five horizontal lines and four spaces where musical notes and symbols are written. Provides a visual framework for pitch and rhythm.

CLEF: A symbol placed at the beginning of the staff to indicate the pitch range of the notes.

NOTE: A symbol that represents a musical sound (pitch) on the staff. Notes have different shapes (whole, half, quarter, etc.) to indicate their duration. Their position on the staff determines their pitch.

CHORD: A group of 3 or more notes played together or in sequence. Chords provide harmony and structure to music.



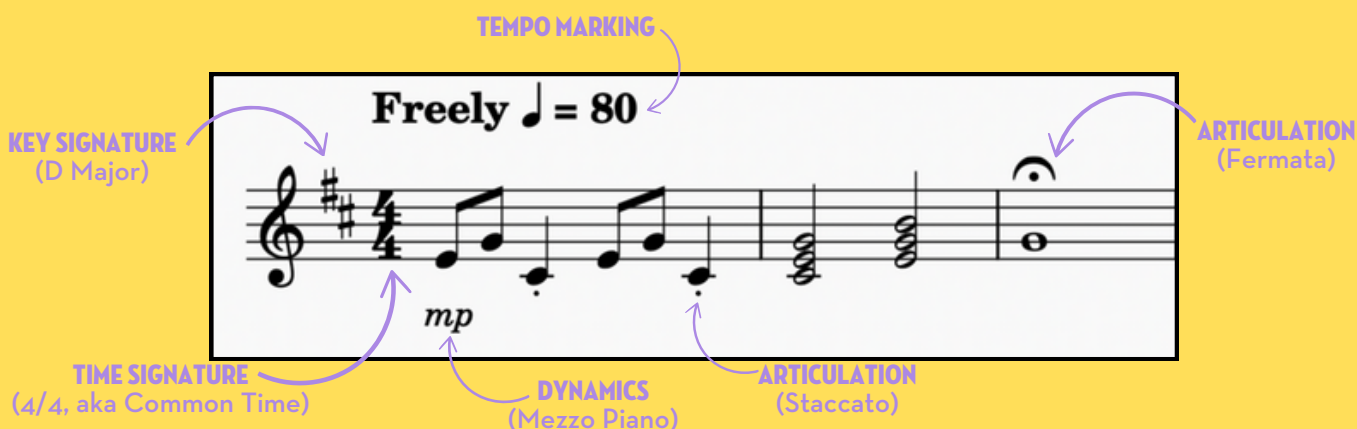
TIME SIGNATURE: Indicates the number of notes in each measure.

KEY SIGNATURE: Tells us what key we are in.

TEMPO MARKING: The speed at which a song or section of a song is to be played. This is also a great place to indicate the intention or emotion for a song or section of a song (i.g. “Freely” or “With Gusto”, etc.). There are also tempo modifiers (accelerando, ritardando, a tempo, etc.)

DYNAMICS: How loud or soft any given note or series of notes is to be played (*p*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, etc)

NOTE ARTICULATION: The quality in which a note is to be played (short, accented, etc)



WHERE TO GO FOR MORE MUSIC THEORY LEARNING

[Learn Music Theory in Half an Hour](#)
[Music Theory Fundamentals: YouTube Playlist](#)
[MuseScore YouTube Tutorial Playlist](#)

SYMBOLS IN SHEET MUSIC

Let's look at all of these symbols in context.

Can you identify the following symbols on this sheet music? (Answers on page 6)

- Staff
- Clef
- Notes
- Chords
- Time Signature
- Key Signature
- Tempo Marking
- Dynamics

Piano-Conductor

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO DROWN?

from the musical THE PELICAN
Rev. 2025-01-21

5

Music by DYLAN GLATTHORN
Lyrics by DYLAN GLATTHORN and WILL LACKER
Orch. by Dylan Glatthorn

CUE: "Good old Zeph."

With Brooding Motion ♩ = 140

5

— in the wa - ter. I was born with my toes — in the sand. And the tide has been ri -

Bonus: What type of sheet music is this?

HOW TO GET STARTED WITH NOTATION

BY HAND

You can notate your songs by hand using staff paper

[Printable staff paper](#): Choose staff paper for piano, guitar, percussion, treble, bass and alto clef. Press the blue “Print” button.

[Printable staff paper \(customizable option\)](#): Customize the staff by clef or instrument by using the menu on the top, and then print using the button on the left-hand menu.

You can purchase staff paper notebooks at most music stores or on [Amazon](#).

NOTATION SOFTWARE

There are lots of digital tools to create and edit sheet music online

[MuseScore](#): a free software that’s user-friendly and great for beginners. Check out this [YouTube playlist](#) for tutorials on getting started.

[Dorico](#): a software with more advanced features; especially useful for larger compositions. You can download a [free version](#) (Dorico SE). As a student, you can get great [discounts](#) on Dorico. [Compare](#) versions and see what is right for you!

[Sibelius](#): a software with more advanced features; especially helpful for collaboration. You can download a [free version](#).

APPS

Songwriting tools at your fingertips

[Voice Memos](#): record voice notes (free, Apple)

[Voice Recorder](#): record voice notes (free, Android)

[Pro Metronome](#): metronome app (free version, Apple)

[Pro Metronome](#): metronome app (free version, Android)

[Tiny Piano](#): keyboard app (free, Apple)

[Mini Piano Lite](#): keyboard app (free, Android)

[Tenuto](#): music theory exercises and practice (\$4.99, Apple)

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KEY SIGNATURE (A Major)

CUE: "Good old Zeph."

CLEF (Treble)

STAFF

With Brooding Motion ♩ = 140 → **TEMPO MARKING**

TIME SIGNATURE (4/4, aka Common Time)

NOTES (E)

CHORDS (This one is A Major)

DYNAMICS (Mezzo Piano) *mp*

CLEF (Bass)

CHORD SYMBOL → A

I was born with my feet
 in the wa - ter. I was born with my toes in the sand. And the tide has been ri -

A Asus2 A Dm/A A Asus2

Bonus: What type of sheet music is this?
PIANO/VOCAL (PIANO/CONDUCTOR)