Learn How to Play

Piano / Keyboard

For

Absolute Beginners

A Self Tuition Book

For Adults and Teenagers!

Martin Woodward

ISBN:

Enquires: http://gonkmusic.com

Acknowledgements

To all the fantastic musicians who I've had the privilege of working with back in the 1960s / 70s including: Pip Williams (guitarist / record producer); Tex Marsh (drummer); Roger Flavell (bassist); Kevin Fogarty (guitarist); Ralph Denyer (singer / songwriter); Phil Childs (bassist); Jim Smith (drums); George Lee (saxophonist); Ron Thomas (bassist); Emile Ford (No. 1 UK singer / songwriter).

To my early mentors: Alan Simonds (guitarist / vocalist); big bruv Steve (guitarist) and Mr. Henley (my inspirational music teacher at Warlingham School 1960 - 65).

And to Myriad Software: http://www.myriad-online.com for the Melody Assistant music notation software which was used for the production of this book. - Thanks!

Contents

Introduction

As the name suggests, this book has been written for the absolute beginner and assumes no prior musical knowledge - just the desire to do it!

The contents are suitable for piano and / or electronic keyboard.

Items covered include:

- Buying your first keyboard or piano;
- Reading music from scratch;
- Easy, effective finger exercises which require minimal reading ability;
- Important musical symbols;
- Your first tunes;
- Audio links for all tunes and exercises;
- Key signatures and transposition;
- Pre scale exercises;
- Major and minor scales in keyboard and notation view;
- Chord construction;
- Chord fingering;
- Chord charts in keyboard view;
- Arpeggios in keyboard and notation view;
- Arpeggio exercises;
- Playing from a *Fake Book* with and without auto accompaniment;
- Plus more!

After completing this book you will have a good basic understanding of music theory as well as a good basic playing technique, paving the way for more advanced study in your chosen field - jazz, blues, pop, classical etc.

Get the Best from this Book

Writing a book which is suitable for every different device is nigh on impossible especially when using music graphics; certainly the ePub and Mobi versions are not ideal for these although I believe that I have succeeded to a great degree and probably better than most. But obviously I want you to get the very best from this book so with this in mind I recommend that you download the pdf version which can be found towards the end of the book - to get there quickly just click here. This can be printed out (for your own use) as and when required.

There are audio links throughout the book which can be accessed two ways:

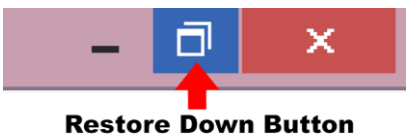
- by using the free external link: http://learn-keyboard.co.uk/book_links.html which gives access to all the links in the order in which they appear in each chapter; or
- by using the links throughout the book which will work best in the pdf version.

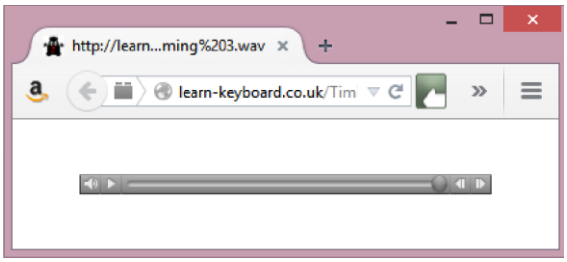
Even if you have the printed version, you may still wish to download the pdf version in order to gain easy access to the links as they appear in the book.

Using the *in Book* Links

Quite probably you may only need to listen to some of the audio links, but all are included for your convenience.

To access the links easily, if you are viewing this on a laptop or PC first of all go to your browser and click the restore down button in order to reduce the view size to something like the image below to the right (by dragging the bottom and sides).

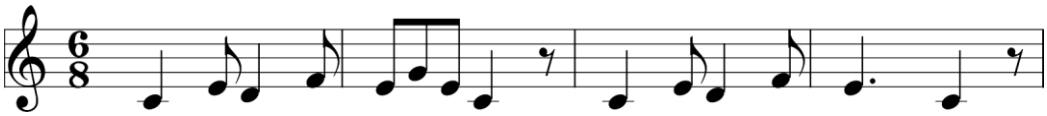




Then click on the link which should then appear in front of the document enabling you to move it out of the way of anything that you may wish to see at the same time.

If you are viewing this on an Android tablet as soon as you click on the link you will lose the book view until you push the 'Back' button (shown below).

If you want to you can have a trial run now by clicking on the following graphic which actually is 'Pop Goes the Weasel'!



Note that the links may not work if you are viewing this in a Google or Amazon sample. Please go to http://learn-keyboard.co.uk/absolute_beginners.html for a free *working* pdf sample.

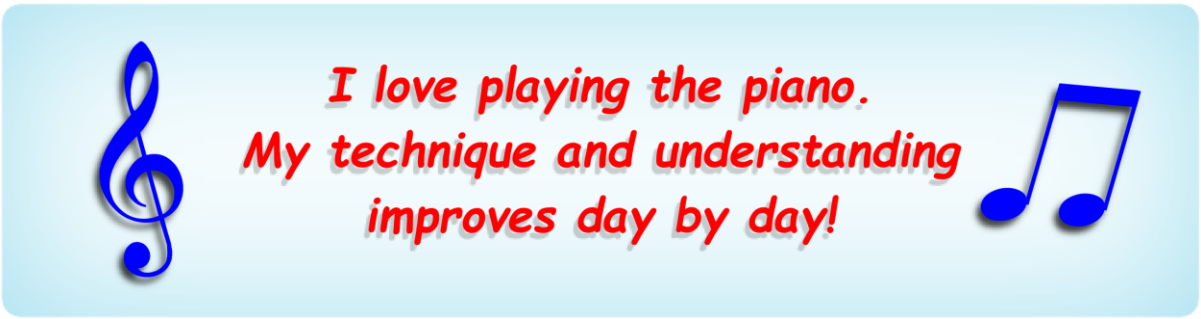
Note also that each link will open a new page in your browser, so you will eventually need to cancel them (or just close the browser).

Trust Your Self

As you progress you will no doubt have good days and bad days, but whatever happens never doubt your ability to succeed, however old you may be.

Now, what I'm going to say next you may think is absolute 'BS', but please hear me out - humour me if you like, as I happen to *know* that it is of tremendous value.

Throughout the book you will periodically come across the following message:



All I ask you to do is *pause* and *read* this every time you see it, out loud would be great, but silently is ok too. The more you can do this the better. Actually it has to be a true statement as presumably you wouldn't be reading this if you didn't want to play the piano or keyboard and if you follow the advice herein your technique and understanding *must* improve day by day!

Over the years I've met and known many individuals who have become extremely successful musicians, some are multi millionaires and worldwide household names

and some I knew when they were down and out and penniless (like I was). They all used similar techniques to the above. At the time I thought they were raving bonkers; now I know they weren't!

If you want to know more about similar success building techniques, please see my website at http://deep-relaxation.co.uk where you will find lots of freebies to prove their worth.

Buying Your First Piano / Keyboard

If you haven't already bought a keyboard or if you are perhaps thinking of changing, you may find the following information useful.

Firstly, just in case you're wondering, there is no such thing as a 'left handed' keyboard and if you ever come across one, it will have been created by an idiot just for a laugh! It makes no difference whether you are right or left handed for playing the keyboard as both are equally important (more or less). On all keyboards of every type, the high pitched notes are to the right and generally played with the right hand and the low notes are to the left and generally played with the left hand.

There are many different types of keyboards - all have black and white keys and to the uninitiated all look the same. But they can be vastly different and which one will be right for you will be determined by:

- Your present needs;
- Your ultimate needs; and of course
- Your budget.

Prices can vary from as little as £50 to many thousands of pounds. The chances of buying one that is absolutely right for your initial and ultimate needs is about nil, but you can at least try!

Keyboards basically fall into the following categories:

a) Synthesizers (hi tech);

b) Workstations (hi tech);

c) Electronic Pianos (hi tech / low tech);

d) Arranger Keyboards (hi tech / low tech);

e) Organs (hi tech / low tech);

f) Controller Keyboards with modules (hi tech);

g) Acoustic Pianos (low tech).

And of course all of the above could be purchased either new or second-hand.

Now, you may have noticed that I've put in brackets 'hi tech' - 'low tech' or both. This is because there are two types of retail music shops - hi tech and low tech and it's very rare that you'll find the two combined in one shop. And by 'low tech', please don't think that I mean cheap or low quality or low price - quite the contrary - it's just a different market.

The typical low tech shops are aimed at the home users and will sell:

- Pianos (acoustic and digital);
- Organs for home use (low tech);
- Arranger Keyboards (low tech);
- Sheet Music;
- Possibly a small selection of Guitars etc.

The typical hi tech shops are primarily aimed at professional working musicians and will sell:

- Portable Electronic / Digital pianos;
- Synthesizers and Workstations;
- Modules and Controller Keyboards;
- Hi tech (and expensive) Arranger Keyboards;
- Guitars (large selection);
- Amplifiers;
- Drum kits etc.

Ok, so let's look at what all these keyboards do.

Synthesizers and Workstations

Workstations are at the very high end of the hi tech equipment and are mainly used by professionals or home recording enthusiasts for recording. They also tend to be very expensive. Synthesizers are again very hi tech and can be extremely difficult to operate.

As such, I'm going to write both of these off as being unsuitable for your needs right now. After having gained some experience at playing perhaps one of these may suit your needs later - but these are not a good choice for a beginner.

Korg Kronos 2 Workstation (76 notes) - very Hi Tech

Electronic / Digital Pianos

These are available as either low tech home pianos in glossy cabinets (and usually very expensive) to hi tech portable stage pianos and everything in between.

Most electronic pianos have graduated hammer action keys which simulate the feel and action of a real acoustic piano - this can be good or bad depending on your preferences. Most also have a full 88 note (7 octave plus) keyboard.

And as well as getting authentic piano sounds, most digital pianos have numerous other sounds for you to play with and enjoy.

Clavia Nord Stage Piano (88 notes)

The low tech home pianos tend to have their own amplification and speakers built in, whereas hi tech stage pianos tend not to. All can be used with headphones.

Now, **most importantly** some in both categories have auto accompaniment features (which we'll deal with later) whereas some will just be simply pianos.

If it is your intention to play classical or jazz seriously, I would suggest that a digital piano could be a good choice for you. But if you are an absolute beginner then consider one which has auto accompaniment which in **no way** prevents the instrument from being used as a normal complete piano. I recently had a Korg SP500 which I used with and without the auto accompaniment for home and professional use.

Korg SV-1 Stage Piano (88 notes)

Korg, Roland, Yamaha, and Kurzweil do a good range of hi tech portables, some with and some without auto accompaniment, some with or without internal amplification.

If you want a top notch (no gimmicks) instrument, then Clavia Nord are excellent. For a budget option, Casio are hard to beat, in fact I am surprised at how good they are for the money. The Casio Privia PX-5S portable digital piano has received some great reviews despite being a budget keyboard.

Casio Privia PX-5S

If you want the convenience of all the gadgetry on an electronic digital piano and also a nice bit of furniture, then there are many (low tech) but generally expensive instruments available such as the Yamaha Clavinova below.

Yamaha Clavinova CVP-609GP

But there are many, many more to choose from in all price ranges.

