BASIC
MUSIC PRINCIPLES

a primer to the basics of music

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Introduction

Thank you for your interest in *Basic Music Principles*. This e-book may be read step-by-step starting from the first page, or it may be used as a simple reference manual, it's up to you. If you are a beginner, we suggest you start from the very beginning.

Enjoy your reading!

About the author

Fabrizio Ferrari is the Founder and President of Virtual Sheet Music Inc. an innovative American web publishing company, established in 1999, which provides products and services for musicians. Fabrizio began studying the violin at the age of 8, earning a master degree in Violin Performance at the Milan Conservatory in Italy. Between 1992 and 2003 he had a very intense professional career, performing in the most prestigious opera theaters and symphonic venues in Italy and in other countries, among those *Teatro alla Scala* in Milan. Between 2000 and 2001 he obtained master degrees in Music Composition and Electro-acoustic Composition. In 2004 he moved permanently to the United States where he is currently involved in the development of many projects such as the *Musicians Page* website and community, a social network for professional musicians, and in the research and development of new products and services for musicians worldwide. He lives in Orange County, California, with his wife Laura and their two children Sofia and Edward.

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Music Notation Basics

Music and music notes

The standard definition of Music is "The Art of Sounds." The sound, in fact, is at the foundation of music. Without sound you have no music. A sound is defined by its pitch (the highness or lowness of a sound) and its *timbre* (the "quality" or "tone" of a sound). If we define also the length of time a sound is produced (the *rhythm*), we can call that sound a "note" which represents a sound with a specific pitch and a specific rhythm.
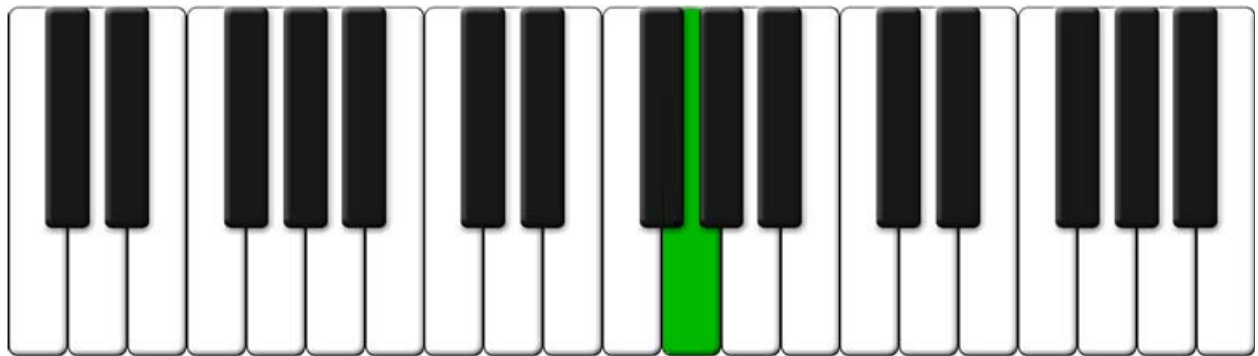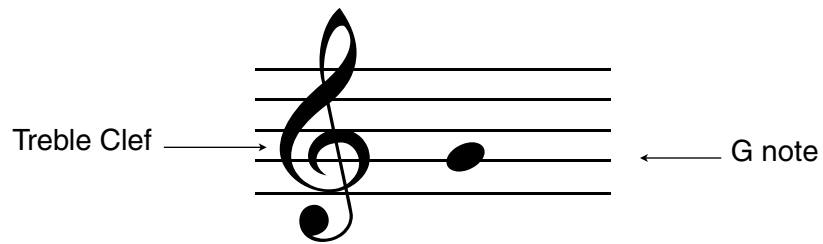
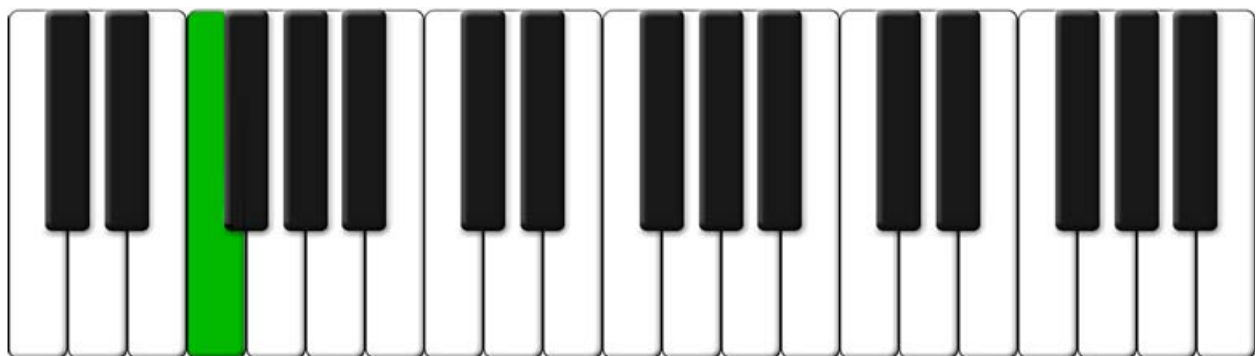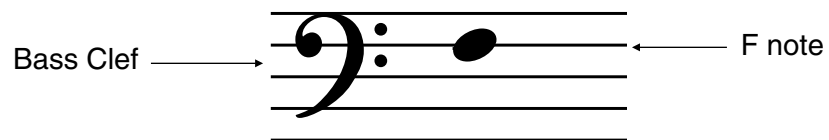To understand what pitch a note has, we place the note on a canvas called *staff*:
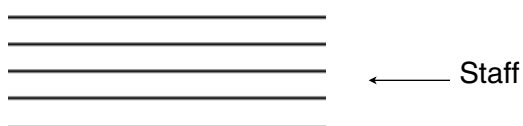
Staff

The staff is composed by 5 lines and 4 spaces. The notes are placed right on those lines and spaces according to their pitch. Notes higher in pitch are placed higher on the staff and vice-versa:

