Practical Music Theory

A Community Musicianship Course
Capella Nova, Inc. – July 2020

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# Week I: Music Literacy – An Introduction

1. ***What is Music Literacy & How do we develop fluency?***

**Musical literacy** is the reading, writing, and playing of music, as well an understanding of cultural practice and historical and social contexts.

Music literacy and music education are frequently talked about relationally and causatively; however, they are not interchangeable terms as complete musical literacy also concerns an understanding of the diverse practices involved in teaching music pedagogy and its impact on literacy. Even then, there those that argue[[1]](#footnote-1) against the relational and causal link between music education and literacy, instead advocating for the solely interactional relationship between social characteristics and music styles. “Musical communications, like verbal ones, must be put in the right contexts by receivers if their meanings are to come through unobscured[[2]](#footnote-2)” which is why the pedagogical influence of teaching an individual to become musically-literate might be confused with overarching ‘literacy’ itself.

‘Musical literacy’ is likewise not to be confused with ‘music theory’ or ‘musicology’. These two components are aspects of music education that ultimately act as a means to an end of achieving such literacy. Even then, many scholars[[3]](#footnote-3) debate the relevancy of these educational elements to musical literacy at all. The term, ‘musicality’, is again a distinct term that is separate from the concept of ‘musical literacy’, as the way in which a musician expresses emotions through performance is not indicative of their music-reading ability[[4]](#footnote-4).

Given that musical literacy involves mechanical and descriptive processes (such as reading, writing and playing) as well as a broader cultural understanding of both historical and contemporary practice (i.e. listening, playing, and musical interpretation while listening and/or playing), education in these visual, reading/writing, auditory, and kinesthetic areas can work in tandem to achieve literacy as a whole.

1. ***Talent vs. Skill***

**Talent** refers to the alleged natural ability to do something, while **Skill** refers to the ability which is acquired by training and practicing. **Talent** is supposedly an inborn ability or natural aptitude of a person which is often hidden and needs recognition. **Skill** on the other hand is a learnt ability, and it can be developed in someone if they put their time and efforts into the study and development of it.

Most people mistake Love and Desire in the arts as talent. Many students are identified young as people who love music, for example, and desire to “do music” and are labeled as “talented.” Ordinary well-meaning people mistake the quick learning and fast early accomplishments of new musicians as an innate ability instead of recognizing that the student’s love of and desire for music motivated them to learn and therefore achieve those successes. This often leads to compounding mistakes by the students’ parents and mentors as focus is placed on further accomplishments in order to validate their “talent” instead of fostering their love and desire for music and feeding their hunger for more knowledge and varied experiences as they develop greater and greater skills.

**Talent, then, is not an innate ability but a sincere love of the art at hand and therefore the desire to practice and develop skill in the subject area.** Anyone you encounter in your life who has impressive skills (in whatever field or area, not just the arts or music!) developed them from nothing at some point. Do not invalidate the lifelong work of a professional anything by attributing their skill to talent! And do not cripple the aficionado by continuing to claim that impressive skill is somehow a divine gift they needed to be blessed with at birth in order to achieve.

*Side note: The word “talent” comes from talenta, plural of talentum meaning a “sum of money.” Developing skills definitely requires a sum of moneyand remember: Time is money!*

# Week II: Hearing Pitch & Rhythm

1. ***Solfege***

Have you ever felt a melody go in one ear and out the other? Like there was nothing concrete to grasp and help you remember? You create a great melody in your head or while humming along, but within a moment it’s gone.

Hundreds of years ago, a system was developed to enable musicians to recognize and transcribe those sought-after melodies. **Solfege** (also called solfa, or solfeggio) provides a framework for melodies by establishing recognizable relationships between pitches, and training your ear to hear patterns. It is an excellent system for learning the architecture behind music, and is a fundamental concept of ear training.

**Solfege** is a method of naming pitches. It works by assigning a syllable to each note of the musical scale. So rather than, say, naming a C major scale as C D E F G A B C, you can name it as **do re mi fa sol la ti do**. This syllabic approach carries a great advantage, since the syllables are easier to sing than the letters.



1. ***Takadimi***

**Takadimi** is a system devised by Richard Hoffman, William Pelto, and John W. White in 1996 in order to teach rhythm skills. **Takadimi**, while utilizing rhythmic symbols borrowed from classical South Indian carnatic music, differentiates itself from this method by focusing the syllables on meter and on western tonal rhythm. Takadimi places specific syllables at certain places within a beat.[[5]](#footnote-5)



1. ***Improvisation***

Just as we ask children to write stories or write about their weekend in order to practice their reading and writing skills and learn to *synthesize* their knowledge, it is important for us to always, as we learn our skills, improvise melodies and rhythmic patterns in order to further ingrain the skills as we go. Improvisation doesn’t have to be complicated or perfect, as long as it’s spontaneous and done **often**!

