

The Basics of Reading Music

CHAPTER

1

INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL

Definition of Theory

Ask your students if they know what theory is about. Most of them will have no idea what they have signed up for! Explain to them that the study of music theory can make them better musicians and performers, better in their solo work and their ensembles, better at classical music and jazz.

Go through the style periods (Table 1) and discuss each of them. Ask students to name historical figures, literary figures, and musical figures from each period. Ask them questions about the names of the periods. For example, what were the Middle Ages in the middle of? What does the word “Renaissance” mean? What does “Baroque” mean? What relationship does the Classical period have to the Classics? What does Romantic mean, if not love? Be sure to call their attention to the term “Common Practice.” That will come up repeatedly throughout *Theory Essentials*.

Music Notation

There are examples of early notation (from the Middle Ages and Renaissance) on the website. Show them to your students. Students are often fascinated to learn that the earliest notation appeared to be little more than “squiggles” and that the earliest staves did not contain five lines. The musical alphabet seems simple enough to students, until you inform them that they must know it (literally) backward and forward. Encourage them to practice saying it backward from G to A as they walk between classes or drive in their cars. Challenge them to master it in a day.

Naming Notes

Many of your students will already read music. If so, the material in this section will be a review. However, even the most “seasoned” reader of music may not know some of the facts presented here. Many students read music fluently without ever knowing what the function of a clef sign is. Yes, they know that treble means high and bass means low, but they don’t realize that the lines and spaces are named the way they are because the clef signs impart their names to one line of the staff. Drill the “real” names of the clefs, not the nicknames. Some students will need or want extra practice in note naming. There are several pages of supplementary exercises in the web version of Chapter 1.

The Grand Staff and Ledger Lines

The most difficult part of the ledger lines section is the exercise on rewriting given notes in a staff with a different clef (Practice Box 1.3). This exercise is crucial because it represents the kind of thought process needed later for part writing. (For example, the tenor voice needs a D, but many students will be confused about which D is required, the line note on the staff or the ledger line note above the staff.) When students have trouble with this exercise, remind them to ask themselves this question: “Is the given note above or below Middle C?” The answer to this question will also have to be true of the note they write. Tell them to imagine Middle C as a point of reference.

It is also important to emphasize that the *ottava* sign is primarily used above the treble staff and below the bass staff. This sign is rarely (if ever) used to lower treble clef notes or to raise bass clef notes.

Octave Identification

The system presented here is not the only system of octave identification in use. Two other viable systems are demonstrated below and may be taught in addition to or in place of the system presented in the book.

The image shows a grand staff with a treble clef on top and a bass clef on the bottom. Notes are placed on various ledger lines above and below the staff. Below the staff, there are symbols representing octave identification systems. The first system uses letters A, B, and C with subscripts. The second system uses letters c and b with subscripts. The third system uses lowercase letters for voice ranges.

AAA – BBB	CC – BB	C – B	c – b	c ¹ – b ¹	c ² – b ²	c ³ – b ³	c ⁴ – b ⁴	c ⁵	
sub-contra	contra	great	small	c ¹ – b ¹	c ² – b ²	c ³ – b ³	c ⁴ – b ⁴	c ⁵	

Half and Whole Steps

One of the most helpful skills a teacher can acquire is the ability to draw a keyboard diagram on the board quickly! The discussion of half and whole steps begins the students' visualization of the piano keyboard, and you will often need to help them see distances by drawing diagrams on your board.

It can be very helpful to do verbal drills in class. Name two letters of the alphabet that are a step apart and ask if the distance is a half step or a whole step.

Accidentals

The most common misconception here is that flats and sharps always refer to black keys. Begin by teaching the names of the black keys, but then bring up the possibility of something like E#. Remind students that there is nothing in the definition of either of these terms that says they have to be black keys on the keyboard. Students will always want to know "why." Explain that in Chapter 2, they will begin to learn patterns where every letter of the musical alphabet will have to be used, no matter what the pitch looks like on the piano.

Many students who already read music, but who have never had much experience writing it, will have a tendency to place their accidentals on the wrong side of the note (on the right). Explain that when speaking the names of notes and when writing them in text, such as G#, they are spoken and written after the letter. However, on the staff, it does little good to read from left to right and encounter the accidental after the note it affects.

It is difficult at this point to explain the concept of naturals. Typically naturals are used to alter notes when there is a key signature; however, key signatures are not introduced until Chapter 2. For now, use the idea of canceling a sharp or flat within a measure as the purpose for using natural signs.

Enharmonic Names

Enharmonicism is a major theme of many aspects of music theory. Make sure students understand that there is more than one way to write virtually every sound in music notation.

Music Manuscript

If you ever hope to be able to read your students' handwritten music, now is your chance! Make them write lots of clefs, notes, and accidentals now, make them write it neatly, and accept nothing less than accurate, legible music. There are two schools of thought on drawing quarter notes. Some like to draw ovals and fill them in; others like to make a flat, diagonal note head with three or four strokes of the pencil across a line or space. The author's preference is the latter, but it is crucial that students be aware of the perils of drawing space notes that wander across the lines and line notes that fill up too much of a space. When you send your students to write at the board, if they are encouraged to draw oval notes, often they will spend a great deal of time doing what the author likes to term "coloring." If you have your students draw oval quarter notes, remind them that this is not an art class and that where music manuscript is concerned, time considerations should take precedence over beauty.

Music for Analysis

If you have time in class, listen to the Bach Prelude (website) and discuss some of the notational aspects. Students will always want to know why some of the stems go the “wrong” direction. Explain the considerations of writing music for the piano, and how there are musical considerations that can take precedence over “right” and “wrong.”

A good exercise is to go around the room and ask one student to name all the pitches in measure one, another student to name all the notes in measure two, and so on.

Melody

Exercise 1. Play various notes on the piano and ask students to sing them. It is important to do this on the first day of classes! You may discover that you have students in your class who cannot match pitch. In the author’s experience, the lack of ability to match pitch does not necessarily mean that a student is “tone deaf.” In fact, truly tone-deaf students are quite rare. More likely, it means that this is a student, usually an instrumentalist, who has never been called upon to sing and who has no idea how to make a connection between the vocal chords and what the ears are hearing. If possible, this student should be placed in a voice class right away, where the student can be taught to make that physical connection between the vocal chords and the sense of hearing, by someone who specializes in singing (which many theory teachers do not).

It is also helpful at this time to make a note as to the vocal ranges of the students in your class. Eventually the students will be called upon to sing four-part harmony and you will have to know their ranges in order to divide them into sections.

It may also be helpful at this time to ask students to sing not just single notes, but also two-note pairs, ascending or descending. Usually these should be seconds and thirds. The purpose of this exercise is to determine that students can hear changes of pitch and the direction of those changes.

Exercise 2. The following melodies are representative of the types of melodies you should ask your students to sing back to you after hearing it only once. The goal is to determine the degree of pitch memory that your students currently possess. You may transpose the melodies if desired. Many other similar melodies may be used.



Exercise 3. Use the following harmonic intervals or others that are similar. Play a harmonic interval for each student. Ask the student to sing the two pitches separately. This is a difficult exercise and some students will not be able to distinguish the individual pitches.

