

Lesson 7: The Grand Staff

Instructions for playing a piece of music are captured in written music. The written documentation of these instructions is called **notation**. Notation gives musicians a common method for communicating musical ideas.

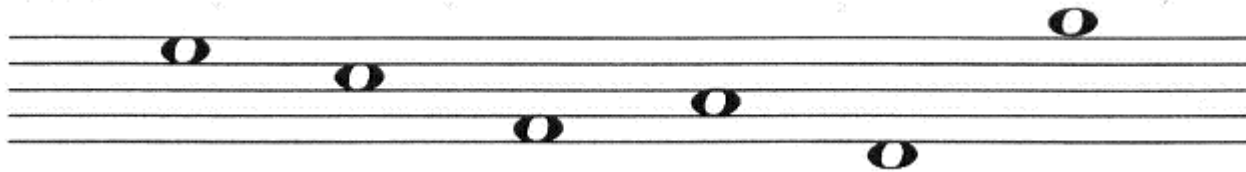
When you visually study musical notation to understand the instructions it contains, it is said that you are "**sight reading**" the music.

A **staff** (or **stave**) is the group of five lines on which notes are written. The plural form of staff can be "staves" or "staves" while the plural form of staves is always "staves".

The placement of the notes on the staff indicates which keys on the piano are to be played. The notes can be written on any **line**. The lines are identified by the numbers 1-5 (bottom to top) – this numbering applies to both the treble clef and the bass clef.

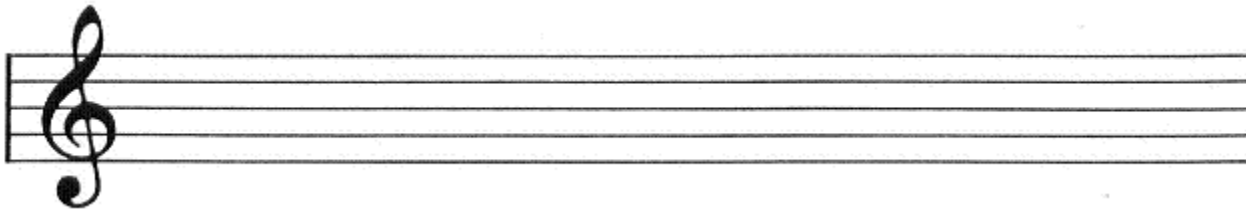


The notes can also be written in any **space** between the lines. The spaces are identified by the numbers 1-4 (bottom to top) – this numbering applies to both the treble clef and the bass clef.

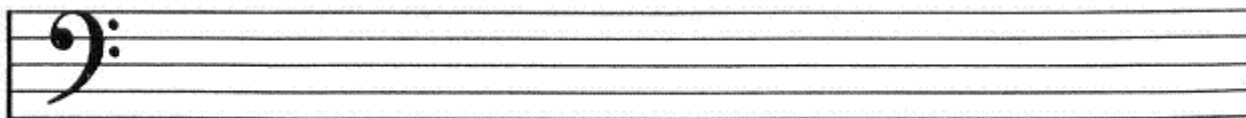


Music written for the piano requires two staves:

The **treble clef** is for notes associated with the top half of the keyboard (and with the right hand). It is also known as the "**G clef**" because the center part of the treble clef symbol resembles the letter "G".



The **bass clef** (pronounced like "base") is for notes associated with the bottom half of the keyboard (and with the left hand). It is also known as the "**F clef**" because the bass clef symbol resembles a backward letter "F".

