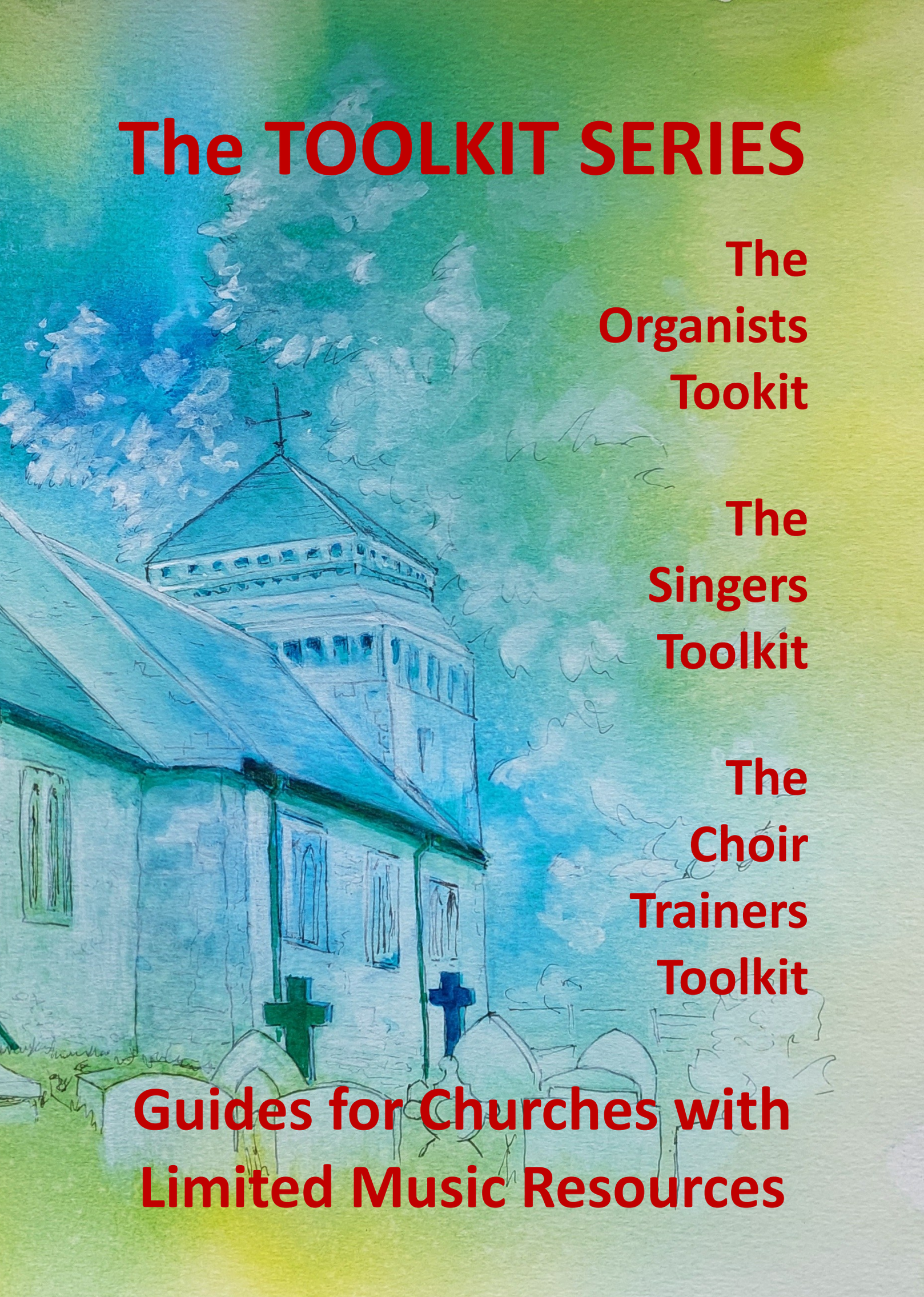


The TOOLKIT SERIES

The Organists Tookit

The Singers Toolkit

The Choir Trainers Toolkit

Guides for Churches with Limited Music Resources

This book is a compilation of three Toolkits, each aimed at supporting live music in churches with limited resources. Each Toolkit concentrates on a different aspect of music making.

The Organists' Toolkit (page 3)

This is intended as a guide for pianists who are called upon to accompany church services on an organ. It doesn't aim at turning them into "organists" in the sense of someone who has total control of all the resources of the instrument but, rather, is a survival pack which introduces them to the geography of the instrument, how to choose and change stops, how to accompany hymns, and where to look for repertoire or further study.

The Singers' Toolkit (page 15)

Adults new to choral singing are the focus of this section, based on sixty years of working with such people and helping them realise some of their singing potential. For many, they had little experience of music notation and the same questions arose many times. These are answered in this Toolkit and other aspects of being a successful choral singers are addressed.

The Choir Trainers' Toolkit (page 31)

It isn't unknown for a small choir to cease to exist through a lack of leadership. Perhaps a long time director moves on or is no longer available to direct the choir. This Toolkit gives the basic knowledge which someone with a modicum of musical knowledge requires to successfully direct a choir. It is divided into three section: **Absolute Basics, Useful,** and **Could be Useful**.

All three sections of this book are derived from web pages with the same names. On the internet, each subject area is more fully developed and includes audio and video examples and interactive exercises.

The Organists' Toolkit

organistsonline.org/organists-toolkit

The Singers' Toolkit

organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit

The Choir Trainers' Toolkit

organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit

Everything on these sites is free to use and download as required.

It is hoped that these three Toolkits, along with their online versions and other sites referred to in the texts, will enable churches with limited musical resources to maintain a tradition of live music making on limited budgets and without access to professional leadership.

THIS IS A FREE BOOK FOR CHURCHES WHICH REQUEST IT

Philip Norman, March 2026 [PS - this is mostly self-proofread. There could be errors, but the essential message stays the same.]

The Organists' Toolkit

A survival guide for pianists who become reluctant organists

The Organists' Toolkit

A Survival Guide for Reluctant Organists

This book is written by Philip Norman and issued by Organists Online. A free copy is available to any church of individual who requires one. For further information please contact Philip Norman

07939 064 247 | 01873 590 055 | 07939 064 247 | pkn@pnms.co.uk

organistsonline.org | www.pnms.co.uk

The Organists' Toolkit

A Survival Guide for Reluctant Organists

Introduction

The intention of this site is **NOT** to teach you how to play the organ. It's a very basic guide so that pianists are able to accompany hymns and play simple music. Also, it does **NOT** give instruction on using the pedals. It's possible to provide a completely satisfactory accompaniment without introducing this complication.

The first part gives a basic description of the mechanics and geography of the organ.

The second part suggests ways of accompanying a congregation and other aspects of service playing.

The third part suggests possible repertoire, further study, and how to find a teacher, if you want one.

Some of the information may seem very basic, but it's put here for completeness.

Although these pages describe pipe-organs, digital and/or electronic organs are conceptually the same, it's just that the method of sound production is different.

As mentioned above, this is a survival guide. It misses out 95% of the glory and variety of playing an organ, but it does lead to safe, usable accompaniments.

If possible (and do all you can to make it possible) arrange practice time on the organ you are going to be playing so that you can get to know its idiosyncracies.

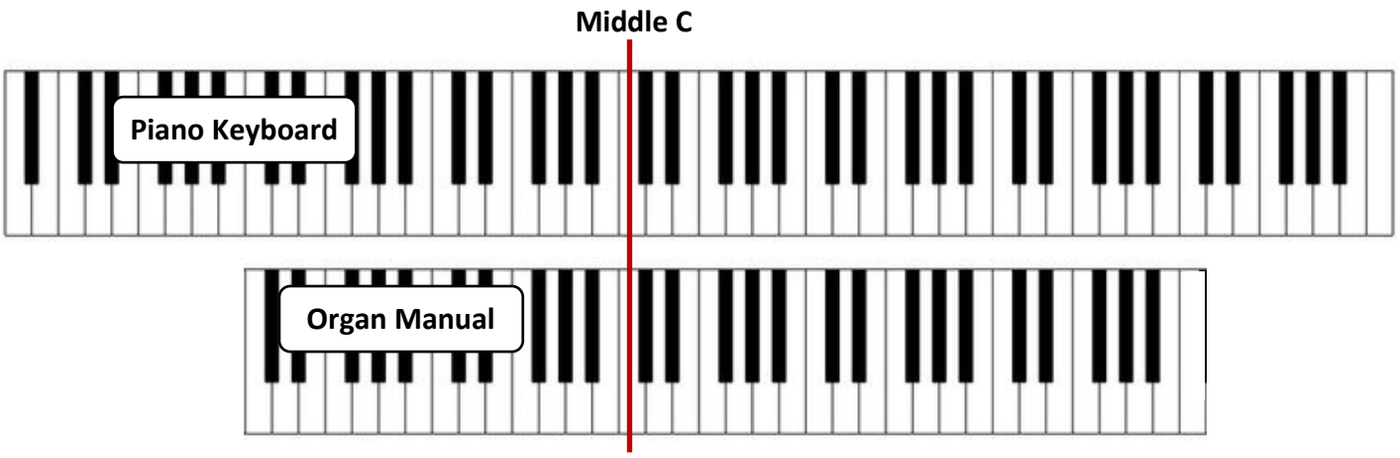
The contents of these pages, with some interactive examples, are to be found on:

organistsonline.org/organists-toolkit

> It's not necessary to absorb all the information in this booklet before attempting to play an organ. Some things are essential (such as understanding the basic geography of the instrument and knowing how to use the stops) while other things (take care using the combination pistons!!!) are recommendations. It could be useful to have this book with you when you go to an organ for the first time so that it can be used as a reference manual.

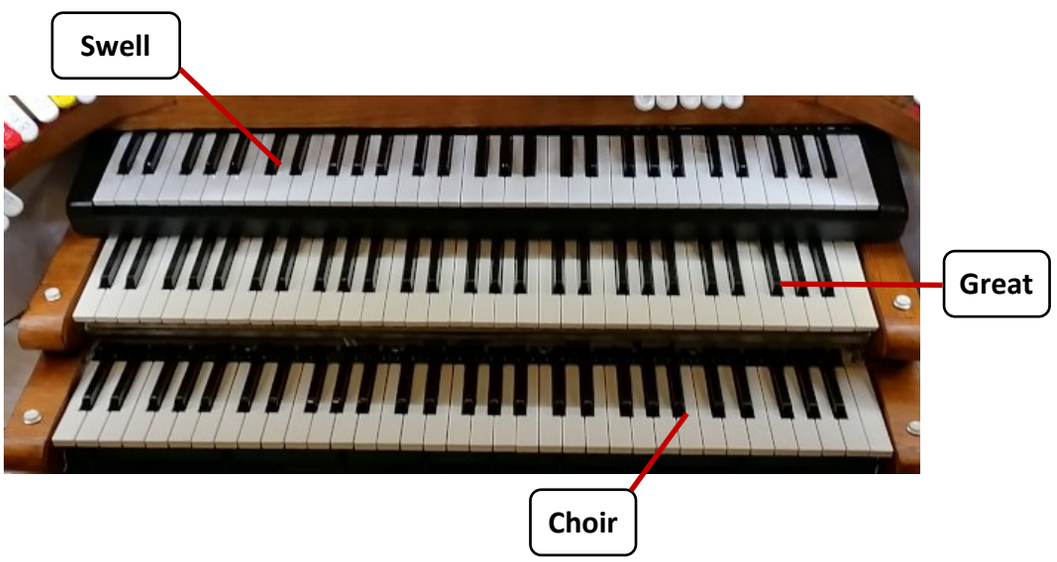
Keyboards (or Manuals)

Essentially, there's no difference between a piano keyboard and an organ manual. Organ manuals, however, are shorter, starting just two octaves below middle C and only ranging upwards for five octaves or less. The main differences are that they are not touch-sensitive (no matter how hard you strike the keys, the volume remains the same) and the sound doesn't die away (as long as you hold the key, the note will sound).



Some organs have two manuals (called *Swell* and *Great* from top to bottom);

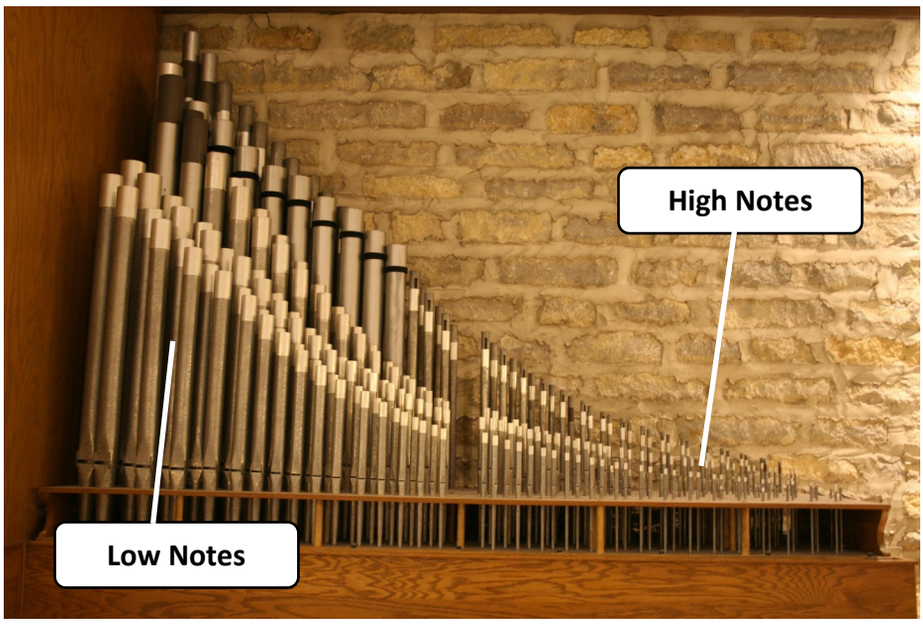
and others have three (called *Swell, Great,* and *Choir* from top to bottom).



It's not necessary to use all the manuals, and it's quite possible to play satisfactory accompaniments on just one manual (in which case, **choose the Great**). You're not likely to run across an organ with four or more manuals but, if you do, the extra manual(s) is/are likely to be the uppermost, so the lower three, from top to bottom, would be *Swell, Great, Choir.*

The stops

The stops provide the different tone colours and can vary between very quiet and very loud. Each stop controls a group (or *RANK)* of pipes. The longer pipes produce the lower notes and the shorter pipes the higher notes.



To produce sounds at concert pitch (give or take a little) the length of the pipe for the lowest manual note is about **8 feet**. In the organ world, notes around concert pitch are said to be "*at 8 foot pitch*". (This is universal across the world. The metric system isn't used.)

With some ranks, the longest pipe is only **4 feet long.** The whole rank sounds **one** octave above concert pitch and the rank is said to be "*at 4 foot pitch*".

With others, the longest pipe is only 2 feet long (*at 2 foot pitch*) and sounds **two** octaves above concert pitch.

16 foot pipes sound an octave lower than concert pitch.

To complicate matters, some stops have fractional pipe lengths (2-2/3 feet, or 1-3/5 feet). More of this later. **But you can decide right now, if you like, to ignore this complication. It's not necessary to use these stops**.

The stops themselves can be either *drawstops* (which have to be pulled out to activate the pipes),

or tabs, (which have to be depressed);

or even *rocking tablets*, which illuminate when active (assuming that the bulb isn't broken).

Never mind the fanciful names of the stops - we'll worry about that later

Usually, apart from a name, there is a number **which tells you the length of the longest pipe,** so you know which sound at concert pitch and which at other pitches (see above).

If in doubt, select just stops of 8-ft pitch. You can experiment using other pitches later.

The stops which apply to any one manual are grouped together and, unless you are very unlucky, are labelled **Great**, or **Swell** etc. If there's no labelling (thankfully rare) it's vital to test the organ beforehand and hope for a good memory.

Couplers

You will see some things which look like stops with a text like *Swell to Great,* or *Choir to Great.* These are *Couplers.* When drawn or activated, by playing on the second named manual, you also play the active stops on the first named manual. For instance, if you have active stops on the **Swell** manual and draw the *Swell to Great* coupler, you can play these stops on the **Great** manual. Couplers are useful for quickly adding extra power, but can be ignored if you feel unsure about using them.

BEWARE!!! BEWARE!!! BEWARE!!! BEWARE!!!

If you draw or activate a coupler with a name such as Swell to **Pedal**, the pedals will start to play notes … and if you are resting your feet on the pedals ……!

Choosing Stops (1)

This section is for basic survival when you get to an organ for the first time. It assumes that you have no experience and limited time to prepare. The information given here can be expanded upon by experimentation at any time.

- Identify the **Great** manual and draw an 8' stop, preferably one called *Open Diapason*. Test it - it should be moderately loud. *Never, never, never, unless you really know what you are doing, choose just a 4' or a 2' stop.*
- If it seems a bit quiet, also draw a 4' stop (*Principal* or *Flute*).
- You are now set up and could accompany a whole service just using these stops. It won't be exciting, but it will be safe.
- If time is on your side, identify the Swell Manual. Select an 8' stop and a 4' stop which (maybe) are a little quieter than those you have on the Great.
- You now have the opportunity, at natural gaps in the music, to change between the Great and Swell and thus have more variety.

Choosing Stops (2)

This section is for those who have passed beyond basic survival.

As a very general rule, the easiest way to get a louder sound is to include stops at a higher pitch than you are already using. For instance, if you have already chosen an 8' stop, add one at 4' pitch; if already using 8' and 4' stops, chose one at 2' pitch. And the reverse for getting quieter. Given time, it's always best to experiment a bit and find out what works well.

As mentioned above, some stops have **fractional pipe-lengths,** (known as *MUTATIONS*). These sound different notes to the one(s) being played. For instance, a 2-2/3' stop sounds an octave and a fifth higher than played. [*Play a C, get a G. Play an A, get an E. Etc.*]

Apart for specialised use, these add richness and colour to a combination of stops. HOWEVER, they can lead to some very strange sounds. **Unless you know what you are doing, or have time to experiment and listen, ignore them.**

Some stops are named *Mixtures*, and have Roman numerals instead of pipe-lengths. For each note you play, these stops add several high sounding notes. Well used, they add clarity and power but, unless you know what you are doing, or have time to experiment and listen, **ignore them**.

Changing Stops (1)

As mentioned above, you can get variety by changing manual at natural gaps in the music. It is similarly possible to change stops, either using the suggestions above or things you have found out for yourself. But:

• The rhythmic flow of the music must not be disturbed whilst you look for a stop to add or subtract;

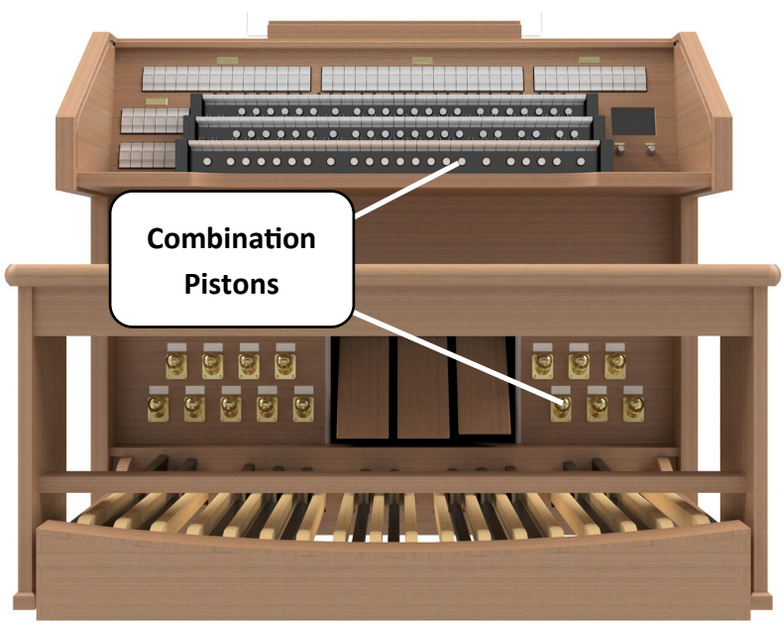
• Without care, it's very easy to follow a stop-change with a flurry of wrong notes.

• It's best NOT to change stops whilst holding a chord. This just leads to a bump in the music.

There's more about this later.

Changing Stops (2)

Some organs have *Combination Pistons* between the manuals or above the pedals. These activate groups of stops at the same time, and (if you feel confident) can be used in the same way as changing stops by hand. GENERALLY SPEAKING, they add extra stops from left to right, but NOT ALWAYS.



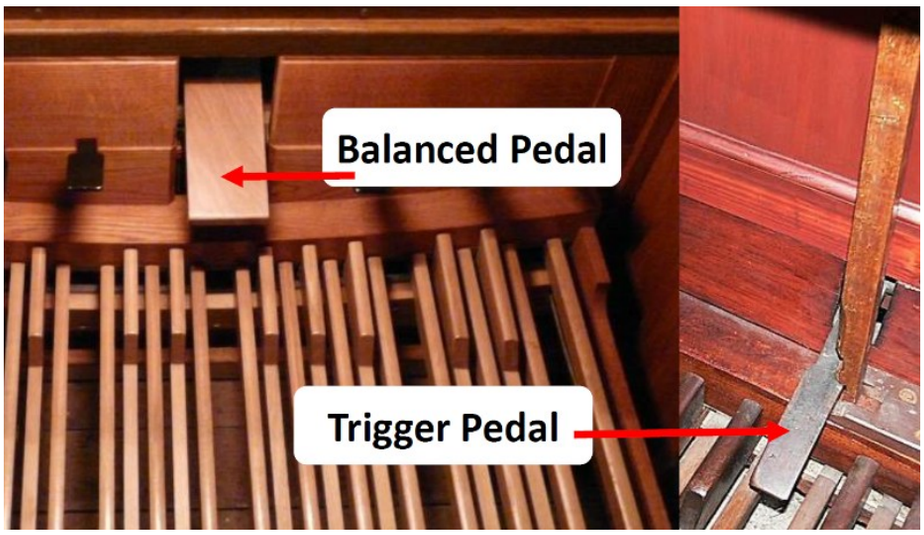
Before using pistons, test them out to see what happens. They can be **TOTALLY IGNORED** if you prefer.