Acoustic Pianos

I would never discourage anyone from getting one of these if this is what they want, but the clear disadvantages are:

- They need periodic tuning;
- They are space greedy;
- They can be very expensive;
- They're not suitable for gigging;
- You will drive your family and neighbours nuts when you practice, as these of course don't work too good with headphones.

On the plus side, when the world eventually forgets how to generate electricity, everyone will want one!

Bosendorfer Grand Piano

I don't think that anyone could deny that the Bosendorfer Beethoven Grand (above) is a beautiful instrument, but at £83,000 I wouldn't really recommend this for a beginner - especially if they live in a bedsit!

But the sounds of this instrument and others have been faithfully reproduced by Clavia and available on all their Nord electronic keyboards. Ok, it's not the real thing, but only an expert could tell the difference and you'd save a massive £81,000!

Harpsichords

The harpsichord is the forerunner of the piano, but has a completely different sound and feel. The main difference is that the strings are plucked rather than hammered. And similar to an organ there is far less velocity control than there is on a piano (acoustic or digital). But having said this, they are superb instruments with a very distinctive and unique sound. Most are incredibly *ornate,* most have reversed coloured keys and some have two manuals.

Two manual Harpsichord

Some of the best known Harpsichord pieces are the Domenico Scarlatti sonatas and also works by J.S Bach, or more recently - *The Adams Family* music

Very few harpsichords are commercially available today and they're now generally only used for classical concerts and operas such as Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* which features the harpsichord extensively.

Another great advantage of the digital electronic keyboard is that the sounds of the harpsichord can be reproduced on most of them.

Organs

Again these come in both hi and low tech, and both tend to be very expensive. The low tech varieties tend to come with auto accompaniment as well as just about every gadget imaginable. I've personally only used hi tech (no gadget) instruments including the early Vox Continental, the Hammond M102 and Hammond C3 all of which I used for gigging around Europe. I still love these instruments (especially the C3), but the downside with these is that they take up a huge amount of space and the C3's require four people to move them - no fun when working basement or attic venues!

Although the sounds of the vintage instruments can never be simulated exactly, some of the modern lightweight keyboards (Korg, Roland and particularly the Nord) get pretty close.

The Legendary Hammond B3

There are of course numerous modern organs available to suit all styles and budgets, but as all of the sounds and most of the features can also be found on modern arranger keyboards and digital pianos, they are less popular than they have been in previous decades.

Another distinctive feature of the organ is that most have two manuals and pedal boards, but even these can be added to other digital keyboards if required.

Arranger Keyboards

In my opinion, this is probably the best choice for anyone who just wants to have fun but also wants to retain the option for getting serious and possibly professional. But the variation in quality, features and prices is vast.

Whereas most electronic pianos come with 88 weighted keys, the arranger keyboards tend to come with either 61 keys (5 octaves) or 76 keys (6 octaves +) and the keys may be un-weighted, semi weighted or fully weighted (hammer action).

In addition:

- All have auto accompaniment, but quality and features vary considerably;
- Some have built in speakers / amplification;
- Most have built in sequencers;
- Some have built in samplers and other features.

Korg PA3X Arranger Keyboard (76 notes)

Again at the low end of the market, the Casios are excellent value and hard to beat, but mainly at the top end of their range. In my opinion the lower end of their range are not really worth considering.

Personally, I wouldn't consider less than 6 octaves which then enables the instrument to be played as a standard piano as an alternative to splitting the keyboard and using the auto accompaniment features. And generally speaking the 6 octave (73 / 76 keys) instruments have the best features.

Casio CTK 7200 Arranger keyboard 61 note with internal amp &speakers

Arranger keyboards that I've personally owned (all 6 octaves+) include:

- Early Yamaha PSR1;
- Korg i2;
- Roland G70;
- Korg PA2X.

The majority of the above do not have internal speakers / amplification which is the norm for professional equipment. In this event you would also need to purchase an external keyboard amplifier and speaker(s), which needn't have to be an expensive item.

Auto Accompaniment

All arranger keyboards and some pianos / organs have the facility to either use the instrument as a full keyboard (in piano mode) or to split the keyboard at a chosen point and use the upper half for the right hand melody work and the lower portion with an alternative sound / instrument for bass etc., or auto accompaniment. But note that you'd be struggling in full piano mode with less than 73 keys.

In the auto accompaniment mode a particular rhythm and style can be selected which will play with bass, drums and other instrumentation as soon as a chord is played in the lower portion of the keyboard. As the chord is changed, the instrumentation will follow automatically. In most cases, intros, endings and fill-ins can also be activated at the touch of a button.

This results in the player being in control of a complete multi instrument band / orchestra. Clearly using this option enables even a novice to produce professional sounding work easily. And as a result, many would call this 'cheating'! Well I suppose if you set the instrument up to do the lot, go off and make a cup of tea and return to take your applause, I suppose it is. My view on this is that if it gives pleasure it can only be good!

BUT, I would strongly recommend that you learn to play both with *and* without the auto accompaniment then you will get the best of both worlds. And the exercises and information herein teaches exactly this - for your greatest fulfilment. Don't make the mistake of spending hours pushing buttons, *'having fun'* and learning nothing - it's an easy trap to fall into!

Some of what I do personally involves using the auto accompaniment which effectively enables me to play *with* a band without having the commitment of being *involved with* a band. Plus it enables me to gig solo should I wish to and of course to earn more money. But I also enjoy playing in normal piano mode without the auto accompaniment.

Note that if you are playing with a band, auto accompaniment would never be used.

Modules / Controller Keyboards

This option is a bit hi tech and involves purchasing a blank controller keyboard which does nothing on its own, but when connected to various sound modules can potentially do and become anything from a superb piano to the best synths etc. Of course the sounds produced would be no better than the modules used.

Sound modules can be used to enhance any keyboard via midi. These are mainly used if you need any particular sounds that are not available on your keyboard. Roland have produced a good range of these but they can be expensive.

However, most modules don't have auto accompaniment features but the Roland BK-7m and the Korg i40m do, which could make these a real option. But unfortunately the i40m is now only available second-hand (if you can find one). Ketron also do one but it's very expensive.

Roland BK-7m Backing Module

Controller keyboards are generally low priced and light in weight (as they don't actually do anything on their own) and are available with 61, 76 or 88 keys and with un-weighted, semi weighted or fully weighted key options. Their main use is in conjunction with computer based recording systems (DAW Digital Audio Workstation) such Cakewalk, Albeton, Cubase etc., using VST sounds downloaded to the computer.

Probably initially you wouldn't want to go down the controller keyboard / module route, but it's certainly worth knowing about for future reference.

Aka MPK 261 Controller Keyboard 61 keys

Sequencers

Most arranger keyboards, synths, workstations and some digital pianos have one or more built in sequencer(s). This enables you to record and playback chord sequences, styles, fills and variations or even complete songs easily (once you've got your head round it).

Out of the sequencers that I've used, I've found the Korgs to be most user friendly - or maybe it's just because I've had a few of them and I understand the Korg way of thinking best. Although the Roland G70 is a good instrument, I have to admit that I found the sequencer hard work - but please don't let me put you off Roland - they're one of the best, but I prefer Korg for sequencers - my choice!

Another option is to use an external sequencer via your PC, which actually allows far more control, editing and mixing possibilities. But I have to say that these can be complicated. I am currently learning Cakewalk Sonar X3 which is straining my brain somewhat.

Samplers

Some arranger keyboards, workstations and synths etc. have a built in sampling facility. This enables the user to record the sound of anything and then reproduce this on the keyboard at varying pitches. This can be useful if you need a particular sound that you can't find the patch for.

Harmonisers

If you are into singing along with your playing, some high end arranger keyboards have built in 'harmonisers' which can create a harmony to your singing and some can even help correct your crap singing.

This feature is on the Roland G70 as well as the Korg PA2X and PA3X. I can't say that it's a feature that I've ever used myself, but it's interesting nonetheless.

Polyphony

When considering various keyboards, you will come across the words 'polyphonic' and 'monophonic'.

A *monophonic* keyboard will only allow you to play one note at a time as in the very early synths - if you play two notes together only one will sound. A keyboard which is say polyphonic to 32 notes will allow 32 notes to be played / sounded at once.

As you only have ten fingers you may think that this is fine, but when you consider that using the sustain pedal and / or auto accompaniment can increase the need for *polyphony*, 32 notes soon becomes inadequate, so the larger the *polyphony* the better!

Advantages / Disadvantages of Internal Amplification

Most of the lower priced portable keyboards and most home digital pianos have internal speakers / amplification. If you intend using the instrument for *home use* only, then this can be ideal. The only possible disadvantage of this is that it makes the instrument physically heavier than it might have been without them, but if you don't intend moving it around too much then this should not cause a problem.

The more expensive portable keyboards tend not to have internal amplification. You may think this odd as it appears that you are paying more and getting less. But as these instruments are primarily produced for the professional (gigging) musician keeping the weight down to the minimum is useful (something that was unheard of when I was gigging); and also this leaves the way clear to purchase the right amplification for the musician's individual needs which could vary considerably, governed by the type and size of venues.

If using one of these instruments for home use there are many suitable small amps on the market. In this instance I would advise purchasing dedicated keyboard equipment as against a guitar amp (which would work, but not as well). A pair of powered PA speakers could also be ideal.

Peavey KB2 Keyboard Amp

Roland KC150 Keyboard Amp

Hammer action or Semi Weighted?

If you come to the conclusion that you want a digital keyboard as against an acoustic instrument, then your next dilemma will be whether to buy one with fully weighted (hammer action) keys or to go for semi weighted.

Without doubt hammer action keys are far better for piano playing, while semi weighted are better for organ, electric piano and synthesiser.

For my time on the road I only ever played the Hammond organ (which is semi weighted). The type of playing I did at that time would have been impossible on a weighted board. But now that I've calmed down a little I'm finding that I play more piano type music. So I have a conundrum - I want both! And not only that, I want top

quality piano / organ sounds, auto accompaniment and I want to be able to move it easily without the risk of a heart attack.

Clearly such an instrument has not yet been invented, but it can be done!

The Ultimate Combination

Here's my ultimate combination:

- Nord Stage 2 with Hammer action (Piano, synth, organ);
- 2nd Controller keyboard with semi weighted keys;
- Korg i40m module (or Roland BK-7m);
- Peavey KB2 amp.

I believe this combination covers everything.

The Nord has the absolute best piano, electric piano and organ sounds. It is also a programmable synthesizer with free access to many vintage sounds such as the Mellotron and Chamberlin. As it's available with a choice of hammer action or semi weighted keys. I would go for the hammer action and use a semi weighted controller keyboard connected to the main board via MIDI for the fast organ stuff.

As there is no auto accompaniment the external Korg i40m would take care of this. The Peavey KB2 amp is great for home use and even small - average venues. And the whole lot could be carried by a weakling and fit into the back of a small car!

Clavia Nord Stage 2 Synth / Piano / Organ (73 notes) - very Hi Tech

Another similar although certainly not so hi tech combination could be:

- Yamaha Tyros 5 (61 note semi weighted with auto-accompaniment);
- 88 Note hammer action controller keyboard connected via MIDI;
- Nord Pedal Keys 27 (optional).

This combination would give you a full hammer action piano keyboard using the sounds from the Tyros; a two manual organ with pedal board (if required), as well as full auto accompaniments and recording features.

Yamaha Tyros 5 Arranger Keyboard (61 notes) - Low Tech

Clearly there are many other possible combinations available by doubling up on keyboards and connecting them via MIDI. But I wouldn't really recommend doing so until you really know exactly what you want.