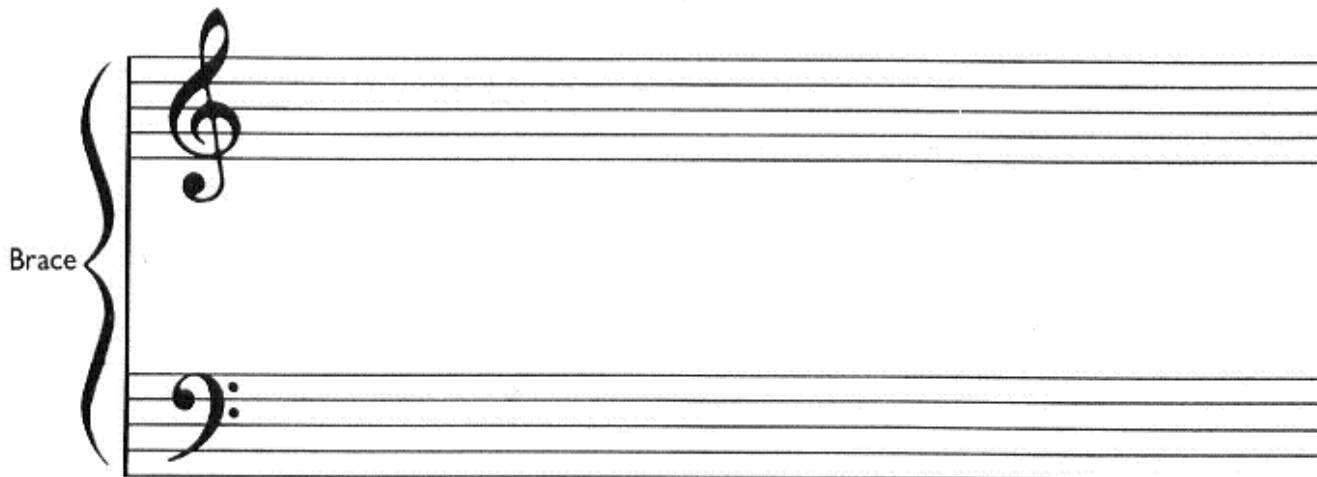


Technically, the "staff" is the group of five lines while the "clef" is the symbol placed on the staff. However, the two terms are often used interchangeably.

The bottom-most line on either staff is called the "first line", the next higher line is the "second line", etc. There are five lines in each staff.

The bottom-most space on either staff is called the "first space", the next higher space is the "second space", etc. There are four spaces in each staff.

The two staves are joined together with a **brace** to create the **grand staff**:



The brace makes it easier to see which treble clefs and bass clefs go together in a piece of music – it is easy to get confused when there are multiple rows of music (called "**lines**" of music) on the same page (see below).



In some curriculum, the introduction of the staves may be delayed. In that case, students are taught to determine if notes should be played by the right hand or the left hand by identifying which direction the note's "stem" falls:

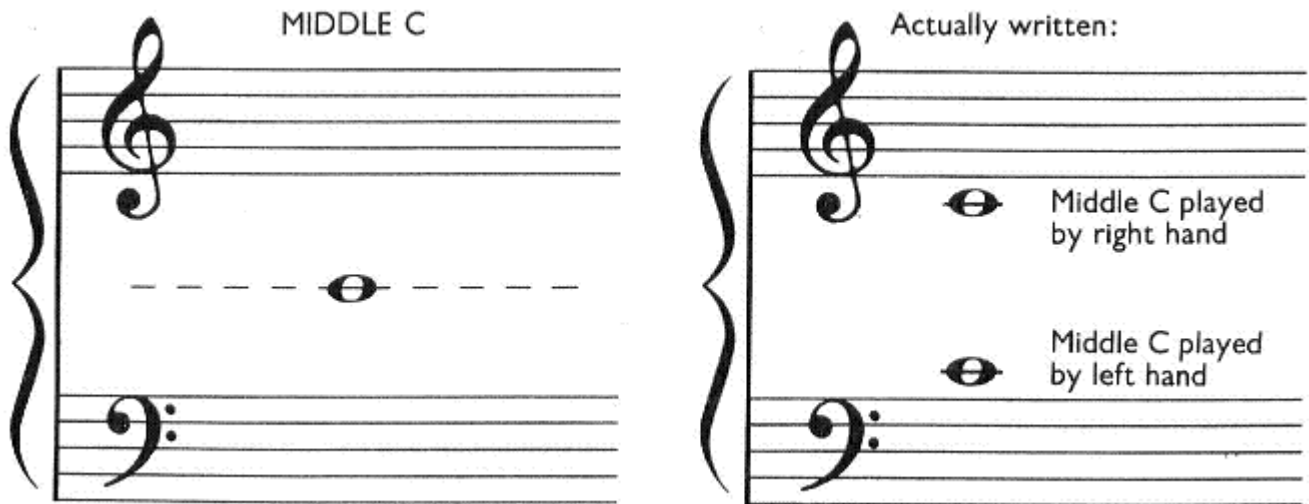


Please understand – that is simply an educational tool used short-term until a student is able to read notes on a staff – "stem up" and "stem down" have nothing to do with which hand plays the note outside of that circumstance. Normally, the appropriate hand is determined by whether the notes are in the treble clef or in the bass clef.

The direction of the stem is mostly determined by the location of the notes within the staff. Generally, notes in the top half of the staff have downward-pointing stems and notes in the bottom half of the staff have upward pointing stems. This gives the notation a neater appearance.