BEWARE!!! BEWARE!!! BEWARE!!! If you use a combination piston, it MIGHT add some pedal stops. If your feet are resting on the pedals, you will get unexpected notes.

However, if you feel uncertain about choosing stops, the use of pistons usually gives you a good combination that sounds well. But test them BEFORE playing, unless you know what you are doing.

More about the Swell manual (and the Choir manual)

Usually, the Swell manual and (sometimes) the Choir manual are said to be *expressive*. That is, the pipes are tucked away in a box to reduce the sound but, by deployment of a pedal (not one of THE PEDALS - but something easy to use without training or much practice), shutters are opened and more sound allowed out. These pedals may be *Balanced* (they stay where in the position where you leave them) or *Trigger* (they have to be latched open).



If there is more than one, and you are lucky, they may be labelled as to which manual they apply. If you get the chance, try them out beforehand.

It's not necessary to use these pedals and, if you choose not to, leave them in the open position (balanced - toe well forward, trigger - latched down).

BEWARE!!! BEWARE!!! BEWARE!!! Very occasionally, something that looks like a balanced swell pedal is a *General Crescendo* pedal and, if "open" brings on all the stops. Usually it's labelled but, if the organ has two or more unlabelled balanced pedals, test them before playing and leave a general crescendo pedal in the "closed position" (heel well down).

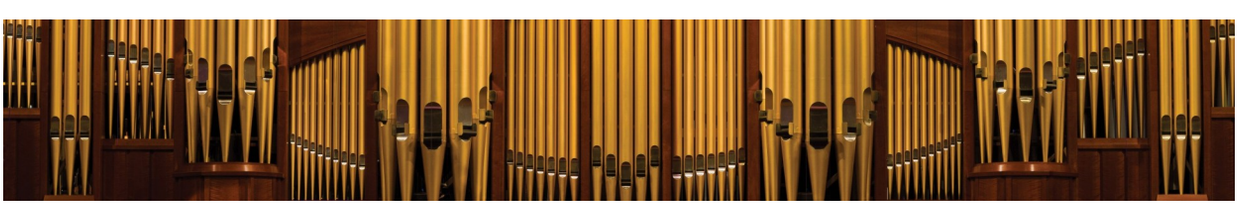
Rare, But ...

This last section is here for the sake of completeness. Older organs (or more modern ones seeking to emulate older ones), or Continentally inspired ones, can include some unusual features:

• The names of the manuals may be German or French (Oberwerk, or Positive etc). Try out a few notes to see which manual is which.

• The couplers may be little latch-down pedals above the main pedalboard.

•To save money on long pipes, some stops of 8' pitch will be missing their lowest octave. There will be one stop (with a name like *Stopped Diapason Bass*) which supplies the missing notes. This stop has to be drawn when using the short-range stops. How will you know? By trying out the organ beforehand.



Hymn Playing

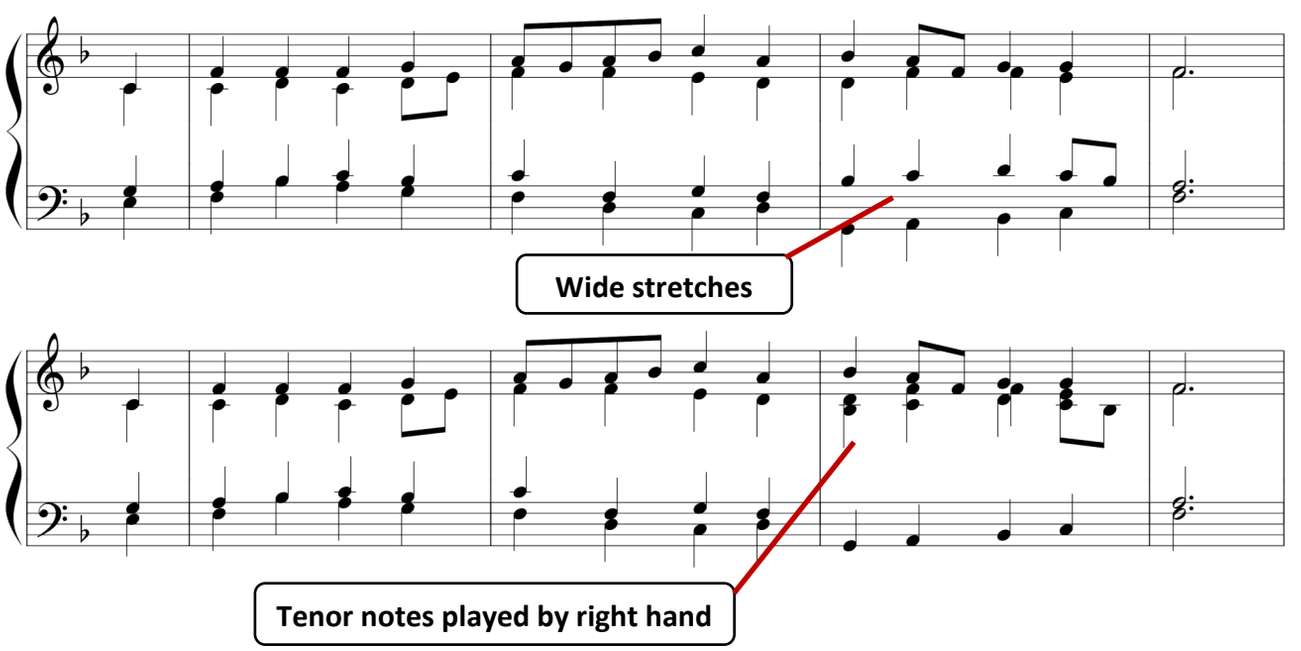
The accompanying of hymns constitutes the universal bedrock of what church organists do. The following comments apply also to simple service settings and other similar music you may be asked to accompany.

Unless you are familiar with them, if asked to accompany Anglican Chants, just say ***NO! Or, at least read pages 46 and 47 of this book****. They provide endless difficulties and problems which are hard to deal with if you are getting used to an unfamiliar instrument.*

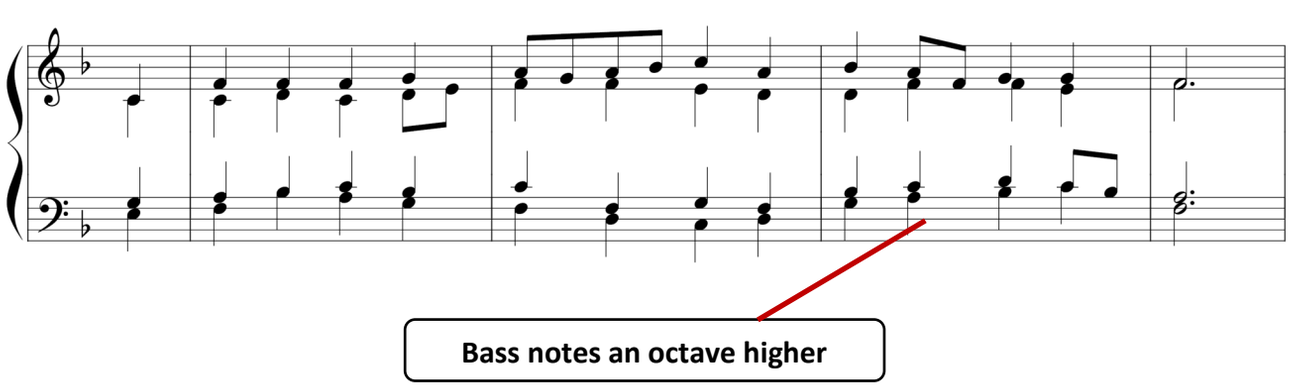
One serious problem for an organist, in all accompanying, is that you both lead and accompany the singing. The comments below will talk about maintaining a sense of rhythmic flow and consistency but, ultimately, the congregation consists of a body of undirected singers, each with his or her idea of how things should be sung.

A skilled professional organist can deal with most cases of congregational waywardness, but this cannot be expected of someone just helping out. Try to be rhythmically coherent, but listen to what is being sung and, if the congregation goes its own way, go with them. It may be a bit unmusical, but it's far better than a clearly audible death-struggle.

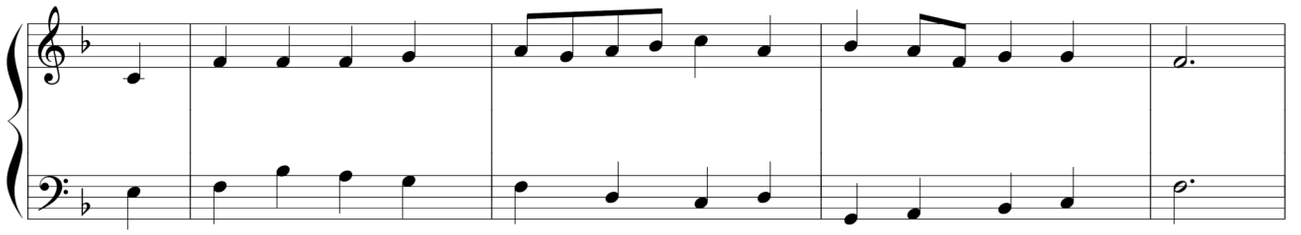
Many hymns are written for a four part choir and don't take the limitation of two hands into consideration. It becomes necessary to redistribute notes from the Alto and Tenor (middle two) parts across the hands according to how far a hand can stretch.



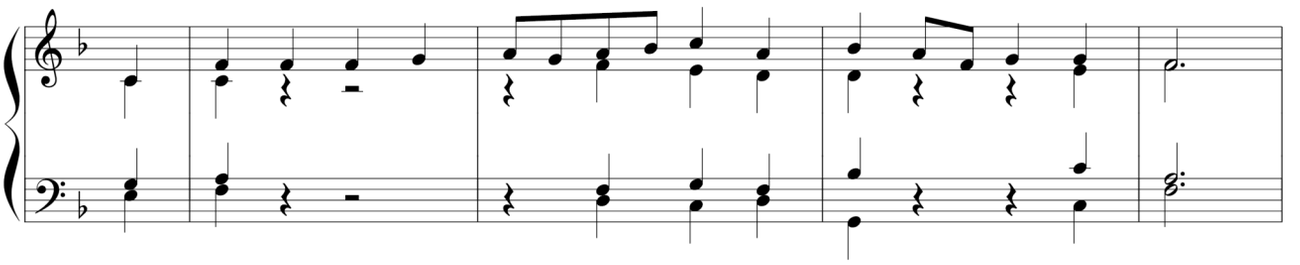
On the other hand, the bass notes could be played an octave higher:



For the sake of **keeping the hymn flowing and rhythmical**, if necessary, play only the melody and the bass:



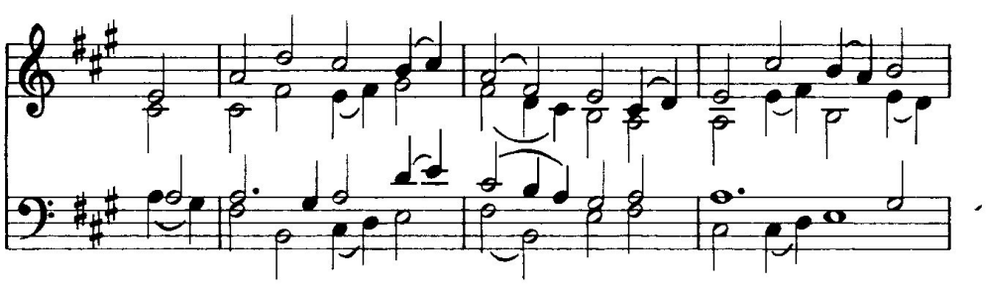
or pin down the important chords at the beginning and ends of phrases:



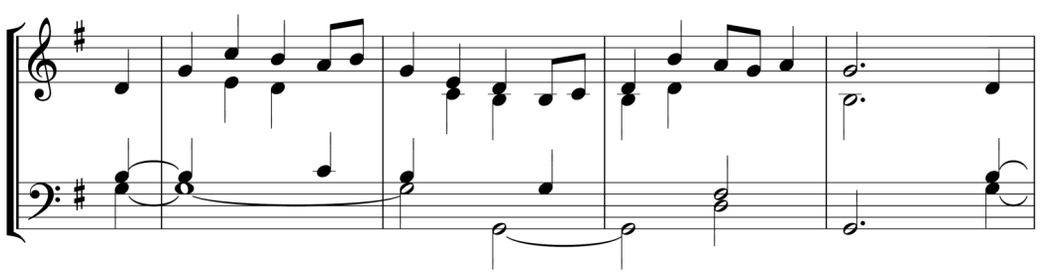
Neither of these solutions is ideal but a congregation will thank you more for a solid, rhythmical accompaniment like this rather than a halting attempt to get all the notes in at a funereal pace.

Simplified Hymns

Online, there are 500 simplified hymns available with no wide stretches, never more than three notes at a time and sometimes only two. This is how the tune *Wolvercote* appears in many hymn books:



and this is how it looks on the website:



You can find these at

organistsonline.org/hymns

and, if you want to, you can find out more about super-simplifying hymns at

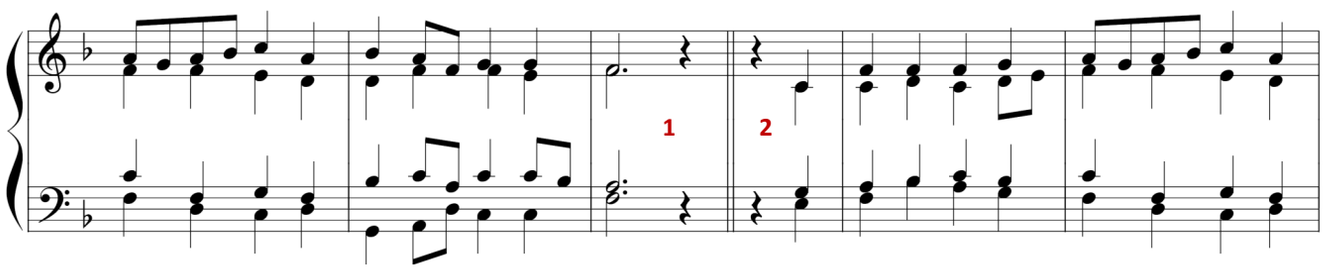
organistsonline.org/hymns/supersimple

Accompanying Hymns

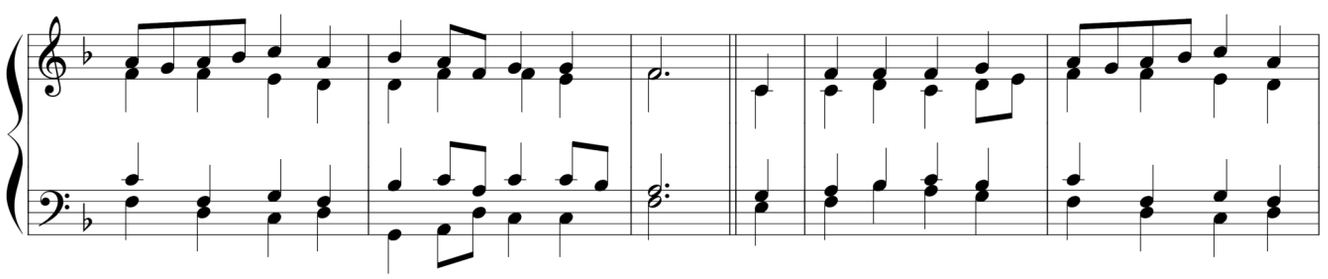
In most churches, a hymn is introduced by playing over the first line or couple of lines. This should **be in the same tempo in which the hymn will be sung**. The rhythmic gap you have planned to place between the verses (see below) should also be used between the play over and the first verse.

It's helpful to a congregation if the first verse is a little louder than the play over. If you are not confident about changing stops or manual, it's always possible to play first just the top line in single notes and then introduce fuller harmony for the verse.

Ideally, the gaps between the verses should not be random but be part of the rhythmic flow of the verses. Something like (with you actually counting the 1, 2 to yourself):

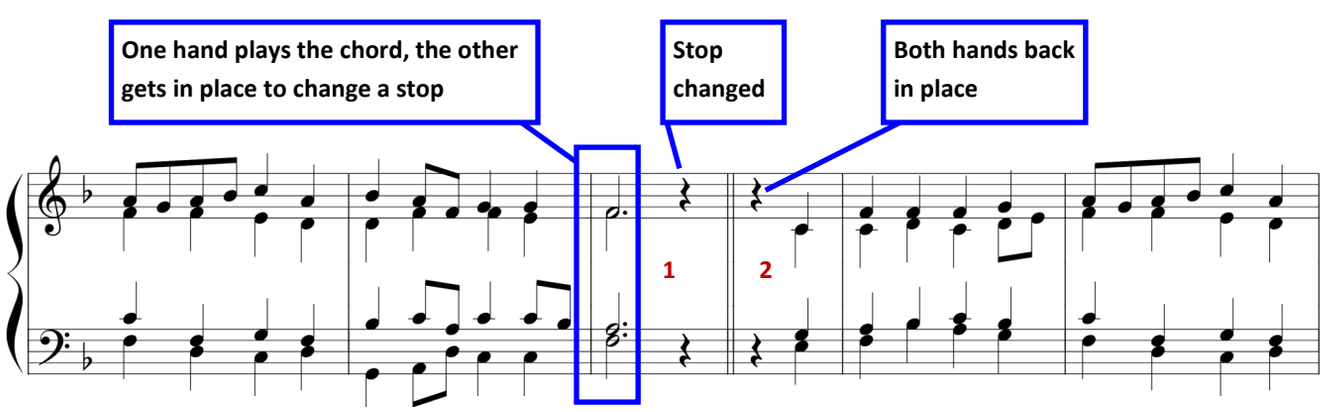


The following, however, is not ideal, as the congregation has little breathing time:



If you are going to change stops between the verses, the two silent beats would be the place to do it.

You could use a combination piston to do this, as it's relatively easy to operate one in the gap. It's more risky when changing stops by hand, as one hand of the other has to reach out, change the stop(s) and then get back into position. It can be useful, on a final chord, to take that chord with one hand so that the other can be in place for a stop change the instant that chord ends.



Voluntaries

Strictly speaking, it's not absolutely necessary to play music before or after a service. However, it has become customary and is generally expected. **If in doubt, do nothing**. On the other hand, if you are a competent

pianist, you will find that much of your Bach, Handel, or other Baroque repertoire will work well. (*Things might not be so ideal with your Chopin Études.*)

A lot of simple music for use in church has been published over the last 150 years and most of it is out of copyright and online. Links to this, so that you can download and print what you want, may be found at

organistsonline.org/organists-toolkit, then go to page 2

Fill-Ins

It's not uncommon, when a hymn falls short of the time it needs to cover, or there is some liturgical action taking place, that an organist improvises covering music. This is not essential and, if you aren't confident with such things, **do nothing**. However at **organistsonline.org/organists-toolkit** page 2, there are some tips about how to cover the action which **do not** require you to have knowledge of harmony, counterpoint, or form.

Further Study

You may wish to know more about the background of the organ, or increase your technical capabilities and learn to use the pedals. There are a number of Organ Tutors (books) available which, although a bit old-fashioned, are out of copyright and can be download at will. There are links to these at **organistsonline.org/organists-toolkit**, then go to page 3.

Best of all, get a good teacher. The web link immediately above makes suggestions, including the **Royal College of Organists**, which maintains a list of accredited teachers across the UK.

Beware!!! Beware!!! Beware !!! If you are going to find a teacher, make sure that they are a good one and know what they are doing. The author of this guide, Philip Norman, was taught for six years by an affable, well known, self-taught local teacher on both piano and organ. He (PN) then had to spend a lot of time undoing bad habits that had been instilled in him.

Other Resources

If you are in a situation where you are having to cover the organ playing, it's possible that other aspects of church music also need support. Here are some downloadable resources:

The Singers Toolkit 1 **organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit** This is intended for adult singers who come to choral singing later in life. It's a compendium of basic knowledge about notation, tips for good singing, and what to do and not do during rehearsals. It's useful if you are having to run a choir.

The Singers Toolkit 2 **organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit/pitching** Some singers have problems singing the same note as the rest of the choir. These pages provide exercises which such singers can use in the privacy of their own home for five minutes a day to improve their skills.

The Choirs Trainers Toolkit **organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit** These pages are for non-choral specialists who find themselves running a choir (maybe, to save it from extinction). The pages are divided into: Absolute Basics, Basics, Useful, and Could be Useful.

Instrumental Carols **organistsonline.org/hymns/carols** These are carols arranged for irregular groups of instruments so that, if you have flautists, violinists or whatever in your congregation, you can add some uplift to a carol service.

All these resources and more are free to download and use at any time

organistsonline.org

The Choral Singers' Toolkit

An Incomplete Guide to Singing in a Choir

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is a distillation of over sixty years of choral singing and choir training.

If I could, I would like to impress you about my background; telling you how, at the age of eight, I was accepted as a chorister at King's College, Cambridge - and that I sang the famous *Once in Royal David's City* solo on several occasions. I would then tell you how, when my voice broke, I received a full scholarship to one of the more impressive public schools and followed this up with an organ or choral scholarship at Oxbridge. A series of sub-organist positions at cathedrals followed until I became one of the youngest Directors of Music in a cathedral - and also filled out my time directing famous choirs around the world and building up an impressive list of CD recordings.

As I said, I would like to impress you, but none of the above would be true. My experiences were very much at the other end of things. At the age of five, I was rejected in an audition for a classroom choir (not even the school choir) - I'd got no sense of pitch. (I was allowed to play the triangle in the "orchestra" which was to accompany the choir - but was told, "Philip, play very quietly." [I'd got no sense of rhythm.])

It took me five years to overcome the rejection before I tried out the local church choir a few days short of my eleventh birthday. I was allowed to remain (they were desperate?) but I didn't have a clue what I was doing. A piece of music was shoved into my hands - and we were off. I was lost. If someone had explained to me the information on page 18 of this booklet things might have been better.

And so it went on - years of randomly picking up scraps of information, and years of miserable failure interspersed with brief moments of progress.