Learn to play first!

Although I'm clearly pro Nord, I've listed most of the major manufacturers in the links page of my website at http://www.gonkmusic.com/gonk_links.html .

Midi

Very simply MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) enables various musical instruments, sequencers and computers to communicate with one another. For instance it makes it possible to play one keyboard and reproduce the sounds from another (but only while they are connected together).

When MIDI data is recorded only the controlling elements such as pitch, velocity, volume, notation, vibrato etc. are recorded - *not* the sound (or audio). So if you recorded something in MIDI on *keyboard '1'* and then played it back on *keyboard '2'* it would use the sounds from *keyboard '2'*. But if you recorded the information in *audio* on *Keyboard '1'* and saved it as an mp3 or wav file, it would sound the same when played back on *Keyboard '2'*.

One big advantage of recording in MIDI is that the MIDI information can be manipulated / altered before re-recording in *audio*. So, for instance if you played a bum note, this could easily be corrected without playing the whole piece again.

Just about all electronic keyboards of all type have MIDI connections.

Buying Second-hand

Like just about anything, if you buy second-hand you will save a huge amount on the new purchase price and lose a great deal less when you come to sell (which is inevitable).

Over the years I've bought several new instruments, but to be honest have lost money on all of them whereas many of the second-hand instruments I've bought, I've used for a few years and often sold for a profit - something I've never got anywhere near doing with a car! And as against cars, musical instruments tend to be very

reliable. In fact I have to say that since 1966 when I bought my Vox Continental organ, I have ***never*** had an instrument fail on me - *I'm hanging onto a tree as I'm writing this!* The only parts that I've ever needed were a **few** keys that got physically broken on my Hammond due to a slightly 'over enthusiastic' playing technique and some valves which were consumables on the Hammonds. But in those days I always kept a supply of what I knew I was going to destroy.

Common sense dictates that you should use caution if buying on eBay etc., although I have bought and sold this way successfully numerous times. But my advice would be to always view before bidding and check out the seller's ratings in detail.

Korg SP500 Stage Piano (88 notes) - with auto accompaniment

If buying new or second-hand from a dealer, be sure to negotiate for the best price. I bought my Korg SP500 new from a dealer, but got an excellent discount which reduced the loss to very little when I came to sell it 4 years later.

No doubt there are many good dealers around, but in the UK I can suggest that http://whitleybayorgans.co.uk take some beating for price and service for low tech instruments. They will deliver anywhere in the UK and offer a warranty on second-hand instruments. - I'm not on commission by the way, just giving credit where credit is due! For hi tech instruments in the UK I've found http://www.pmtonline.co.uk pretty good on price and service.

Finally, if you're not sure what to buy, my advice is to buy the best second-hand instrument that you can afford (preferably 6 octaves or more). Some of the older top name keyboards are excellent. But always check new prices first, and then at least you will minimize your losses if you get it wrong which you probably will!

Other items that you will need include:

- A stool (preferably height adjustable);
- A stand strong enough to accommodate the keyboard;
- A good quality sustain pedal (preferably with a reverse polarity switch);
- A music stand (included with most keyboards);
- A dust cover for the keyboard (ebay);
- Amplification and leads if not included;
- Headphones if you want your family to retain their sanity.

Piano / Keyboard Pedals

Most upright pianos (acoustic and digital) have two pedals. The right hand one is the sustain pedal (damper) and the left one is the soft pedal (una corda). More recently many grand pianos are now fitted with a third pedal in the middle called the sostenuto pedal.

Pedals on a modern Grand

Very simply the sustain pedal sustains all notes played for the time the pedal is depressed. The soft pedal basically mutes the sound to a degree and also modifies the tones somewhat. The sostenuto pedal enables the pianist to sustain selected notes, while other notes remain unaffected. On digital pianos often the middle (sostenuto) pedal can be assignable.

When purchasing most portable keyboards, pedals are rarely included, but at the very least you would need a sustain pedal. Single, double and triple pedals for these are widely available.

Add on Pedals for Digital Instruments

In addition to the sustain pedal you may also find a swell pedal useful if you want to use organ sounds. This just simply increases and decreases the volume and is a fixture on all organs.

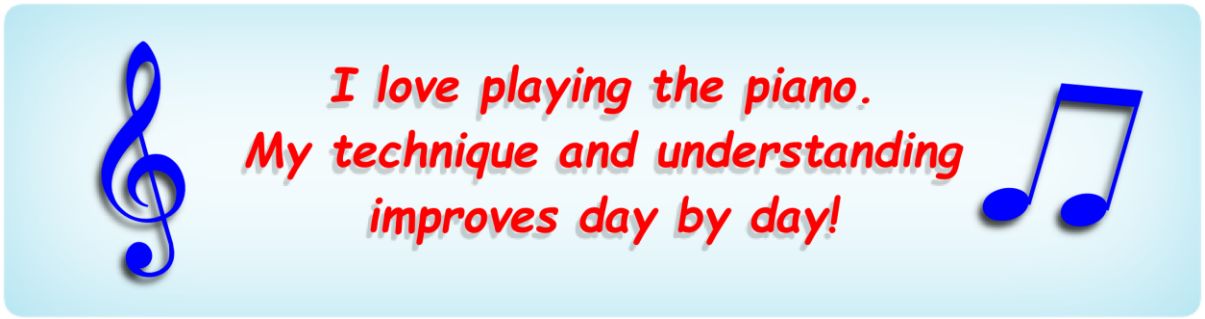
Swell Pedal for Organ Sounds

If you want to play bass with your feet, you may want to add a pedal board (with swell pedal included). These are primarily used for organ music.

Nord Pedal Keys 27

Beyond all of the above the only other 'pedals' you may need could be assignable switches to perhaps alter the speed of a rotary tone cabinet (Leslie), which could be physical or electronic; or to trigger drum fills or style variations in auto accompaniment etc.

Now we'll begin learning to play!



The Notes of the Keyboard

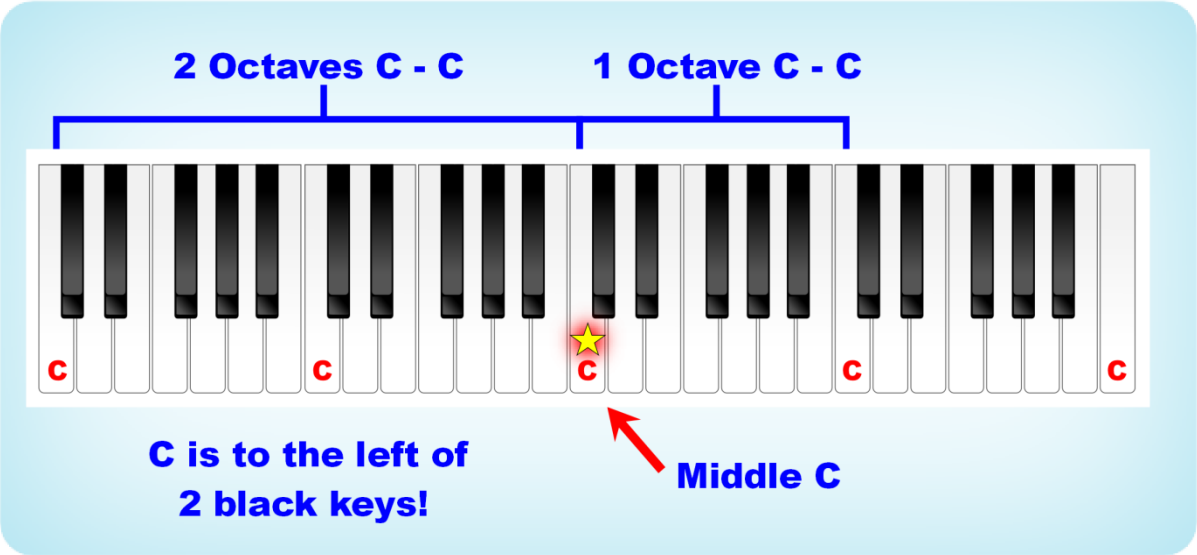
Firstly we'll look at the notes of the keyboard and how to identify them.

As already stated, some keyboards / pianos have more keys than others, but this makes no difference in relation to understanding how to play them, as they all have the same basic arrangement of black and white keys.

If you look closely you will see that the black keys are in groups of two then three.

This enables us to find every single note easily. And the first one that you must learn is **'C'** which can be found just to the left of two black keys.

The diagram below shows a four octave span revealing five **C's** each of which are eight notes apart - hence octave - as in octagon - eight!



Probably the most important note on the keyboard is **middle C** which is the **'C'** that is more or less in the middle of the keyboard and because it is so important, we are going to put a star on ours as shown.

Now all the notes to the left of **middle C** get gradually lower in pitch and all the notes to the right gradually get higher. And usually you will use your right hand for the higher notes and your left hand for the lower notes.

*So which hand plays **middle C**?*

That's a good question and the answer is that it could be either, but I will explain more shortly.

Now I'll show you what all the other notes are called, but I don't want you to get too confused about all this at the moment. We will be taking it all slowly step by step.

Here's the other notes!

This is mind boggling, how am I going to remember this lot?

Easy, if you split them up into two main groups according to the number of black notes as shown below:

Notes around the Two Black Keys!

Notes around the Three Black Keys!

And if you can't remember which comes first **G** or **A** you're probably going Gaga - get it? - GA - GA!!

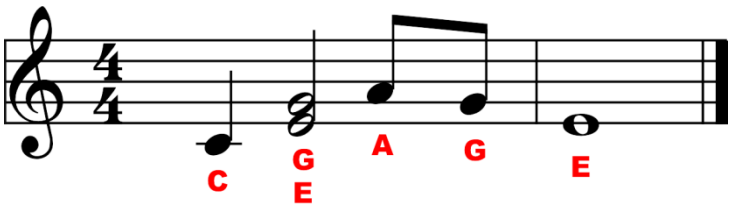
What about the black ones, what are they called?

Don't worry I've not forgotten them, we'll be dealing with them shortly, but first we'll look at how the keys of the keyboard relate to music notation.

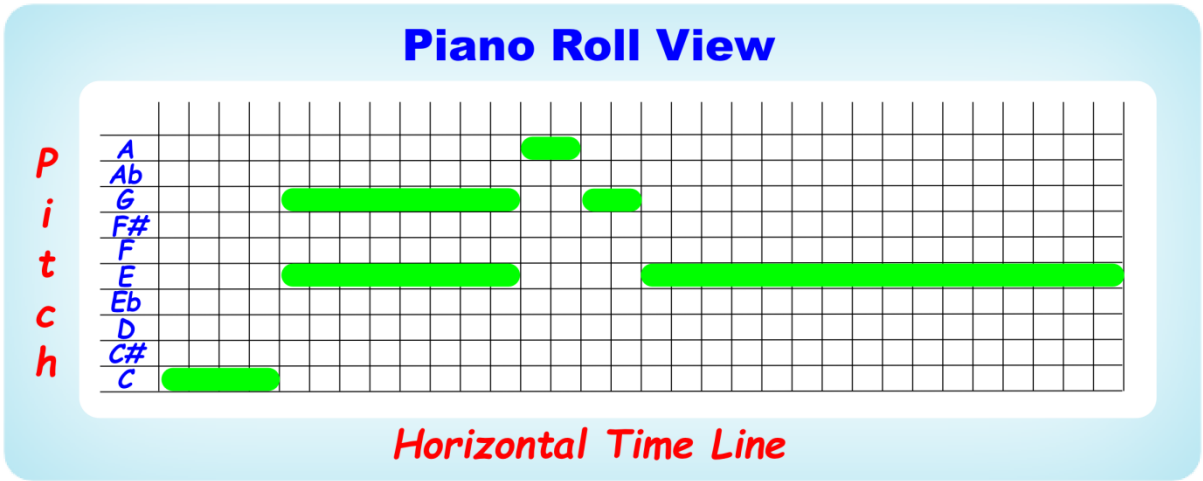
Music Notation

Music notation is basically a glorified *graph* using groups of lines called staves or staffs with the 'time line' being the horizontal axis from left to right and the pitch being the vertical axis. How long a note is played for is determined by the time element of the note i.e. crotchet, quaver, minim etc. When it is played is determined by how far along the time line it's placed. The pitch of the note is determined by how high or low it's placed on the vertical axis (the stave). Simple - easy peasy - in theory!

