List of musical symbols

Here is a pretty comprehensive list of musical symbols and what they mean. The following list is almost entirely taken from Wikipedia - List of musical symbols. I have simplified it a bit here but if you want to know more- that is a great place to start as it is really comprehensive. As with all these handouts- feel free to ask me about anything that you need explaining during the lessons!

**Musical symbols** are the marks and symbols, used since about the 13th century in the musical notation of musical scores, styles, and instruments to describe pitch, rhythm, tempo – and, to some degree, its articulation (e.g., a composition in its fundamentals).

### Lines

#### Staff
Or Stave. The five lines on which notes are written. The higher on the lines, the higher the pitch.

#### Ledger or leger lines
These extend the staff to pitches that fall above or below it. Multiple ledger lines can be used when necessary to notate pitches even farther above or below the staff.

#### Bar line
These separate measures or bars to make it easier count music.

#### Double bar line, Double barline
These separate two sections of music or are placed before a change in key signature.

#### Bold double bar line, Bold double barline
These indicate the conclusion of a movement or an entire composition.
Bracket
Connects two or more lines of music that sound simultaneously.

Brace
Connects two or more lines of music that are played simultaneously in keyboard, harp, or some pitched percussion music.
Clefs And Tab

Clefs define the pitch range of the staff on which it is placed. A clef is usually the leftmost symbol on a staff. Additional clefs may appear in the middle of a staff to indicate a change in register for instruments with a wide range. In early music, clefs could be placed on any of several lines on a staff.

G clef (Treble clef)
The centre of the spiral defines the line or space on which it rests as the pitch G above middle C, or approximately 392 Hz. Positioned here, it assigns G above middle C to the second line from the bottom of the staff, and is referred to as the "treble clef." This is the most commonly encountered clef in modern notation, and is used for most modern vocal music. Middle C is the first ledger line below the staff here. The shape of the clef comes from a stylised upper-case-G.

F clef (Bass clef)
The line or space between the dots in this clef denotes F below middle C, or approximately 175 Hz. Positioned here, it makes the second line from the top of the staff F below middle C, and is called a "bass clef." This clef appears nearly as often as the treble clef, especially in choral music, where it represents the bass and baritone voices. Middle C is the first ledger line above the staff here. The shape of the clef comes from a stylised upper-case F (which used to be written the reverse of the modern F).

Neutral clef
Used for pitchless instruments, such as some of those used for percussion. Each line can represent a specific percussion instrument within a set, such as in a drum set. Two different styles of neutral clefs are pictured here. It may also be drawn with a separate single-line staff for each untuned percussion instrument.
Treble and bass clefs can also be modified by octave numbers. An eight or fifteen above a clef raises the intended pitch range by one or two octaves respectively. Similarly, an eight or fifteen below a clef lowers the pitch range by one or two octaves respectively. A treble clef with an eight below is the most commonly used, typically used for guitar and similar instruments.

Tablature
For stringed instruments it is possible to notate tablature in place of ordinary notes. In this case, a TAB sign is often written instead of a clef. The number of lines of the staff is not necessarily five: one line is used for each string of the instrument (so, for standard 6-stringed guitars, six lines would be used). Numbers on the lines show which fret to play the string on. This TAB sign, like the percussion clef, is not a clef in the true sense, but rather a symbol employed instead of a clef. Similarly, the horizontal lines do not constitute a staff in the usual sense, because the spaces between the lines in a tablature are never used.
Notes and rests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note</th>
<th>British name / American name</th>
<th>Rest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semibreve / Whole note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minim / Half note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crotchet / Quarter note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quaver / Eighth note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semiquaver / Sixteenth note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demisemiquaver / Thirty-second note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For notes of this length and shorter, the note has the same number of flags (or hooks) as the rest has branches.
**Beamed notes**
Beams connect quavers and notes of shorter value. In metered music, beams reflect the rhythmic grouping of notes.