If you really want to know what happened next and that I am not a total fraud, you could visit **www.pnms.co.uk/pkn** for further information.

The contents of this booklet cover the most important things that a new adult choral singer, who, perhaps, is trying out choral singing for the first time but has no background in music, needs to know. Some of it's about singing, but a lot is about not getting lost when holding printed music for the first time, and about understanding, to some degree, the amazing plethora of obscure signs and markings that cover the copy. Many of the questions and confusions which arise with new singers are covered here.

Much of my time has been spent with small groups of amateur singers piecing together a performance so that they can realise their ambition of singing in a choir. This booklet covers their principal concerns - things that they have worried and fretted about.

Anyone can sing, and can sing very happily in a choir without knowing anything about music notation. However, although you could learn Russian or Turkish without knowing their alphabets, your appreciation of the language would be much greater if you could read it. The information in this document won't make you a sight-reader (that takes practice and/or the accident of inheritance), but it will clear up much of the confusion that can occur if a choir is score-based (uses printed music extensively) by setting out the basic information for understanding the whats, hows, and whys of printed music. If a conductor barks out, "Tenors, I want a fortissimo on the G double flat, then a diminuendo until the staccato wedge," that will no longer be a confusing fog of technicalities.

You can find the information in this booklet online, with audio and video examples at

organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit

Philip Norman - August 2022

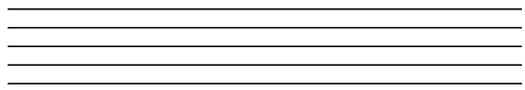
THE CHORAL SINGERS' TOOLKIT

A compact (but NOT totally comprehensive) guide for new choral singers

CONTENTS

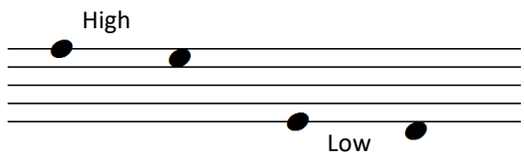
FINDING AND KEEPING YOUR PLACE IN THE MUSIC

Notes are written on a **STAFF** or **STAVE.**

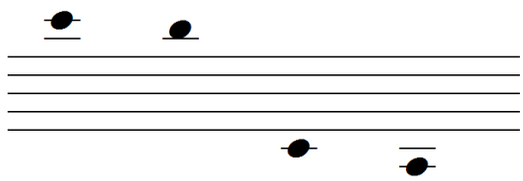


This shows if they are **HIGH** or **LOW.**

Notes can be written on the lines or in the spaces.

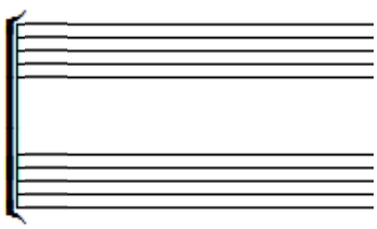


Very high or low notes are written on **LEDGER LINES.**



Several staves may be performed at the same time. They are then grouped together with a bracket or brace at the left margin. A group of staves is commonly called a **LINE (GB)** or **SYSTEM (US).**

A two-stave line with a bracket.



A three-stave line with a brace.

The most common division of voices in a choir is

SOPRANO - ALTO - TENOR - BASS

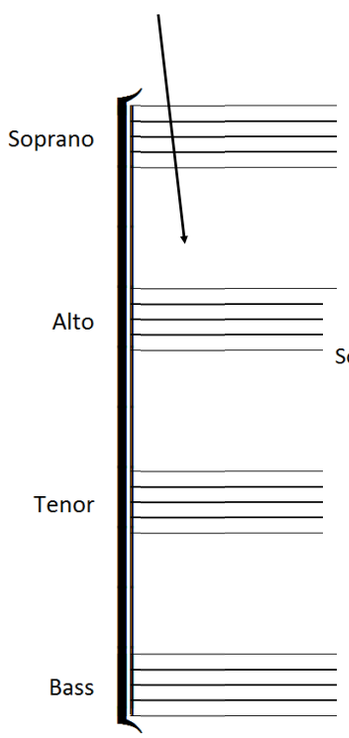
High - Low - Lower - Lowest

These may be subdivided

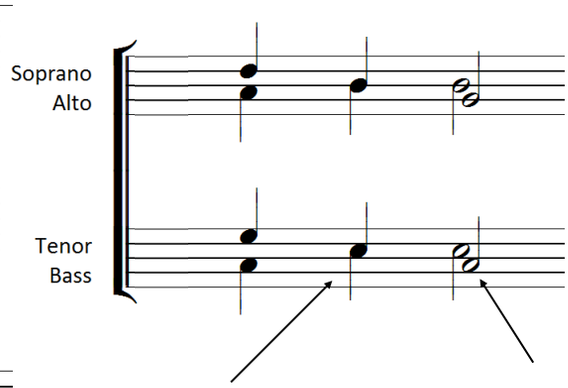
SOPRANO 1 - SOPRANO 2

Higher - Lower

The voices are often assigned to a 4-stave line like this.



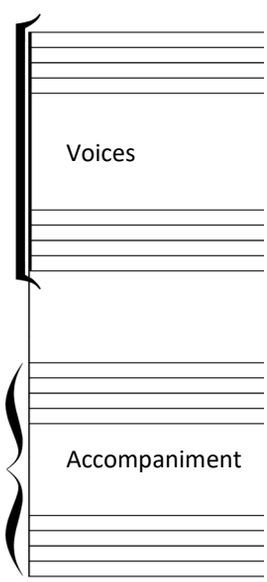
Sometimes, to save space, the Sopranos and the Altos, and the Tenors and the Basses will share a stave. Then if the note **TAILS** point **upwards**, they are soprano or tenor notes, and if the note tails points **downwards,** they are alto or bass notes.



Singing the same note.

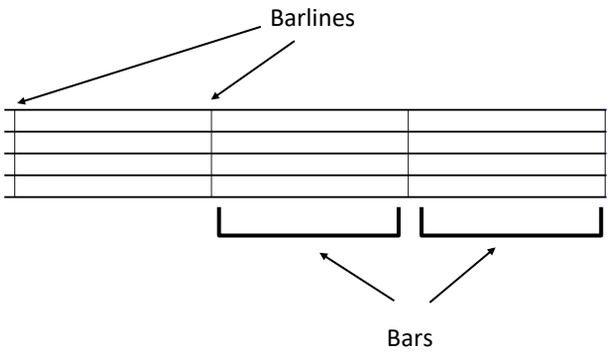
Tenors lower than the basses.

It's not unusual that, under the choral parts, a piano or organ part will be printed.

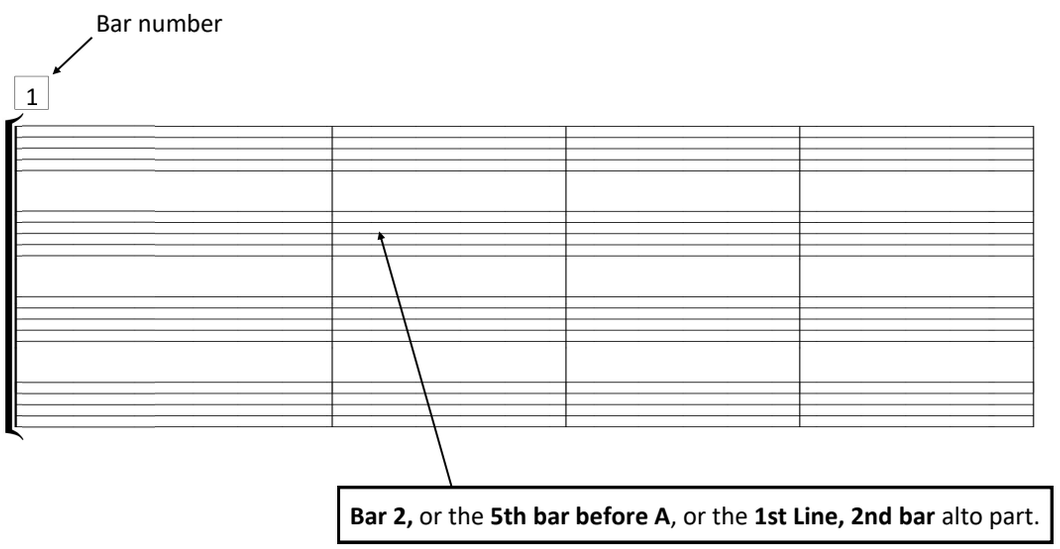


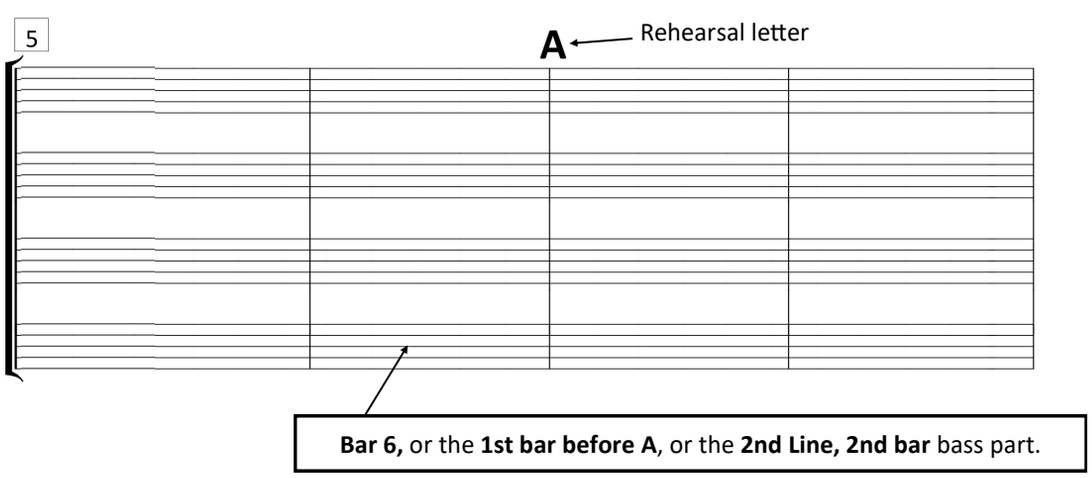
On a stave, **BAR LINES** divide it into smaller units.

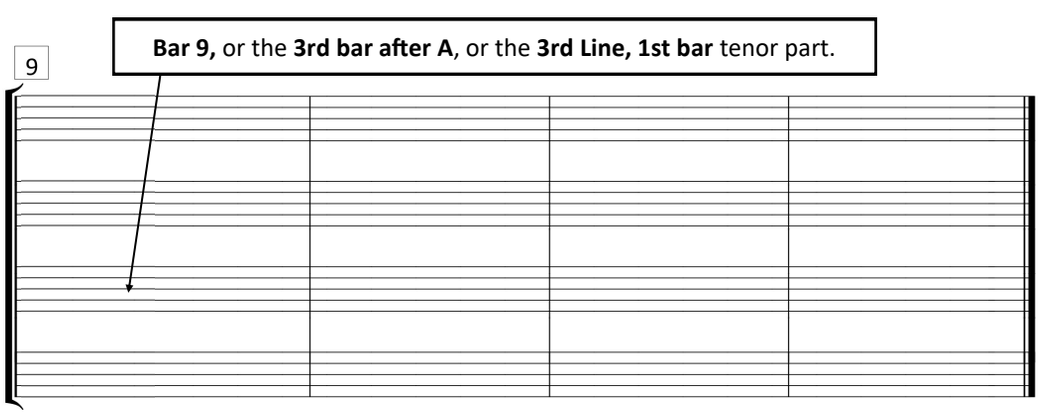
The gap between two bar lines is called **BAR**.



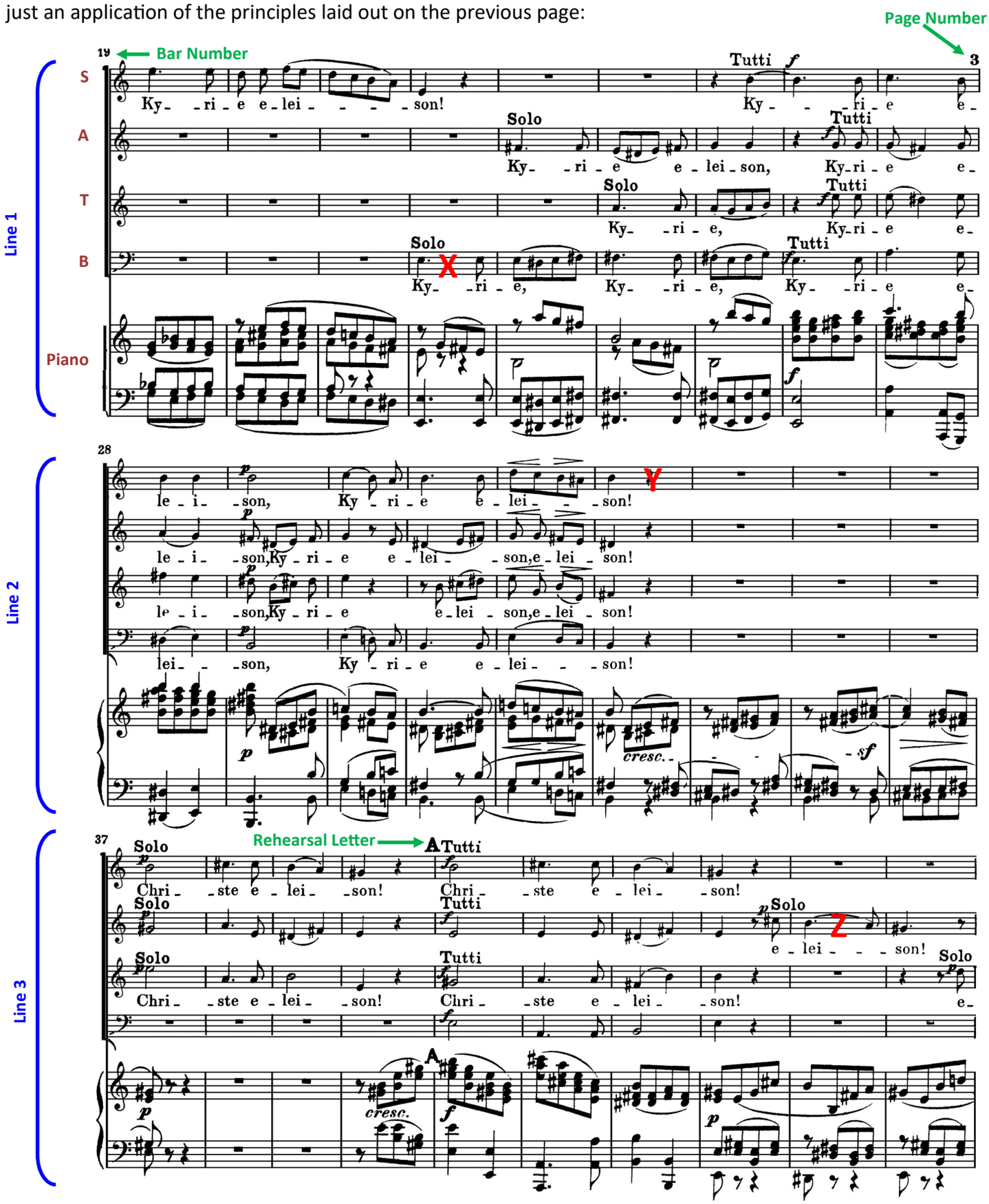
We can orientate ourselves on a page by **BAR NUMBERS**, **REHEARSAL LETTERS/NUMBERS** (landmarks on the page), or **LINE/BAR** references.







Here is a real life example. If you aren't used to looking at printed music it could seem complicated, but it's just an application of the principles laid out on the previous page:



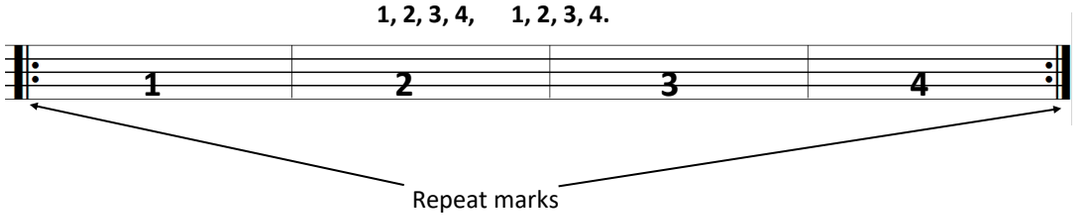
X = Page 3, bar 22, or line 1 bar 4, or the 19th bar before A, bass.

Y = Page 3, bar 33, or line 2 bar 6, or the 8th bar before A, soprano.

Z = Page 3, bar 45, or line 3 bar 9, or the 5th bar after A, alto.

Bars between **REPEAT MARKS** are sung twice, thus:

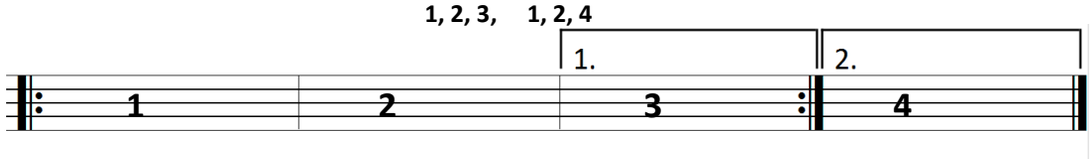
1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4.



o-o-o-o-OOO-o-o-o-o

Sometimes, there are different endings for the first time a section is sung (**1ST TIME BAR**) and the second time it is sung (**2ND TIME BAR**). Thus:

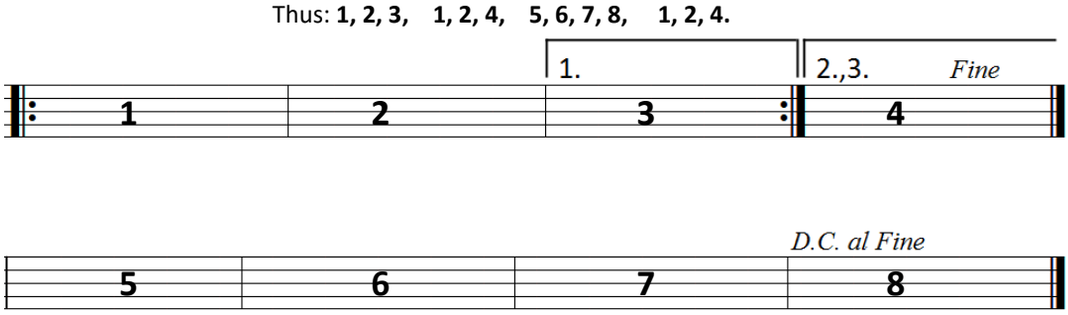
1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4



o-o-o-o-OOO-o-o-o-o

At the end of a piece ***D.C. al Fine*** tells you to go back to the beginning and sing through to ***Fine*** in the **3RD TIME BAR.**

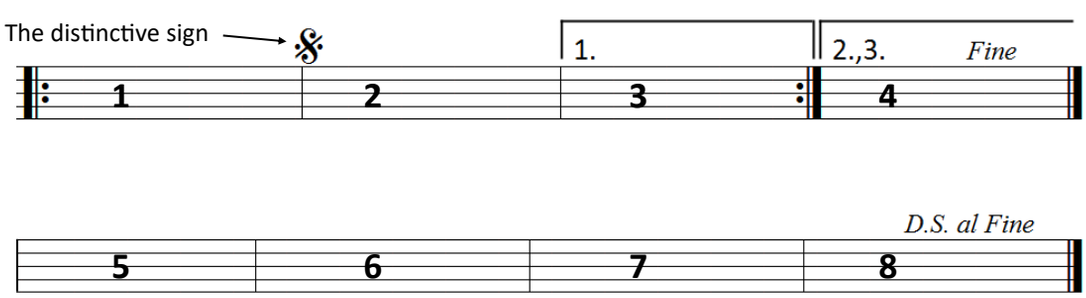
Thus: **1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1, 2, 4.**



o-o-o-o-OOO-o-o-o-o

At the end of a piece ***D.S. al Fine*** tells you to go back to the **distinctive sign** and sing through to ***Fine*** In the **THIRD TIME BAR.**

Thus: **1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4 , 5, 6, 7, 8, 2, 4.**

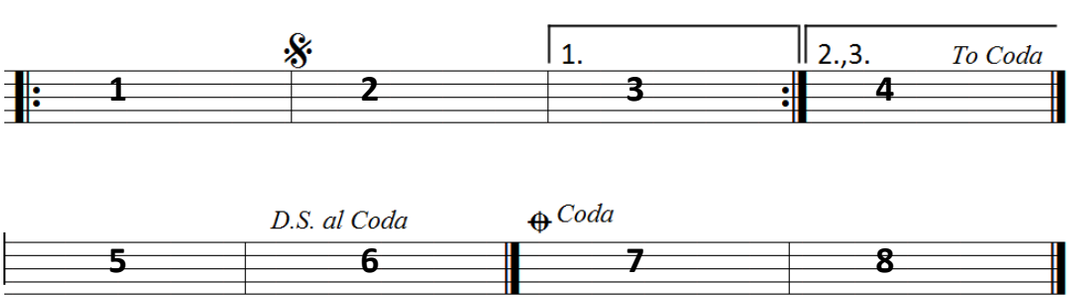


o-o-o-o-OOO-o-o-o-o

At the end of a piece ***D.S. al Coda*** tells you to go back to the D.S.sign, sing through to the **3RD TIME BAR,** then jump to the **CODA.**

Thus: **1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 2, 4, 7, 8**. ***There are many possibilities, but they all use the same basic methods.***

This might seem complicated, and it is. Even professional musicians can get lost in repeats and DS's etc.



BEATS AND TIME SIGNATURES

Most music has **accented** or **louder** beats at regular intervals.
We normally count the louder beats as **1** and the lesser beats as 2, 3, 4, etc.

