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The Music Notation Project

Exploring Alternative Music Notation Systems

Improving Upon Traditional Music Notation

Many people struggle to learn to read and play music, and many give up before they become proficient. Could a better notation system make reading, writing, and playing music more enjoyable and easier to learn? We think so.

The Chromatic Staff Approach

Here is a chromatic scale on a traditional diatonic staff (above) and the same chromatic scale on a chromatic staff with five lines (below). This is just one of many versions of chromatic staff.

C C# D D# E F F# G G# A A# B C

Basic 5-Line Chromatic Staff

C C# D D# E F F# G G# A A# B C
D♭ E♭ F♭ G♭ A♭ B♭

When you listen to the scale, which staff best represents what you hear?



0:00 / 0:07



On a chromatic staff each note has its own line or space on the staff. On the traditional staff only seven notes have their own line or space, the notes from just one key (C major/A minor, the white keys on the piano). The remaining notes (the black keys) have to be represented by altering these seven notes with sharp signs (#) or flat signs (b), either in the key signature or as an accidental.

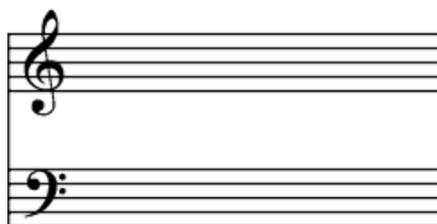
aspects of traditional notation such as [key signatures](#), [accidentals](#), [clefs](#), [octaves](#), and [intervals](#). The rest of this page shows how.

Many Different Kinds of Chromatic Staff

There are many variations on this chromatic staff theme, with a number of different line patterns (see [Notation Systems](#)). We use a basic five-line version just to introduce the concept, not to suggest that it is the best one. We do not promote a particular alternative notation system, but document a variety of them and teach the general principles on which they are based.

Key Signatures

“The need for a new notation, or a radical improvement of the old, is greater than it seems, and the number of ingenious minds that have tackled the problem is greater than one might think.” — Arnold Schoenberg [\[1\]](#)



There are fifteen different key signatures to memorize in traditional notation, and one must always keep the current key signature in mind while playing. With a chromatic staff this is not necessary since a note's position on the staff directly indicates what note to play. All keys are equally easy to read.

[Show more about Key Signatures](#) | [Expand all sections on this page](#)

Accidentals



In traditional notation accidental signs must be used to represent accidentals — notes that are not in the current key signature. On a chromatic staff they are not needed since all notes have their own

[Show more about Accidentals](#)