High Pitch

Low Pitch
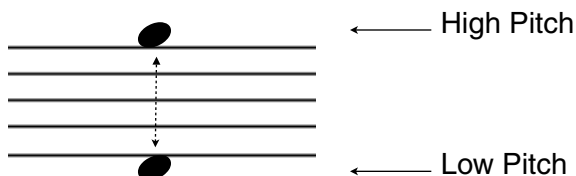
To name the pitches, we use the first seven letters of the alphabet: A, B, C, D, E, F, G. We also use a *clef* at the beginning of the staff to establish a point of reference to understand at what absolute pitch we must start counting notes. There are several clefs in music, but the most common ones are the treble, the bass, the alto and the tenor clef:

Treble Clef →   ← G note

middle C

Bass Clef →   ← F note

middle C

Alto Clef → C note

middle C

Tenor Clef → C note

middle C
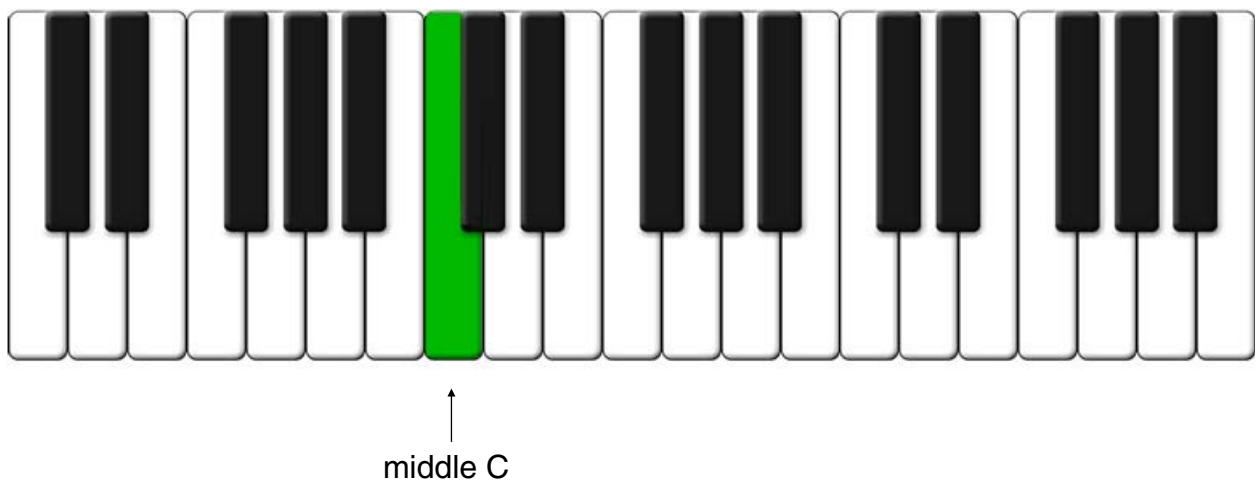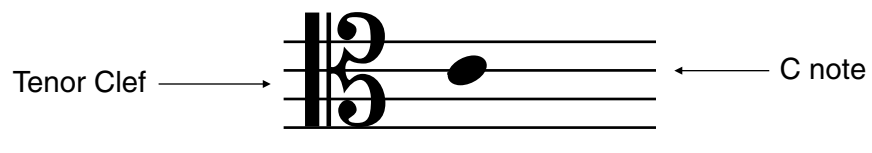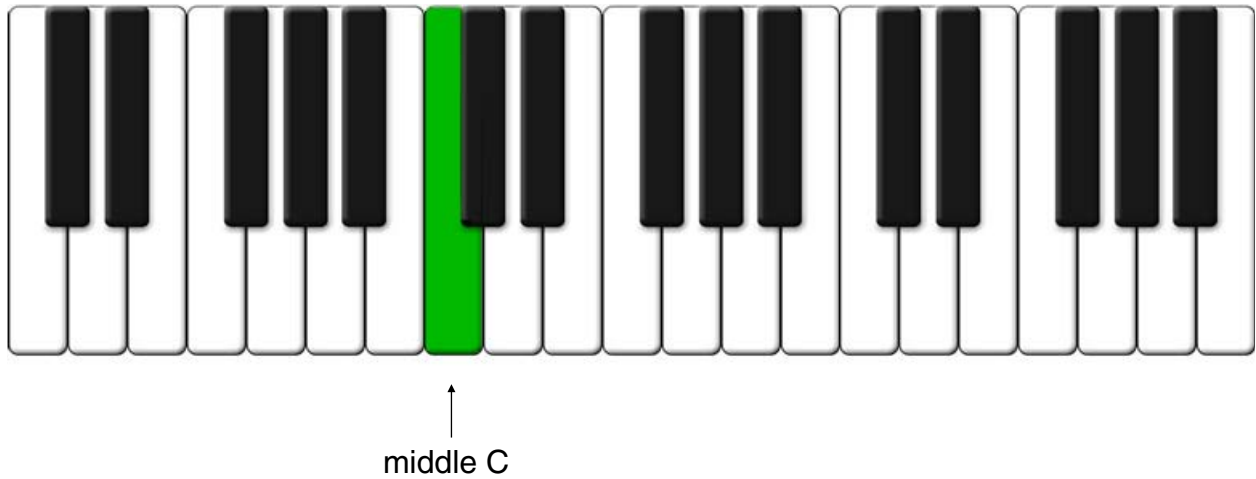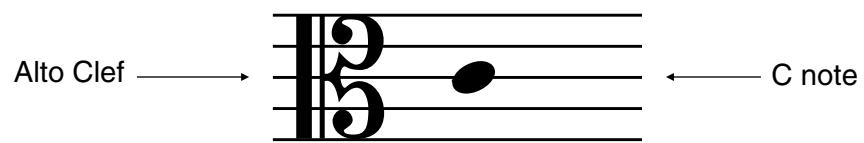
The Rhythm

The rhythm defines the duration of a note (how long or for how many beats a note lasts). It also defines the duration of *rests* (a rest is a "pause" in music).