GOD save our **GRA** - cious King , **LONG** live our **NO** - ble King, **GOD** save the King,

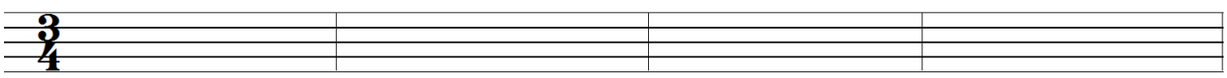
1 2 3 ***1*** 2 3 ***1*** 2 3 ***1*** 2 3 ***1*** 2 3 ***1*** 2 3

GOOD King Wen - ces - **LAS** looked out **ON** the feast of **STE** - phen

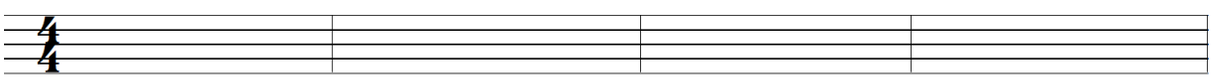
1 2 3 4 ***1*** 2 3 4 ***1*** 2 3 4 ***1*** 2 3 4

NB!! You will notice that some notes last *longer* than one beat, and some *shorter* than one beat, but the counting is kept ABSOLUTELY REGULAR.

On a stave, the **bar lines** are placed immediately before the accented beats.



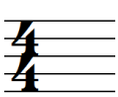
GOD save our **GRAC** - cious King, **LONG** live our **NO** - ble King

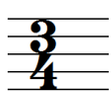


GOOD King Wen - ces - **LAS** looked out **ON** the feast of **STE** - phen,

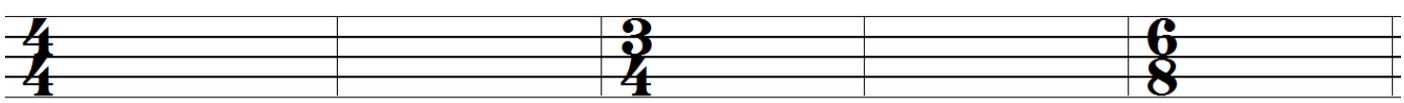
God Save Our Gracious King has **THREE BEATS IN A BAR,** and Good King Wenceslas has **FOUR BEATS IN A BAR.**

Usually, there is a **TIME SIGNATURE** at the beginning of the music (as in the examples above).
The **UPPER NUMBER tells** you how many beats there are in a bar. For the time being, we can ***ignore the LOWER NUMBER.***





Sometimes, the time signature will change during the course of a piece.



For the sake of convenience, in **FAST** music, a conductor may decide to count some beats as just parts of other beats.

So **FOUR** beats in a bar could be counted as **TWO** beats like this : | 1 and 2 and | 1 and 2 and |

Or **SIX** beats could be counted as **TWO** beats: | 1 and a 2 and a | 1 and a 2 and a |

Or **THREE** beats could be counted as **ONE** beat; | 1 and a | 1 and a | 1 and a |

But the counting stays regular.

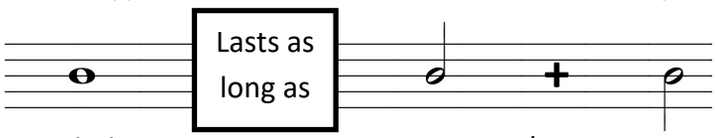
On the other hand, in **SLOW** music, the beat may be divided into shorter beats.

FOUR beats may be counted like this: | 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and | or even: | 1 2, 3 4, 5 6, 7 8 |.

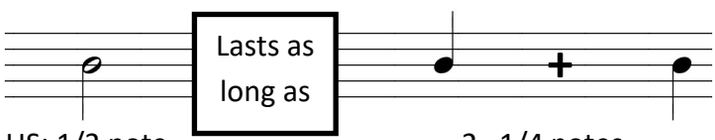
THREE beats may become: | 1 and 2 and 3 and | or: |1 2, 3 4, 5 6 |

NOTES, RESTS & TIME VALUES

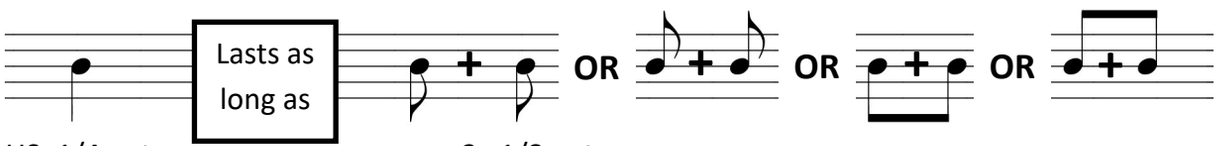
The appearance of a note tells **HOW LONG IT LASTS** compared to other notes (**ITS TIME VALUE**).



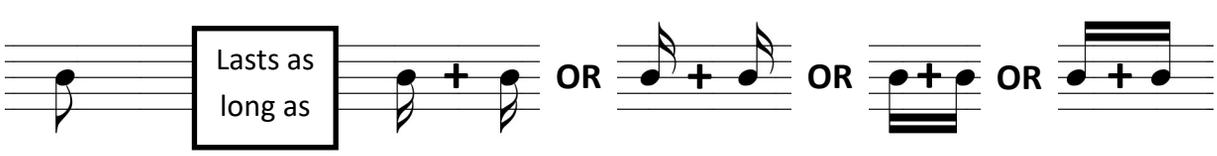
US: whole note = 2 1/2 notes
UK: semibreve = 2 minims



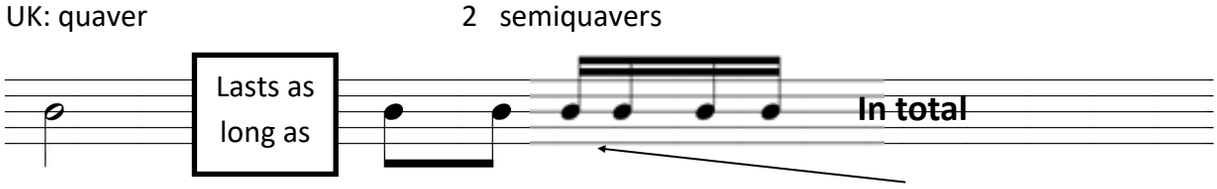
US: 1/2 note = 2 1/4 notes
UK: minim = 2 crotchets



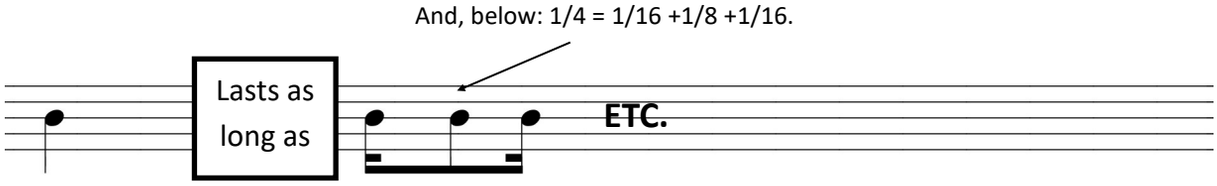
US: 1/4 note = 2 1/8 notes
UK: crotchet = 2 quavers



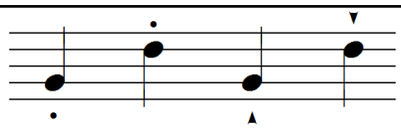
US: 1/8 note = 2 1/16 notes
UK: quaver = 2 semiquavers



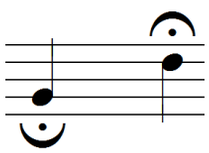
Short notes fit exactly into the time value of longer notes. Above: 1/2 = (2 x 1/8) + (4 x 1/16).
And, below: 1/4 = 1/16 +1/8 +1/16.



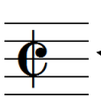
It makes ***no difference*** to the *time value* whether the ***tails point up or down*** or whether they are *joined or not.*



The sound of a note may be *clipped* by **STACCATO** dots or wedges,
or may be *lengthened* by a **PAUSE.**

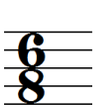


MORE ON TIME SIGNATURES: the **LOWER NUMBER** says what we are counting as the beat.

= 2 beats in the bar, counting in 1/2 notes (minims). =  Old fashioned, but still used.

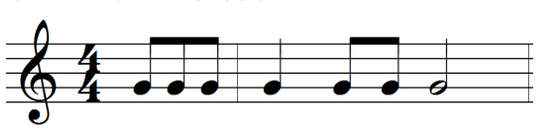
= 4 beats in the bar, counting in 1/4 notes (crotchets). = 

= 3 beats in the bar, counting in 1/4 notes (crotchets).

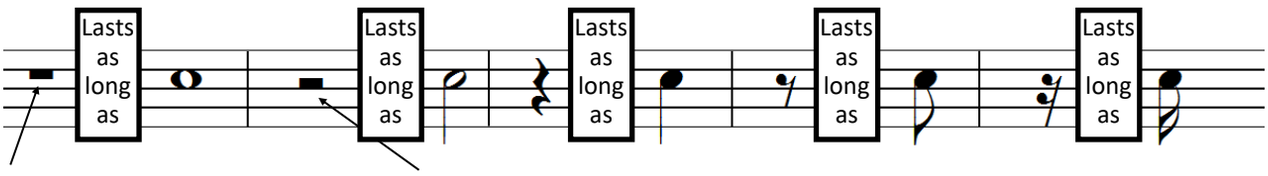


= 6 beats in the bar, counting in 1/8 notes (quavers).

Some pieces begin with a **short bar;** that is, an **UP-BEAT** or **ANACRUSIS.**

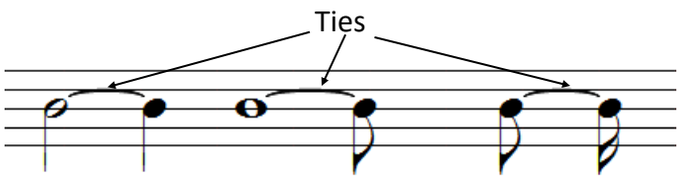


There are **RESTS**, which tell you when **NOT** to sing. These also have **time values**.

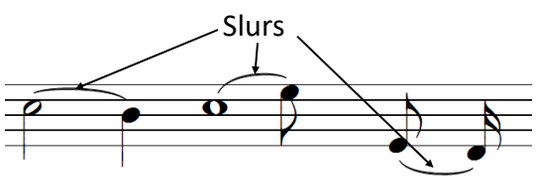


Semibreve **S**uspended from a line. **M**inim **M**ounted on a line.

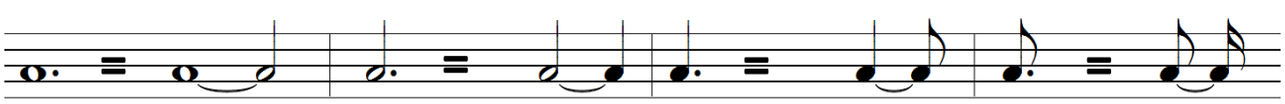
Note can be **TIED** together to make one longer note **IF THEY ARE AT THE SAME PITCH** (on the same line or space).



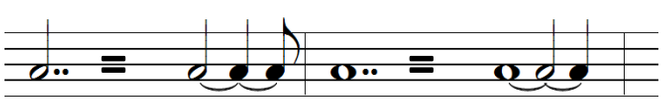
If the notes **ARE NOT AT THE SAME PITCH**, the curved lines are **SLURS**, which mean, "sing smoothly."



A **DOT** after a note (or rest) makes it **50% LONGER.**

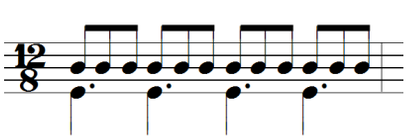


A **DOUBLE DOT** after a note (or rest) makes it **75% LONGER.**

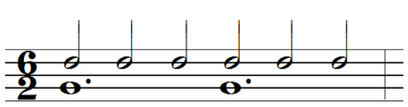


EVEN MORE ABOUT TIME SIGNATURES WITH DOTTED NOTES

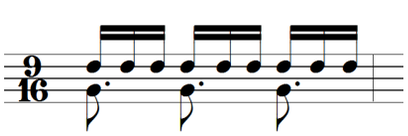
If the **UPPER** number of a time signature is a 6, 9, or 12, it's **POSSIBLE** that the basic beat divides into 3.
In these cases, to find the **number of beats in** a bar**, DIVIDE THE UPPER NUMBER by 3.**
To find what that beat is, imagine that the beat suggested by the **LOWER** figure is **tied together in groups of 3, OR is a <u>dotted note.</u>**
(This is a confusing complication - but it's what happens)



4 beats in a bar, counting in **dotted 1/4 notes or crotchets.**



2 beats in a bar, counting in **dotted whole notes or semibreves.**



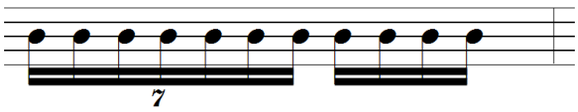
3 beats in a bar, counting in **dotted 1/8 notes or quavers.**

This is called **COMPOUND TIME.**

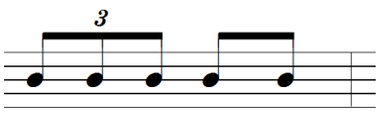
Music without this complication is said to be in **SIMPLE TIME.**

A Last bit about note values - using **TUPLETS**

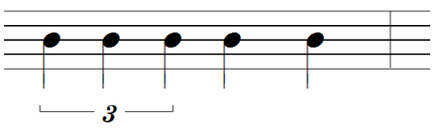
If a beat is divided into an unusual number of smaller notes, a **bracket** or **little number** is used to alert the performer.



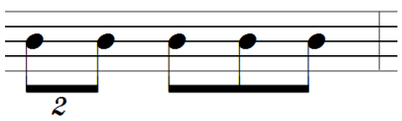
7 in the time of **4**. A **septuplet**.



3 in the time of **2**. A **triplet**.



3 in the time of **2**. A **triplet**.

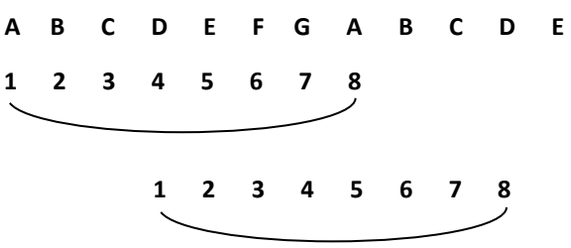


2 in the time of **3**. A **duplet**.

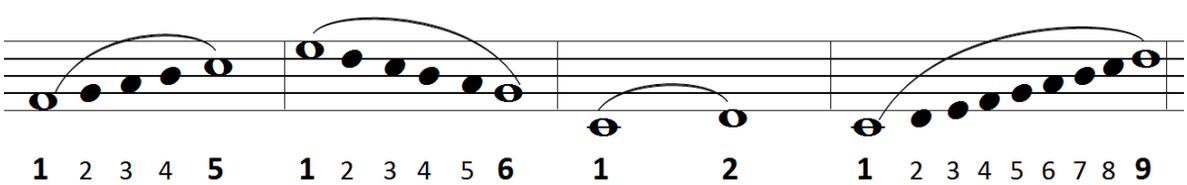
NOTE NAMES, PITCHES AND INTERVALS

Notes are given letter names from A - G, which are then repeated for many different notes. This is because notes of the same letter name, although higher or lower, sound very similar and go together (harmonise) very well.

The distance between two notes of the same name is called an **OCTAVE.**



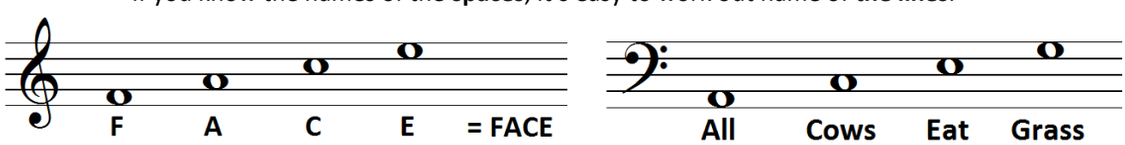
The distance between two notes is called an **INTERVAL**, counting the starting note as **1**.



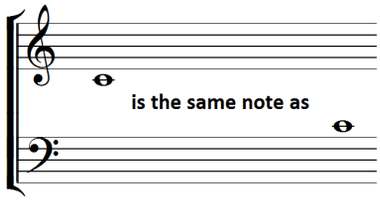
a 5th a 6th a 2nd a 9th

CLEFS are used to define the letter names of the lines and spaces of the stave.
The most usual are the **TREBLE** clef for **high** notes and the **BASS** clef for **low** notes.

If you know the names of the **spaces**, it's easy to work out name of **the lines**.



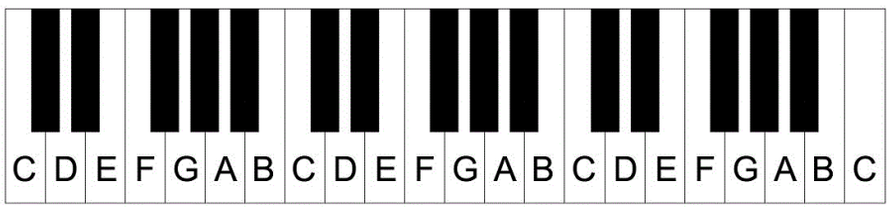
Treble Clef Bass Clef



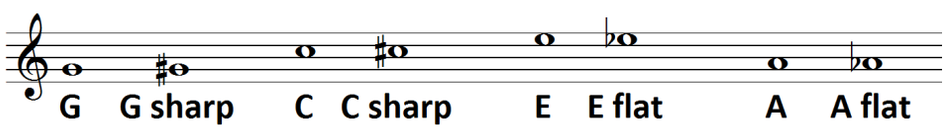
With a **2-stave line,** the **Sopranos and Altos** sing from the **Treble Clef** and the **Tenors and Basses** from the **Bass Clef**.
With a **4-stave line**, it's not uncommon to use a **Treble Clef** for the **Tenors**, but everyone knows that they sing an **octave lower**.

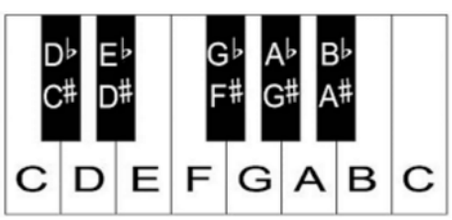
ACCIDENTALS (SHARPS AND FLATS)

The basic notes A - G can be found as the white notes on a piano keyboard.



To get to the equivalent of the black notes, we need to use **SHARPS (#)** and **FLATS (b).**
These are placed in front of notes. A **sharp RAISES** a note by a **SEMITONE** (moves it to the key immediately to the right), and a **flat LOWERS** a note by a **SEMITONE,** (moves it to the key immediately to the left).



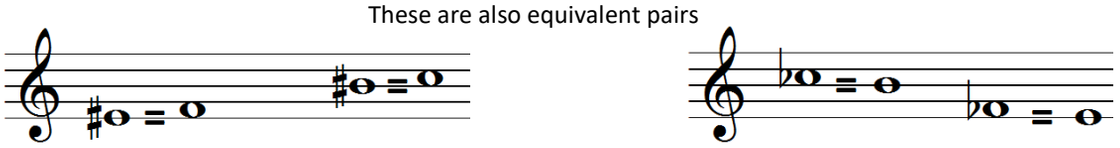


You will notice, for instance, that G# and Ab are the same note. We use both names, though, to keep the music spelling and grammar correct. For example, although the following sounds correct, you wouldn't write it:

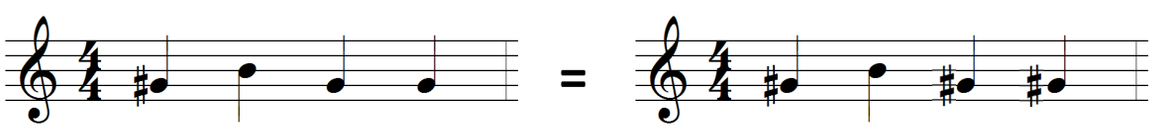
Wen eye hert mie nee, ei treyed not two kri.

So, it's similar with music.

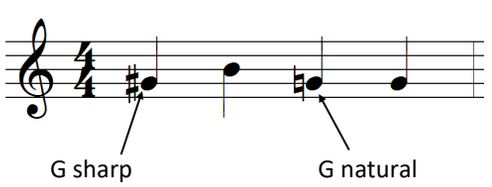
These are also equivalent pairs



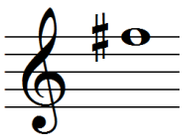
The effect of an accidental lasts until the **next barline.**



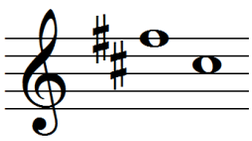
An accidental can be **CANCELLED** by using a **NATURAL.**



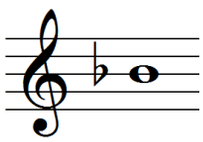
If a piece uses the same accidentals many times, they are often gathered together at the beginning to form a **KEY SIGNATURE.**
These accidentals in the key signature then **AFFECT EVERY NOTE OF THE SAME LETTER NAME,** *unless cancelled by a natural.*



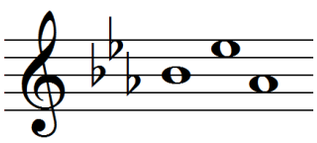
EVERY F, whether high or low, is **SHARPENED.**



EVERY F and C, whether high or low, is **SHARPENED.**

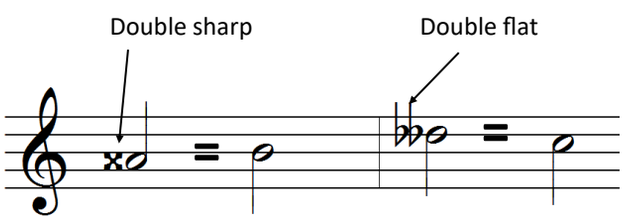


EVERY B, whether high or low, is **FLATTENED.**



EVERY B, E, and A, whether high or low, is **FLATTENED.**

To meet the dictates of musical grammar, there are also **DOUBLE SHARPS** (which raise a note **TWO** semitones), and **DOUBLE FLATS** (which lower a note **TWO** semitones).



