



Notation

In this final article in the series on elements of music, we look at the very basic building block of notation.

Notation is a thread woven through all the thirteen elements previously discussed – rhythm/beat, melody, dynamics, harmony, tempo, tonality, form, soundwaves, timbre, touch, body, soul and spirit. The most noticeable difference between notation and all other elements (except the body) is the fact that it is visible. All the other music elements combine in a huge aural tapestry, and notation gives it a visible representation.

Definition

Notation, from the Latin *notatio*, means ‘a marking’. Notation is a system of descriptive, graphic symbols set down in writing. My simple definition for students is this:

Notation is music ideas and instructions written down on paper.

It uses the alphabet, along with many different shapes, lines and ovals. To a non-musician, the music symbols are not easy to understand. They are a different

type of written language which takes time and practice to convert into sounds – like learning phonics.

God message

Notation teaches us many things about God’s character. Firstly, just as a composer writes his name on his music as creator, God has placed His signature on all His creation, because He wants to be remembered as the Creator. Psalm 119:52 tells us:

I remembered Thy judgements of old,
O Lord, and have comforted myself.

Secondly, just as notation is a tangible manifestation and a preservable record of all the invisible music elements, God had His Word notated as a preservable record in the Bible of God’s invisible qualities.

This shall be written for the generation to come and the people which shall be created shall praise the Lord.
Psalm 102:18

Thirdly, just as a composer’s notation is very specific because he cares greatly about his musical ideas and wants his instructions to be carefully followed, God is also very specific about His instructions for our lives because He cares enormously for us.

...He cares for you. *1 Peter 5:7*

Lastly, just as a composer obviously loves writing music and wants to share this love and passion with others, God wants to share His love with His children and the Bible is His series of love letters to us.

We can see how music notation is a reflection of God’s loving character. It is a visible

record of music, just as the Bible records the Creator’s love for us. Romans 1:20 tells us:

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead so that they are without excuse.

We have no reason to doubt who creates music when the composer puts their name to it. Likewise, we know that God is the Creator of us and the world, because His signature is obvious everywhere.

History

A very brief history of notation shows us how it has changed over the centuries. In Ancient Times, most music was taught aurally and memorised. Priests had basic notation symbols written on the Scriptures to assist chanting. Conductors called *chironomers* used hand signals to direct the players. In the Middle Ages, small black markings called *neumes* were invented to indicate the rise and fall in melodies.

In about 1000 AD an Italian monk, Guido D’Arezzo, introduced the *line* to show how high or low the singers should go. Gradually more lines were added to become the standard five lines used today. In the Renaissance, clefs and notes indicated specific numbers of beats. Rhythm became more defined with barlines and time signatures. Composers of the Baroque and Classical periods became more specific in notating their ideas. In the Romantic period and late

Nineteenth Century, more signs and terms arose to describe tempo and dynamics. In the late 1900s and Twentieth Century even more symbols came into use with the invention of electronic instruments.

Learning by reading vs learning by ear

The development of notation was excellent for preserving composers’ works. However, there has been a downside to it. In the late 1880s and 1900s, there was a move to learning music by reading rather than by ear. The twentieth century heralded a flood of teaching methods and beginners’ books. Ideas became fixed and bound by the written symbols, so improvisation and creativity diminished. Musicians became specialists in performance, composing, teaching, instrument making and many other areas of the music industry, rather than becoming well-rounded musicians. Many students received an unbalanced music education compared with those of earlier centuries, where a player was expected to do everything – compose, perform, improvise and write their own notation. Today’s students can become excellent performers at the expense of other important related areas, especially sight reading (playing a piece from music the musician has never seen before). Despite the multitudes of exam systems now available, the focus on notation does not necessarily guarantee competent music readers.

Having said all that, in the last fifty years the pendulum has swung back a little

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towards learning more by ear in some teaching methods. But for many the printed page remains a type of 'security blanket'. There is a lost art of listening as so many are trained to depend on eyes, have difficulty memorising and lose much creativity and confidence. Sadly, this was my experience along with many others I've spoken to who were music students in the late 1900s.

This stifled situation does not seem to be new. What the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates said about the invention of the alphabet might equally apply to the development of music notation:

This discovery... will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. This specific you have discovered is an aid — not to memory but to recollection — and gives...only the semblance of truth; they will hear much and learn nothing; they will appear to know much and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company for they will seem wise without being wise.

*Andrew Wilson-Dickson,
The Story of Christian Music, page 48*

Conclusion

In summary, we have seen how important music notation is in:

- recording and preserving music
- acknowledging the creator of a piece of music
- showing evidence of someone who loves and cares about details and wants to share their ideas with others.

Notation reflects the same qualities about our Creator-God. I am very thankful for all the inspired writers of the Bible books so God's love message could be preserved for thousands of years. Our current human minds have become so dulled to spiritual things, and having the Author's written Word is essential to our lives. Music styles and their notation have changed over the centuries but the message of God to His children has not. 'God is love' has been the constant theme throughout the ages — and all events in the Bible are evidence that God is the same yesterday, today and forever.

I trust this series of articles on the music elements has been useful and of interest. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated. I can be contacted via email at wendy@thegiftofmusic.com.au.

All articles and much more can be found on my website at www.thegiftofmusic.com.au (click below). ■

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