

Music Theory Essentials

Course Outline

A comprehensive curriculum for music learning across multiple modules, covering everything from musical notation fundamentals to composition techniques.



by Elizabeth Sullivan Music



Module 1: First Notes

Unit 1: The Music Alphabet and Staff

Lesson 1: Introduction to the Music Staff - Understand the basic layout of the five-line musical staff and its purpose in notation.

Lesson 2: Basic Note Names - Introduce the seven primary note names in the musical alphabet and their significance.

Lesson 3: Acronyms (FACE, EGBDF) - Utilize handy acronyms like FACE for spaces and EGBDF for lines to simplify the recall process.

Lesson 4: Ledger Lines - Recognize notes that exist outside the standard staff through the use of ledger lines.

Lesson 5: Note Placement on the Staff - Associate the seven primary note names with their specific positions on the musical staff, especially as they relate to the treble clef.

Lesson 6: Bar Lines and the Double Bar - Dive into the significance of bar lines, their variations, and their crucial function in musical pieces.

Unit 2: Dive Into the Treble Clef

Lesson 1: Introduction to the Treble Clef - Familiarize oneself with the look and placement of the treble clef on the musical staff.

Lesson 2: Octaves and Middle C - Understand the importance of middle C and its relation to the treble clef. Introduce octave numbers (C1, C2, C3, Middle C4 etc.)

Lesson 3: Ledger Lines - Delve into how notes are represented beyond the staff using ledger lines in conjunction with the treble clef.

Unit 3: Exploring Your Instrument

Lesson 1: Playing your First Notes - Introduce finger numbering, C Position (for piano), Basic Hand Placement & Posture, Dexterity Exercises (physically playing)

Lesson 2: Intervals (Skips and Steps) - Understanding the basics of intervals and ascending/descending notes. Semitones and steps. Introduction to the chromatic scales as a scale based on all semitones.

Lesson 3: Major Scale - Learn how to play the C major scale. WWHWWWH (interval understanding of scale structure). Outlining all of the intervals within the major scale based on semitones (M2: 2 semitones, M3: 4 semitones, P4: 5 semitones etc.)

Module 2: Simple Rhythms

Can emphasize the use of Rhythm Games in this module

Unit 1: Understanding Beats

Lesson 1: Beat vs Rhythm - Beats being the constant feeling in tempo (never changes).

Rhythm is dynamic and changes. Tempo markings.

Lesson 2: Note Values and Duration - Rhythm Tree (Content ID: 63)

Lesson 3: Introduction to Rests - Rhythm Tree (Rests)

Lesson 4: Time Signatures - Numbers can change, but the formula is the same. 4/4, 3/4, 4/8, 3/8, etc.

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Unit 2: Applying Rhythms in Context

Lesson 1: Reading Simple Rhythms - Playing rhythms (rest and played rhythms)

Lesson 2: Rhythm and Melody Integration - Playing melodies without rests (Twinkle Twinkle, Frère Jacques, etc). Finger Positions.

Lesson 3: Rhythm and Silence in Melodies - Playing melodies with rests

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Unit 3: Understanding Subdivisions

Lesson 1: Half Notes to Quarter Notes - Understand subdivisions and play the break up of half notes

Lesson 2: Quarter Notes to Eighths - Understand quarter note subdivisions and play the break up of quarter notes

Lesson 3: Eighths to Sixteenths - Understand eighth note subdivisions and play the break up of eighth notes

Module 3: More Reading Basics

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Unit 1: Dive Into the Bass Clef

Lesson 1: Introduction to the Bass Clef - Familiarize oneself with the look and placement of the bass clef on the musical staff.

Lesson 2: Octaves and Middle C - Understand the importance of middle C and its relation to the bass clef. (Note: Possibly introduce octaves)

Lesson 3: Ledger Lines - Delve into how notes are represented beyond the staff using ledger lines in conjunction with the bass clef.