Notes and rests of different durations are represented by the following symbols:

If you add a dot to a note, its duration is increased by 1/2:

You can also tie notes together to increase their duration:

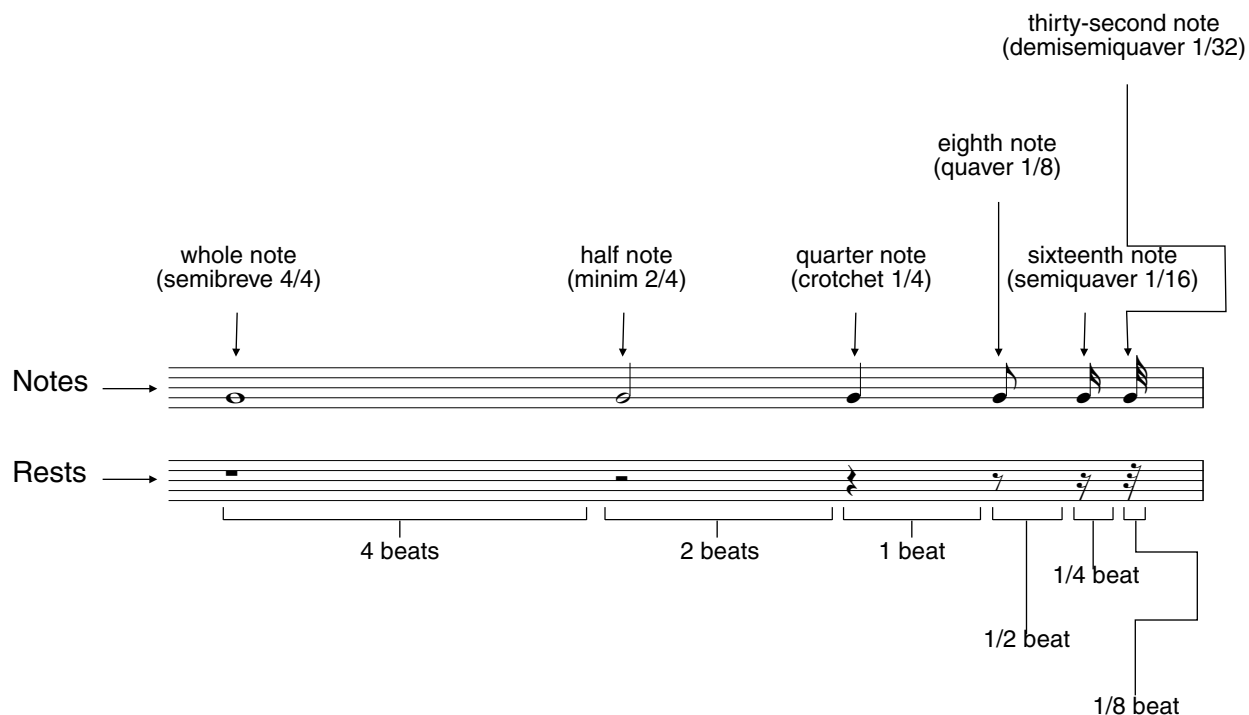Notes of 1/8 (♪) duration or lower are often grouped together with *beams*. A beam is a thick line that connects two or more notes to ease readability. The use of beams is called *beaming*:

without beaming   with beaming
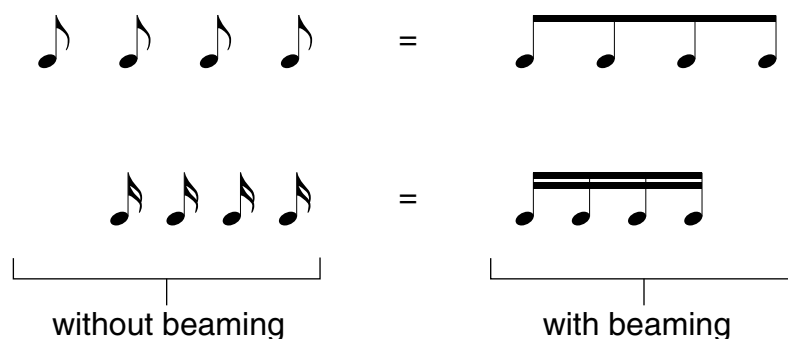
To help keep track of beats, the staff is divided into *bars* (or *measures*). A *time signature* (or *meter*) placed on the staff (usually at the beginning of the piece, right after the clef) indicates how many beats you can expect to find in each bar:
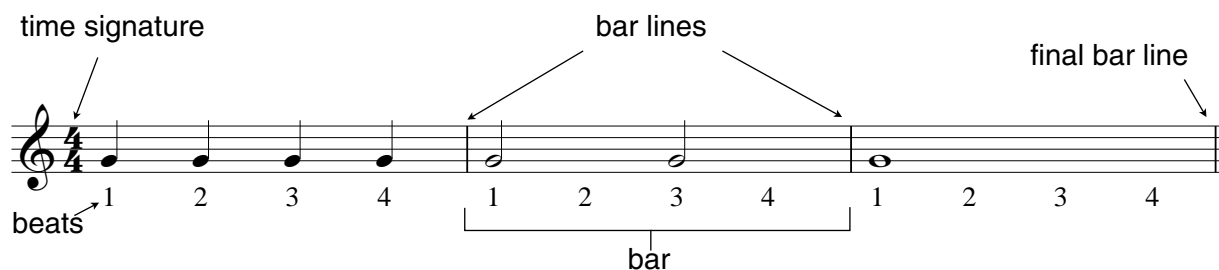
The top number of the time signature indicates how many beats there are in each bar. The bottom number shows what kind of note value receives one beat. In the previous example, a time signature of 4/4 means that there are four beats in each bar and that each beat is worth one quarter note. Of course, there are several different time signatures in music, here are a few examples:

There are also different ways to write a time signature. For example, the following signatures are equivalent:

$$\frac{4}{4} \longrightarrow \text{C} \qquad \frac{2}{2} \longrightarrow \text{¢}$$

Bar lines, not only delimit bars, but can be of different kinds according to their meaning:

Double Line Bar
it defines different
music sections

Start Repeat Bar
it defines the start
of a repetition

End Repeat Bar
it defines the end
of a repetition

Repetition:
this bar must be played twice

Final Bar
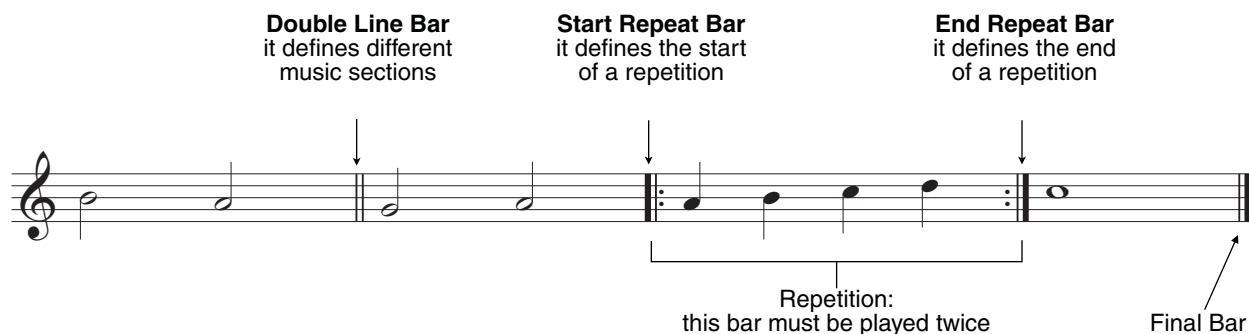
About repetitions

A repetition is usually bound by the *Start Repeat Bar* which defines where the repetition starts, and the *End Repeat Bar* which defines where the repetition ends. If no *Start Repeat Bar* is present (very common in music!), the repetition is supposed to start from the beginning of the piece.

Accidentals

Any note can be raised or lowered by placing an accidental directly before it:

♯ (sharp) ⟶ Raises a note one half step

♭ (flat) ⟶ Lower a note one half step

♮ (natural) ⟶ Cancels previously used sharp or flat

Here are a few examples:
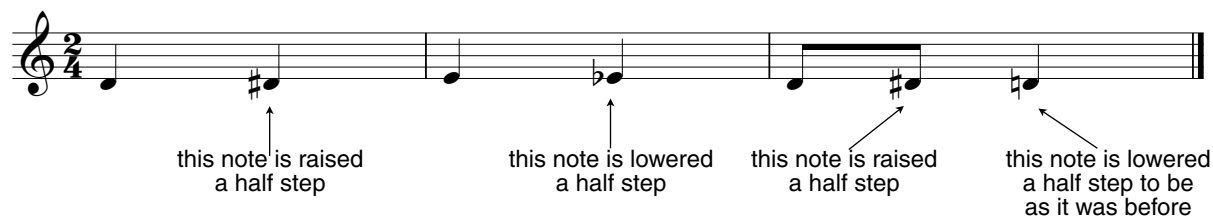

this note is raised
a half step

this note is lowered
a half step

this note is raised
a half step

this note is lowered
a half step to be
as it was before

As general rule, accidentals are only applicable inside the bar where they appear. If you find an accidental inside a bar and you don't find it again in the following one, its effect is no longer applied. Of course that's not the case when accidentals are defined as *key signature*. Accidentals, in fact, can be also placed at the beginning of the piece or subsequent section (*key signature*) in order to have all subsequent corresponding notes altered accordingly, unless a different accidental is placed before them:

Key Signature

these notes are
raised half a step

these notes must be played "naturally"
(i.e. are lowered half a step)

💡 Half Step vs Whole Step and intervals up to one octave

A *half step* is the smallest distance between notes in traditional music. If you take a piano keyboard, any key is a "half step" apart. You can't have a smaller distance between notes! A *whole step* instead is composed of two half steps. If you take a piano keyboard, any key is a *half step* whereas every two keys you have a *whole step*. A *whole step* is a second interval. Two *whole steps* is a third and so on, up to one octave:
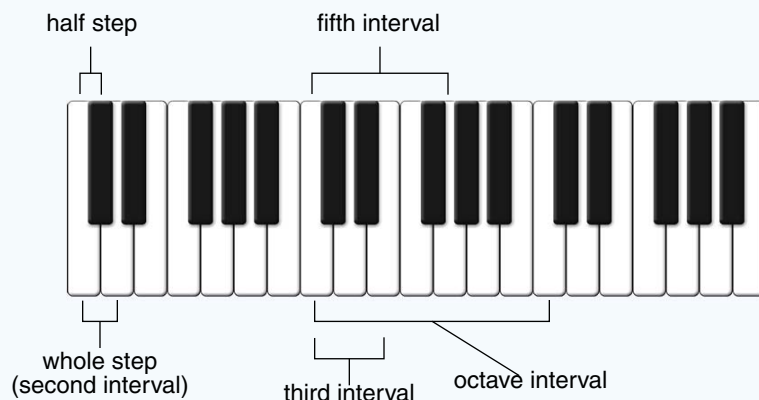

💡 Pickups, upbeats and anacrusis

The *pickup is* the note (or a sequence of notes) which precedes the 1st downbeat in a bar. It allows the piece to have the strongest "accent" (downbeat) correctly located on the 1st beat of the subsequent bars. Traditionally the *pickup* is not counted inside a bar since it is actually "preceding" the first bar. There may be single note pickups (like in the case of *Amazing Grace*) or multiple notes pickups. See some example below:

💡 About slurs and legato

A *slur* is defined by a curved line connecting multiple notes. You may often find two or more notes "slurred" together. To play notes grouped by a slur requires to have a smooth and connected sound. Such a style is known as *legato*. Here is an example of *legato* from a passage for violin:
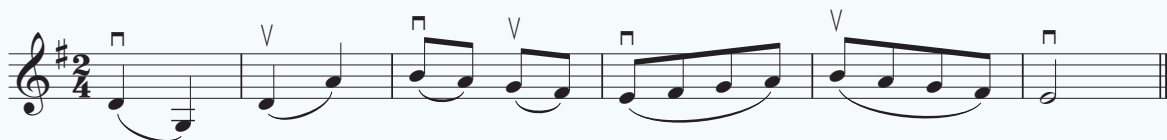
Musical Scales

A scale is a sequence of notes which may be in ascending or descending order. Here is an example of a scale in the key of C major:

There are several kinds of scales according to the intervals they contain, but the most known are the diatonic major and minor scales, the melodic and harmonic minor scales and the chromatic scale.