LOUDNESS

ppp ***pp*** ***p*** ***mp*** ***mf*** ***f*** ***ff*** ***fff***

Very quiet > > > > > > > Middle quiet/loud > > > > > > > > > Very loud

Also: pianissimo, piano, mezzo-piano, mezzo-forte, forte, fortissimo

Getting louder

Crescendo
Cresc.

Getting quieter

Diminuendo
Dim.
Decrescend
Decresc.

These signs (**accents**) make a note **LOUDER** than those immediately surrounding it.

– > ***sf*** ***fz*** ***fp*** ***sffz*** ***sfz***

TEMPO (Fast or Slow)

Slow	Middle	Fast
Adagio	Moderato	Allegro
Largo	Andante	Presto
Lento		Vivace

Getting Faster	Getting Slower
Accelerando	Rallentando (rall.)
Accel.	Ritenuto (rit.)

The Italian words above are **relative** and have no absolute value**.** The indications below, although appearing to be **absolute**, are often varied according to how many performers there are and/or how much **acoustic** (echo) there is.

♩ = 100: 100 crotchet beats in a minute. ♪ = 50: 50 semiquaver beats in a minute. 𝅗𝅥 = 72: 72 minim beats in a minute.

BREATHING

We have all been breathing for a long time, so we know how our body feels when the lungs are full/empty.
We use this knowledge to control our breathing and, if we have to sing for a long time without taking a breath, we conserve the air we have and don't let it all out in the first few seconds.

There is a discipline about breathing and singing which is different from normal speech. Before starting to sing, take a good breath during the beats running up to the start time. For instance: 1, 2, 3, 4, SING, becomes 1, 2, deep breath, SING.

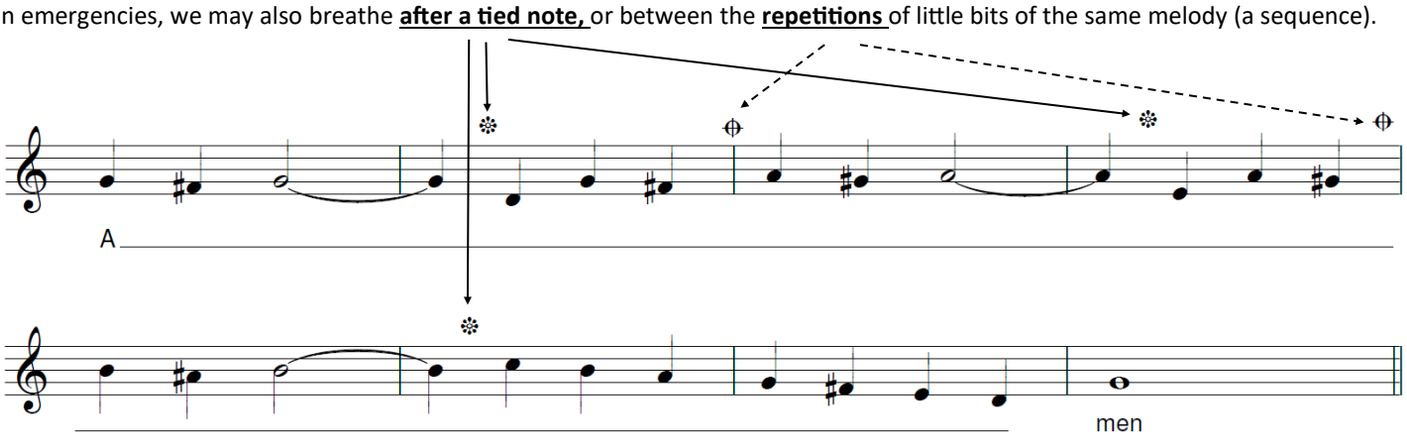
In the best circumstances, we only breathe where there is a rest or a punctuation mark in the text:

There was a young girl in the choir, (breath) whose voice arose higher and higher, (breath) 'til one Sunday night, (breath if needed) ...

In emergencies, we may have to breathe between words: *There was a young girl (breath) in the choir, ...*

We (normally) **NEVER** breathe in the middle of a word: *'til one Sun-(breath)-day night, …* (but see the example below).

In emergencies, we may also breathe **after a tied note,** or between the **repetitions** of little bits of the same melody (a sequence).



PLACING CONSONANTS

Consonants are placed as late as possible in a note. For instance, if the word **"cat"** is sung on a **4 beat note**, the "t" comes just before the next note, NOT on beat 4: **Ca** - 2 - 3 - 4 - **T,** NOT **Ca** - 2 - 3 - **T** .

Also, be careful not to **sizzle** the letters "s" or "z". For instance, with "Bus", **Bu** - 2 - 3 - 4 - **s**, NOT **Bu** - 2 - **s - s - s.**

DIPHTHONGS

English is full of compound vowel sounds (diphthongs). Say these words *out loud and slowly,* and note how, mid-way through, the vowel sound changes: **Gate, Time, Toy.** You may notice something like this: G-a-a-a-**e-e**-t, T-a-a-a-a-**e-e**-m, and T-o-o-o-**e-e**.

When singing diphthongs, we save up the second vowel sound until as **late as possible**:

G-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-***e-e***-t, T-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-***e-e***-m, T-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-***e-e***.

We **NEVER** start the second vowel sound early:

G-a-a-a-***e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e***-t, T-a-a-a-a-a-***e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e***-m, T-o-o-o-o-o-o-***e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e.***

CAN'T SING? TONE DEAF??

Everybody can sing. Well, 99.999% of people can as *tone deafness* is very, very rare. Singing is just an extension of normal speech. If you can hear how other people modulate and inflect the way they talk (how their voice goes up and down) and you do the same, you are not tone deaf. However, if talking is a stroll in the park, singing in a concert is like running a marathon; it requires stamina, muscle tone, and an understanding of how to use your whole body to the best effect. For example, you may give an occasional squeak of surprise but, in normal life, you won't be using those upper notes time and again and be expected to hold on to them.

Singing is a combination of muscle control (especially, what you do with you vocal cords and lungs), the ear (listening to what you are doing and what is going on around you), the brain (checking up on the previous two points and anticipating what's coming up).

Singing in a choir is also a team effort, so you have to be prepared to use your voice at the extreme ends of its abilities when the situation requires.

HITTING THE RIGHT NOTES: This depends on practice. If you have done no more than sing in the bath, or hum as you weed the garden, you are likely to have just been using those notes which come most comfortably to you. Singing in a choir demands a much wider range of notes and finding these takes practice and (just as it's easy to miss scoring 180 in darts without putting in some hours of preparation) it's easy, initially, to miss the note, especially if it's a high one (requiring much more physical effort). This is when it's important to listen to yourself and others. If you hear that you are higher (but probably lower) than the voices around you, make some adjustment to what you are singing. If you still can't find the note, stop and listen until notes within your range return. Your range (the number of notes you can sing) will extend as your voice adapts to the extra demands being made upon it.

BREATHING WELL: In normal life, you can take a breath when you want to, not just when some external circumstance allows. Assuming that you are standing or sitting in a good position (not hunched up with the chest and stomach compressed but with the back straight and your shoulders back) you should be able to take enough breath to avoid breathing in the wrong places. This does, however, depend upon noting in rehearsals where breaths should be taken and, in performance, conserving or managing your breath until you get to these places.

SINGING IN TUNE: If you are breathing well and listening, this becomes easier with practice. However, beware of top notes (it's easy to shave the peak off a melody and then be under pitch), long notes (as not much seems to be happening, they tend to sag), and last notes (you may be running out of breath or the concentration lapses).

USEFUL PRACTICAL TIPS

Always take a pencil to rehearsal. A conductor may give a thousand performance instructions during a term and you won't be able to remember them all. Write down what he or she says in the score to remind yourself (use a soft pencil if it's a hired printed score, some other conductor with another choir may have other ideas).

If online or on-disk rehearsal tracks become available, use them. They are a valuable resource for reinforcing your knowledge of the notes between rehearsals.

Try to be on time for rehearsals. During the course of a term, the equivalent of a whole rehearsal can be lost waiting to get everyone assembled or, if you always miss the warm-up period, valuable time when you could be improving your technique and knowledge is lost. Ask questions when in doubt, either of your singing colleagues** or the conductor.

** But discreetly, please. A welter of personal consultations going on can wreck the progress of a rehearsal.

Find out more, with audio and video examples, at organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit

THE SINGERS TOOLKIT - PART 2

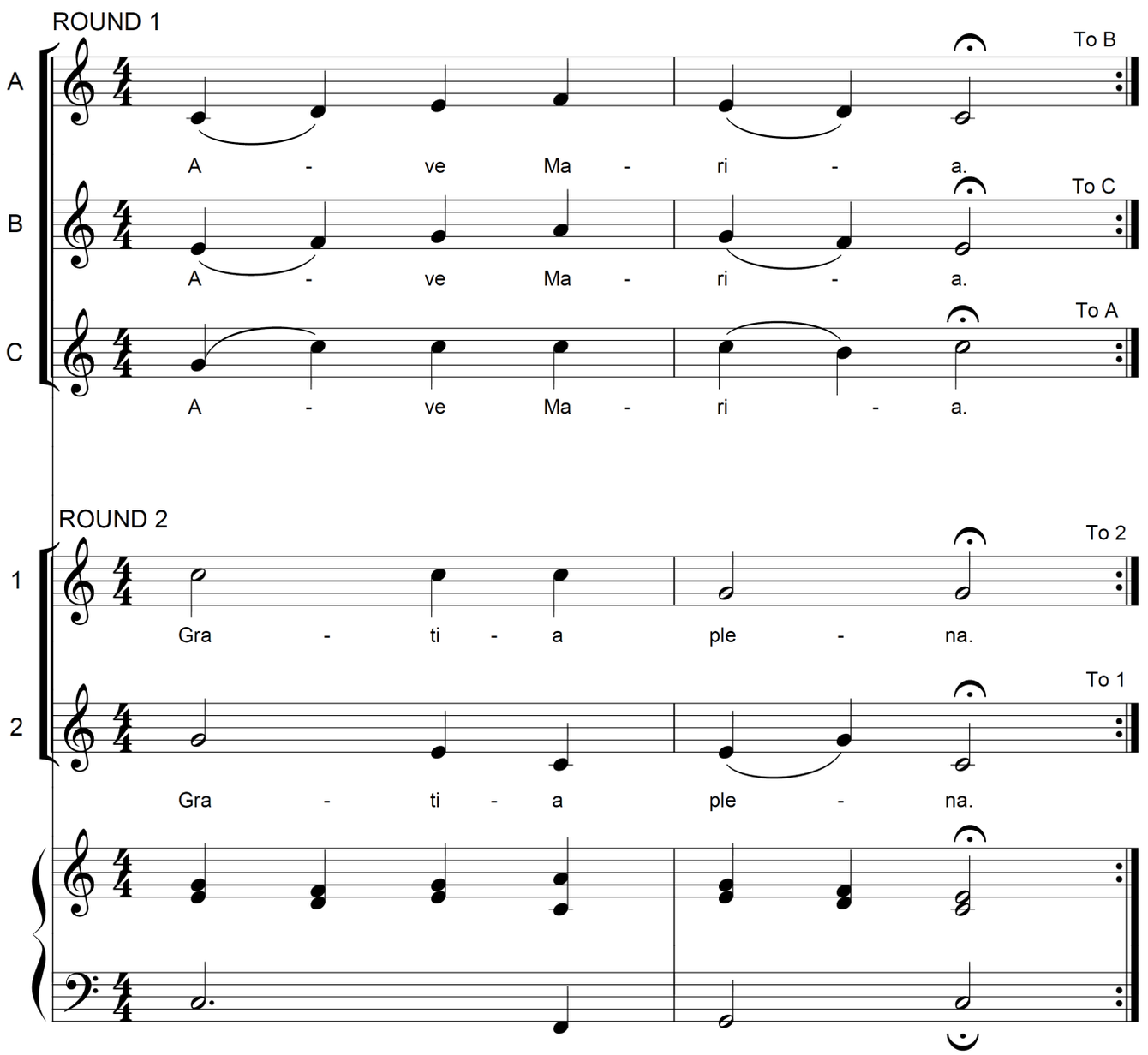
The Singers' Toolkit is aimed, primarily, at adult singers who return to singing after some decades of absence, or have never sung in a choir before. Some of these singers have difficulty matching pitch (singing the same notes as the rest of the choir). Singing the right notes is a matter of ear/voice co-ordination (rather like scoring 180 in darts is a matter of eye/hand co-ordination - as mentioned above) and can be improved with practice.

The Singers' Toolkit Part 2 provides a series of online pitching exercises, grouped suitably for soprano, alto, tenor, bass, or don't-know, which can be practised for a few minutes each day in the privacy of the home.

Find out more at:

organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit/pitching

Rather than leave a blank space on this page, here is a double canon:



To find this, audio and/or video rehearsal tracks, and performance suggestions, go to organistsonline.org/small-choirs/downloads, then search for "Ave Maria Oven Ready"

This is a quick-to-learn piece which can easily be taught by ear only.

The Choir Trainers' Toolkit

A guide for reluctant choir trainers

THE CHOIR TRAINERS' TOOLKIT

Introduction

This site is intended for reluctant, stand-in conductors and choir-trainers. Those people who, in normal circumstances, would not choose to train and direct a choir; those who realised that without their help a choir would wither and die. (Or those who stood still when everyone else took one step backwards.)

There are many small church choirs scattered up and down the country saved from oblivion by a member of their own ranks who, when qualified and/or experienced leadership left and couldn't be replaced, stepped forward to keep things going. They may be experienced singers who have learned much as a choir member but haven't had to actually take charge before. Or perhaps, someone who has agreed to the play the organ and then discovered that there is a choir to run. It's not unknown for such people to find, some months or even years later, that they are still in harness with no relief immediately in sight.

Always, always, always (assuming that it's possible) have a tuned instrument available for accompanying rehearsals. Singers can't learn to appreciated accurate pitch if all they hear is a howling organ or jangling piano.

These pages do not pretend to be an exhaustive treatise on directing a choir, but rather a compilation of the most important things to take into account, with some pages of deeper background available for those who need or want them.

The points below are not given in a pre-conceived order of importance, as that order could be different from place to place.

Courage

There's a popular image of The Conductor, forged during the 19th Century, of a wild genius, hot-lined to Eternity, seeking to draw from the music great philosophical and human truths. Well, this may be true in some circles, but mostly the whole process comes down to making sure that everyone starts and stops together, sings in the same way, and doesn't sound too unpleasant. Within these prosaic parameters, and perhaps a touch of imagination, a lot can be achieved.

In other words, don't feel overwhelmed by the situation. Within a church, the choir director's job is to make sure that everything is satisfactorily done; to be an enhancement of a service rather than a distraction.

Competency

It's useful if a choir's director has a little more knowledge of music than the members. **Although it's not totally necessary, an understanding of music at least equivalent to that to be found in The Singers Toolkit (from page 15 in this book) is worth striving for (if not already achieved).** If you could persuade your singers to get to grips with these pages as well, a lot of time and grief in rehearsals would be saved. They can be found, along with enhancements and interactive features, at **organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit**.

Some pages go well beyond the knowledge needed for simple survival (see the Menu page) but if you have time to become confident with these, the process of directing and running a choir will become much easier.

Rehearsals

Have them. Even is it's only for 30 minutes on a Sunday morning. It's important that a choir knows what it's doing, even if it has done all of it before. It can be very distracting if, during a service, some choir members are trying to catch up with what's going on. If it's possible, hold rehearsals some other time in the week as well, so that performances can be more secure and the singing a little more polished.

Budget

However modest the choir, and however restricted it's ambitions, it's always useful to have access to some funds for development and new repertoire without expecting members to pay for things themselves. A bit of negotiation with church councils may be needed.

Profile

If a choir hopes to gain new members, it's vital that people know about it and how to make contact with it. If a church's magazine, newssheet, or website don't mention the choir of who runs it, this is a really important thing to rectify. There are churches that advertise on Organists Online that, although seeking an organist and choirmaster (so we know that they have both) don't mention either on any of their publicity material.

New Repertoire

It's hard to persuade people to come to rehearsals if they are only going to run through the same pieces they have been singing for years. Every choir need challenge and variety if it is going to grow. There are lots of free pieces suitable for small church choirs on *The Small Choirs Website*, and the Simple Arranging page of **organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit** shows how to prepare simple pieces yourself.

Conducting

Beating Time

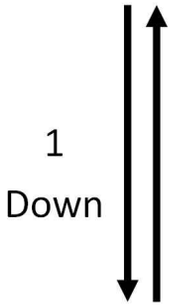
The basic purpose of a conductor is to make sure everyone starts and stops together and, during the intervening time, stays together. Exactly how you do this doesn't matter (as long as both you and the singers know what you are doing). There are various conventions but many of these will have to be abandoned if you are both conductor and accompanist - in which case, a significant nod or twitch of any spare limb may have to suffice. The main things are: a) know what you are going to do and how; b) make sure that singers know what you are going to do and how; and c) be consistent.

Wild, arm waving beats don't really help anyone, neither do wooden, mechanical beats. Something which is a bit restrained is easier to keep an eye on. If the beat is flowing, with a little flick at the actual moment that the beat occurs, and with these beats round about the same place in space each time, it's easier for a choir to follow. You can see world famous conductors on YouTube flailing about - but they are dependent on professional performers knowing what they are doing. It's hard to be more specific on a printed page. However, video examples are available at **organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit/conducting**.

But the ultimate, greatest rule of all, is that the first beats of bars are DOWN BEATS.

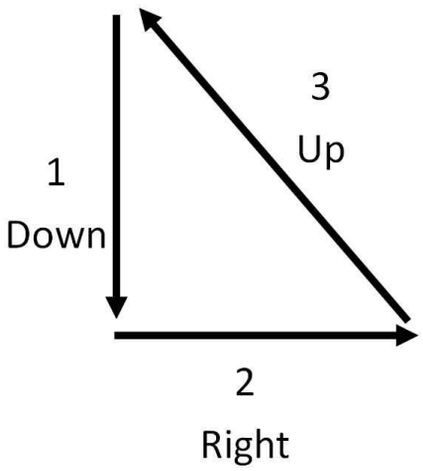
Before Starting

Be still for a moment or two and make sure that you have decided yourself on the tempo. Then, in that tempo you have decided, give some preparatory beats. Too few, and the choir won't pick-up the tempo. Too many - and the choir might not wait for you. Make sure it's the same number every time and the choir has practised coming in, not just getting to the notes just a little bit after you have started (and not all at the same time). Two preparatory beats can be very useful as the choir can think (and take) a Deep Breath with these beats.



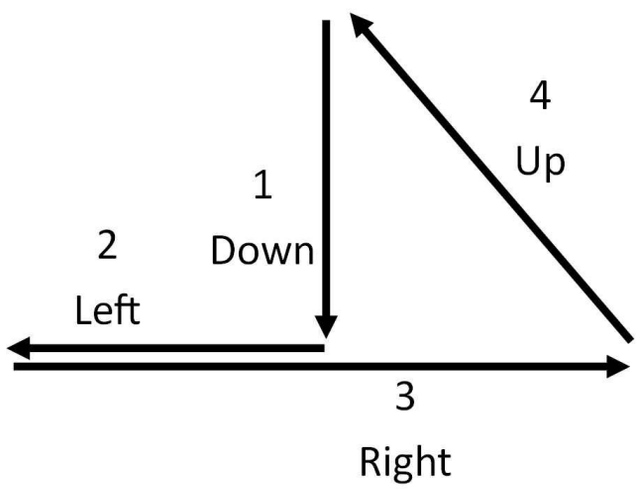
Duple Time

This is a pattern for 2/4, 2/2, 6/8 (a compound duple time - see **The Singers' Toolkit**) and anything else with two beats in the bar. **Remember to keep it flowing**. You can invent your own pattern, but please keep first beats of the bar as downbeats, and remember to be consistent for your singers.



Triple Time

Triple time is anything in 3/8, 3/4, 3/2, or 9/8 (a compound triple time). If you want to have two preparatory beats, Nos 2 and 3 are best.



Quadruple Time

Such time signatures as 4/8, 4/4, 4/2, and 12/8 (a compound quadruple time) are in quadruple time. A good choice of preparatory beats would be Nos 3 and 4.

Divided Beats

If the music is very slow, you might want to divide the beat (1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and) for 4/4 or (1 and a 2 and a 3 and a 4 and a) for 12/8. An attempt to represent this graphically will, in all probability, just lead to confusion, so visit

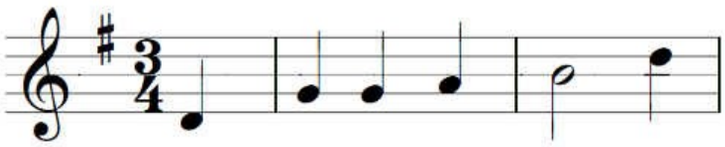
organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit/conducting

for video examples.

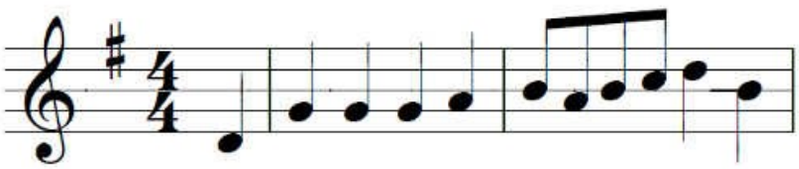
Combined Beats

If the music is very fast, you might want to reduce how many beats you give (as a rapidly moving, flopping hand doesn't help a choir). 4/4 can be reduced to 2/2, or 3/4 can become one beat in a bar (the down beat).

Upbeats or Anacruses



Some music begins with one of more upbeats. In this first example, the music begins on beat 3, so the preparatory beats with be Nos. 1 and 2.



In this second example, the music begins on beat 4, so the preparatory beat with be Nos. 2 and 3.

The Other Hand

So far, everything has been about what the beat-giving hand does (which, professionally, would be the right hand, but this doesn't really matter). The other hand is useful for interpretive direction (crescendo, diminuendo etc) and pointing to individual parts as they come in. Otherwise, let it be still. There's not much to be gained in using it to mirror-image what the beat-hand is doing.