Lesson 4: Intervals (Skips and Steps) - Understanding the basics of intervals and ascending/descending notes. (Semi tones, thirds, regular C major intervals)

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Unit 2: The Grand Staff

Lesson 1: Introduction to the Bass Clef - Familiarize oneself with the look and placement of the bass clef on the musical staff.

Lesson 2: Octaves and Middle C - Understand the importance of middle C and its relation to the bass clef. (Note: Possibly introduce octaves)

Lesson 3: Ledger Lines - Delve into how notes are represented beyond the staff using ledger lines in conjunction with the bass clef.

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Unit 3: Melodic Patterns

Lesson 1: Simple Melodic Patterns - Ascending and descending melodic lines. Stepwise motion: moving between adjacent notes. Melodic leaps: Incorporating larger intervals to create more dynamic phrases. Repetition and variation, using repeated motifs to establish familiarity.

Lesson 2: Melodic Phrasing - Repetition and variation. Phrasing of melodic lines (much like sentences in English). Introduction to legato, staccato, tenuto, etc. Practice playing melodies with different melodic patterns and phrasings.

Lesson 3: Listening and Analysis - Analyze examples of melodies from different genres, identifying specific melodic patterns.

Module 4: Dynamics

Unit 1: Understanding Dynamics in Music

Lesson 1: Introduction to Dynamics - **Definition:** Explain that dynamics refer to the variations in loudness and intensity in music. They add emotional expression and contrast to a piece. **Importance:** Discuss how dynamics enhance musical storytelling and engage the listener.

Lesson 2: Dynamic Markings - **Common Terms:** Introduce the basic dynamic markings and their meanings: **p** (piano): soft, **f** (forte): loud, **mp** (mezzo-piano): moderately soft, **mf** (mezzo-forte): moderately loud, **pp** (pianissimo): very soft, **ff** (fortissimo): very loud, **crescendo** (cresc.): gradually getting louder, **decrescendo** (decresc.) or **diminuendo**: gradually getting softer

Unit 2: Interpreting Dynamics in Music

Lesson 1: Reading Scores - Teach students how to identify dynamic markings in a musical score and understand their context within the piece.

Lesson 2: Expressive Playing - Discuss how dynamics can change the mood and character of the music. Encourage students to think about how they can use dynamics to convey emotion.

Unit 3: Practical Exercises

Lesson 1: Dynamic Variations - Have students practice playing a simple scale or melody at different dynamic levels. For example, start softly (p), gradually increase to loud (f), and then return to soft (p).

Lesson 2: Crescendo and Decrescendo - Choose a short passage and practice applying a crescendo and decrescendo, focusing on smooth transitions and maintaining control.

Lesson 3: Contrast in Dynamics - Select a piece that has contrasting dynamics and practice emphasizing those differences. Discuss how it affects the overall interpretation of the music.

Unit 4: Listening and Analysis

Lesson 1: Active Listening - Play recordings of pieces that showcase dynamic contrasts. Ask students to identify where dynamics change and discuss how it impacts their perception of the music.

Module 5: Key Signatures and Circle of 5ths

Unit 1: Introduction to the Circle of 5ths

Lesson 1: What is the Circle of 5ths? - Definition: The Circle of Fifths is a visual representation of the relationship between different keys in music. It shows how keys are related by perfect fifths and helps musicians understand key signatures, chord progressions, and modulation. Structure: Explain that the Circle is arranged in a clockwise direction with each step representing a perfect fifth. Starting from C major, the order is: C → G → D → A → E → B → F# → Db → Ab → Eb → Bb → F



Unit 2: Key Signatures

Lesson 1: Major Keys - Discuss how each key in the Circle has a corresponding key signature. As you move clockwise, each key adds one sharp. For example: C major: 0 sharps, G major: 1 sharp, D major: 2 sharps, and so on. Lesson 2: Minor Keys - Introduce the relative minor keys, which can be found by moving three steps counterclockwise from each major key. Relative vs. Parallel Minors (A minor is the relative minor of C major). Lesson 3: Reading the Circle of 5th's - Breaking down how to decode using a system I've developed