Here are some examples of them:

Diatonic major scale (D major key):

Diatonic (natural) minor scale (D minor key):

Melodic minor scale (D minor key):

Harmonic minor scale (D minor key):

Chromatic scale:

💡 Major and Minor

Major and *Minor* are usually adjectives that describe a scale, a key or a chord according to their used intervals. If a major third is used in a scale, key or chord, it is considered a "major" scale, key or chord. In the same way, if a minor third is used in a scale, key or chord, it is considered a "minor" scale, key or chord. Major scales, keys or chords sound "happy" compared with minor scales, keys or chords that sound sad and melancholic.

Example of major chord (C major triad):

Example of minor chord (C minor triad):

Dynamics

Dynamics make the music "alive." Any music passage can increase its effectiveness thanks to applied dynamics. When you play *forte* (𝒇) you increase the volume of a note or a passage. Conversely, when you play *piano* (𝒑) you decrease that volume. *Forte* and *piano* mean literally "loud" and "quiet" respectively, in Italian.

Here is an example using dynamics from a violin piece:

Passage from Fiocco's Allegro for violin and piano*:*

The *forte* symbol at the beginning of this passage tells us to play *forte* (loud) the notes from the first note until the *diminuendo* hairpin appears

The *diminuendo* hairpin tells us to play the passage gradually quieter

The *piano* symbol tells us to play *piano* (quiet) starting from the E note until the next dynamic (*mezzo-forte*) appears

The *mezzo-forte* symbol tells us to play that note as well the subsequent ones (until the next symbol) at a "medium volume"

Here are the basic dynamics you can find in music:

𝒑𝒑   ——————▶   *pianissimo* - very quiet (may have two or more "p")

𝒑   ——————▶   *piano* - quiet

𝒎𝒑   ——————▶   *mezzo-piano* - more than quiet

𝒎𝒇   ——————▶   *mezzo-forte* - less than loud

𝒇   ——————▶   *forte* - loud

𝒇𝒇   ——————▶   *fortissimo* - very loud (may have two or more "f")

fp   ⟶   *forte-piano* - play *forte* then suddenly *piano*

sf   ⟶   *sforzando* or *sforzato* - play a sudden accent

⟶   *crescendo hairpin* - increase the volume gradually until the end of the hairpin

sfz   ⟶   like above

fz   ⟶   *forzato* - similar to *sforzato* but a little bit less

rfz   ⟶   *rinforzando* or *ronforzato* - similar to *sforzato* but louder

cresc.   ⟶   *crescendo* - increase the volume gradually until the next dynamic

dim.   ⟶   *diminuendo* - decrease the volume gradually until the next dynamic

⟶   *diminuendo hairpin* - decrease the volume gradually until the end of the hairpin

Different dynamics can also be expressed by using words. Here is a list of the most common Italian words used to express different dynamics in music:

crescendo: increase the volume gradually until the next marked dynamic.

diminuendo or **decrescendo:** decrease the volume gradually until the next marked dynamic.

calando: decrease the volume and the emphasis gradually until the next marked dynamic.

perdendosi: losing volume, fading into nothing, dying away.
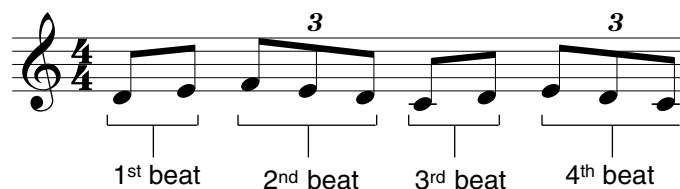
marcato: stressed, pronounced.

sotto voce: soft, whispering.

pesante: heavy, loud, deep.

**leggero** or **leggiero:** light, soft.

Tuplets

A *tuplet* is a group of notes subdivided within a single beat with a different number of equal subdivisions from that usually permitted by the time-signature (also know as "irregular groups"):
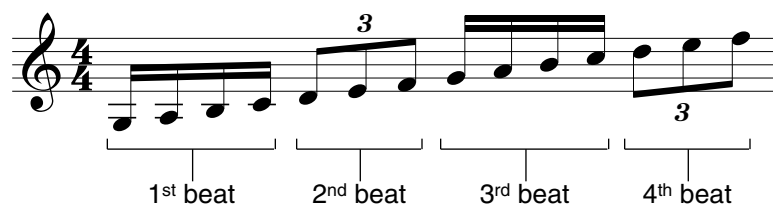

Tuplets may be called in different ways according with the number of grouped notes; they may be called duplets if the group is of two notes, *triplets* if the group is of three notes, and so on:
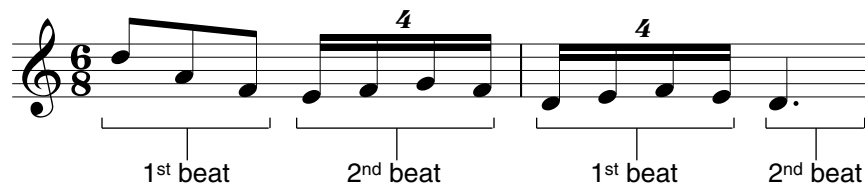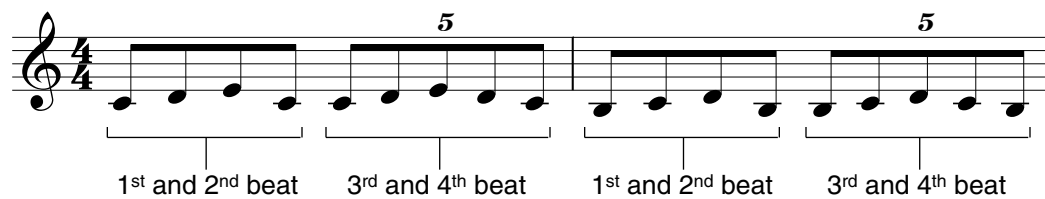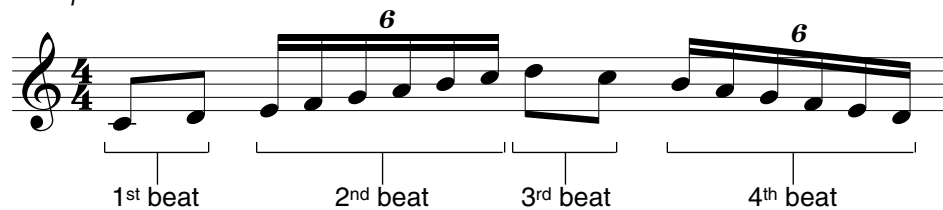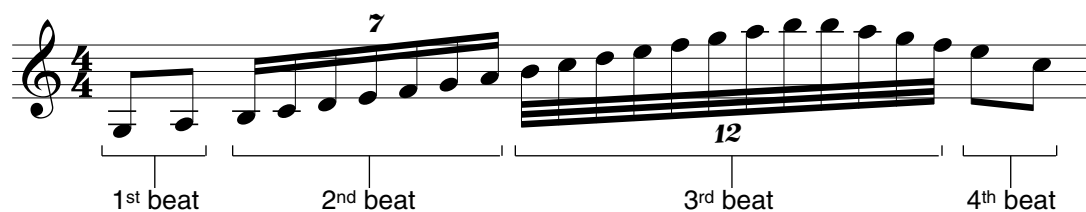
Duplets:
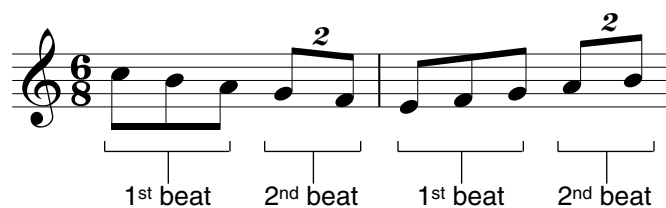
Triplets:

Quadruplets:

Quintuplets:

Sextuplets:

More Tuplets:

Music Ornaments

Also known as *embellishments* or *flourishes*, they are added to music usually to "decorate" or "ornament" melodic lines. Most of the ornaments are performed as "fast notes" around a central note. The amount of "ornamentation" in a piece of music can vary from quite extensive (see the Baroque period) to relatively little or even none.

In the Baroque period, ornaments were most of the times improvised, whereas starting from J.S.Bach and other well known baroque composers ornaments began to be written on the sheet music.

Here is a list of the most common and known ornaments:

Trill:

The trill is a rapid alternation between an indicated note and the one above, also known as the *shake*. Here is an example of *trill* and its effect:
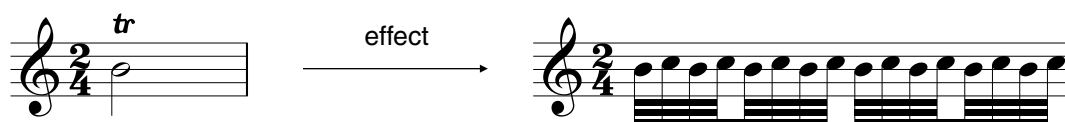
A zigzag line written on the right of the *trill* can define its precise duration on the same note or on adjacent notes:

Mordent:

The *mordent* is similar to a *trill* but it consists of a single or a few alternations between an indicated note and the note above (called the *upper mordent*) or below (called *lower mordent*). A short zigzag line is usually the mordent symbol and tells you the length and the number of alternations involved. A further vertical line in the middle of the mordent symbol tells you that the mordent is *lower* (otherwise is supposed to be *upper*). Here are a few examples of *mordents* and their effects:
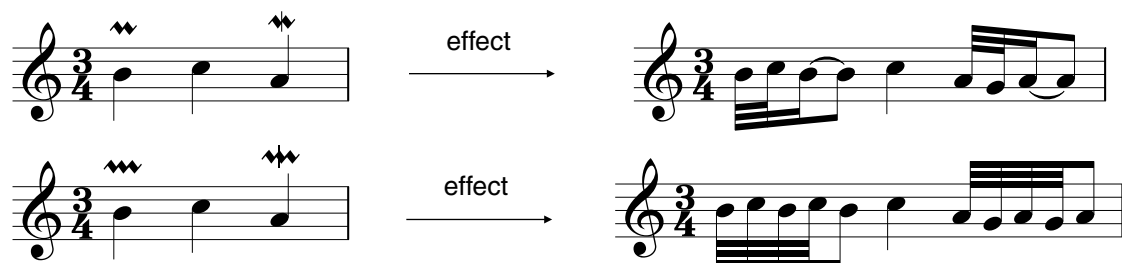
Appoggiatura:

The *appoggiatura* (from the Italian verb "Appoggiare" that means "to lean upon") is a single, small note placed before a regular note from which takes away the time-value of the *appoggiatura* itself. In triple time instead, the *appoggiatura* can take up to two thirds of the time (you can find this practice often in Mozart's repertoire). Here are a few examples of *appoggiaturas*:
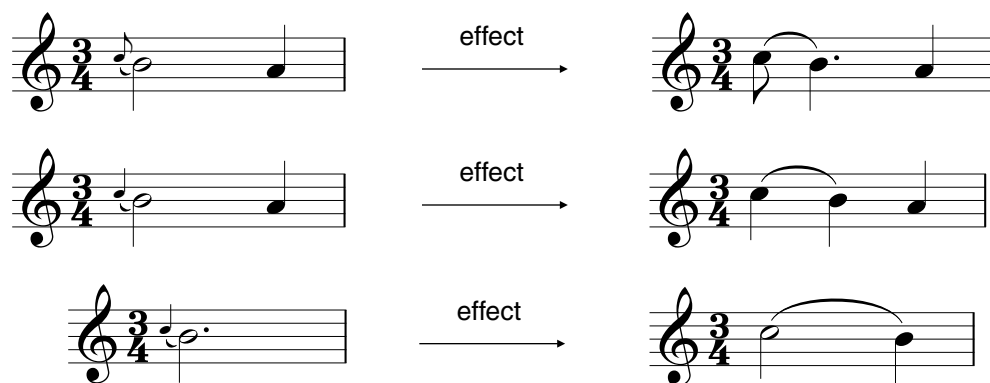

Acciaccatura:

The *acciaccatura* (from the Italian verb "Acciaccare" that means "to crush") can be considered similar to the *appoggiatura* but much shorter. Usually an *acciaccatura* is performed without taking the time of the note it is referred to, that means that it is played "up beat" the note. *Acciaccaturas* are usually played "as short as possible," without a defined duration, that's why they are usually always written as *quaver* (eighth note). It is written like an *appoggiatura* with an oblique stroke through the stem. Here is an example of *acciaccatura*:
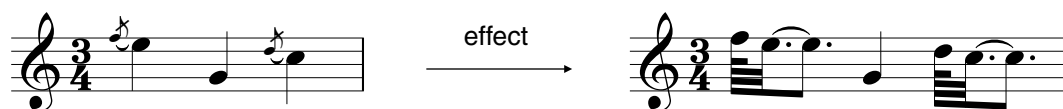
Turn (gruppetto):

A *turn* (or *gruppetto* in Italian) is a short figure consisting of the note indicated, the note above the one indicated, the note itself again, the note below the one indicated, and the note itself again. But depending by its location on the music, it can also simply indicate a group consisting of the note above the one indicated, the note itself, the note below the one indicated, and the note itself again.

A regular *turn* is marked by an S-shape lying on its side above the staff. Here are a few examples of regular *turns*:
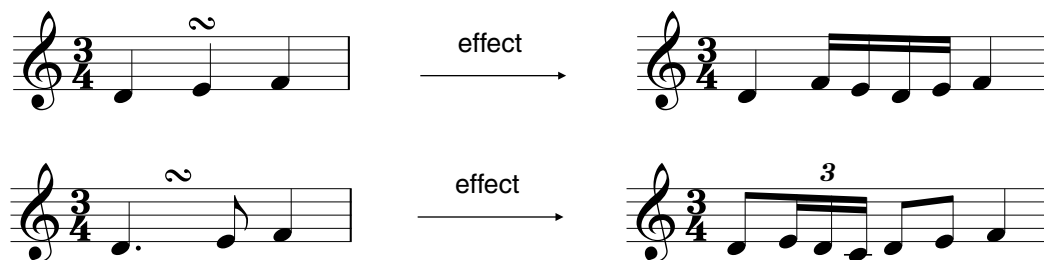
An inverted *turn* (the note indicated, the note below the one indicated, the note itself, the note above it, and the note itself again or its shorter version as explained above) is usually indicated by putting a short vertical line through the normal *turn* sign, though sometimes the sign itself is turned upside down:
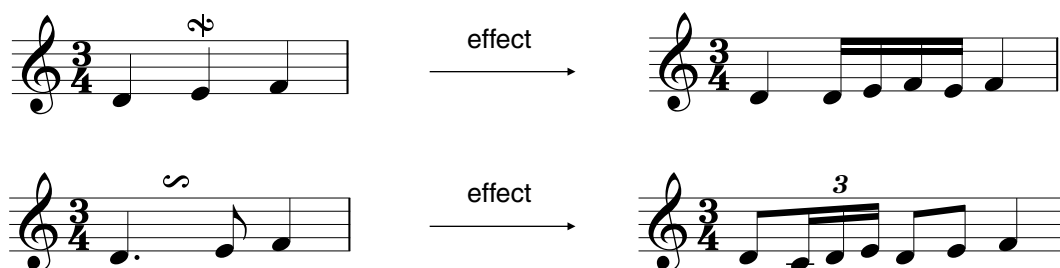
The interpretation of the *turns* may vary according to their context, the music style and the "personal taste" of the performer, that's what makes music the first of the interpretative arts!

Glissando:

From Italian, the *glissando* is a slide from one note to another, signified by a wavy line (mostly used in the piano repertoire) or a straight line (mostly used for strings) connecting the two notes and it may also be marked as *glissando* or abbreviated *gliss*.

Rests are often omitted between the two notes involving the *glissando*:

Here too, the interpretation of the *glissando* may vary depending on its context, the music style and the personal taste of the performer, from a "fast," "short" or "light" *glissando* to a "slow," "long" or more prominent *glissando*:

Key Signatures Chart
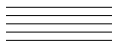
𝄞	**C major or A minor**
𝄞♯	**G major or E minor**
𝄞♭	**F major or D minor**
𝄞♯♯	**D major or B minor**
𝄞♭♭	**B♭ major or G minor**
𝄞♯♯♯	**A major or F♯ minor**
𝄞♭♭♭	**E♭ major or C minor**
𝄞♯♯♯♯	**E major or C♯ minor**
𝄞♭♭♭♭	**A♭ major or F minor**
𝄞♯♯♯♯♯	**B major or G♯ minor**
𝄞♭♭♭♭♭	**D♭ major or B♭ minor**
𝄞♯♯♯♯♯♯	**F♯ major or D♯ minor**
𝄞♭♭♭♭♭♭	**G♭ major or E♭ minor**
𝄞♯♯♯♯♯♯♯	**C♯ major or A♯ minor**
𝄞♭♭♭♭♭♭♭	**C♭ major or A♭ minor**

Glossary

Accent	an Accent mark (**>**) is added to a note to emphasize its sound.
Accidental	any sharp (♯), flat (♭) or natural (♮) sign.
Allegro	fast tempo (120-168 bpm), from the Italian happy.
Andante	slower, at a "walking" pace (76-108 bpm) (from Italian walking, moving).
Arco	used by strings, with the bow (from Italian bow).
Bar Lines	bar Lines divide the music staff into measures (or bars).
Beat	the basic time unit of music, also known as the basic "pulse" of music.
Breath Mark	a breath mark or luftpause or, for bowed instruments, a bow lift, is a symbol used in musical notation to direct the performer of the music passage to take a breath or to make a slight pause.
Chord	an aggregate of musical pitches sounded simultaneously.
Chromatic Scale	the chromatic scale is a musical scale with twelve pitches, each a semitone or half step apart.
Common Time	the Common Time (marked with **C**) is the same as the $\frac{4}{4}$ time signature.
Crescendo	from Italian, "playing gradually louder" (abbreviated *cresc.*).
D.C. al Fine	play again from the beginning, stopping at Fine (from Italian: *end*) D.C. is the abbreviation for Da Capo that in Italian means "from the beginning."
Decrescendo	from Italian, "playing gradually softer" (abbreviated *decresc.*).
Diminuendo	from Italian, same as Decrescendo (abbreviated *dim.*).