Eye Contact

Theoretically, a choir should be able to follow a clear beat - whatever else the conductor is doing, but it doesn't really work like this. At vital points (entries, endings, pauses, changes of tempo etc) the conductor should fix and compel the choir by eye contact. Many a performance has come to grief because a nose-in-the-copy conductor failed to look at the choir and they (to a man and woman) lacked the confidence to start without the added stimulus of an encouraging or demanding gaze. Also, the choir should get into a habit of watching the conductor, especially at those vital points mentioned above.

Still Time

Remember - before beginning a piece, let there be a moment of stillness. This has two purposes:

- it gives you time to make sure you have the tempo you want in mind;
- the choir can be quite sure when you start to give the preparatory beats. Any other movements at this time could be confusing.

Key Signatures

This is where things start to get a bit theoretical. You might want to listen to the audio examples available at

organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit/key-signatures

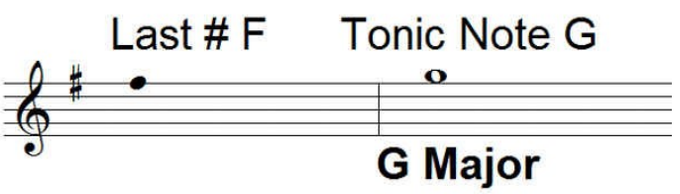
Most music written between 1600 and 1900 (and an awful lot either side of those years) is written in keys. These are described as **major** or **minor** which (very roughly) equate to **happy** or **sad.** Each key has a **Tonic** (home note or key note) on which a melody or piece seems most complete.

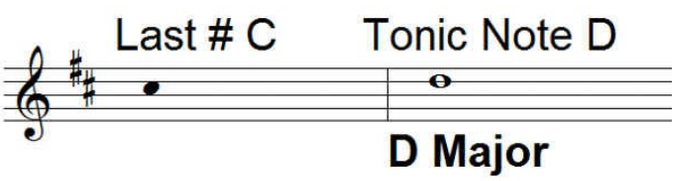
Major Keys

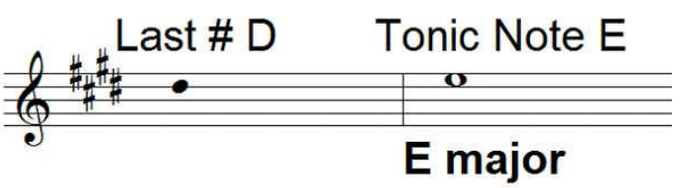
You can work out the key of a piece from the collection of accidentals (sharps or flats) grouped at the beginning of each stave: the key signature.

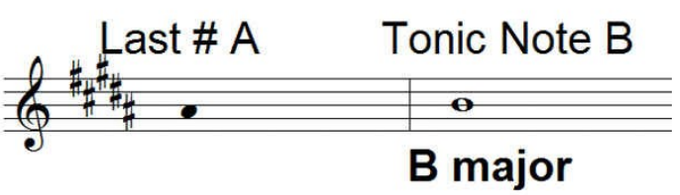
(If you are not completely confident with staves, accidentals, sharps and flats, it could be very useful to have a look round *The Singers' Toolkit*.)

For **MAJOR key signatures in sharps (#)**, you can look at the last sharp, and move up **ONE** step **(a 2nd)** for the key-note or tonic. **(Why is one step a 2nd? - see page 25.)**

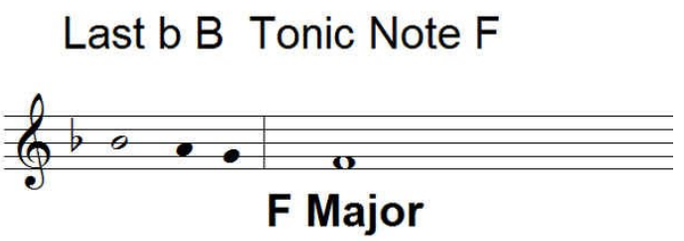


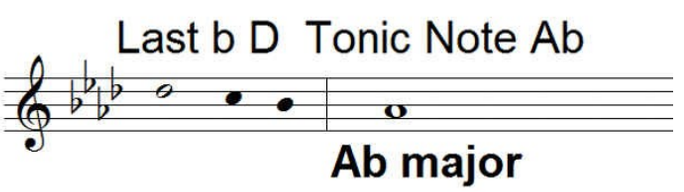


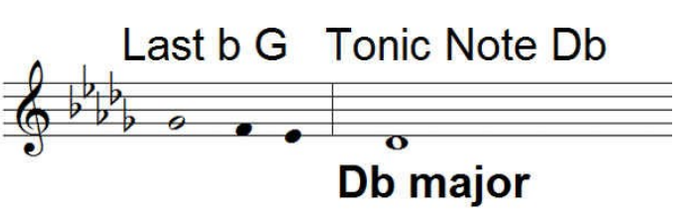




For **MAJOR key signatures in flats (b)**, you can look at the last flat, and move down **THREE** steps (**a 4th**) for the key-note or tonic. **(Why are three steps a 4th? - see page 25.)**



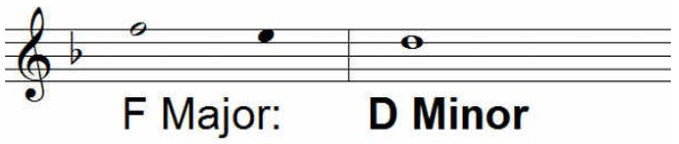




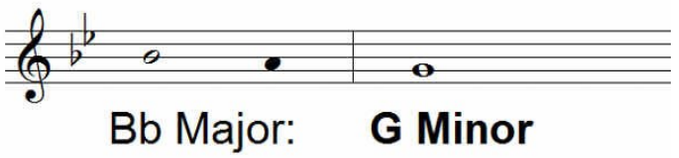
Key signatures DO NOT mix sharps and flats. !!!SPECIAL CASE!!! When there is NO key signature, the major key is C Major.

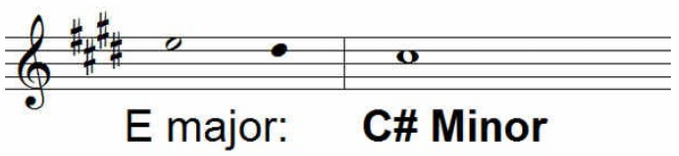
Minor Keys

Minor keys share the key signature with the major key most closely related (has the most notes in common). Major and minor keys which are closely related are said to be **relative**. To identify any minor key signature, just move **TWO** steps (**a 3rd**) **DOWN** from its relative major.

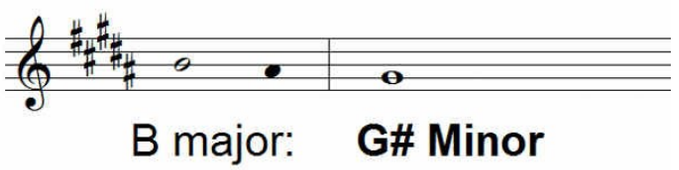


Remember!!! After moving down a third from the major tonic note to the relative minor tonic note, always check to see if that note is affected by the key signature - as in the last two example.





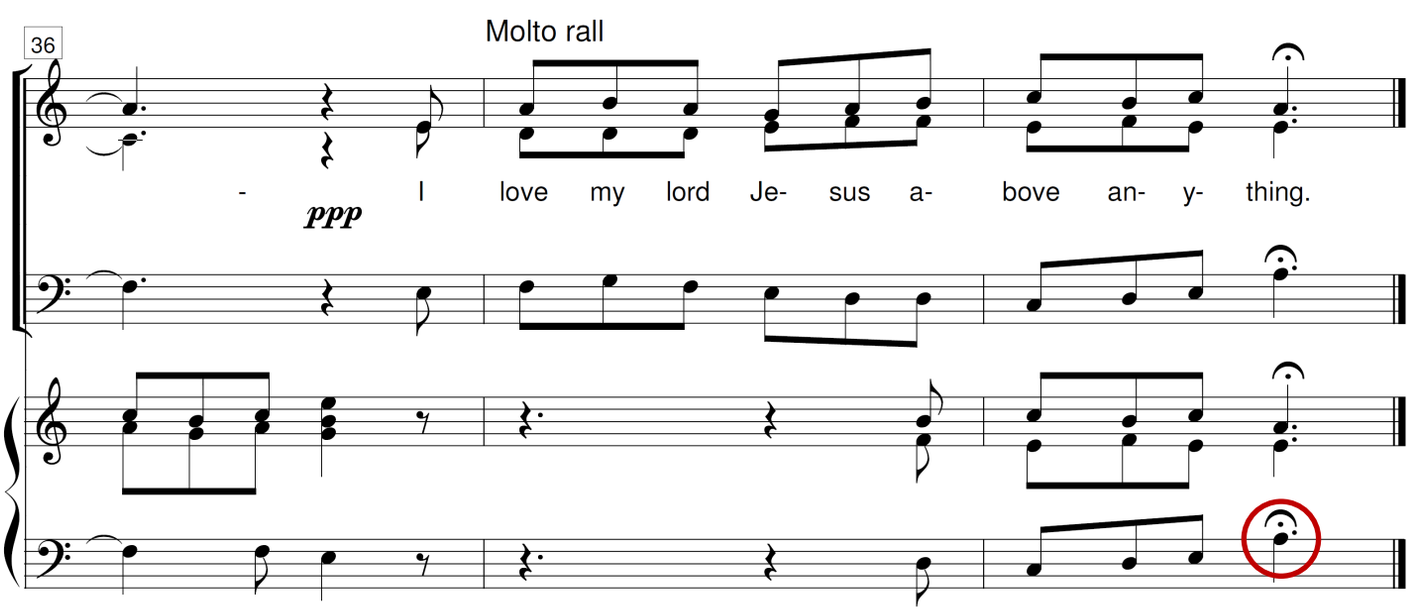
(There's a C# in the key signature.)



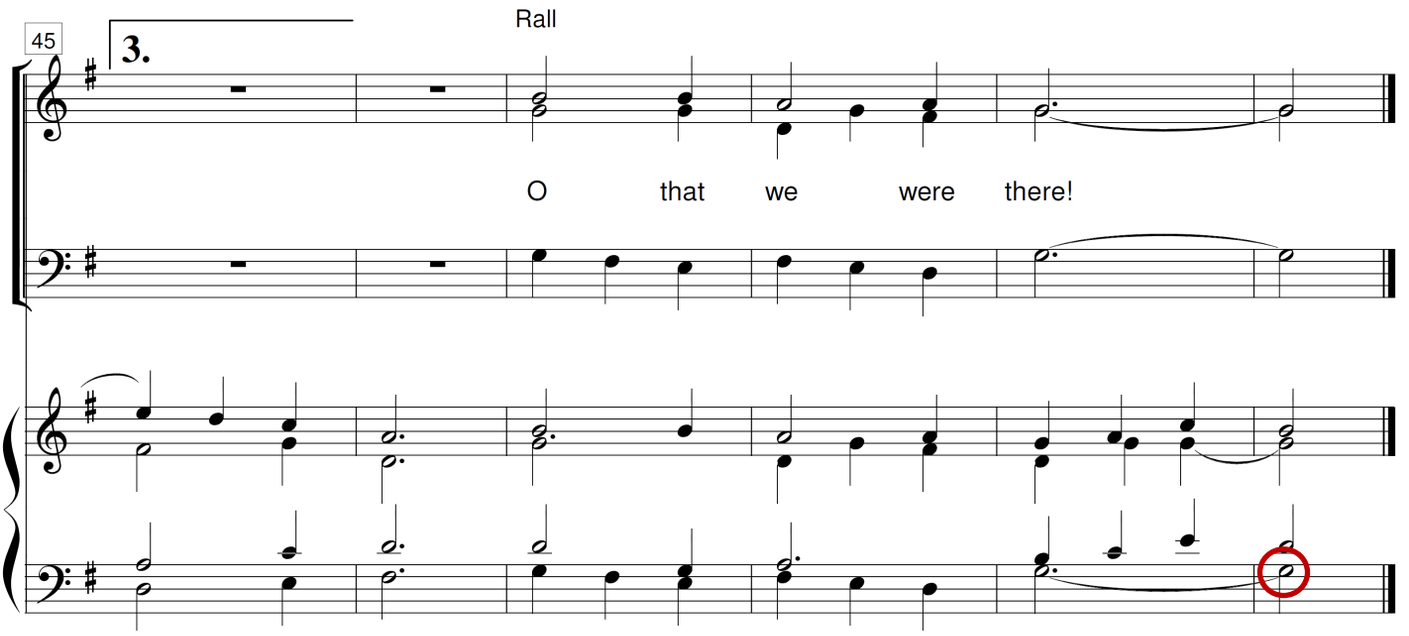
(There's a G# in the key signature.)

Minor or Major?

The easiest way to tell if a piece is in a major key or its relative minor is to look at the last bass note. This is VERY LIKELY to be the tonic or key note:



In this example, the key signature suggests either C major or A minor. But the last bass note is A, so the key is A minor.

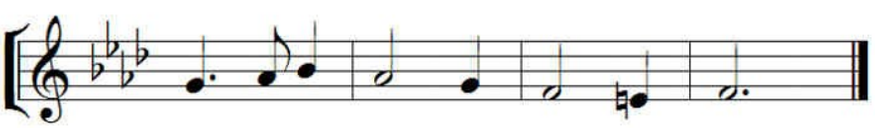


In this example, the key signature suggests either G major or E minor. But the final bass note is a G, so the key is G major.

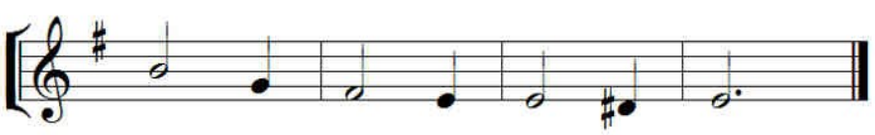
If, when deciding whether a key signature is major or minor, you have lingering doubts, there is an additional check. This check can be very useful if you only have a melody to look at without a bass note.

With a minor melody, it's not uncommon for the **7th note of the scale** (the one just below the tonic or key note) to be **raised** a semitone by an accidental near the beginning or end of the piece.

This snippet could be in Ab major or F minor. However, the 7th note of an F minor scale would be E, and the E is raised a semitone by a natural, so the key is F minor.



In this example, which could be in G major or E minor, the D (the 7th note of a scale starting on E) is sharpened, so the key is E minor.



And one last possible check - if you have an unaccompanied melody, there's a good chance that the last note is the key note.

Some melodies are truly key-androgynous. For instance, the *Passion Chorale* (O sacred head, sore wounded) is harmonised by Bach both as a major melody and as a minor melody in different contexts.

Confusions?

At the end of Bach's A minor harmonisation mentioned above, the last bass note is an E - the fifth note of the scale. But then, as also mentioned above, this melody is major/minor androgynous.

Percy Buck's hymn tune *Gonfalen Royal* is in G major, but ends every verse with a D in the bass. However, there is a final Amen which resolves to a G major chord.

Martin Shaw's melody *Little Cornard* (Hills of the North, Rejoice) starts in C minor and ends in Eb major.

Similarly, Graham Kendrick's *The Servant King starts* in C minor and ends in Eb major.

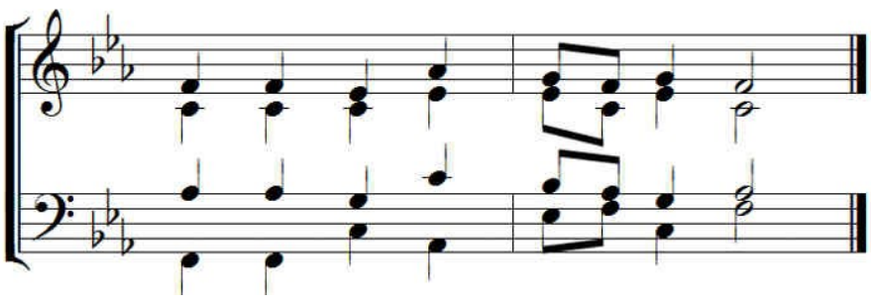
However, cases such as these are exceptions. If you are having to transpose a piece (see later), the general rules given elsewhere hold good, no matter how exceptional the melody may be.

Possible confusions can also arise with:

Modes

Older music (largely before 1600, but some after) is written in **MODES**. These were the precursors of our major/minor keys and the key signature rules given on the Key Signatures page don't apply to them. Originally, modal pieces were written without accidentals or key signatures but during a long period of transition, something like our modern system evolved.

Here is the conclusion of *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland,* a German melody from the 12th century, with a harmonisation from 1609. The key signature suggests Eb major or C minor, but the last bass note is F. (If you want to get technical, it's the Dorian mode, starting on F.) This is no problem if you want to transpose it. Just pretend that it's in Eb, follow the rules given earlier (in the Transposition page) and you will end up with everything perfectly in place.

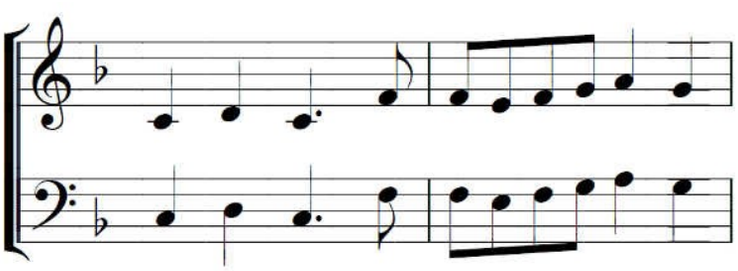


This guide is not the place to discuss the theory of modes and their use. Have a good look round Google for more information.

Warm Ups

Choral warm ups are recommended at the beginning of a rehearsal as the vocal cords, like any other muscles, fare better if not put under a lot of strain without having a little period for limbering up. Nowadays, some choirs spend a lengthy period going through a series of arduous exercises whereas, fifty years ago, most would have sung through a piece they knew and then considered themselves ready. For choirs with limited rehearsal opportunities, or with adult members who are restless during such procedures, a compromise is advised.

Singing through a known hymn tune (in unison) at a pitch comfortable for everyone (see page 42 for an explanation of this) is a good starting place. Something like *Cwm Rhondda* in F major. Just singing this

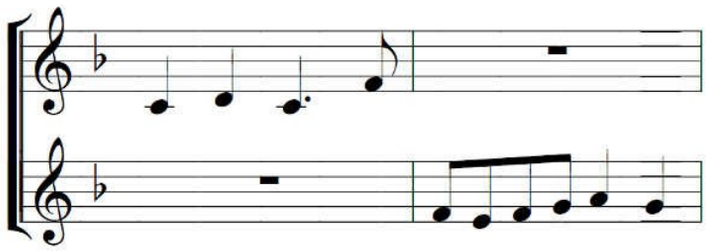


through in unison (with or without words) can lead to a number of additional exercises, such as:

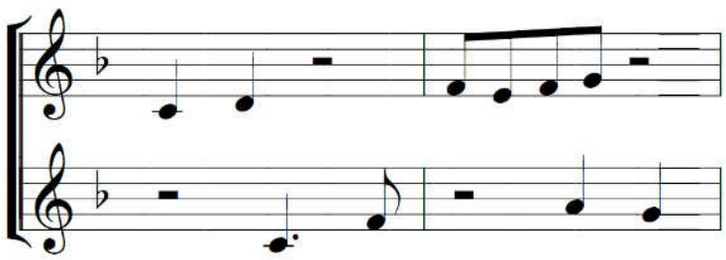
- Starting, stopping together;
- Singing the whole melody in four breaths, then two breaths, then one;

- Singing unaccompanied without losing pitch.

Divided into two groups, the choir can sing alternate bars (which promotes coming in after rests without scooping {which is a function of the inner ear and imagination}) and often leads to some amusement.



This can be done at two beat or even one beat intervals:



which exercises the skills of precise starting note, ends of phrases not being elongated, and concentrating.

Another tactic which leads to some amusement is for everyone to sing the first and last notes of the melody or a section and, in the gap, try to imagine the music going on. If this is conducted, there is usually an amusing cluster at the end. But it helps to develop the inner ear and can lead to some discussion about this.

This becomes even more amusing if the beat isn't conducted, as the final cluster is spread across several seconds. (So then it's time to discuss a steady sense of beat and time.)

Most amateur choirs can benefit from chanting a known text (Happy Birthday?, a Christmas carol?) on a monotone to practise maintaining pitch. It can help their listening if they do this against a held or repeated tone a perfect fifth, a major third, a major second etc above or below.

Many choirs visibly brighten if they can manage to chant an unaccompanied perfect fifth for a while. If they have become used to their own mistuning, or even hearing the narrowed fifths of equal temperament, they are struct by the ringing purity of the sound.

Intervals

In *The Singers' Toolkit*, the naming of intervals by number is introduced (3rd, 6th, octave, and so on). Each interval may have a number of qualities such as **perfect, imperfect, augmented, minor, major,** and **diminished**. Some of these are referred to in the paragraph above. Whilst it is very useful to know how all possible intervals are named, this knowledge isn't absolutely essential to running a choir - and it's long and complex to explain, - too long and complex for a short guide like this. However, a full explanation is available in the online version of this guide:

organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit/more-intervals

which also has some explanatory audio samples. A good knowledge of intervals will be useful in the next sections, **Simple Arranging** and **Transposition**.

Simple Arranging

Why Arrange?

As mentioned in the Introduction, it's important that a choir, however small, has new goals to work towards. This page assumes that you have very few resources to call upon, the chance of being granted a meaningful budget remote, and that the number of your singers is small.

Even with such unencouraging circumstances, there's much which can be done.

You may end up doing quite a bit of arranging - and armed with nothing more than some manuscript paper and access to a photocopier you would have all you need. However, most singers are happiest singing from printed music rather than a manuscript, so, if possible, download a free music typesetting programme and learn to use it. *Musescore* is quite popular, but you might also want to investigate *Finale Notepad, LilyPond,* or anything else that Google suggests.

A useful, cheap source of pieces are the forgotten or never used hymns in our hymn books. For a small choir looking for quick-to-learn pieces, these are extremely useful.