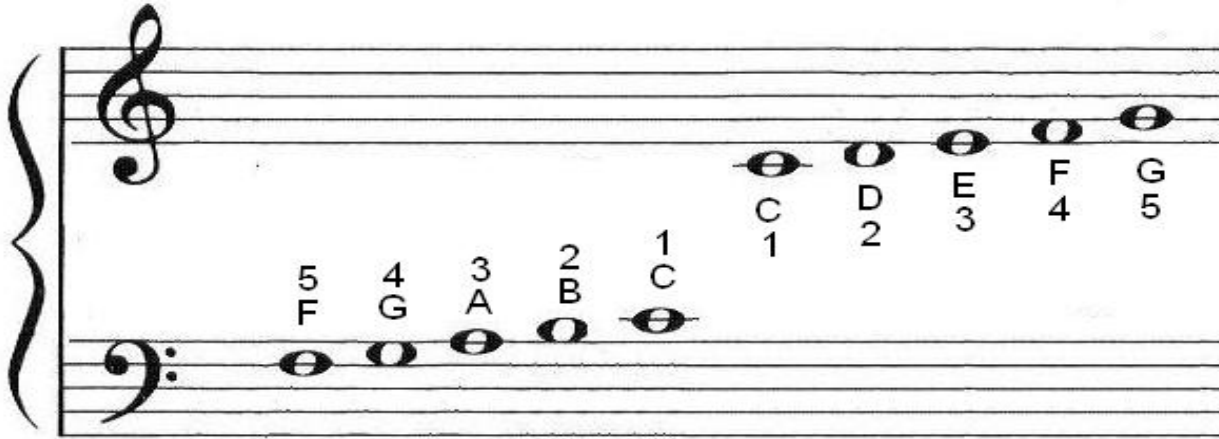
The note that represents Middle C is always placed on an imaginary line in the space between the two clefs. In written music, that imaginary line is represented by a short line that runs horizontally through the note. This short line is called a **ledger line**.

If Middle C is to be played by the right hand, the note is placed closer to the treble clef. If Middle C is to be played by the left hand, the note is placed closer to the base clef.



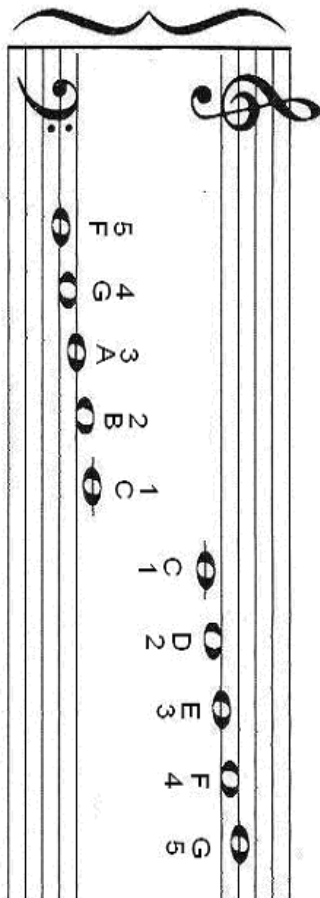
In Lesson 6, you learned how your fingers are numbered and how to place your hands in the "Middle C position" – in that position, both thumbs are on Middle C. In that position, your ten fingers are touching nine keys on the keyboard – nine keys instead of ten because your two thumbs share Middle C.

When you match each of those nine keys to notes on the grand staff, it looks like this:



The notes in the bass clef are played with your left hand – the finger numbers have been included here. The notes in the treble clef are played with your right hand. For example, when you see the bass clef's "F" note, you are to play the "F" below Middle C on the keyboard with the pinky finger of your left hand.