Unit 3: Understanding Harmonic Progressions

Lesson 1: Roman Numeral Chord Progressions Major Keys - Exp. I ii iii IV V vi viidim. Lesson 2: Roman Numeral Chord Progressions Minor Keys - Exp. i iidim III iv v VI vii. Lesson 3: Common Harmonic Chord Progressions - Show how the Circle of Fifths can help in creating chord progressions. Common progressions like I-IV-V or ii-V-I can be easily visualized using the Circle. For instance, in C major: I (C) - IV (F) - V (G)

Module 6: Sight-Reading Fundamentals

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Unit 1: Preparing to Sight-Read

Lesson 1: What is Sight-Reading? - Explain that sight reading is the ability to read and perform music notation at first sight without prior preparation.
Lesson 2: The Importance of Sight-Reading - Discuss why sight reading is a valuable skill for musicians, including improving musical fluency, enhancing ear training, and increasing overall musicianship.

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Unit 2: Basic Sight-Reading Practice

Lesson 1: Steps to Effective Sight Reading - Preview the Music: Encourage students to look over the piece before playing. Identify key signatures, time signatures, and any dynamic markings or articulations. Staff and Clefs: Review the musical staff, treble and bass clefs, and the placement of notes. Note Values: Familiarize students with different note values (whole, half, quarter, eighth notes) and rests. Time Signatures: Explain how time signatures dictate the rhythm and structure of a piece.
Lesson 2: Recognizing Melodic Patterns - Identify Patterns: Teach students to recognize common patterns in music, such as scales, arpeggios, and intervals. This will help them anticipate what they will play. Rhythm First: Suggest clapping or tapping the rhythm before playing the notes. This helps internalize the timing and feel of the piece.

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Unit 3: Practice Techniques

Lesson 1: Start Slow - When beginning to play, remind students to start slowly. They should focus on accuracy rather than speed, gradually increasing tempo as they become more comfortable.
Lesson 2: Use Simple Pieces - Recommend starting with simple melodies or exercises that are within their skill level. Gradually increase the complexity as they improve.
Lesson 3: Daily Exercises - Incorporate daily sight-reading exercises into practice routines. This could include reading short excerpts from various genres.

Module 6: Composition



Unit 1: Introduction to Composition

Lesson 1: What is Composition - Explain that music composition is the process of creating original music, combining elements such as melody, harmony, rhythm, and form. Discuss how composition allows musicians to express their creativity, convey emotions, and share their unique voice.



Unit 2: Elements of Composition

Lesson 1: Melody - Define melody as a sequence of notes that are musically satisfying. Discuss how to create memorable melodies using stepwise motion and interesting intervals.

Lesson 2: Harmony - Introduce harmony as the combination of different musical notes played or sung simultaneously. Explain the role of chords and chord progressions in supporting melodies.

Lesson 3: Rhythm - Highlight the significance of rhythm in music. Discuss how different note values, time signatures, and rhythmic patterns contribute to the overall feel of a piece.

Lesson 4: Form - Explain musical form as the structure of a composition. Introduce common forms such as verse-chorus, ABA, and sonata form, and discuss how they provide a framework for organizing musical ideas.



Unit 3: Inspiration and Ideas

Lesson 1: Finding Inspiration - Encourage students to find inspiration from various sources, such as nature, art, emotions, or existing music. Suggest keeping a journal for ideas and themes.

Lesson 2: Starting Points - Discuss different ways to start a composition, such as creating a catchy melody, developing a chord progression, or establishing a rhythmic motif.



Unit 4: Practical Composition Exercise

Lesson 1: Create a Short Piece - Have students compose a short piece (8-16 measures) using the elements discussed. They can: Choose a key and time signature. Write a melody with an accompanying chord progression. Experiment with different rhythmic patterns.

Lesson 2: Reflection and Revision - Editing and Improving: Discuss the importance of revising compositions. Encourage students to listen critically to their work and make adjustments to improve dynamics, phrasing, and overall flow.

Lesson 3: Experimentation - Emphasize that composition is a process of exploration. Encourage students to try different styles, instruments, and techniques to expand their creativity.