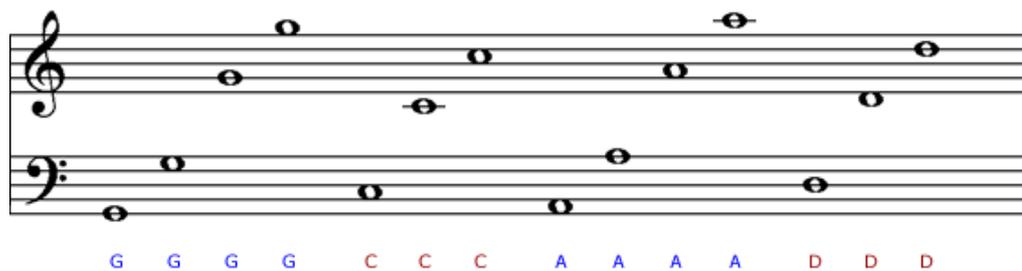
Clefs



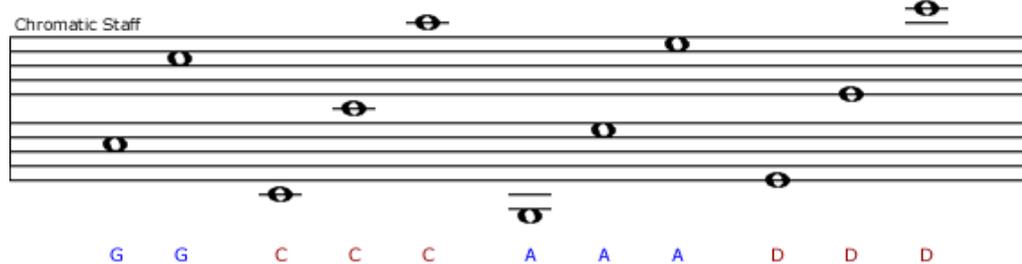
In traditional notation, staves that look the *same* may represent *different* sets of notes, depending on the clef symbol. On a typical chromatic staff the lines and spaces always represents the same notes, and an octave or register symbol simply indicates the staff's pitch range.

[Show more about Clefs](#)

Octaves



On a traditional staff, two notes an octave apart do not look alike. If a note falls on a *line*, the note an octave higher or lower will fall on a *space* (and vice-versa).



On chromatic staves like the one above, notes an octave apart look the same. Notes are easy to identify since a given note always has the same appearance regardless of its octave.

Intervals

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is a C major scale (C4 to C5) with intervals labeled below: Whole Step, Whole Step, Half Step, Whole Step, Whole Step, Whole Step, Half Step. The bottom staff is a C major scale (C4 to C5) with intervals labeled below: Major 3rd, Minor 3rd, Minor 3rd, Major 3rd, Major 3rd, Minor 3rd, Minor 3rd, Major 3rd.

Intervals that look the same in traditional notation may not be the same interval. In this illustration, whole steps and half steps are visually indistinguishable, as are major and minor thirds. What you see does not always correspond with what you *hear* and must *play*.

Chromatic Staff

The image shows a chromatic staff with a C major scale (C4 to C5) and intervals labeled below: Whole Step, Whole Step, Half Step, Whole Step, Whole Step, Whole Step, Half Step.

Chromatic staves represent intervals more consistently and more accurately. As shown in this illustration of a C major scale, whole steps are always two notes on two neighboring lines or on two neighboring spaces. Half steps are always one note on a line and another on a neighboring space.

[Show more about Intervals](#)

A Better Approach to Music Notation

All of these features of traditional music notation combine to make reading music much more difficult than it might be with a better notation system. For an analogy, imagine trying to do arithmetic with [Roman numerals](#). It can be done, but the notation system makes a big difference. Of course it is important to view traditional notation in its broader historical context and to keep in mind the innovations and reforms that it has undergone over time. [2]

Alternative music notation systems with chromatic staves avoid each of these pitch-related difficulties, and offer significant advantages over traditional music notation.[3]

Next

[Notation Systems](#) — Check out some alternative music notation systems.

[Tutorials](#) — Learn about various approaches to alternative music notation.

[1] Arnold Schoenberg was probably the most influential 20th-century composer of Western “classical music.” It is less commonly known that he also invented a [chromatic staff notation system](#). [This quote](#) is from his “A New Twelve-Tone Notation,” written in 1924 (see *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*). Although Schoenberg was a proponent of atonal, non-diatonic music, his statement is relevant for all kinds of music. Most alternative notation systems were invented primarily with traditional tonal music in mind, and we are interested in making all types of music easier to read and play. Though we quote Schoenberg we do not discount the importance of diatonic scales and keys. Chromatic staff notation systems actually represent diatonic scales, tonalities, and their intervals much more faithfully than traditional notation. See [Intervals](#) on this page, and our [Intervals Tutorial](#).

[2] Traditional notation was developed over several centuries for use with music and instruments that were different from those of today. [Guido d’Arezzo](#) introduced his staff-based system in about 1025 CE, but the five-line staff only became standardized in the 1500s. This staff-based notation was a significant achievement that improved upon the notation systems that preceded it, and it has continued to evolve over time to address new notational needs as they arose.

[3] One of the few disadvantages to chromatic staves is that they typically require more vertical space on the page, since they include five additional notes per octave. Some notation systems solve this problem, for example these [notations with more than one notehead shape](#), [Express Stave notation](#), and [Clairnote notation](#).