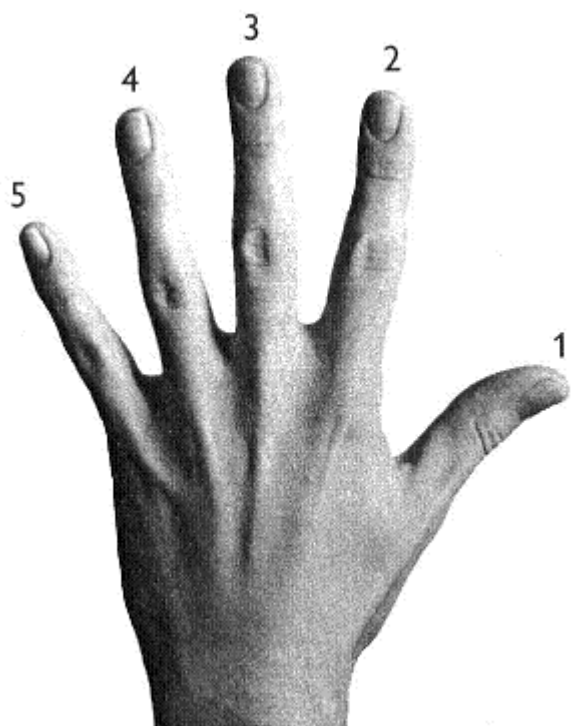
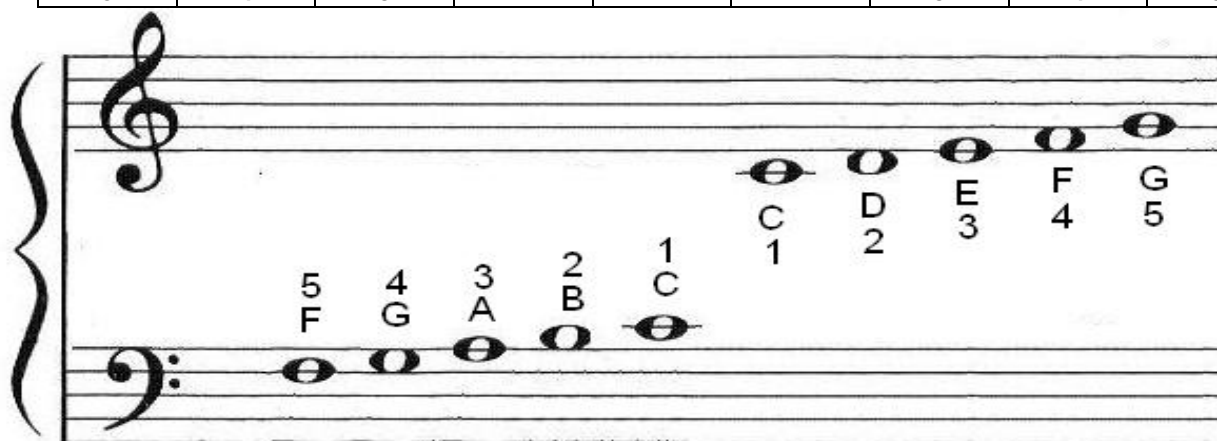
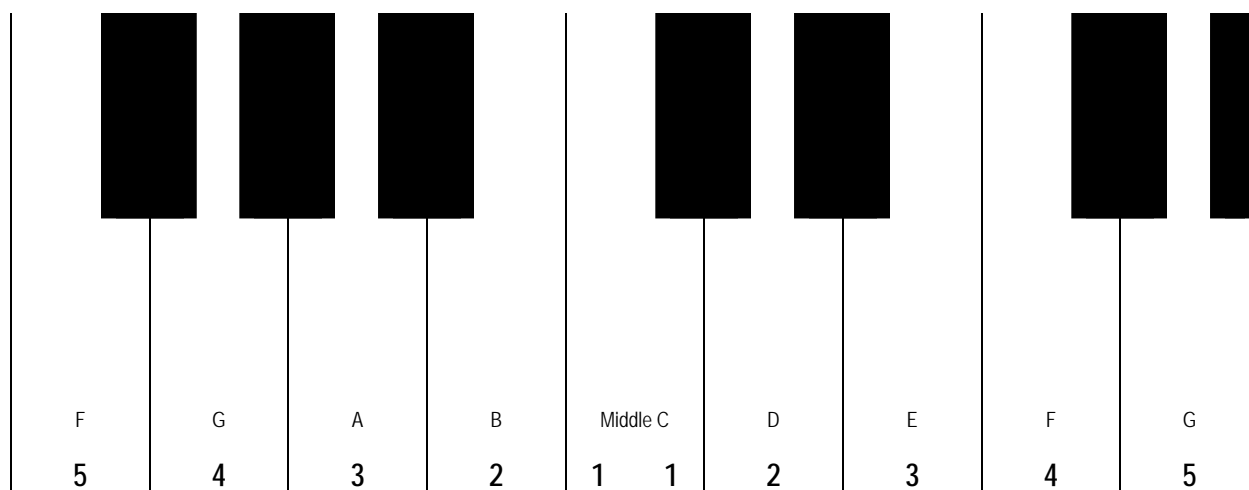
You can see that the two staves neatly flow into each other. The only line that is missing between them is the imaginary line on which Middle C sits – and that line is represented by the ledger line that always runs through the middle of Middle C. Middle C is shown twice here – once for the left hand and once for the right hand.