**Dotted note**
Placing a dot to the right of a note lengthens the note's duration by one-half. Additional dots lengthen the previous dot instead of the original note, thus a note with one dot is one and one half its original value, a note with two dots is one and three quarters. Rests can be dotted in the same manner as notes.

**Ghost note**
A note with a rhythmic value, but no discernible pitch when played. It is represented by an "X" for a note head instead of an oval.

**Multi-measure rest**
Indicates the number of measures in a resting part without a change in meter to conserve space and to simplify notation. Also called *gathered rest* or *multi bar rest*. 
Accidentals and key signatures

Common accidentals

**Accidentals** modify the pitch of the notes that follow them on the same staff position within a measure, unless cancelled by an additional accidental.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flat</th>
<th>Lowers the pitch of a note by one <strong>semitone</strong>.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharp</td>
<td>Raises the pitch of a note by one semitone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>Cancels a previous accidental, or modifies the pitch of a sharp or flat as defined by the key signature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double flat</td>
<td>Lowers the pitch of a note by two chromatic semitones. Usually used when the note to modify is already flattened by the key signature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double sharp</td>
<td>Raises the pitch of a note by two chromatic semitones. Usually used when the note to modify is already sharpened by the key signature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key signatures

Key signatures define the prevailing key of the music that follows, thus avoiding the use of accidentals for many notes. If no key signature appears, the key is assumed to be C major/A minor, but can also signify a neutral key, employing individual accidentals as required for each note. The key signature examples shown here are described as they would appear on a treble staff.

Flat key signature

*Lowers* by a semitone the pitch of notes on the corresponding line or space, and all octaves thereof, thus defining the prevailing major or minor key. Different keys are defined by the number of flats in the key signature, starting with the leftmost, i.e., $B_{\flat}$, and proceeding to the right; for example, if only the first two flats are used, the key is $B_{\flat}$ major/G minor, and all B's and E's are "flatted", i.e., lowered to $B_{\flat}$ and $E_{\flat}$.

Sharp key signature

*Raises* by a semitone the pitch of notes on the corresponding line or space, and all octaves thereof, thus defining the prevailing major or minor key. Different keys are defined by the number of sharps in the key signature, also proceeding from left to right; for example, if only the first four sharps are used, the key is $E$ major/C♯ minor, and the corresponding pitches are raised.

To work out a key signature quickly-

Look at the flats, take the second-most from the right and that is the key. So if there are 5 flats (from left to right)- B, E, A, D, G. The key is Db Major (or it’s relative minor).

If the key signature has sharps in, then we take the last sharp on the right (from left to right) and go up a letter. Eg, if there are 3 sharps- F, C, G. The key is A Major (or it’s relative minor).

Order of sharps-

Father Charles Goes Down And Ends Battle

Order of flats- (the above reversed!)

Battle Ends And Down Goes Charles’ Father
Time signatures

Time signatures define the meter of the music. Music is "marked off" in uniform sections called bars or measures, and time signatures establish the number of beats in each. This does not necessarily indicate which beats to emphasize, however. A time signature that conveys information about the way the piece actually sounds is thus chosen. Time signatures tend to suggest, but only suggest, prevailing groupings of beats or pulses.

**Specific time – simple time signatures**
The bottom number represents the note value of the basic pulse of the music (in this case the 4 represents the crotchet or quarter-note). The top number indicates how many of these note values appear in each measure. This example announces that each measure, or bar, is the equivalent length of three crotchets (quarter-notes). You would pronounce this as "Three Four Time", and was referred to as a "perfect" time.

![Simple Time Signature](image)

**Specific time – compound time signatures**
The bottom number represents the note value of the subdivisions of the basic pulse of the music (in this case the 8 represents the quaver or eighth-note). The top number indicates how many of these subdivisions appear in each measure. Usually each beat is composed of three subdivisions. To derive the unit of the basic pulse in compound meters, double this value and add a dot, and divide the top number by 3 to determine how many of these pulses there are each measure. This example announces that each measure is the equivalent length of two dotted crotchets (dotted quarter-notes). You would pronounce this as "Six Eight Time."