As an example in the diagram below, the first note to be played is **C** which is the lowest pitched note of the phrase and is a crotchet (don't worry I'll explain all this shortly) followed by **E** and **G** which are higher pitched and played together. They are both minims which are sustained for twice as long a crotchet. Then we have **A** which is the highest note of the phrase followed by **G** again both of which are quavers being timed half the value of a crotchet. And finally the last note of the phrase is **E** which is a Semibreve (notice that it has no stem) which is 4 times the time value of a crotchet.



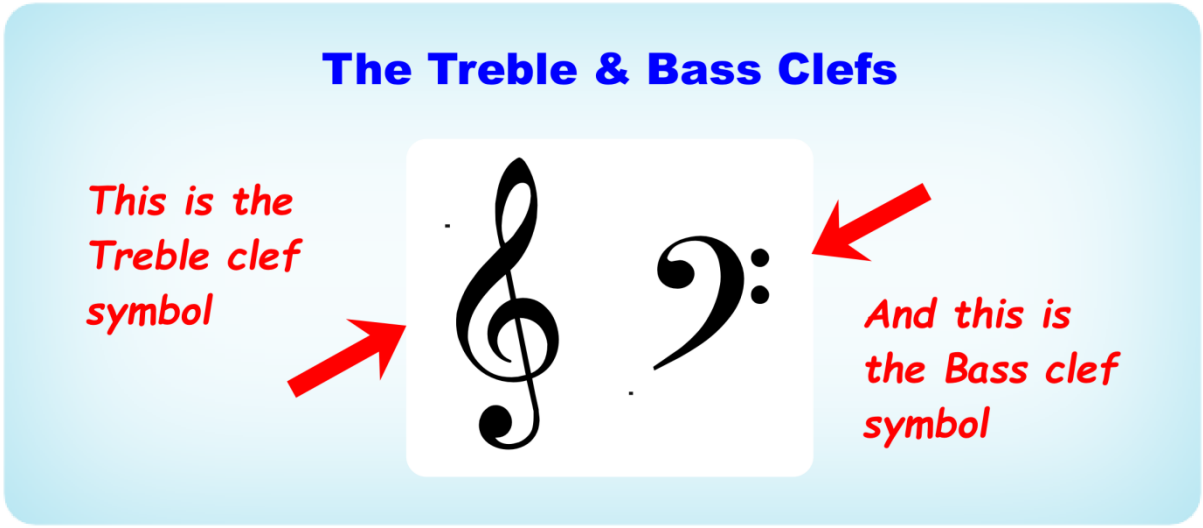
The next diagram shows exactly the same phrase in graph form or *Piano Roll* form as used in music recording software. Click on either to hear the phrase, if you want to.



Can you recognise the similarities between the two diagrams?

Undoubtedly any untrained musician would find the piano roll view simpler to understand, and it certainly has its uses when editing recorded music. But look at how much space it takes up compared to the first diagram. And remember this is a very short, one hand phrase. So clearly, learning conventional music notation has to be to every musician's advantage.

In order to extend the vertical axis (in conventional notation) and potentially accommodate more notes, this is split into clefs. The two clefs used in piano music are the treble and bass clefs as shown next and these form the grand stave (or staff).

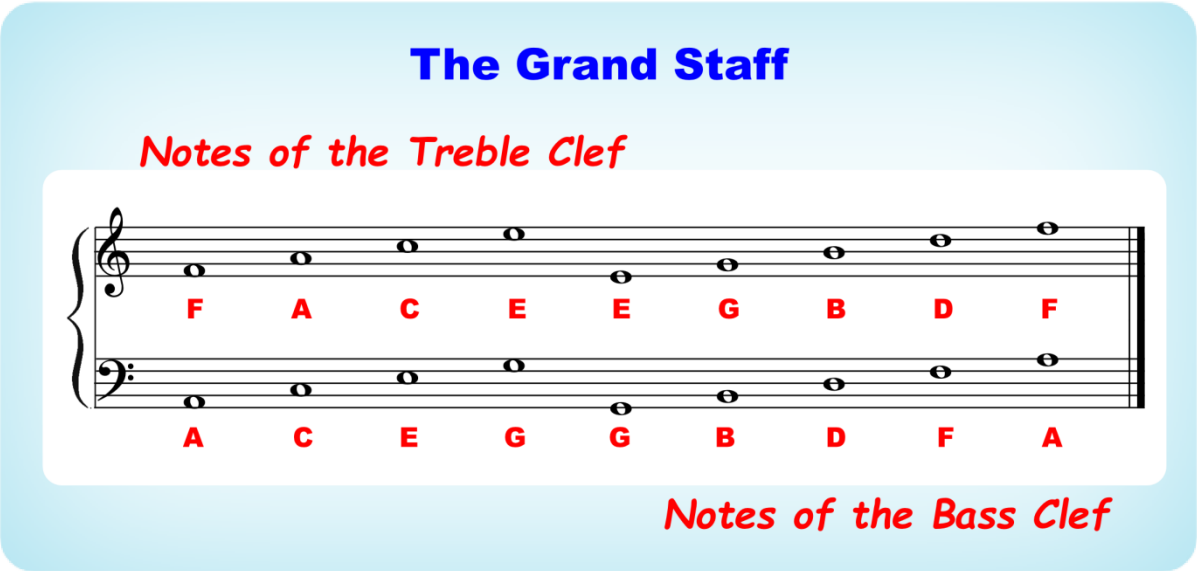


Saying: "the two clefs used in Piano music" implies that there are other clefs.

Yes there are several other clefs used by other instruments and singers, the most common being the Alto and Tenor clefs, but from the piano / keyboard point of view, you can completely put them out of mind, just simply know that they exist and forget about them!

The Grand Staff

The Grand staff is made up of two ‘staves’ or ‘staffs’ of five lines each, the top one being the ‘treble clef’ which is mainly used for the higher notes by the right hand and the ‘bass clef’ mainly used for the lower notes by the left hand.



What’s the difference between a staff and a stave?

Actually no-one seems to know for sure, but a staff is a stave - it’s just a word, well two words actually, so don’t worry about it!

The important thing that you need to learn is that the ‘staves’ or ‘staffs’ are split into the two clefs (for piano music) - these are what you need to learn and remember.

An easy way to remember the notes of each clef is to think of them in sections like:

- Treble Clef *space* notes **F A C E** - the word *FACE!*
- Treble Clef *line* notes **E G B D F** - *Every Good Boy Deserves Favours!*
- Bass Clef *space* notes **A C E G** - *All Cows Eat Grass!*
- Bass Clef *line* notes **G B D F A** - *Giant Bears Don’t Fly Aeroplanes!*

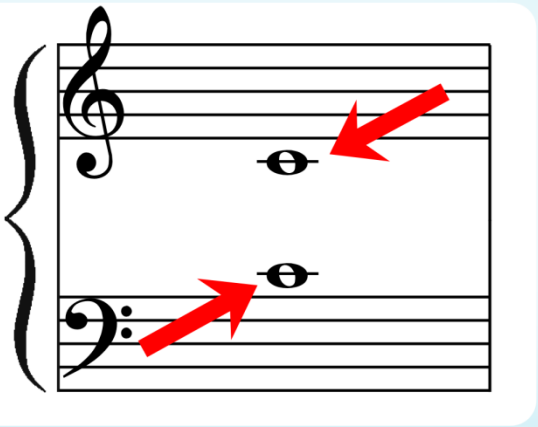
So which one is ‘middle C’?

Well actually ‘middle **C**’ is not in the above illustration, because it falls below the lines of the treble clef and above the lines of the bass clef. In fact it’s exactly mid way between both clefs.

The next illustration will show you where it is! Although it is shown in both the treble and bass clefs it is the same note.

Middle C

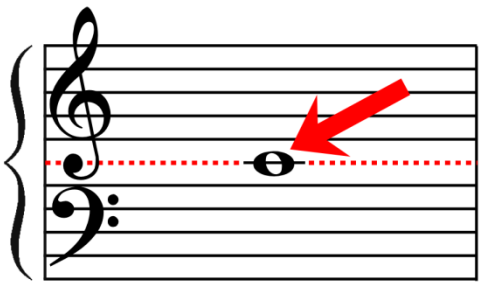
Middle C is below the lines of the Treble Clef and above the lines of the Bass Clef



If we bring the two clefs closer together, you will see that there is an imaginary line exactly midway between the two clefs and this is where middle **C** lives.

Middle C

If we bring the two clefs closer together and draw an imaginary line between them, this is where we find Middle C

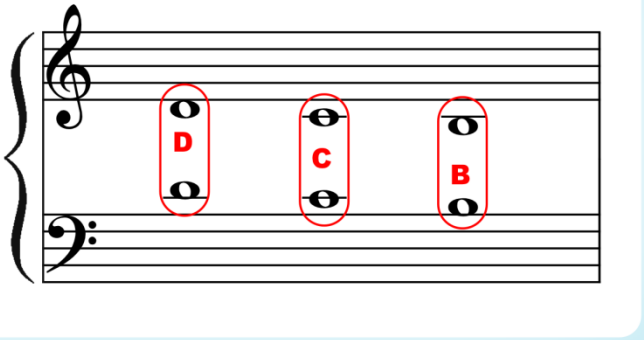


And this is why middle **C** has a line drawn through the middle of it. This is called a ledger line and happens with some other notes as well, in fact any time a note goes above or below the clef staff lines.

Now the notes both sides of middle **C** (**B** and **D**) also fall either above or below the clef staff lines which can be seen next.

Notes Between the Clefs

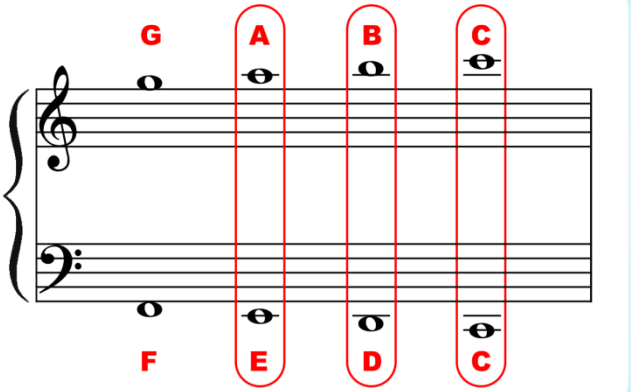
The notes shown here are the same notes written in different clefs



Now there are also notes that fall both above the treble clef and below the bass clef and these in fact would be the top four and the bottom four white notes of a four octave spread.

