

Music Theory For Pianists

David Hicken

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Preface

My intention with this book has been to create a simple and understandable reference manual for pianists and composers about all aspects of music theory which are relevant for modern musicians. The information contained here can be used by all musicians, regardless of level, background or instrument.

Piano students often encounter words, signs and symbols in their music which require simple explanations, and although the value of a good teacher cannot be overemphasized, a reference manual such as this can help them tremendously.

Beginning composers sometimes need guidance regarding proper procedures used in music notation so that their music is written correctly, looks good, and can be interpreted accurately by other musicians.

Many amateur and professional musicians may want to brush up on their general knowledge of music theory, including the various rules which have been established over the centuries. This book is designed to be read straight-through to help fill in any gaps in a musician's knowledge.

Although I have in some cases gone slightly beyond what is required of modern musicians, such as in an explanation of *mordents* and *turns* which are no longer in common use, I have made examples of each topic as clear and concise as possible. I have avoided going into great detail regarding all of the permutations of ornaments, or various chords and their relationships with each other, and left these topics for future volumes dedicated to each subject.

After being a piano teacher for twenty-five years, I have a good idea as to what piano students as well as amateur and professional musicians should know in order to perform, interpret and compose music well, and I have made sure that this book covers all relevant topics.

Although I am originally from England, I have used mostly American terminology throughout the book rather than British, because it is more commonly recognized throughout the world. Some of the differences are listed below.

United States

whole step
half step
whole note
half note
quarter note
eighth note
sixteenth note
thirty second note
voice-leading
leading tone
authentic cadence
deceptive cadence
Half-cadence

Great Britain

tone
semitone
semibreve
minim
crotchet
quaver
semiquaver
demisemiquaver
part-writing
leading note
perfect cadence
interrupted cadence
imperfect cadence

Everything that you need to understand the basics of written music notation is contained in this book. I hope you will gain much from its contents, and that it helps to enrich your music-making.

Musically yours,

David Hicken

Note Values

Most music has a steady beat, and when you find yourself tapping your foot in time to music, you are tapping a beat. The word “note” in music can refer to a sound as well as a written sign. The music note, or written sign that is most commonly used to represent a steady beat is called a quarter note.

Quarter note 

A steady beat might look like this: 

Half notes last twice the length of quarter notes.

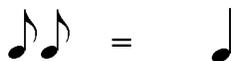
Half note 

Two half notes  occupy the same amount of time as 

These combinations of notes can be lined up on top of each other as follows:



Eighth notes are shorter, and two of them occupy the same amount of time as one quarter note.



The round part of a music note is called the note-head, which can be hollow or filled in depending upon the type of note. The line at the side of a note is called the stem which can point up or down from the note

head. Whole notes don't require a stem. Shorter notes also include a flag or tail, but as you will see in a moment, flags can be replaced by beams. The following notes are the most commonly used in music:

Whole Note 

Half Note 

Quarter Note 

Eighth Note 

Sixteenth Note 

Shorter notes such as eighth and sixteenth notes are usually beamed together to make them easier to read.



Combinations of note values can be written as follows:



As mentioned earlier, a stem may go up or down from the note-head, but it must be placed on the right of the note-head when going up and on the left of the note-head when going down.



 Regardless of which side the stem is placed, a flag or tail must *always* be on the right side and never on the left.