![Compound Time Signature](image)

**Common time**
This symbol is a throwback to fourteenth century rhythmic notation, when it represented 2/4, or "imperfect time". Today it represents 4/4.
**Alla breve or Cut time**
This symbol represents 2/2 time, indicating two minim (or half-note) beats per measure. Here, a crotchet (or quarter note) would get half a beat.

**Metronome mark**
Written at the start of a score, and at any significant change of tempo, this symbol precisely defines the tempo of the music. In this particular example, the performer is told that 120 crotchets, or quarter notes, fit into one minute of time.
Note relationships

**Tie**
Indicates that the two (or more) notes joined together are to be played as one note with the time values added together. To be a tie, the notes must be identical – that is, they must be on the same line or the same space. Otherwise, it is a slur (see below).

**Slur**
Indicates to play two or more notes in one physical stroke, one uninterrupted breath, or (on instruments with neither breath nor bow) connected into a phrase as if played in a single breath. In certain contexts, a slur may only indicate to play the notes *legato*.

Slurs and ties are similar in appearance. A tie is distinguishable because it always joins exactly two immediately adjacent notes of the same pitch, whereas a slur may join any number of notes of varying pitches.

A *phrase mark* (or less commonly, *ligature*) is a mark that is visually identical to a slur, but connects a passage of music over several measures. A phrase mark indicates a musical phrase and may not necessarily require that the music be slurred. In vocal music, a phrase mark usually shows how to sing each syllable in the lyrics.

**Glissando or Portamento**
A continuous, unbroken glide from one note to the next that includes the pitches between. Some instruments, such as the trombone, timpani, non-fretted string instruments, electronic instruments, and the human voice can make this glide continuously (portamento), while other instruments such as the piano or mallet instruments blur the discrete pitches between the start and end notes to mimic a continuous slide (glissando).

**Tuplet**
A number of notes of irregular duration are performed within the duration of a given number of notes of regular time value; e.g., five notes played in the normal duration of four notes; seven notes played in the normal duration of two; three notes played in the normal duration of four. Tuplets are named according to the number of irregular notes; e.g., duplets, triplets, quadruplets etc.
**Chord**
Several notes sounded simultaneously ("solid" or "block"), or in succession ("broken"). Two-note chords are called **dyad**; three-note chords are called **triads**. A chord may contain any number of notes.

**Arpeggiated chord**
A chord with notes played in rapid succession, usually ascending, each note being sustained as the others are played. It is also called a "broken chord".
Dynamics

Dynamics are indicators of the relative intensity or volume of a musical line.

**Pianissimo**
Very soft. Usually the softest indication in a piece of music, though softer dynamics are often specified with additional p's.

**Piano**
Soft; louder than pianissimo.

**Mezzo piano**
Moderately soft; louder than piano.

**Mezzo forte**
Moderately loud; softer than forte. If no dynamic appears, mezzo-forte is assumed to be the prevailing dynamic level.

**Forte**
Loud. Used as often as piano to indicate contrast.

**Fortissimo**
Very loud. Usually the loudest indication in a piece, though louder dynamics are often specified with additional fs

**Crescendo**
A gradual increase in volume.
Can be extended under many notes to indicate that the volume steadily increases during the passage.

**Diminuendo**
Also decrescendo
A gradual decrease in volume. Can be extended in the same manner as crescendo.
Articulation marks

Articulations (or accents) specify how to perform individual notes within a phrase or passage. They can be fine-tuned by combining more than one such symbol over or under a note. They may also appear in conjunction with phrasing marks listed above.

- **Staccato**
  This indicates the musician should *play the note shorter than notated*, usually half the value, the rest of the metric value is then silent. Staccato marks may appear on notes of any value, shortening their performed duration without speeding the music itself.