Notes Above or Below the Clefs

Some notes fall above or below the clef staff lines as shown here!



The two C's shown here are 4 octaves apart!

Wow this is getting heavy; I don't think I'll ever understand all this!

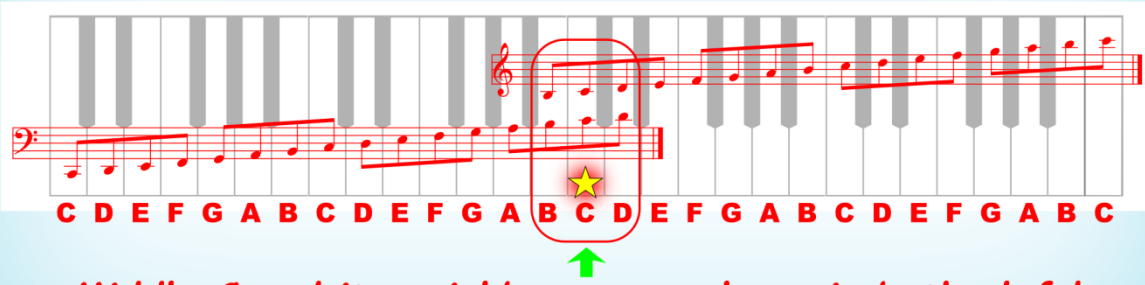
Please don't distress yourself, we will be dealing with everything one step at a time and it will all become clear as you progress. But you may occasionally need to review various sections to gain a complete understanding. - Just read on!

How the Notes Relate to the Keyboard

Now we'll look at how the musical notes relate to the keyboard.

This next diagram may at first look a little confusing and difficult to read; and if you are reading this on a tablet, it may not be clear. If you haven't already done so, please go to the rear of the book to get the pdf download link and you will be able to see this much more clearly, even more so in landscape view!

Notes of Both Clefs Together



Middle C and its neighbours are shown in both clefs!

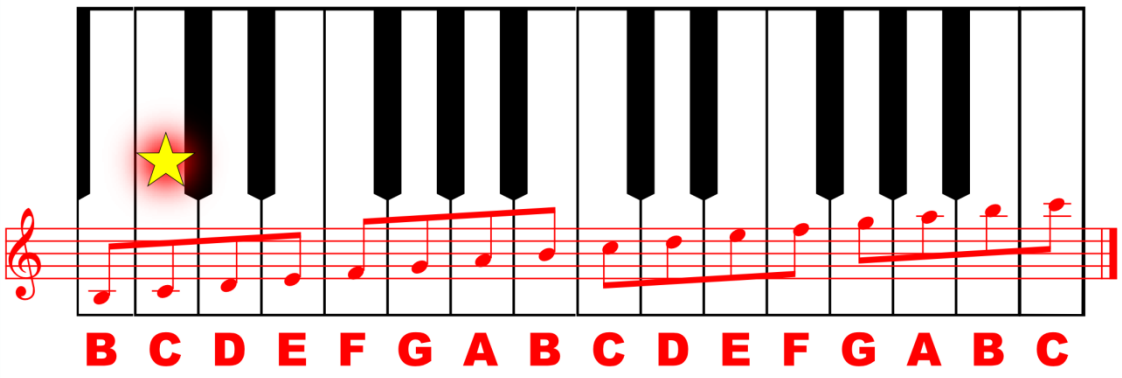
To make this easier to see, below I have split the keyboard into two 2 octave sections, one for each clef, but remember that we have put a star on Middle **C** so that you can always find it!

So notice that the next two diagrams are actually the same as the above diagram split into two.

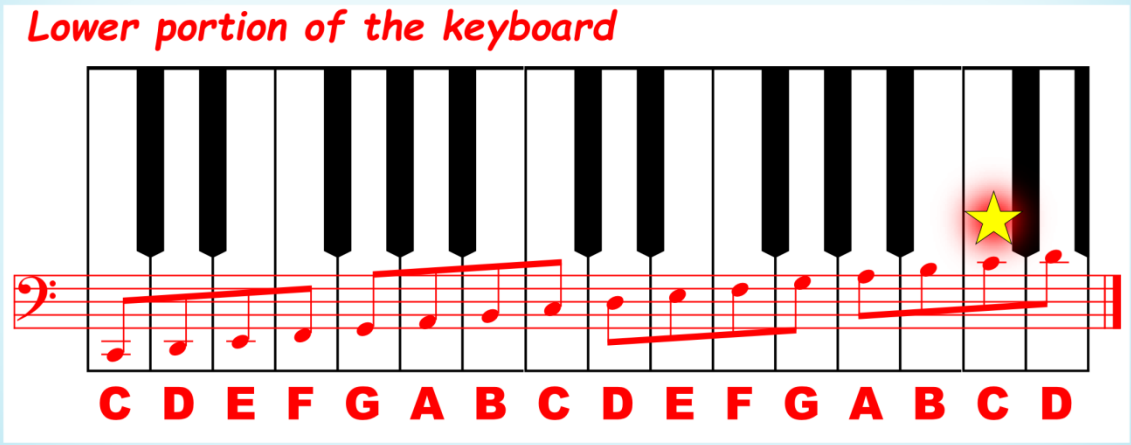
It may be useful for you to print out these three diagrams and look at them in detail.

Notes of the Treble Clef

Upper portion of the keyboard



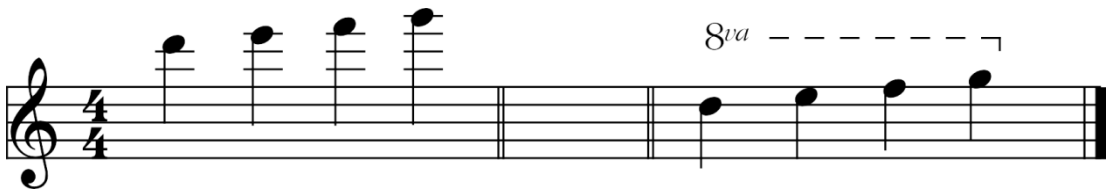
Notes of the Bass Clef



Ok so this shows a four octave spread, but what happens when the notes are higher or lower than these as on larger keyboards?

Good question! And the answer is that up to a certain point more ledger lines are added, but when there are too many they become impossible to read quickly, so instead the music is written an octave (or more) lower or higher to keep within the clefs and then the ***8va, 8vb, 15ma*** or ***15mb*** symbols are used.

As an example the following two phrases are exactly the same, but on the second one the ***8va*** symbol is used indicating that the notes should be played an octave higher than written.



- ***8va*** = play the bracketed notes one octave higher;
- ***8vb*** = play the bracketed notes one octave lower;
- ***15ma*** = play the bracketed notes two octaves higher;
- ***15mb*** = play the bracketed notes two octaves lower.

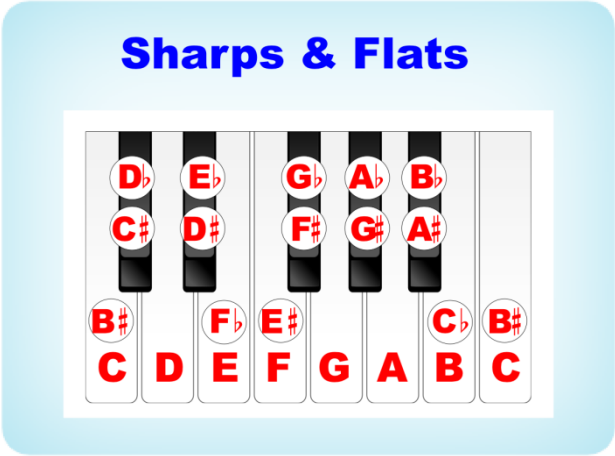
To be honest it will probably be a while before you'll need these.

Sharps & Flats

We've already learnt that the interval from one **C** to the next is an *octave*. And indeed this is the same interval from **B - B** or **G - G** etc.

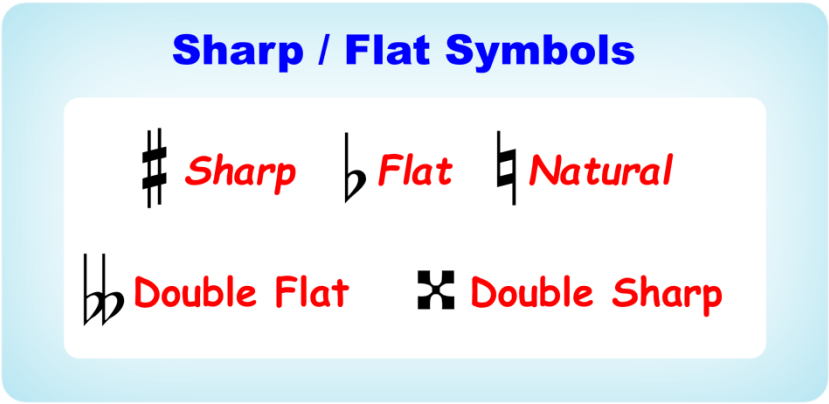
Now the smallest interval in Western music is a semitone which is the interval from any note on the keyboard to its nearest neighbour be it black or white.

So the interval between **C** and **B** is a semitone, and also the interval between **E** and **F** as in both cases there are no black notes in-between. In all the other cases there *are* black notes in-between, so the semitone interval will be to the black note above or below. And as you can see by the diagram below the first black note after **C** is called **C sharp** *or* **D flat**. Note that in some circumstances **B** could also be known as ***C flat*** (as there are no black notes in between) and **C** could also be known as ***B sharp*** - but actually this is very rare.



To *'sharpen'* a note is to raise the pitch and to *'flatten'* one is to lower the pitch.

There are also *double sharps* and *double flats* where the pitch of a note is raised or lowered twice as much (2 semi-tones). But as these only occur occasionally in keys heavily endowed in sharps or flats we're not going to get involved with these here; and it may be years before you come across any.

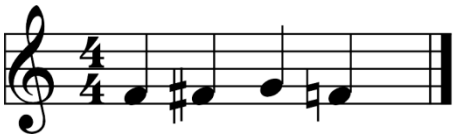


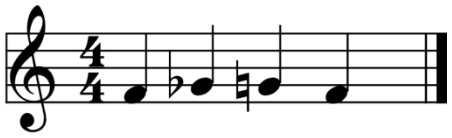
Whether a particular note is known as a sharp or a flat depends on the key signature which will be dealt with later.

Sharps and flats occur in music in two different ways:

- as accidentals; or
- within key signatures (which could also include accidentals).

When they are accidentals, they are simply added to the music as and where they occur as shown below.





