

# Everything you want to know about reading sheet music (but were always afraid to ask)



If this is your first time singing in a choir--or you're simply rusty--picking up a piece of sheet music might feel intimidating. But it shouldn't. While it can take years to master sight reading, there are definitely tips and tricks that will help you get started reading and singing right away. Here are some of the most common markings you'll come across, as well as 101 advice to make the first few months with Guelph Community Singers more enjoyable.

## First things first...



Each part in the music is written on a staff of five lines running across the page left to right. If a note is written higher, you'll sing it higher too.

See those little vertical lines in the staff above? We count those vertical "bars" or "measures" in the music. So Rachel might say, "begin at bar six." That means you will start singing six bars in from the beginning of the piece. There's usually a number above or below the staff every few bars, or at each major section. Look for those in the examples below.

## So, what part should you sing?

In chorale / choir music we usually divide into four singing parts: Soprano (highest), Alto (still high but lower), Tenor (lower), Bass or Baritone (very low). Women tend to be Soprano or Alto, or sometimes Tenor. Men tend to sing Tenor or Bass. If you're unsure what part to join, talk to Grace at the piano before we begin and she will help you.

You'll find our four singing parts shown together, starting with Soprano at the top, Alto below, then Tenor, and Bass, followed by the piano at the bottom (two staves). Hot tip: the vocal staves are joined with a straight bracket, whereas the piano parts are joined by a curly brace.

A musical score for a choir and piano. It features five vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and two piano staves. The vocal parts are grouped by a straight bracket, and the piano parts are grouped by a curly brace. The lyrics "you don't real-ly care for mu-sic do you?" are written below the Bass staff. The piano part includes chord markings: E3, F, Bb, and F. The score is in a key with one flat and a common time signature.

Sometimes the music will put Soprano and Alto parts on the same staff, with note stems up

for Soprano, and stems down for Alto. Same with Tenor stems up and Bass stems down on a lower staff.

6

1. I am weak but Thou art strong;  
 2. Thro' this world of toil and snares,  
 3. When my fee - ble life is o'er,

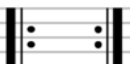
B $\flat$  Cm7 F7

Occasionally you'll see *Unis.* or *Unison* meaning we sing the same part. The word "*div.*" indicates two sections singing in unison will now *divide* into different parts.

In music when we need to sing a note a little lower or higher than a normal scale, (in a Blues song for example), a sharp # indicates the note is sung a little higher, and a flat  $\flat$  indicates it's sung a little lower.

**Let me repeat myself. Let me repeat myself...**




See those thick double bars with the dots in the example above? Those mean we repeat the part between those bars and a matching set later in the music. (These repeats are useful when a song repeats say, the same chorus again and again. Why bother writing it out three times?) And we'll sing the numbered verses 1 through 3 on the first, second and third times

through. The repeat signs look like this:  ...although there's often many pages of

music between the two signs. Sometimes the endings are a little different each time through,

so above the part to sing each time you'll see these numbered symbols: 

1.
2.

A few more complicated directions are used in some songs: *D.C.* meaning "go back to the beginning" and keep singing. *D.S.* means "go back to the  sign" and keep singing. If it's "*D.C. al Fine*" or "*D.S. al Fine*" then stop at the word *Fine*. If it's "*D.C. al Coda*" or "*D.S. al Coda*," then sing until you see "To Coda  " and then jump to the Coda  section near the end of the song.

Clear as mud, right? Don't worry. Just watch Rachel (or your neighbour when he or she turns the pages back and forth!) and she'll guide you. You'll get the hang of it.

**Time out**

If you watch Rachel waving her arms around, you'll know how quickly or slowly to sing. The music can also give some timing cues:

*rit. or ritardando...*

slow down... *rall. or rallentando* is also used for slowing down

*accel. or accelerando...*

speed up

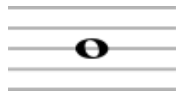
*a tempo ...*

after slowing down or speeding up, resume at the previous speed

### Note length and rests

So we've covered the notes to sing, but for how long? Musical notation has symbols to indicate how long to hold a note, or how long to be silent (rest).

Whole note (four beats)



Whole rest (four beats, or the entire measure) – looks like a “hole” in the line



Half note (two beats)



Half rest (two beats) – looks like a “hat” on the line



Dotted quarter note (one and a half beats)



Rests are sometimes dotted too! Look in the example music above.

Quarter note (one beat)



Quarter rest (one beat)



Eighth note (half beat)



Eighth rest (half beat)



Sixteenth note (two of these to an eighth-note)



Sixteenth rest (two of these to an eighth rest)



Eighth notes written as a group with a horizontal line

(Sixteenths in a group will have two horizontal lines)



There are others, but these are the important ones. Sometimes we hold a note over more than one measure; this is done with a curved line that “ties” two or more notes, and they are

sung as if they are one big long note, not several notes:



### Count me in!

Knowing when to jump into your part can be tricky in some songs, so it's helpful to count the

beats. The beginning of the song (or section) will have a time signature that describes how many beats to count in each bar / measure.



4/4 - Four beats to a measure, and the beat is a quarter note. (Most music is 4/4). Also written as “C” for “Common time.”

2/4 - Two beats to a measure, and the beat is a quarter note.

3/4 - Three beats to a measure, and the beat is a quarter note.

6/8 - Six beats to a measure, and the beat is an eighth note.

### A little bit softer now...

After we get the hang of a song, we'll pay more attention to *dynamics*: singing softly or loudly. You'll often see these notations running throughout the music.

***ff*** fortissimo... really loud!

***f*** forte... loud

***mf*** mezzo-forte... medium loud

***mp*** mezzo-piano... medium quiet

***p*** piano... quiet

***pp*** pianissimo... very quiet

**<** crescendo... gradually get louder

**>** decrescendo or diminuendo... gradually get quieter

Sometimes notes will have other marks, such as:



accent... put extra emphasis on this note



staccato... sing this note short (don't confuse with the dot at the side)



fermata... hold this note until Rachel signals us to continue singing

There are other symbols not included here, but these should cover the important ones. Check Wikipedia's list at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_musical\\_symbols](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_musical_symbols) if you need more information!

Music images from Wikipedia and:

<http://blog.sharmusic.com/blog/bid/84504/Going-Home-Dvorak-and-America>

<http://www.musicnotes.com/sheetmusic/mtd.asp?ppn=MN0077148>

<http://www.musicnotes.com/sheetmusic/mtd.asp?ppn=MN0074614>