- **Staccatissimo** or **Spiccato**
  Indicates a *longer silence after the note* (as described above), making the note very short. Usually applied to quarter notes or shorter. (In the past, this marking’s meaning was more ambiguous: it sometimes was used interchangeably with staccato, and sometimes indicated an accent and not staccato. These usages are now almost defunct, but still appear in some scores.) In string instruments this indicates a bowing technique in which the bow bounces lightly upon the string.

- **Accent**
  Play the note louder, or with a harder attack than surrounding unaccented notes. May appear on notes of any duration.

- **Fermata (Pause)**
  A note, chord, or rest sustained longer than its customary value. Usually appears over all parts at the same metrical location in a piece, to show a halt in tempo. It can be placed above or below the note. The fermata is held for as long as the performer or conductor desires.

- **Up Stroke**
  On a plucked string instrument played with a plectrum or pick (such as a guitar played pickstyle or a mandolin), the note is played with an upstroke.
On a plucked string instrument played with a plectrum or pick (such as a guitar played pickstyle or a mandolin), the note is played with a downstroke.
Ornaments modify the pitch pattern of individual notes.

**Trill**
A rapid alternation between the specified note and the next higher note (according to key signature) within its duration. Trills can begin on either the specified root note or the upper auxiliary note, though the latter is more prevalent in modern performances.

**Mordent**
Rapidly play the principal note, the next higher note (according to key signature) then return to the principal note for the remaining duration. In most music, the mordent begins on the auxiliary note, and the alternation between the two notes may be extended.

**Mordent (inverted)**
Rapidly play the principal note, the note below it, then return to the principal note for the remaining duration. In much music, the mordent begins on the auxiliary note, and the alternation between the two notes may be extended.
Octave signs

The 8va (pronounced ottava alta) sign is placed above the staff (as shown) to tell the musician to play the passage one octave higher.

An 8va or, as alternative in modern music, an 8vb sign (both signs reading ottava bassa) is placed below the staff mean play the passage one octave lower. [4][5]
Repetition and codas

**Tremolo**
A rapidly repeated note. If the tremolo is between two notes, then they are played in rapid alternation. The number of slashes through the stem (or number of diagonal bars between two notes) indicates the frequency to repeat (or alternate the note. As shown here, the note is to be repeated at a demisemiquaver (thirty-second note) rate.

**Repeat signs**
Enclose a passage that is to be played more than once. If there is no left repeat sign, the right repeat sign sends the performer back to the start of the piece or the nearest double bar.

**Simile marks**
Denote that preceding groups of beats or measures are to be repeated. In the examples here, the first usually means to repeat the previous measure (or bar), and the second usually means to repeat the previous two measures.

**Volta brackets (1st and 2nd endings, or 1st- and 2nd-time bars)**
A repeated passage is to be played with different endings on different playings; it is possible to have more than two endings (1st, 2nd, 3rd ...).

**Da capo**
(lit. "From top") Tells the performer to repeat playing of the music from its beginning. This is usually followed by *al fine* (lit. "to the end"), which means to repeat to the word *fine* and stop, or *al coda* (lit. "to the coda (sign)"), which means repeat to the coda sign and then jump forward.

**Dal segno**
(lit. "From the sign") Tells the performer to repeat playing of the music starting at the nearest *segno*. This is followed by *al fine* or *al coda* just as with *da capo*.

**Segno**
Mark used with *dal segno*. 
**Coda**
Indicates a forward jump in the music to its ending passage, marked with the same sign. Only used after playing through a *D.S. al coda* (Dal segno al coda) or *D.C. al coda* (Da capo al coda).
**Instrument-specific notation**

**Guitar**
The guitar has a *fingerpicking* notation system derived from the names of the fingers in Spanish or Latin. They are written above, below, or beside the note to which they are attached. They read as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>pulgar</td>
<td>pollex</td>
<td>thumb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>índice</td>
<td>index</td>
<td>index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>medio</td>
<td>media</td>
<td>middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>anular</td>
<td>anularis</td>
<td>ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c, x, e, q</td>
<td>meñique</td>
<td>minimus</td>
<td>little</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>