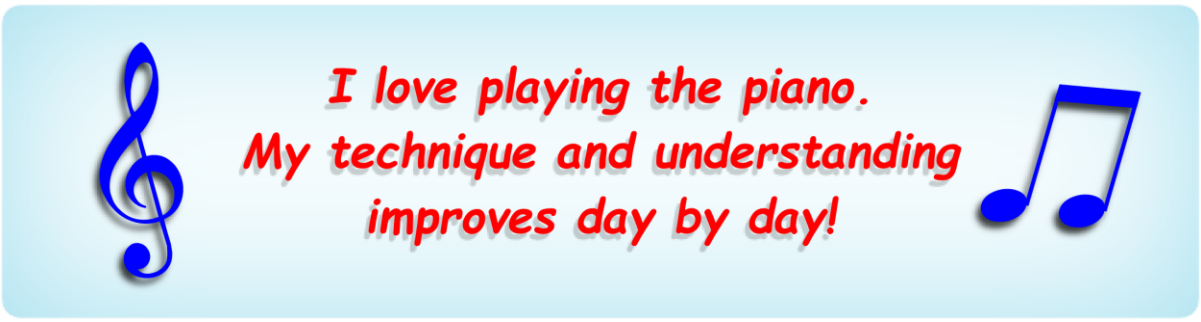
In this case any repeats of notes that are *'sharpened'* or *'flattened'* this way remains so for the duration of the bar unless *'naturalised'* using the '*natural'* symbol.

If you look carefully at the last diagrams you will see that both examples are identical. The first one uses **F sharp** and the second uses **G flat** (same notes) to produce the same result.

Why do the black notes have two names? Why not just call them flats or sharps but not both?

Yes, I can see the confusion, but this is because there are flat keys and sharp keys which we'll be learning about later, along with key signatures.

But first we'll deal with the timing.



Timing and Rhythm Part 1

Hopefully you've understood a little about the vertical axis of the musical graph (stave). Now we'll start looking at the horizontal axis - the time line, which consists of: time signatures, bars and note values.

Time Signatures and Bars

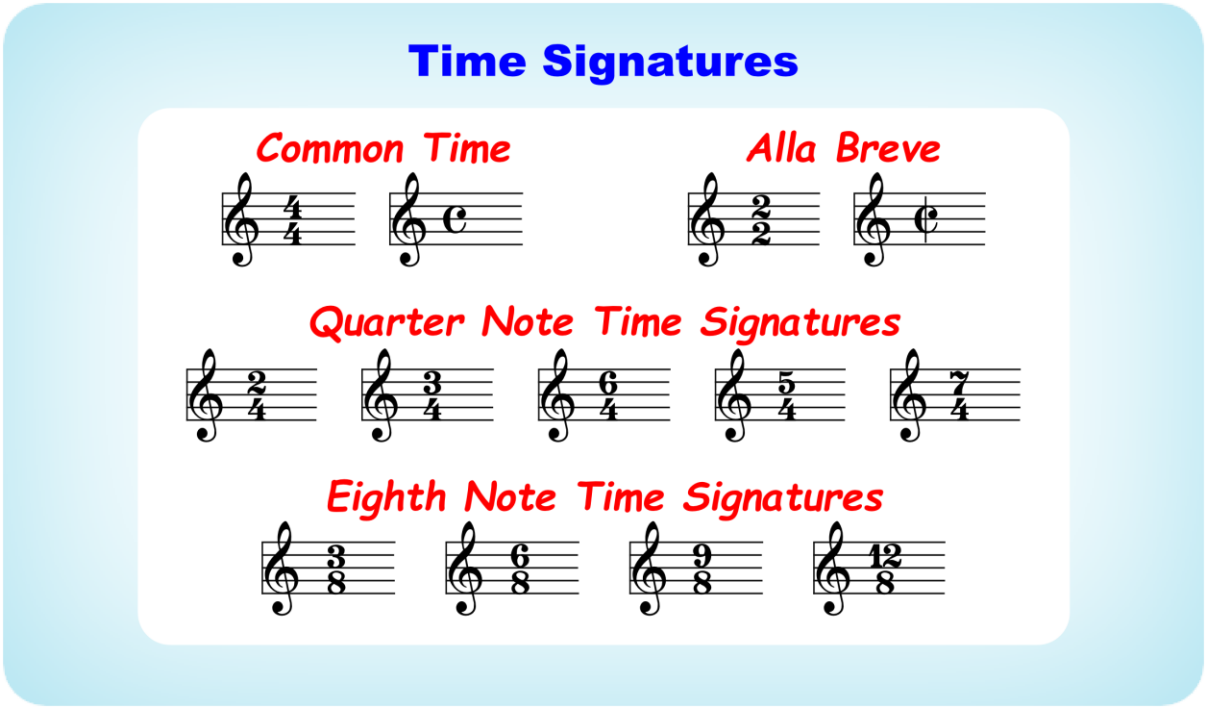
Each group of notes is separated into 'bars' or 'measures', which are the vertical lines separating the various notes or groups of notes. The time signature, determines how many notes of what length are to be played to each bar, the first beat of which is often slightly or heavily accented.

The most common time signatures are:

- **4/4** - four quarter notes to each bar. Think or repeat '**1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4' etc**., and with your right hand tap with the '**1 2 3 4**' beats but not the 'ands'. With your left hand tap on the '**1** and **3**' beats;
- **3/4** - three quarter notes to each bar (Waltz time). Think or repeat '**1 & 2 & 3 & 1 & 2 & 3**' etc., and with your left hand tap on the '**1**' beats and with your right hand on the '**2 / 3**' beats;
- **2/4** - two quarter notes to each bar (March time). Think or repeat '**1 & 2 & 1 & 2**' etc., and with your left hand tap on the '**1**' beats and with your right hand on the '**2**' beats;
- **6/8** - six eighth notes to each bar (two set of three - Jazz Waltz). Think or repeat '**1 2 3, 2 2 3 - 1 2 3, 2 2 3**' etc., (no 'ands' this time) and tap all the beats with your right hand and on the '1' beats with your left hand but giving more emphasis on the first '**1**' beat of each pattern. This may seem similar to **3/4** time, but it's generally much faster.

The time signature is always given at the beginning of each piece, and will remain the same throughout unless information is given to the contrary.

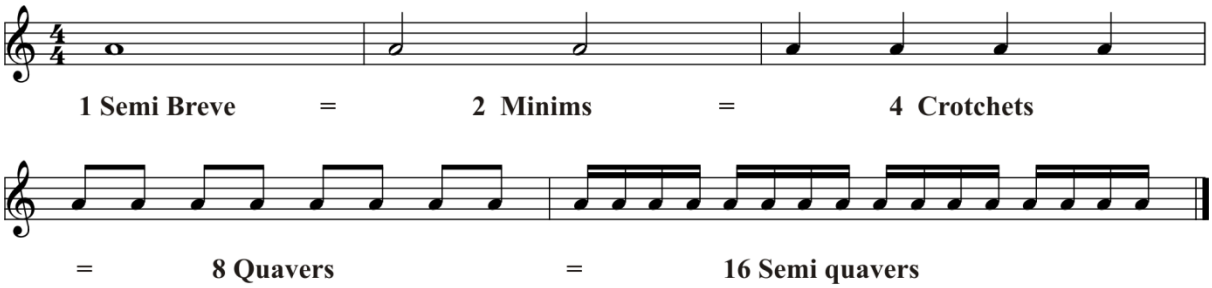
The most common time signature without doubt is **4/4** which is also known as *'common time'* and this also has an alternative symbol as shown below as does the **2/2** time signature which is known as *'cut common time'* or *'alla breve'*.



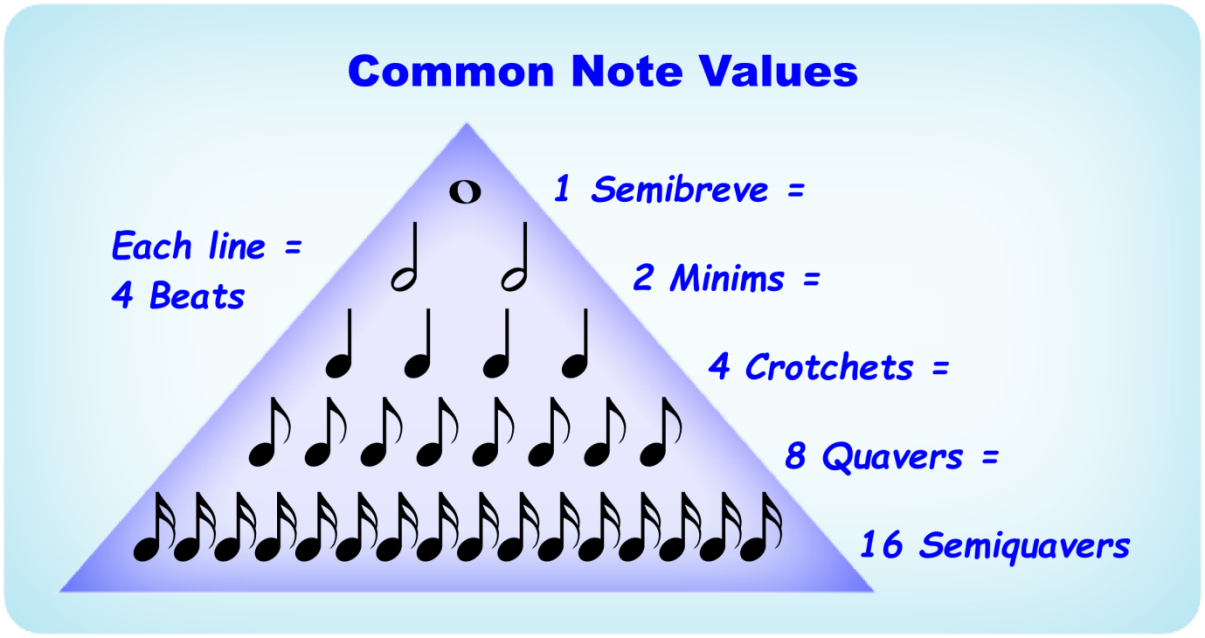
There are other time signatures which we're not going to deal with here, but by the time you come to need them you will understand them perfectly.

Note Values

The most important note values that you are likely to come across for a while are as follows:

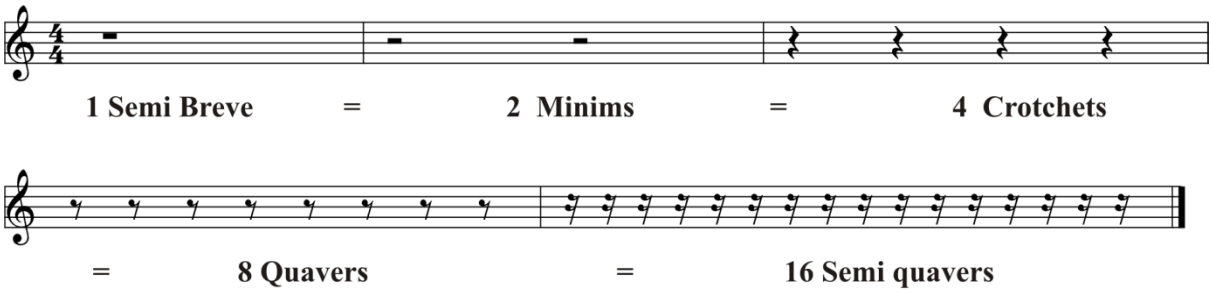


- The ‘semibreve’ also known as a ‘whole note’ counts as 4 beats (therefore taking up the whole of a **4/4** bar);
- The ‘minim’ also known as a ‘half note’ counts as 2 beats (therefore taking up half of a **4/4** bar);
- The ‘crotchet’ also known as a ‘quarter note’ counts as 1 beat (therefore taking up a quarter of a **4/4** bar);
- The ‘quaver’ also known as an ‘eighth note’ counts as half a beat (therefore taking up an eighth of a **4/4** bar);
- The ‘semiquaver’ also known as a ‘sixteenth note’ counts as a quarter of a beat (therefore taking up a sixteenth of a **4/4** bar). As more *‘tails’* are added to the quaver family the note values halve. So four tails will create a 64th note, but we are not going to go into these here.