# Week III: written pitch

***Notes***

When written on a staff, a note indicates a pitch and rhythmic value. The notation consists of a notehead (either empty or filled in), and optionally can include a stem, beam, dot, or flag.

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***Staff***

Notes can’t convey their pitch information without being placed on a staff. A staff consists of five horizontal lines, evenly spaced. The plural of staff is staves.



***Clefs***

Notes still can’t convey their pitch information if the staff doesn’t include a clef. A clef indicates which pitches are assigned to the lines and spaces on a staff. The two most commonly used clefs are the treble and bass clef; others that you’ll see relatively frequently are alto and tenor clef.

The Treble Clef or “G” Clef is so named because the symbol is a stylized letter "G" that encircles the line of the staff, indicating where the "G" above middle C is located.

The Bass Clef of “F” Clef is so named because the two dots the straddle the fourth line up on the indicates where the "F" below middle C is located.

***Grand Staff***

The grand staff consists of two staves, one that uses a treble clef, and one that uses a bass clef. The staves are connected by a curly brace. The “middle” C on the grand staff corresponds to the “middle” C on the piano.



# Week IV: Written Meter and Time

 ***Protonotation***

Protonotation is a system of musical notation stripped of complicating elements, and focusing only on basic elements of meter, rhythm, and scale degree. (This system is drawn from Gary Karpinski’s Manual for Ear Training and Sight Singing.) Following is an example melody in both standard notation and protonotation.





 ***Time Signatures***

The time signature is a notational convention used in Western musical notation to specify how many beats (pulses) are contained in each measure (bar), and which note value is equivalent to a beat.

The top number in a time signature indicates the number of beats in a measure, and the bottom number indicates what note duration gets counted as one beat. Read the time signature like a fraction to extrapolate this information. For example, the time signature of 4/4 is a measure with four beats, the quarter note getting the beat. The time signature of 2/2 is a measure with two beats, the half note getting the beat.

 ***Rhythmic Values and their Divisions***

Rhythm refers to the combination of long and short durations in time. Durations are notated with either unfilled or filled noteheads. Unfilled noteheads can appear with or without a stem; filled noteheads always appear with a stem. Flags can be added to the stems of filled noteheads; each flag shortens the duration by half.

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Rests represent silence in musical notation. For each durational symbol there exists a corresponding rest.



Dots and ties allow for basic durations to be lengthened. A dot occurs after a pitch or a rest, and it increases its duration by half. For example, if a quarter note is equivalent in duration to two eighth notes, a dotted quarter note would be equivalent to three eighth notes. Generally, undotted notes divide into two notes; dotted notes divide into three. Thus, undotted notes are typically used to represent the beat level in simple meter, while dotted notes are used to represent the beat in compound meter.



A tie lengthens a duration by connecting two adjacent identical pitches. Ties are used to either sustain a pitch beyond the length of a single measure, or to make a particular rhythmic grouping in a measure more clear.

In the example below, the duration of the first pitch is longer than a single measure, so it is represented by tying the dotted half note, which lasts the full measure, to the first beat of the subsequent measure.



 ***Beams***

It’s important to remember that notation is intended to be read by performers. You should always strive to make your notation as easy to interpret as possible. Part of this includes grouping the rhythms such that they convey the beat unit and the beat division. Beams are used to group any notes at the beat division level or shorter that fall within the same beat.

In this example, the eighth notes are not grouped with beams, making it difficult to interpret the triple meter.



If we re-notate the above example so that the notes that fall within the same beat are grouped together with a beam, it makes the music much easier to read.



***Borrowed divisions***

Typically, a meter is defined by the presence of a consistent beat division: division by two in simple meter, and by three in compound meter. Occasionally, composers will use a triple division of the beat in a simple meter, or a duple division of the beat in a compound meter.

Triplets are borrowed from compound meter, and may occur at both the beat division and subdivision levels, as seen below.



Likewise, duplets can be imported from simple meter into a compound meter.



# Bibliography

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1. Swanwick, 1999, as cited in Csikos & Dohany, 2016, p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Levinson, 1990, p.24 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Levinson, 1990; Csapo, 2004; Waller, 2010; Hodges & Nolker, 2011; Burton, 2015; Mills & McPherson, 2015; Csikos & Dohany, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wolf, 1976, as cited in Gudmundsdottir, 2010, p.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hoffman, Richard; William Pelto; John. W. White (1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)