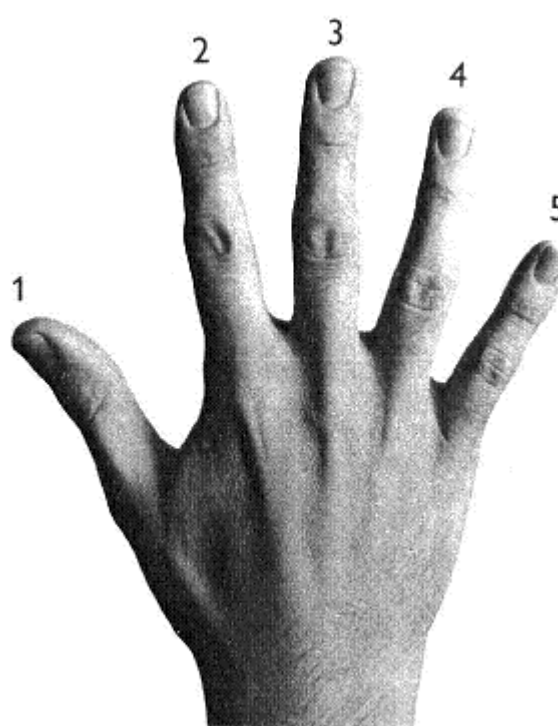
To the left, you can see a grand staff that has been rotated 90 degrees. If you hold this rotated grand staff over the keyboard, you can see how the placement of the notes on the grand staff is directly related to the placement of the keys on the keyboard. On the rotated grand staff, the lower notes are to the left and the higher notes are to the right – same as the keyboard.

So, when the grand staff is rotated back to its original position, the lower sounding notes are placed lower on the grand staff and the higher sounding notes are placed higher on the grand staff.

The following page pulls together everything you have learned so far – it shows the associations among the finger numbers, the keys on the keyboard and the notes on the grand staff:



left hand



right hand

Sometimes, musical notation will show suggested "**fingering**" for a set of notes – fingering is when the publisher of the music suggests which fingers should be used to play a specific note. This fingering appears as small numbers (1-5) just above the treble clef and just below the bass clef, in line with the specific notes.

For the Younger Student

New vocabulary: **note, staff, line, space, treble clef, bass clef, grand staff, brace, stem, ledger line, fingering**

"A grand staff has a treble clef and a bass clef"

- 1) Have your child look through his/her lesson book and identify the treble clef and bass clef in different songs. Emphasize that "treble" and "top" both start with "t" and that "bass" and "bottom" both start with "b"; therefore they can more easily remember which clef is on top and which is on bottom. Talk about which hand would play notes from each clef.
- 2) Have him/her practice tracing the treble clef and the bass clef (the symbols). It is likely too difficult for him/her to draw them freehand, so you may need to electronically scan the symbols and copy/paste a number of them onto a single page. Tracing those shapes will allow your child to recognize them more quickly.

"Notes can sit on a line or in a space"

- 1) Have your child look through his/her lesson book and find "line" notes and "space" notes. For each one, discuss to which line or space the note is associated (first, second, etc.) Don't yet worry about associating a letter or key to any of the notes. The idea here is to get him/her to start recognizing there are visual differences among the notes.

"Notes show which keys on the piano are to be played"

Flashcards can be helpful with this exercise – they can be purchased for about \$5 at most musical supply stores.

This exercise will take weeks, maybe months to master – please be very patient.

- 1) Have him/her find a number of Middle C's in his/her lesson book (look for the ledger line) – have him/her identify if that note would be played with the right hand or the left hand and then have him/her play Middle C with the thumb of the correct hand.
- 2) Have him/her find examples of the four notes closest to Middle C (left hand "A" and "B") and (right hand "D" and "E") in his/her lesson book but don't call them by letter name yet. Instead, identify them by their relationship to the top line (5th line) of the bass clef and the bottom line (1st line) of the treble clef. Emphasize the visual differences.
- 3) Only after he/she can easily recognize the visual differences among A-B-C/C-D-E, then associate letter names and keyboard keys to the notes. Have him/her practice naming the letter and playing the note with the correct hand and correct finger (using the Middle C hand position). This learning process may require multiple steps.
- 4) Only after he/she can easily identify the note-letter-key-hand-finger associations for the A-B-C/C-D-E notes, add the next closest four notes (left hand "F" and "G") and (right hand "F" and "G") – repeat steps 2 and 3 for these new notes. Emphasize keeping both hands on the keyboard, in the Middle C position, at all times.