Rests

Each bar must always compute to the correct value (except when 'lead in' notes are used). Therefore any space where no note is sounded is taken up by a 'rest(s)' which have similar values to the notes.



Note the similarity to the minim and semibreve rest. Although they look similar they are rarely confused as the semibreve takes up the whole bar. I always remember these as a minim *'rests'* and a semibreve *'hangs'!*

*Sorry, I don't get any of this. Could you just explain again exactly what **4/4** timing means?*

Ok, the top '**4**' of the '**4/4**' symbol means that there are four beats to the bar and the bottom '**4**' tells us the value of the beats, and as a crotchet is a quarter of a semibreve, this means that there are four quarter notes (crotchets) to each bar.

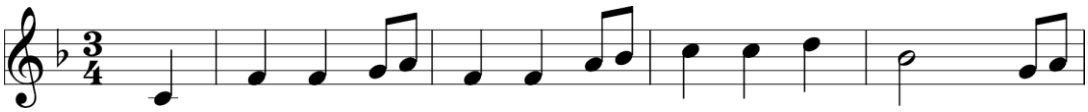
In the case of **3/4** this means that there are three quarter notes (crotchets) to a bar and **2/4**, two quarter notes to a bar.

In the case of **6/8** the there are six 'eighth' notes (quavers) to a bar.

Being totally ridiculous, if the time signature was **19/16** there would be nineteen sixteenth notes (semiquavers) to a bar, but such a time signature does not exist in practice - (maybe on another planet). However, time signatures such as **11/8** and **7/4** etc., although a little unusual *do* exist! - I love both of them and use them frequently!

Lead in Notes

Some tunes don't start on the first beat of a bar, in which case 'lead in' note(s) are used which will make the first bar shorter than the normal bar time. Sometimes (but not always) this is adjusted by also making the last bar a different length to make up the difference. An example of this is shown below which is in fact the first few bars of 'Away in a Manger'.



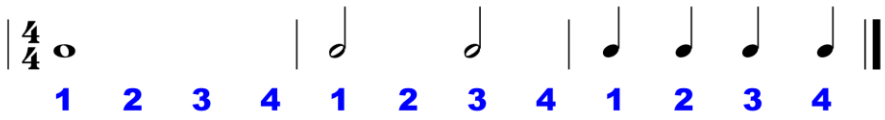
4/4 Timing

Now, looking at the example below, I want you to count out loud or in your head: **1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4** and clap your hands on the beats with the notes. Then you'll be clapping the rhythm.

Notice the **4/4** sign at the beginning and also the '**bar lines'** between each four beats.

4/4 Timing Example

Count evenly and clap on the notes!



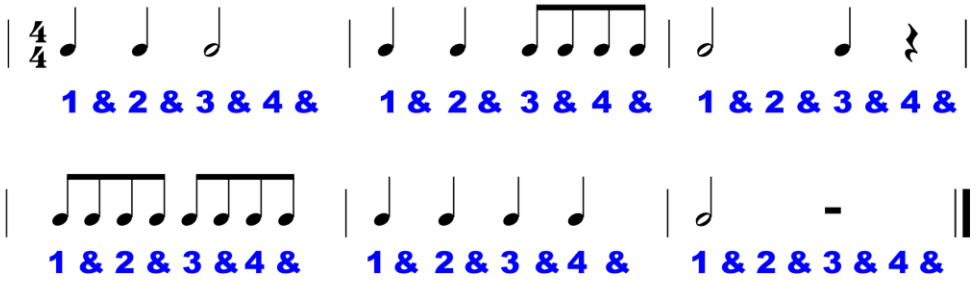
That should have been fairly simple.

Now I'd like you to count **1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &** etc., as in the next example we're going to include some quavers and also a couple of rests.

If you like, instead of clapping you can tap a steady four beats with your left hand and tap on the notes with your right hand, but don't forget to think the **'&s'** in your head!

4/4 Timing Example 2

Count evenly and clap on the notes!



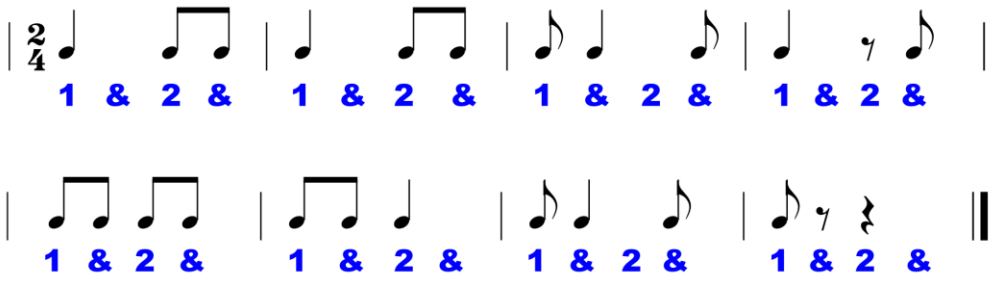
2/4 Timing

2/4, as I mentioned only a short while ago, means that there are two quarter notes (crotchets) to each bar. And this is just like 'marching' time. So when counting as we have done previously, you need to count **1 - 2 - 1 - 2** etc., or **1 & 2 & 1 & 2 &** etc. if there are quavers involved (which there are).

And accent should be given to both first and second beats.

2/4 Timing Example

Count evenly and clap on the notes!



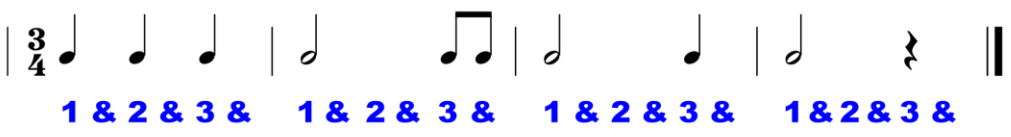
Just about all military music is written in **2/4** timing. If you've ever seen our glorious U.K. Queen's 'Trooping the Colour', you will have heard many! But **2/4** timing is also extensively used in all types of music, including folk and classical.

3/4 Timing

3/4 timing is Waltz timing and should be counted: **1 - 2 - 3 - 1 - 2 - 3** etc., or if there are quavers involved: **1 & 2 & 3 & 1 & 2 & 3 &** etc., with accent on the first beat only.

3/4 Timing Example

Count evenly and clap on the notes!



So exactly how long in time is a crotchet?

There is no set time, but they are always equal unless the tempo changes during the piece. The tempo for every piece of music is generally indicated at the beginning by showing how many crotchets there are per minute or in classical music the following *Italian* terms are used:

Italian		Translation		Beats per Minute
Grave	-	*Very Slow / Solemn*	-	*40 - 44*
Largo	-	*Slow*	-	*46 - 48*
Lento	-	*Slow*	-	*50 -52*
Adagio	-	*Leisurely*	-	*54 - 56*
Andante	-	*Easily*	-	*58 - 63*
Andantino	-	*Slightly Faster*	-	*64 - 72*
Moderato	-	*Moderately*	-	*74 -92*
Allegretto	-	*Fairly Quick*	-	*96 - 108*
Allegro	-	*Quick / Lively*	-	*112 - 116*
Vivace	-	*Briskly*	-	*120 - 132*
Presto	-	*Fast*	-	*138 - 168*
Prestissimo	-	*Fast as Possible*	-	*176 - 208*

So why are all these terms in Italian?

Because many of the most important composers from the Renaissance to the Baroque period were *Italian*. That's just about all the composers who eat spaghetti and who's names end in *'i'!*

I love playing the piano.
My technique and understanding
improves day by day!

Using a Metronome

If you have a modern electronic piano or keyboard there will almost certainly be a built in metronome which can be altered to any specific time value. Note that as well as setting the timing you will also need to set how many beats there are to a bar and the metronome will then 'ding' on the first beat of every bar and 'tick' on the others.

If you've listened to any of the links so far, you'll notice that I've added a metronome to them - with the 'ding' at the first beat of each bar (or measure).

If you are using an acoustic instrument, you will need an external metronome. Electronic versions are widely available and are very inexpensive, but there's something really special about the old fashioned traditional clockwork versions which unfortunately are more expensive. I love them - they come in the same category as cuckoo clocks for me - a touch of nostalgia! - But all they do is tick, tock and ding - no cuckoos!

What about when a piece slows down or speeds up?

In this event the no metronome (electronic or mechanical) would be able to cope with the infinite possibilities, but in these events the following terms are used in the music notation:

Italian		Translations
Accelerando	-	*Increase speed*
Rallentando	-	*Slow down*
Ritardando	-	*Slow down*
a tempo	-	*Resume original tempo*

That's it for timing and rhythm for the time being. I'll show an example of **6/8** timing a little later, as this requires the need for dotted notes which we haven't dealt with yet.

Your First Test

Now it's time for your first test.

Oh please, is this really necessary?

Well yes, but the test is only so that you can find out what you understand (or not) of what we've covered so far. And if you get any of the questions wrong, it only means that you will need to go back and have another look at what we've done so far.

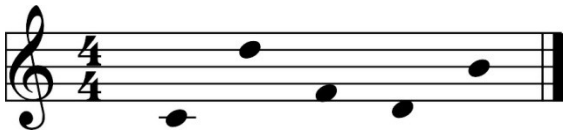
Question 1

Looking at the keyboard chart shown above what are the notes called that are numbered:

a) 25? - b) 30? - c) 22? - d) 15? - e) 29?

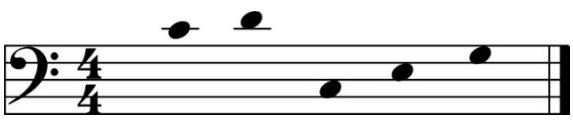
Question 2

Looking at the following diagram which is in the *treble clef*, identify the names of each note in order and show where they can be found on the keyboard chart (above). For instance the first note is **'C'** and is **No. 25** in the chart.



Question 3

Looking at the following diagram which is in the *bass clef*, as before, identify the notes in order and where they can be found on the keyboard chart (above).



Question 4

How many crotchets equals a minim?

Question 5

How many crotchets equals a semibreve?

Question 6

Is the following note a semibreve, minim, crotchet or quaver?

Question 7

Is the following note a semibreve, minim, crotchet or quaver?

Question 8

Is the following rest a semibreve, minim, crotchet or quaver?

Question 9

How many minims could there be in a **4/4** bar?

Question 10

Is **F sharp** the same note as **G flat**, **A flat** or **B flat**?

The correct answers can be found towards the end of the book.

If you have answered any questions incorrectly, you should look again at the information shown previously. But do also remember that the most important aspect of playing the piano or keyboard is the actual physical practice, so please work hard at getting your fingers working well and pay attention to correct hand / seating position, timing, accuracy and smoothness in your playing. All of these items will be covered next.

Let's Begin

Hopefully you now understand a little of the theory explained so far which obviously is important. But having understood this of course you also need the physical technical ability to hit the right notes with the correct velocity in the right order at the right time. This may take months of intense practice to become reasonably proficient and years to become superb. But make no mistake about it *anyone* can do it - at any age. Don't let anyone ever tell you that you are too old or too anything else to do this - I repeat - ***anyone can do it!*** And if you're knocking on a bit like me, it could give you a new lease of life!