A Word About Copyright

As this page talks about arranging, there is the possibility of running up against copyright laws. This varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and that about to be summarised applies to the UK/EU so, if you are really worried about this, check if necessary.

- Copyright exists on original works until the end of the year during which falls the 70th anniversary of the copyright owner's death. For example, if the owner died at 00:00:01 on 1st January 1950, the copyright exists until 23:59:59 31st December 2020.
- With a music work, there can be separate copyright on the melody, harmony, arrangement, text, translator etc. So, if a genius 10 year old produces a new work today, in 60 years from now another genius 10 year old adds a text, and 60 years later still another wunderkind supplies a translation, it's going to be a long time before the whole thing is completely copyright free.
- If a piece exists in the **Public Domain** (all copyright has expired) and somebody makes a new arrangement, that arrangement is now copyright, but anybody can use the piece in its original form.
- **Graphic copyright** exists on printed pages for 25 years. This means, even if every aspect of a piece is copyright free and now exists in the Public Domain, it's not permissible to photocopy (hand copying is fine) the piece for 25 years from the time of first modern printing. However, this does not apply to reprints. If a work was printed in 2010, the graphic copyright expires at the end of 2035, even if the work is reprinted several times.

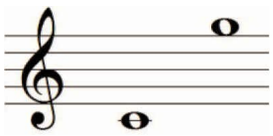
Vocal Range and Transposition

As mentioned above, it's fairly obvious that our hymn books are full of tunes and hymns that our congregation is never going to sing and any one of these can be performed as a little anthem - absolutely straight, without frills or embellishments.

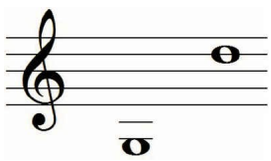
HOWEVER!!

If the choir is going to sing on its own, it has to sound as good as possible. You don't want the congregation to

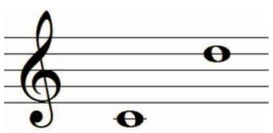
be looking at their watches, longing for you to cease, and you don't want to put off potential new members, so it's important to select something that lies within the range and capability of your singers. If you are reading these pages, you probably have a small choir of just a few voices, singing in unison, so it's important to take into consideration those singers who are not natural tenors (if you are lucky enough to have any men) or sopranos.



Generally speaking, singers who describe themselves as sopranos have a range something like this. If there's anything below middle C, they will start to grumble, and top G marks the limit for most of them, and that means only the occasional top note. Too many of them, and the sound will soon suffer.



On the other hand, natural altos tend to be happier with this.



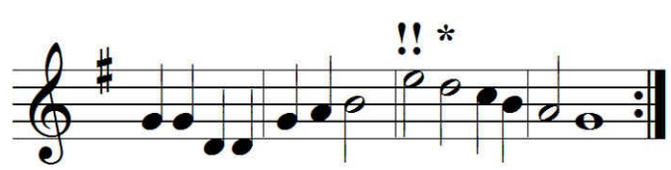
So, if all upper voices are going to be singing in unison, that leaves an effective, universally strain-free range as illustrated to the left.

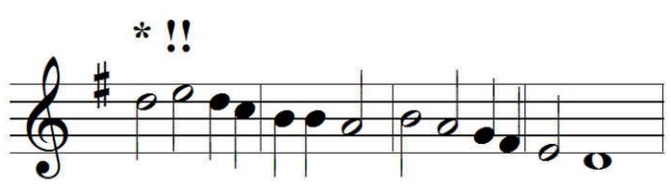
The same line of thinking applies to men: a range of C below middle C to D above middle C is most comfortable for the majority.

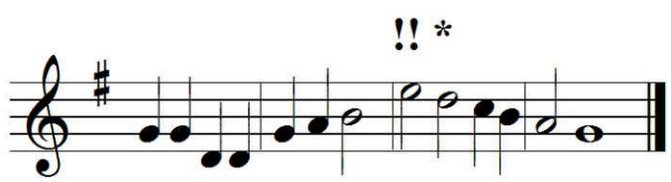
Just as some tenors and sopranos are liable to struggle with too many top G's, the same applies to basses and altos with top D's, so the really safe range for untrained women's voices is middle C to the octave above, and for untrained men from tenor C to middle C. **Much** straying outside these ranges is not recommended. (But please remember that we are talking about unison choirs here, not choirs singing in parts.) Of course, some hymn tunes have such a large range that the rules-of-thumb outlined above cannot be observed (but they can be taken into account when selecting a melody as an anthem.

So, getting back to the matter in hand, if choosing a hymn as an anthem for a unison choir, it's important to take the range of the melody into consideration. In many hymns books, especially older ones, the melodies are harmonised for SATB singing, so the melody lies well above the recommended safe range.

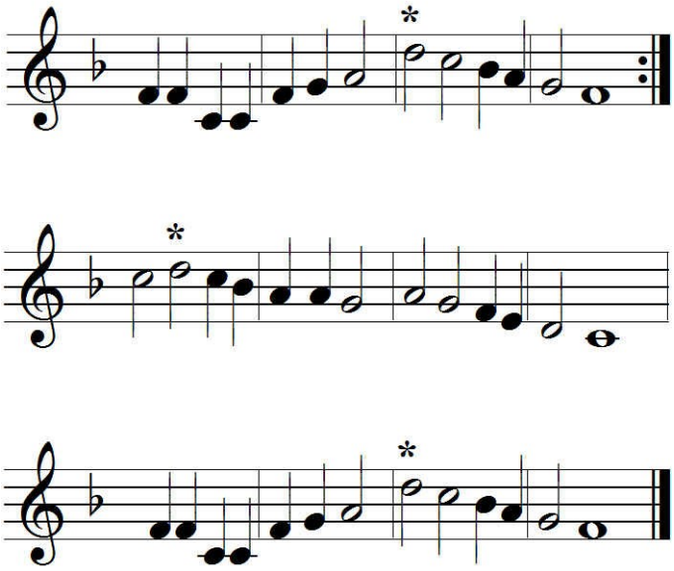
Suppose, for instance, that your unison choir decides to sing *Come, ye faithful, Raise the Strain* as an Easter anthem to the tune *Ave Virgo Virginum*. In many hymn books, this is printed in G major:







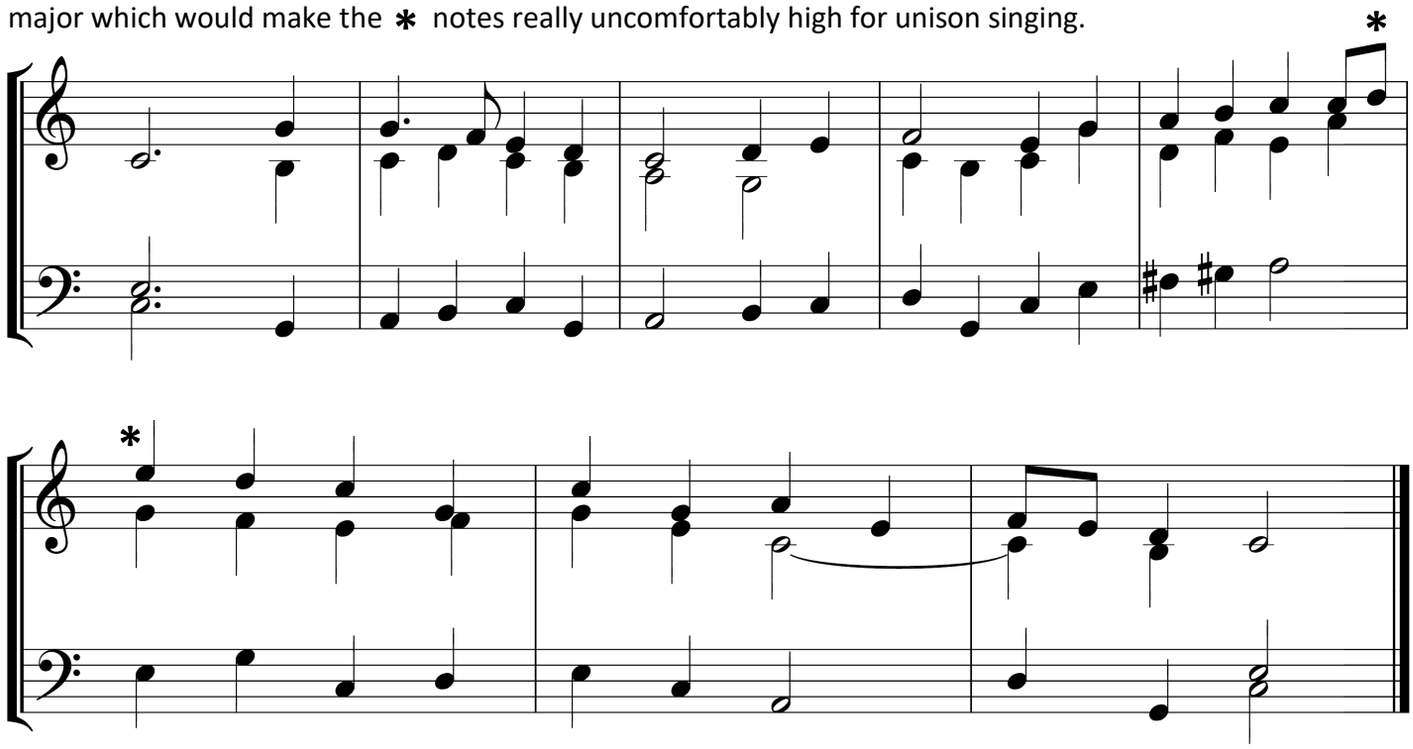
At * and !! there are notes which are likely to really test the upper range of some people. Although most should (might?) be able to cope with the * notes, these copers are likely to give the !! notes a miss. Allowing for the repeat, that's eight straining notes in one verse, and thirty two if all four verses are sung. This melody would be much better sung in F major:



in which case there are no extreme high notes, and only four top-range notes per verse - something which many singers would be grateful for.

In other words, for a successful outcome with hymn-anthem singing, it's going to be necessary to transpose quite a lot of repertoire down. If you or your organist (if you have got one) can transpose at sight, this is not much of a problem. Otherwise, things have got to be written out in a transposed key. (Also, it's best for singers to get used to associating singing pitch with notation. That is, avoid singing low pitched melodies when looking at high pitched notation.)To do this well, it's essential to have a good grasp of key-signatures (see from page 35) and intervals (see above).

These are the closing bars of *Wachet Auf!* (*Wake, O Wake!*). In some hymn books it's printed a tone higher in D major which would make the * notes really uncomfortably high for unison singing.



Even in this C major version, there are nine rather high notes in one verse (twenty seven across three verses).

This could be further transposed down to Bb major which would relieve a lot of the problems with lots of high notes but would give the singers seven rather low notes to sing. Overall, amateur singers singing low notes is less likely to grate on the ear than them stretching for the frequent high notes. Also, the high notes come at the apex of phrases, so need a good volume, so I would recommend singing this in Bb. Incidentally, in many Lutheran churches, which still frequently use this melody for congregational singing, it is printed in Bb.

How to go about transposing leads us deep into somewhat complicated music theory and doesn't have a place in this simple guide. Similarly, suggestions about how to develop a simple unison tune into something more elaborate, but with little or no knowledge of harmony, counterpoint or form, would overfill these pages.

For such information, freely online, please visit

organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit/arranging

Appendices

This is information closely related to the subject matter of the Toolkit series but not, in some cases, at present (February 2026) available in the online versions.

Anglican Chants - a Brief Guide - page 46

Accompanying Anglican chants well requires some skill and some perseverance in practice. As, by and large, the use of Anglican chants is less universal than in former times, the opportunities to acquire that skill are fewer. This appendix sets out the basic information necessary to adequately accompany or even teach a psalm or canticle. It doesn't claim to be comprehensive - it only covers two pages. Contrast that with the preface to *The New Cathedral Psalter* (published in 1909 - a time when the use of Anglican chant was more prevalent) where some eleven pages are devoted to explaining the intricacies of chanting.

If you want to deepen your knowledge, some time spent on Google and or You Tube would be profitable. Specific sites aren't recommended as some of these could disappear during the lifetime of this book, but the eternally blossoming internet is always going to come up with something.

Plainsong - a Brief Guide - page 48

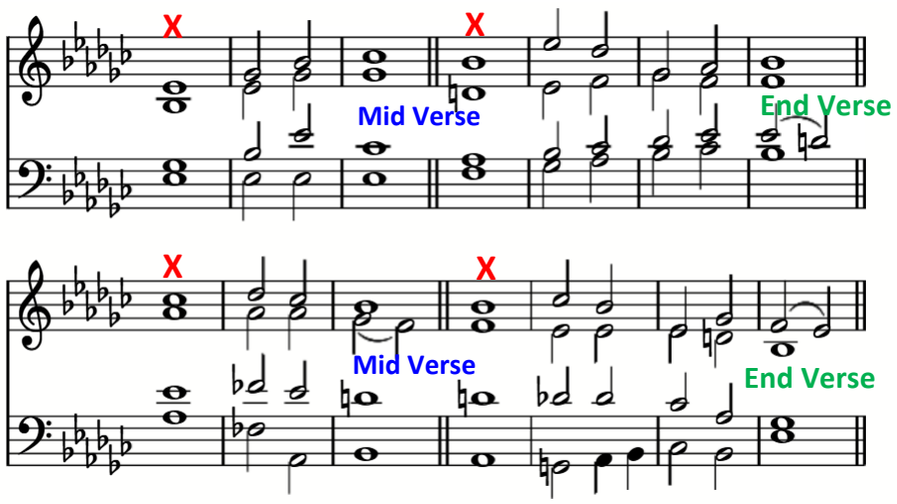
Four pages of information set out the basic knowledge needed to understand the traditional square notation of plainsong, and a few tips are given about performing it. This is an area where interpretive passions run high and conflicting musicological theories can lead to over-heated disputes. From an initial standpoint, if you are having teach plainsong to a choir, listen to as many examples as you can on You Tube, read the information widely available on Google, but don't let any claims that "this is the only way to do it" dampen your enthusiasm. Your basic aim is to produce something that sounds plainsong-like without getting entangled in the musicological niceties.

Organists Online - Summed Up - page 52

Organists Online was set up in November 2000, initially to help choirs, churches, and organists find each other in north London. This core function continues (although expanded to cover the whole of the UK) but since then a range of free, downloadable resources have been added to help churches keep music live within their congregations. 99%++ of the content on Organists Online is there, online, waiting for people to use it. There's enough information and downloadable material for any church to run a modest music department for almost no cost.

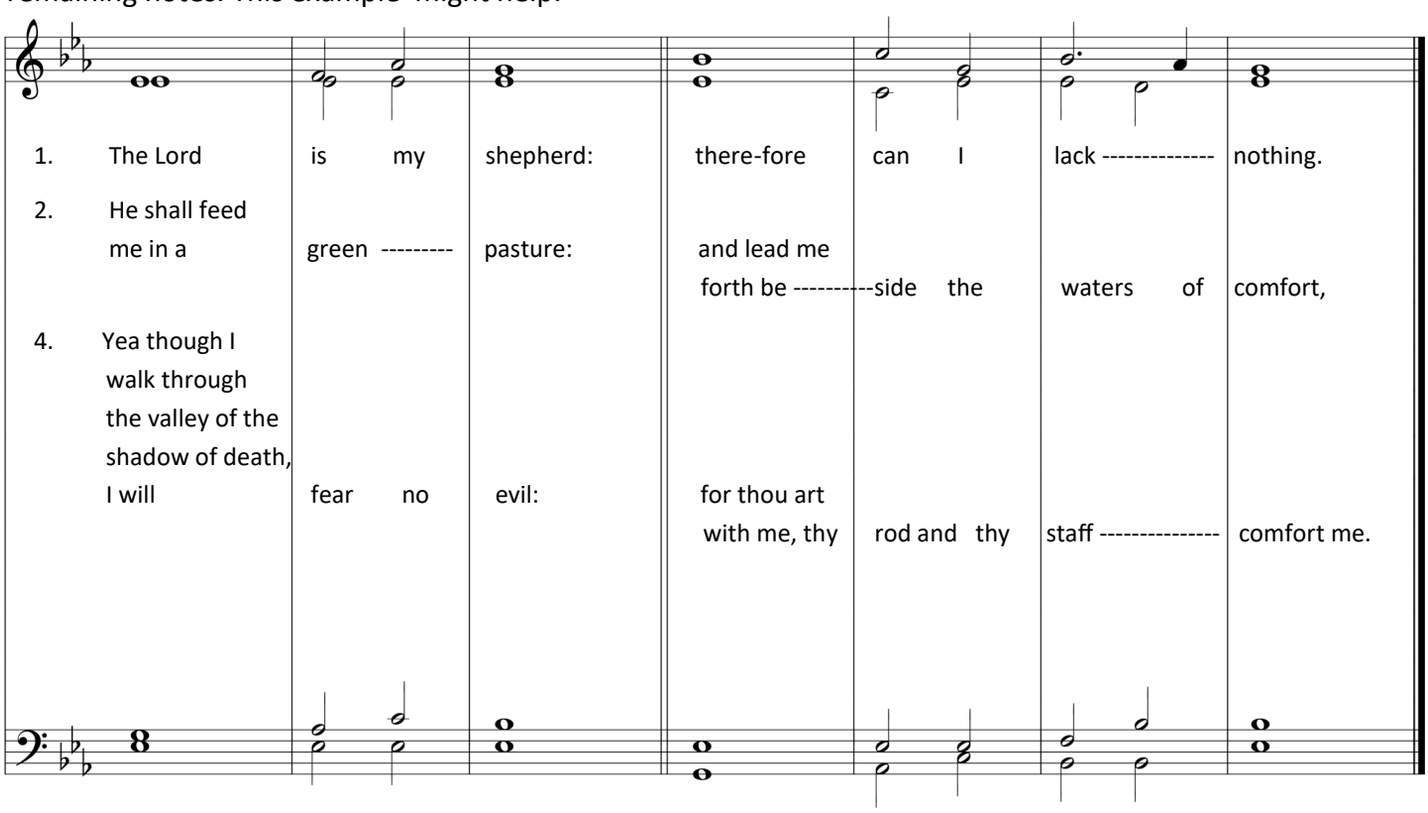
Organists Online is run by Philip Norman, who has also placed the various Toolkits online and compiled the contents into this book.
If you have any enquires, please contact:
07939 064 247 | 01873 590 055 | pkn@pnms.co.uk

Anglican Chants - a Brief Guide



Anglican chants and Anglican chanting, for many centuries, formed the backbone of the Prayer Book Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. It was used for singing the psalms and canticles. It's not unusual now to find these parts of such services being said or replaced by responsorial psalms, but some churches maintain the older traditions. The chants are either single (seven bars in length) or double (fourteen bars in length) and, unless you are very unlucky, all have the same structure. (Not all are in such an unfriendly key as this example by Walford Davies.)

Psalms and Canticles are prose texts with a different length for each verse (unlike hymns) but these verses have to be fitted into the same length of music. This is achieved by not singing the notes in strict tempo but adjusting everything to the amount of text to be accommodated. A single chant covers one verse, and a double chant two. Double barlines correspond to the middle and the ends of verses. For each verse-half, most of the text is sung on the *reciting note* (**X** on the chant above) then the concluding syllables are sung to the remaining notes. This example might help:



Normally, the verses would be written out something like this:

1. The Lord | is my | shepherd: therefore | can I | lack | nothing.
2. He shall feed me in a | green |pasture: and lead me forth be - | side the | waters of | comfort.
   This is called the **pointing** of the psalm.

Unfortunately, the pointing is different from one psalter (book of psalms) to another, as it's purely an editorial decision. Here's the first part of psalm 29, verse 10 as it appears in the Oxford Psalter:

The Lord shall give | strength unto his | people.

And this is how it comes out in the Parish Psalter:

The Lord shall give strength | unto his | people.

Each psalter also has its own way of showing the pointing. In the Parish Psalter it's actually like this:

The Lord shall give strength ' unto his ' people.

In each chant, bars 2, 5, and 6 generally have two notes only and if only two syllables are assigned to these notes (| is my |, | can I |, | fear no |) things are pretty straight forward. Often, for the sake of preserving a natural accentuation of the words, three of more syllables are assigned to these two notes. In such cases, the last of the syllables is placed on the second note (| rod and *thy* |, | strength unto *his* |).

Occasionally, editors wish for a different distribution and this is indicated in the text. For instance, in the Parish Psalter, a dot is placed where the note changes (| visited · *and re-* |, | stand · *in the* |). Other psalters will have other methods.

Some psalters have very complicated methods, all in the interest of a natural **speech rhythm**.

Occasionally, when a double chant is in use, *2nd Part* will be printed as the beginning of a verse. This indicates that the singing should begin at bar 8. Usually, this is because there is an odd number of verses to be distributed across the chant but, occasionally, it is to add emphasis to the meaning of the words.

More rarely, again for the sake of a good accentuation of words, an editor will come to some novel distribution of the words across a chant. This is usually made very clear in the text. However, preparation and practice on the part of the organist will make such cases much easier to cope with.

General Style

Since early in the twentieth century, it has been accepted that the psalms and canticles should be sung in a natural, unhurried **speech rhythm**. This means that, during the long reciting notes the words should not be rushed or gabbled and, during the later notes of the chant, not unnaturally drawn out or emphasised. It's not easy to describe this, but a couple of sessions with You Tube will be very clarifying. It's still possible to find some places singing the psalms with a gabble, gabble, gabble, thump, thump, thump style which is deeply engrained within the congregation. If you are visiting organist - just go with the flow. If you have a more permanent position - I leave it to you to decide whether you want to wave the banner of reform, but tread carefully. Similarly, if you find yourself having to direct a choir on a longer term basis, think long and hard before new-brooming your way through established traditions.

It's a good general practice, especially if you are having to accompany psalms, to look at them and practise them beforehand. Even the most experienced organist can be caught out by novelties of pointing that seemed oh so logical to an editor.

Plainsong - a Brief Guide

Plainsong (*Plainchant, Gregorian Chant*) has evolved over a millennium and a half, and a little bit more as well. Of course, over this long period and across the whole of Europe, variations of actual notes and performance methods have changed but this brief guide sets out how it is generally performed today. The end product should be something that sounds like "plainsong" as generally heard in churches, in the media, and as understood by most people. It takes no account of the quarrels between musicologists and the associated (and sometimes amusing) mud-slinging.