Dotted note	a note with a dot after it means that half the value of the note is added to it.
Double Bar (‖)	indicates the end of a piece of music.
Down Bow (⊓)	for strings, drawing the bow downward, towards the floor.
Duet	a composition with two different parts playing together.
Dynamics	refers to the volume or style of a given piece or passage of music.
Eighth Note (♪)	also known as a *quaver*, is a musical note played for one eighth the duration of a whole note.
Eighth Rest (�7)	is the equivalent rest of an *eighth note*.
Enharmonic	two notes that are written differently, but sound the same are called *enharmonic*. For example a D♯ is enharmonic of a E♭.
Fermata (⌢)	the Fermata is an element of musical notation indicating that the note (or rest) should be sustained for longer than its value would indicate. Exactly how much longer it is held is up to the discretion of the performer or conductor, but twice as long is not unusual. It is usually printed above, but occasionally below (upside down), the note that is to be held longer. Occasionally holds are also printed above rests or bar lines, indicating a pause of indefinite duration.
Fingerings	tell you which fingers and hand positions to use when playing
Flat (♭)	also known as *bemolle* in Italian, when placed before a note lowers it by a half step (a semitone) and it remains in effect for the entire measure.
Forte (ƒ)	from the Italian *strong*, it means to play loudly.
Half Note (♩)	also known as a *minim*, is a musical note played half the duration of a whole note. In a 4/4 time signature it receives two beats.
Half Rest (▬)	it is the equivalent to a rest of a *half note*.

Harmonic	in acoustics, the harmonic of a wave is a component frequency of the signal that is a multiple integer of the fundamental frequency. On stringed instruments you create harmonics by lightly touching the strings.
Interval	the distance between two notes (or pitches).
Key Signature	a key signature is a series of sharp or flat symbols placed on the staff, designating notes that are to be consistently played one semitone higher or lower than the equivalent natural notes unless otherwise altered with an accidental. Key signatures are generally written immediately after the clef at the beginning of a line of musical notation, although they can appear in other parts of a score, notably after a double bar.
Largo	very slow tempo (40-60 bpm), from the Italian *large, wide*.
Ledger line	a line drawn over a note, slightly longer than the note itself, parallel to the staff, above or below, spaced at the same distances as the notes within the staff. Ledger lines extend the music staff above or below.
Mezzo Forte (*mf*)	from the Italian *half strong*, it means to play moderately loud.
Mezzo Piano (*mp*)	from the Italian *half soft*, it means to play moderately soft.
Moderato	moderate tempo (108-120 bpm), from the Italian *moderate*
Music Staff	the music staff has 5 lines and 4 spaces where notes and rests are written.
Natural Sign (♮)	also known as *bequadro* in Italian, it is an accidental sign used to cancel a flat or sharp from either a preceding note or the key signature. Naturals are assumed (by default) in key signatures and mentioned only in key signature changes.
Note	a note is a sign used in musical notation to represent the relative duration and pitch of a sound; it can also be simply considered as a *pitched sound*.
Open String	for strings, is the fundamental note of the unstopped, full string.
Phrase	a musical *sentence*, often 2 or 4 measures long.
Piano (*p*)	from the Italian *soft*, it means to play soft.

Pitch	defines the highness or the lowness of a note which, in notation, is indicated by the horizontal placement of the note on the music staff.
Pick-up Notes	one or more notes that precede the 1st downbeat in a bar. They are also called *upbeats* and *anacrusis*.
Pizzicato	for strings, tells to play a passage by plucking the strings
Quarter Note (♩)	also known as a *crotchet*, it is a musical note played for a quarter of the duration of a whole note. In a 4/4 time signature it receives one beat.
Quarter Rest (𝄽)	is the equivalent rest of a *quarter note*.
Repeat Sign (:‖)	is the sign which indicates a section should be repeated. If the piece has one repeat sign alone, then that means to repeat from the beginning, and then continue on (or stop, if the sign appears at the end of the piece). A corresponding sign facing the other way indicates where the repeat is to begin.
Rest	It is an interval of silence in a piece of music, marked by a sign indicating the length of the pause.
Rhythm	It is the variation in the length and the organization of a series of notes or rests over time.
Scale	a sequence of notes in ascending or descending order.
Sharp (♯)	also known as *diesis* in Italian, when placed before a note raises it by a half step (a semitone) and it remains in effect for the entire measure.
Shifting	for stringed instruments, moving between positions.
Slur	a curved line connecting notes of different pitch.
Staff or Stave (☰)	is a set of five horizontal lines and four spaces, each of which represents a different musical pitch
Tempo	from the Italian *time*, it is the speed or pace of a piece of music.
Tie	a curved line connecting two notes of the same pitch. A tie between two notes makes the first note last the value of both notes *tied* together.

Time Signature	It specifies how many beats are in each measure and which note value constitutes one beat.
Transposition	moving a note or a group of notes up or down in pitch by a constant number of semitones.
Treble Clef (𝄞)	also known as *G clef* or *violin clef* (from the Italian *chiave di violino*) indicates the position of the notes on a musical staff. The center of the clef indicates the position of the G note on the staff (2nd line from the bottom).
Up Bow (⋁)	for strings, drawing the bow upward, towards you.
Upbeat	see *pick-up note*.
Whole Note (𝅝)	also known as a *semibreve*, it is a musical note that in a 4/4 time signature receives four beats and lasts one entire bar (or measure).
Whole Rest (𝄻)	It is the equivalent rest of a *whole note*.

References and Resources

On the web

About music:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music
http://whatismusic.info
http://www.musictheory.net/

Sheet Music:

http://www.looksheetmusic.com/
http://www.virtualsheetmusic.com/
http://www.sheetmusicplus.com/

Musicians Networks:

http://www.musicianspage.com

Books

Basic Music Theory: How to Read, Write, and Understand Written Music (Paperback)
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ISBN-10: 3802404165
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ISBN-10: 9780316098304
http://www.virtualsheetmusic.com/go/BMP4

Hal Leonard Pocket Music Theory: A Comprehensive and Convenient Source for All Musicians (Paperback)
ISBN-10: 9780634047718
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