Do also remember that the ability to read music is not necessarily related to how good a musician you could become. Some of the world's greatest musicians are unable to read music at all (Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder etc.), but a basic understanding will certainly help you get going. Even some great sighted musicians are lousy sight readers.

One thing that every great musician has in common is that they all have an understanding of scales, chords and harmony (which will be covered herein), and would have all spent many hours a day practicing finger techniques. Clearly they were motivated!

In short the more you put into it - practice - the more pleasure you will get out of it. The satisfaction achieved is totally immense. And there are some wonderful pieces of music available that are relatively easy to play. But it's never worth going beyond your capabilities as this will just cause anxiety. Take it one step at a time!

Correct Hand and Seating Positioning

Firstly it's a good idea to make sure that your hands are clean and warm. You can achieve this by soaking them in warm water for a while, but then dry them thoroughly. Alternatively, sit on them to warm them up; but if you happen to be sitting on a cold marble slab, nestle your right hand under your left armpit and your left hand under your right armpit for a while which is a method that I used regularly whilst gigging around Europe during the cold winters of the 60's.

The next thing is to be sure that you adopt a correct seating position so that you can achieve the correct hand position. If your seating is incorrect (too low or too high) then your hand positioning will never be correct. I recommend using a height adjustable piano stool so that you can experiment in order to get comfortable. Or of course you may have an adjustable keyboard stand.

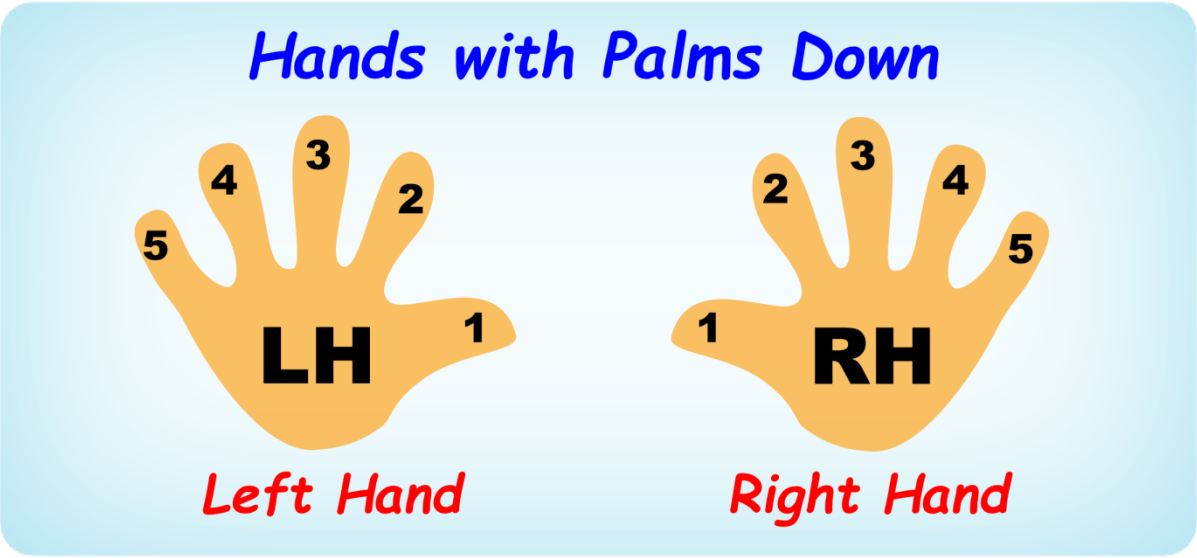
Do also take into account the fact that you may need to use the pedals, or at least the sustain pedal. So both feet should be comfortably flat on the floor to begin with.

And of course your stool should be positioned so that you are seated more or less in the centre of the keyboard - belly button opposite **middle C**!

The next pictures illustrate the correct and incorrect hand positions.

Fingering

As far as music is concerned what most people will call their 'first' finger is their 'second' finger as in music the 'first' finger is always your thumb (on both hands).



Your First Exercises

As your music reading ability is no doubt limited right now, for our first few exercises we're going to use five notes only (in each hand), all of which are consecutive to one another so that you don't get lost. Each finger will always play the same note, but not necessarily in the same order.

These initial exercises will enable you to utilise every finger in both hands thereby giving each finger equal practice. And we'll only be using time elements that we've already covered: crotchets, minims and semibreves (and quavers a little later).

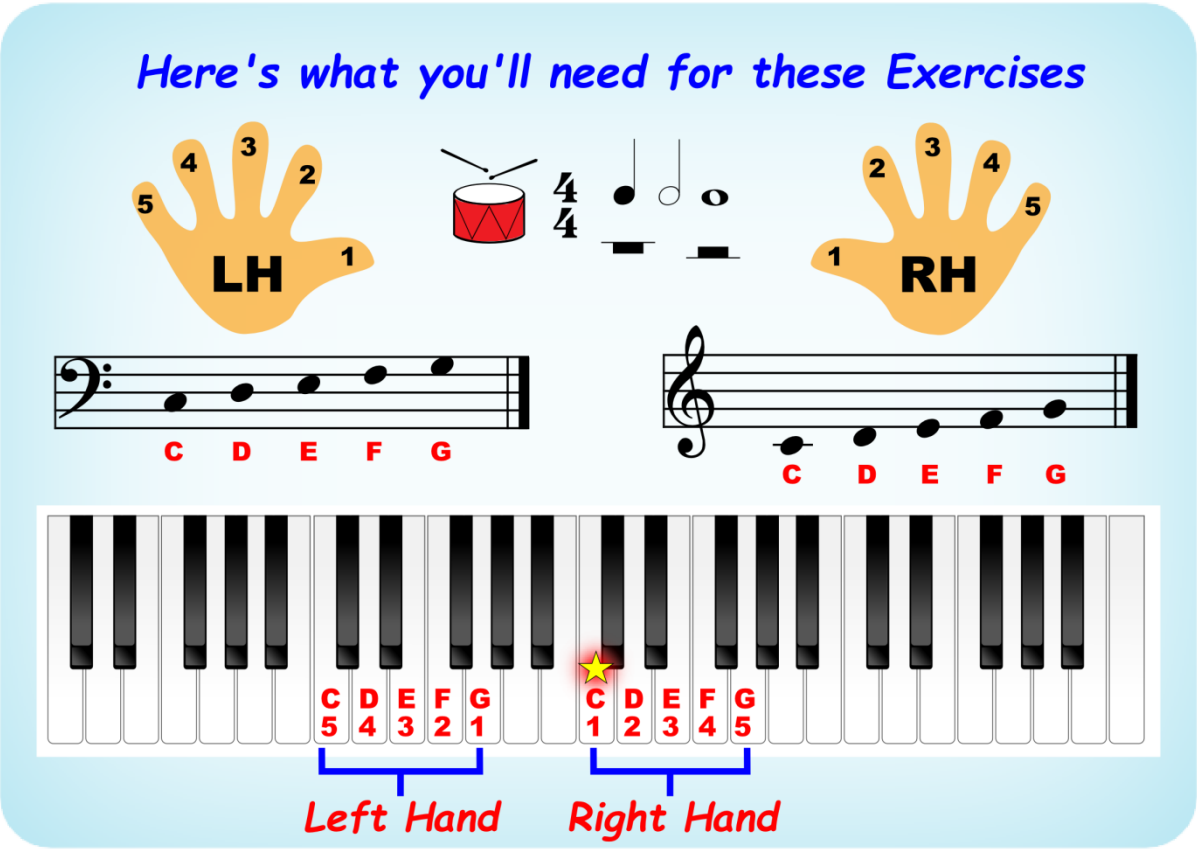
Begin by resting your hands lightly on these five notes in a relaxed claw like position; then when you are ready begin depressing the keys in the order shown in a piston type motion using the tips of your fingers and the sides of your thumbs. Make sure that you release each note before playing the next except for the minims and semibreves which should be sustained longer. And try to play each note with equal pressure, which I know is not easy at first.

Most importantly keep to a strict rhythm which can be as slow as you like, ideally use a metronome set to a comfortable speed.

Each exercise should be repeated seven times and speed can be increased only when you are ready. You will see the significance of 'seven' later!

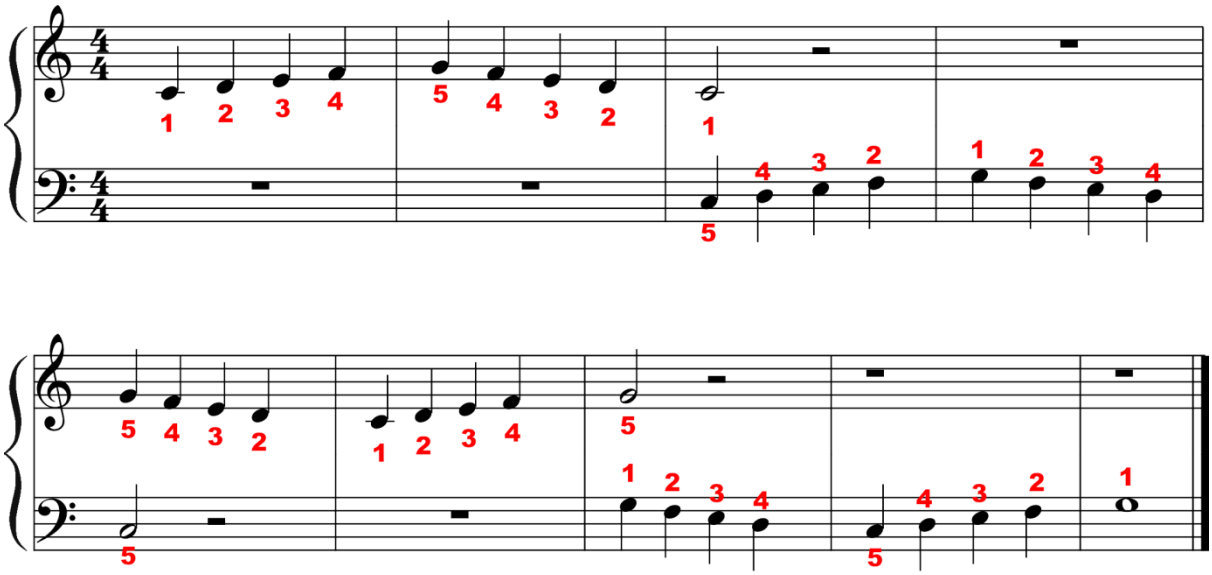
All of the exercises can be heard by clicking on the hyperlinks as they appear (as explained previously) or by downloading them from the website.

Each of these exercises uses the notes and fingering as shown in the next diagram. Note that the thumb of your right hand plays middle **C** and your left hand plays the same notes an octave below. Although both hands are used, they are not used together except for single sustained notes. In each case try and be aware of which notes you are playing. Perhaps sing along as you are doing it (silently if you wish) **- C D E F G F** etc.



Exercise 1

This one is the simplest as it's just straight up and down, one finger after the other in order. Even though eventually you will find this very easy, I understand that if you're a complete beginner, even this will take some practice. But remember speed is not an issue.



Exercise 2

This exercise uses the same five notes and fingers, but in a different order. If you hold your fingers over the notes, you can't fail to hit the correct ones, but remember, do try and be aware of which notes you are playing.