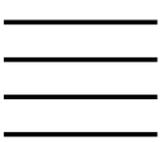
Rhythm

Unlike later music, there is no insistent, regular accented beat driving the music forward. There is nothing like *God save our gra-cious king,* or *Happy birth-day to you.* Much more - it's the subtle interplay of units of two or three time which arise from carefully enunciated, well produced speech. Bar lines (we'll get to these later) have no particular rhythmical meaning.

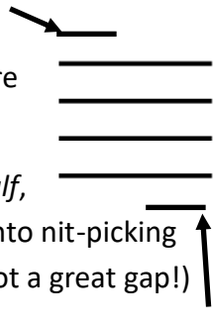
Expression

The music is generally peaceful with no moments of exaggeration. There are no sudden louds or softs, no pronounced accents, and no sudden accelerations or decelerations. That's not so say that it must be clinical or cold, there's bound to be some moments of added warmth as it's sung by living, breathing people reacting to the text - but all extremes are not part of the style.

Notation



The music, these days, is generally written on a four line **stave**. This is because, by and large, plainsong melodies are not as wide ranging as those of later centuries, so more lines aren't needed. As in modern music, the higher on the stave, the higher the note, and the lower on the stave, the lower the note.

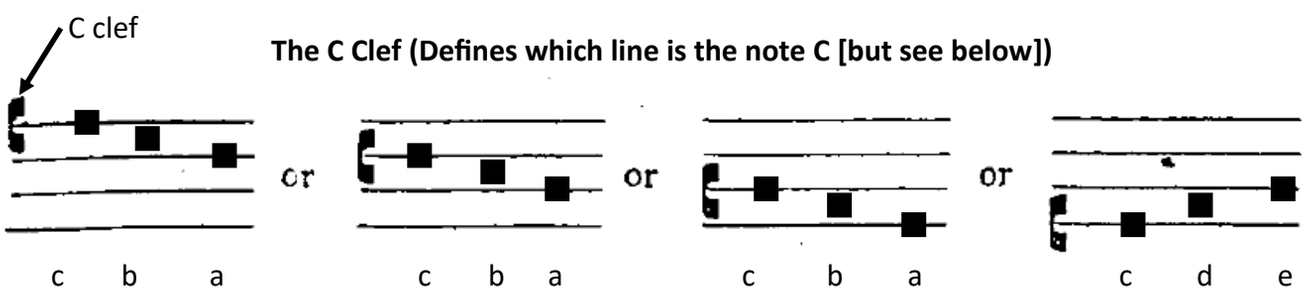


Very occasionally, you might come across *ledger lines* for wide-ranging melodies, but these are unusual and never more than one is used at a time.

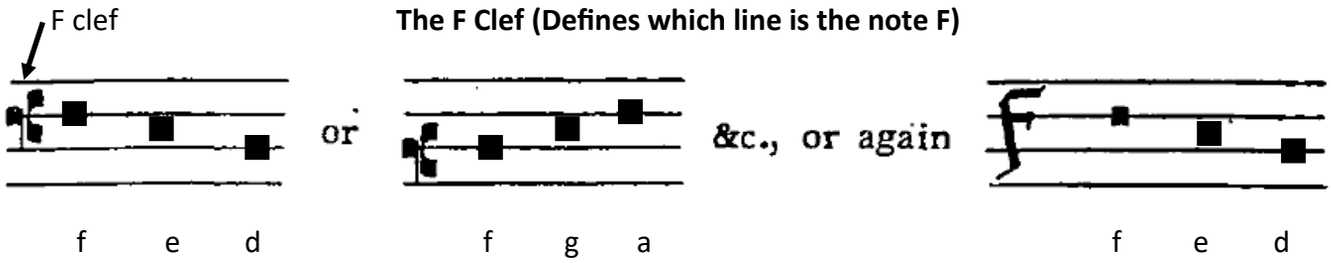
Bar lines, as mentioned before, have no rhythmic meaning. They are described as *quarter*, *half*, *full*, and *double*, and they divide the music into phrases or natural sections. Without getting into nit-picking detail, the larger the bar line, the more of a breath or cessation of movement it allows (but not a great gap!)

Usually, the notes before a half, full, or double bar line are somewhat lengthened.

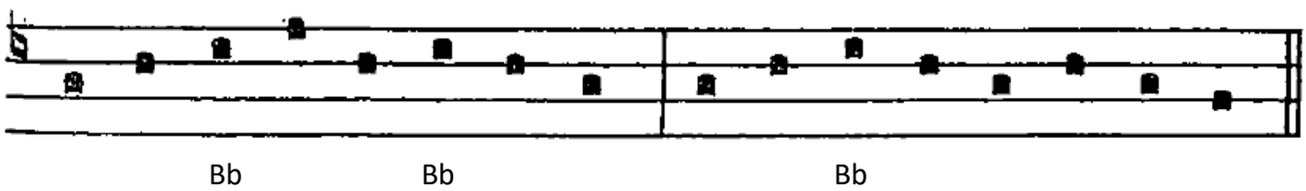
Clefs



The F Clef (Defines which line is the note F)



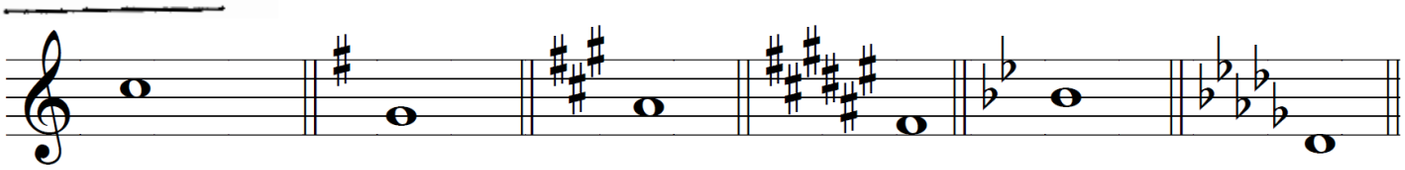
Occasionally, a flat sign is used like this:



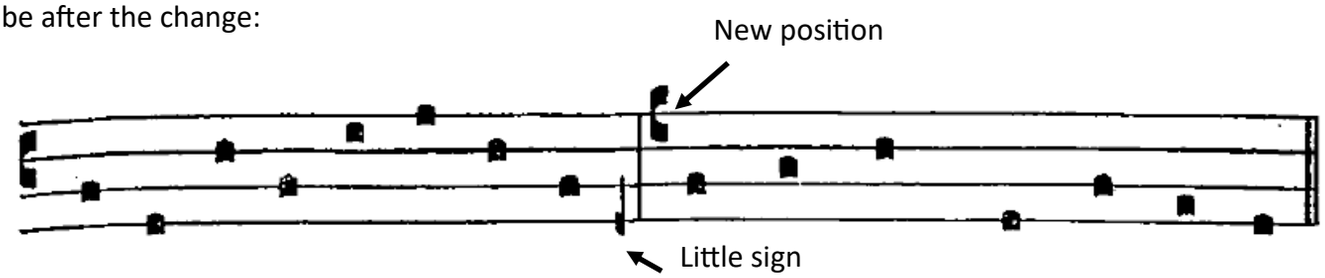
But, usually, a flat sign only applies to the note it is next to or immediately close to.

Clefs have no absolute pitch. The choice of line is purely to get as much of the melody on the four line stave as possible without using leger lines. So

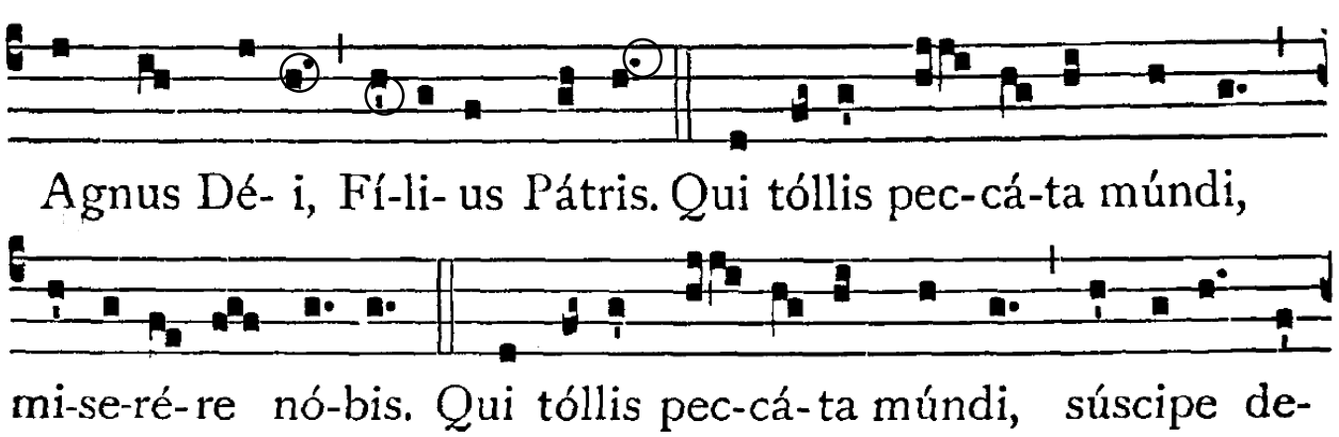
corresponds to any of (that is the tonic or key note of any "key" you are playing in):



Sometimes, a clef position is changed in the middle of a piece. Then, a little sign indicates what the first note will be after the change:



Towards the end of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century, the monks of the Benedictine monastery of Solesmes strove to gather together ancient manuscripts of plainsong to "purify" it of errors. They invented a number of rules (some summarised above) and extra signs to help performance. These are editorial and it's not essential to know them all (lengthening dots and slight emphasis with vertical strokes etc).

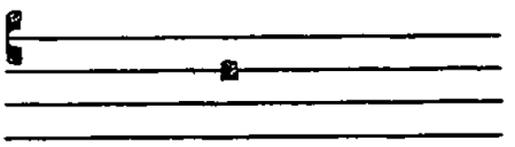


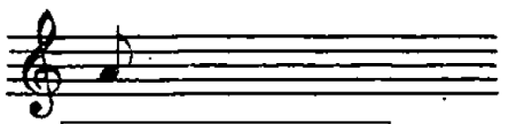
Notes and Note Groupings (Neumes)

(It's not necessary to know these names to sing them)

[Essentially, all notes last the same length. The shape and/or grouping doesn't change this.]

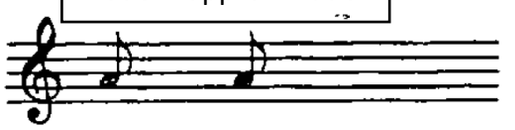
1 *Punctum*



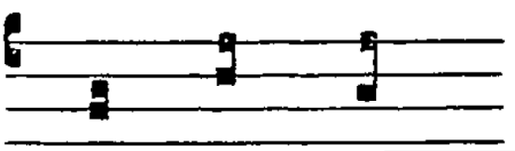


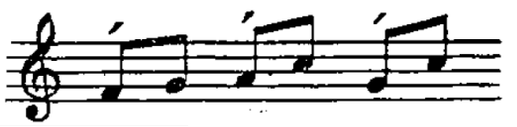
Modern approximation

2 *Virga*



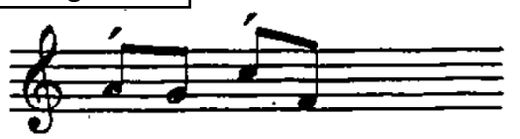
3 *Podatus* (or *pes*)



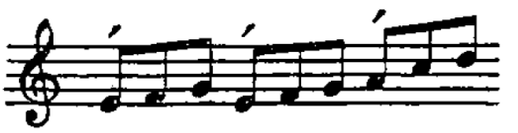


The lower note is sung first.

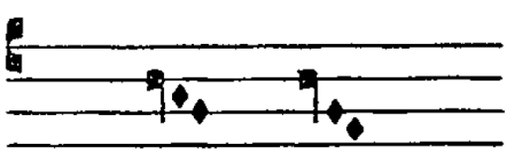
4 *Clivis*



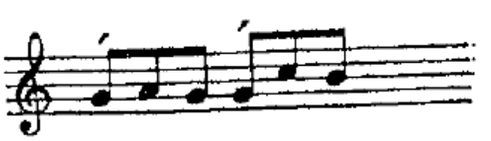
5 *Scandicus*



6 *Climacus*



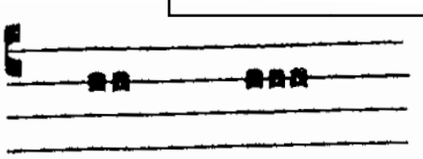
7 *Torculus*



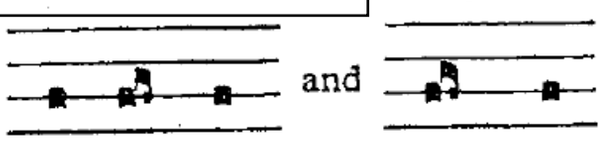
8 *Porrectus*

The top and the bottom of the solid stroke are the notes

9 *Strophicus*



EITHER as a held note OR very gentle repetition.



The small (*liquescent*) notes are sung lightly (NOT more quickly).

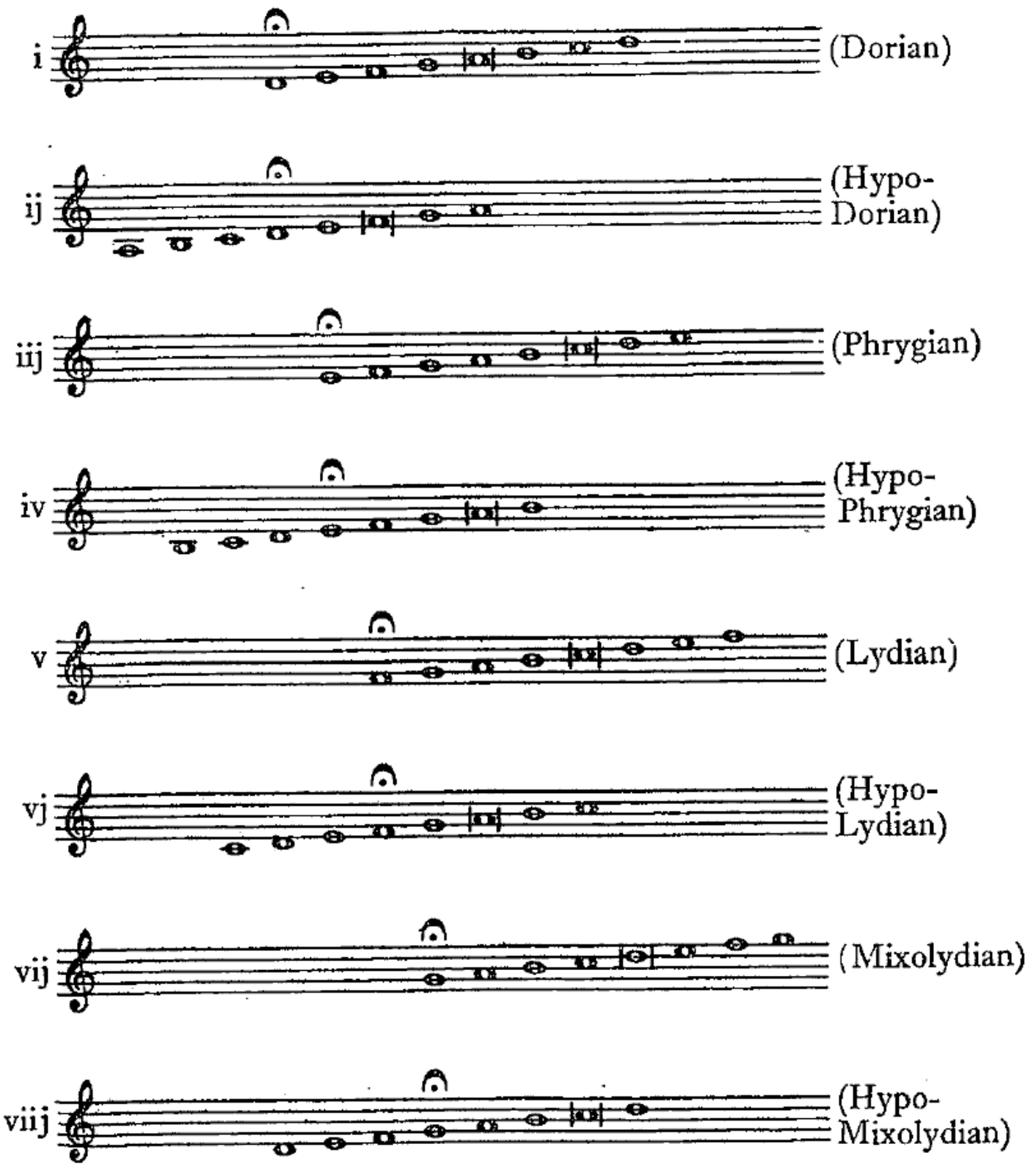
10 *Quilisma*

In the middle of three rising notes, sung gently, with the preceding note emphasised a little.

The Eight Ecclesiastical Modes

Plainsong doesn't have major or minor keys but, instead, **modes** - each of which has a different overall "feel" or "flavour" to the other modes. All the modes can be played on just the white notes of a piano.

If, in performance, we want to accompany plainsong and we restrict ourselves to just the white notes, the melodies can be far too high or too low, so they would need transposing. In such cases, accidentals (sharps and flats) would have to be used. However, when plainsong is sung unaccompanied, we just choose a pitch that is suitable for the voices to hand and don't have to worry about the mechanics of transposition.



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The Toolkit Series - and more

THE SINGERS' TOOLKIT 1

organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit

A basic, quick-fix guide to choral singing for adults with no musical background, helping them survive the hurly-burly world of singing from printed music, with a few useful tips about actually singing thrown in for good measure.

THE SINGERS' TOOLKIT 2

organistsonline.org/singers-toolkit/pitching

Some new singers find matching pitch (singing the same note as everybody else) difficult. This can be solved with a little regular practice. On this site, there are exercises in pitching which, if attempted for, say, five minutes a day for several weeks, would alleviate the problem.

THE ORGANISTS' TOOLKIT

organistsonline.org/organists-toolkit

A short guide for pianists who are called on to play the organ. It covers a basic description of how to use the keyboards and stops, how to accompany a hymn, and includes downloadable copies of suitable music for voluntaries.

THE CHOIR TRAINERS' TOOLKIT

organistsonline.org/choir-trainers-toolkit

Armed with the information in The Singers' Toolkit, and the additional information on this site, someone with basic musical knowledge could successfully run a choir. This site is particularly intended for emergency situations where a choir leader has moved and a choir, without some sort of leadership, might cease.

SIMPLIFIED HYMN ACCOMPANIMENTS

organistsonline.org/hymns

Hymn accompaniment needs to be fluent and accurate but most hymn tunes, written for a four part, require more than a basic skill to be played. On this site 500 well known hymns, covering the whole of the church's year, are arranged with easy to play accompaniments: never more than three notes at a time, sometimes only two, and no large stretches.

CAROLS UPLIFT

organistsonline.org/hymns/carols

Slim Carols

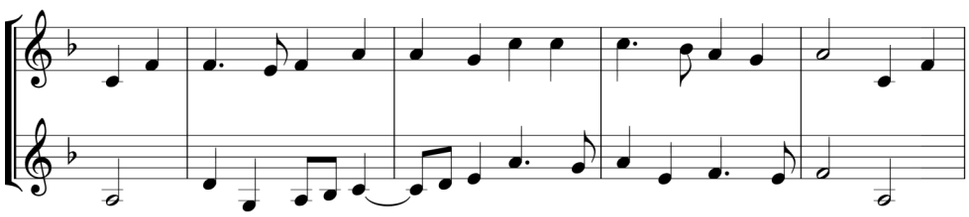
Instrumental arrangements of the Christmas hymns and carols from the 500 hymns mentioned above. Parts are provided for all the common orchestral instruments in flexible form (that is, a wide variety of instrumental groups can use these arrangements). These are particularly suitable for small groups with a limited choice of instruments and are in 3-parts only.

Super Slim Carols

2-part arrangements for almost any combination of instruments so that any instrument may play the melody and any instrument the accompaniment but the resulting harmony is still good.

For both Slim and Super Slim carols, instrumental parts are provided for:

violins, violas, cellos, double basses, recorders, flutes, oboes, bassoons, clarinets in Bb, trumpets in Bb, french horns in F, tenor horns in Eb, trombones playing from either bass clef or treble clef … etc.



This is part of the **Super Slim** arrangement of *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*. Any of the listed instruments may play the upper part in any octave, and any of the listed instruments may play the lower part in any octave but the harmony will still be good.

THE SMALL CHOIRS SITE and OVEN READY ANTHEMS

organistsonline.org/small-choirs/downloads

1,500+ pieces for church choirs with few or no men, copyright cleared and free to download and use as required. The pieces range from unison anthems, through flexible pieces in two or three parts, to more demanding pieces for SSAA-Men. This site includes **Oven Ready Anthems and Carols.** That is, each piece has a backing track (should it be needed) and rehearsal tracks in audio and video format.

More information about the Small Choirs Site

Free Music Downloads

The principal purpose of this site is to provide free, downloadable music for church choirs with few or no men.

The list is fully searchable, using such criteria as:

Church Season:

Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Purification (Candlemass), Lent, Passiontide, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity, Harvest, Communion, and General.

Voicing:

One Part, Two Parts, Three Parts, Four Parts, SATB, Many Parts, Flexible, A Cappella, and Accompanied.

Also by:

Composer, Name of Piece, or any suitable key-word.

Searches by multiple criteria are also possible, such as:

Bach, Advent, One Part, Accompanied, or Lent, Three Parts, Flexible, A Cappella.

There is no charge for downloading, copying, and performing a piece, as long as it is in the context of a church service of something similar. If you want to use a piece in some commercial connection, there is a link to a list of contact information of composers, editors and arrangers on the Downloads page.

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