The Music Notation Project
Exploring Alternative Music Notation Systems

Desirable Criteria for Alternative Music Notation Systems

This is our list of generally desirable criteria for alternative notation systems. The notation systems that are given a full presentation on our site meet each of these critera. There are a few possible exceptions, and in these cases the particular criterion in question has been noted. These criteria were originally established during the MNMA's Research Project.

1. The notation is convenient for a human writer (as contrasted with a machine) to express musical ideas. The notation is convenient for a human performer to recreate those musical ideas.

2. The notation can be written conveniently and quickly with nothing more than a writing tool (such as a pencil) without the absolute necessity of a ruler or other drawing aids or specially prepared paper. In other words, a plain piece of paper and a pencil, or a chalkboard and chalk should be sufficient for quickly notating music in the notation if desired.

3. The notation is independent of all musical instruments for intelligibility so that the notation is readily adaptable to all instruments including the human voice.

4. The notation can express music of all reasonable degrees of complexity – not only simple music.

5. The notation is relatively simple so as to be practical for both children and adults.

6. The notation is flexible enough so as to be appropriate for the music of the past, present, and foreseeable future, as well as to music of various cultures, and to both solo and ensemble performance.

7. The notation is writable using only a single color on a contrasting background (for example black on white) without shading or tinting. Such a monochrome system offers the maximum in simplicity and convenience, and is considered essential, especially since many people have some degree of color-blindness.

8. The notation possesses a fully proportional pitch coordinate, where each of the twelve common pitches is spaced in a graphic manner, so that progressively larger pitch intervals have progressively larger spacing on the coordinate, providing a visual representation of each interval that is exactly proportional to its actual sound.

9. The staff, or graph, shows an octave cycling effect, or octave periodicity, so that each successive

register after learning one octave.

10. No more than five identical, successive, and equidistant staff lines are shown, so that staff lines can be quickly identified without counting lines.

11. Both the lines and spaces of a staff are used as positions for notes on the pitch coordinate in order to economize on paper space and therefore on eye movement.

12. Adequate provision for voice leading (keeping multiple melodic lines distinct) is provided.

13. The time coordinate must provide for proportional (or approximately proportional) graphic spacing of notes, rests, and other events, and must also provide for mathematically understood symbols for the divisions and multiples of time values, except optionally in children's music and situations where graphic representation of time values alone may be adequate.

14. The notation is adaptable to a variety of microtonal systems.

15. The notation system must allow the pitch axis to be uninterrupted (made continuous) so that the staff can encompass an arbitrary number of octaves while preserving proportionality of pitch. In addition, the notation system must allow the pitch axis to be interrupted (made discontinuous) at convenient points in order to provide separate staves for specific instruments or voices in an ensemble, or to separate the two hands in keyboard music, when desired. Both options (continuous and discontinuous) must be available.

16. The notation provides for the convenient addition of optional or supplementary kinds of information, which may or may not be necessary or desired in some music (for example, information about dynamics, expression, tonality, choice of instruments, tone color, lyrics, etc).

17. Frequently used symbols must be at least as convenient to write in longhand as are the corresponding symbols of traditional notation. For example, if the noteheads are all rectangular, or require unusually precise drawing, they take an unacceptably long time to draw. Exceptions are allowed for symbols that provide some benefit missing from the traditional system, as long as the overall amount of time to write a typical piece of music is not noticeably longer than in traditional notation.

For Notation Designers

If you are the designer of a music notation system and would like to see it presented with the others featured on our site, we would be willing to consider including it. We are primarily interested in systems that meet all of, or at least most of, our desirable criteria for alternative music notation systems that are listed above. However, we will make an effort to consider each notation system according to its own merits.

If you are interested, please contact us. We will need a detailed description of your notation system,

that would also be very helpful. We will review your notation and make a decision on whether to add it to our site.

The Fine Print: Note that this offer may be amended in the future, and all notations on our site will be subject to any future changes. Additionally, we reserve the right to indicate whether notations meet or do not meet any set of criteria the organization may adopt. For instance, we may decide to group notations according to whether they meet any set of criteria such as those listed above. Finally, decisions about inclusion on our site are unrelated to decisions about inclusion in any future research we may conduct or support.