LA COUNTY LIBRARY

DIY Library Program

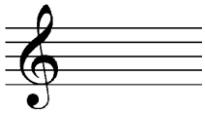
MUSIC COMPOSITION

LEARNING THE BASICS

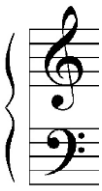
Recommended for Ages 12 and up

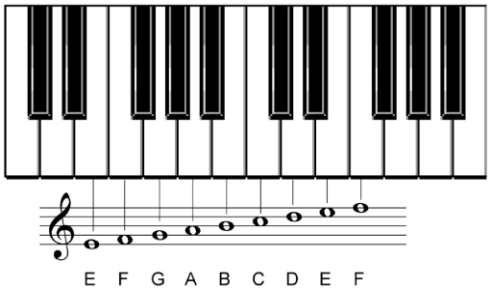
Listening to music is a terrific way to unwind. Playing and composing music can be just as fun. Think about all those songs you've performed in the shower! Even if you are not musically inclined or own an instrument, music can be a creative outlet. If you are musical, it can even become a career. But, while music relies on creativity, there is also a science to it, and this program will attempt to explain the basics and get you started composing your first simple piece of music.

What you need to know:

Music is "a succession of tones arranged to create a different sound" (Miller, 2016). Those tones are placed on a **staff**, made up of five lines and four spaces, shown below.

The **pitch** (the highness or lowness of a tone) of the music is determined by a **clef**, or a graphical symbol placed at the beginning of the staff. Shown above is the **treble clef**, which shows notes that are positioned above middle c on a piano.

The **bass** (pronounced "base") **clef** below shows notes that are positioned below middle C on a piano.

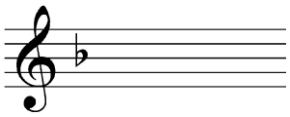
There's also the **grand staff** which links the treble and bass clefs because you need to see both when playing the piano with two hands.

To give you an idea, middle C is right in the middle of the piano, and all pitches can be described relative to it. All pitches have a letter assigned to them. We use the first seven letters of the alphabet: A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. Here is a visual of these notes on a piano:



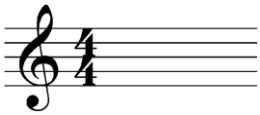
There are seven notes altogether, with black keys in the middle. A succession of eight notes in a row is called a **scale**, starting on one note, and ending on the same note an **octave** higher. All the black keys in between the white ones are **flats** and **sharps** and they are characterized like this in music:

Sharp Flat

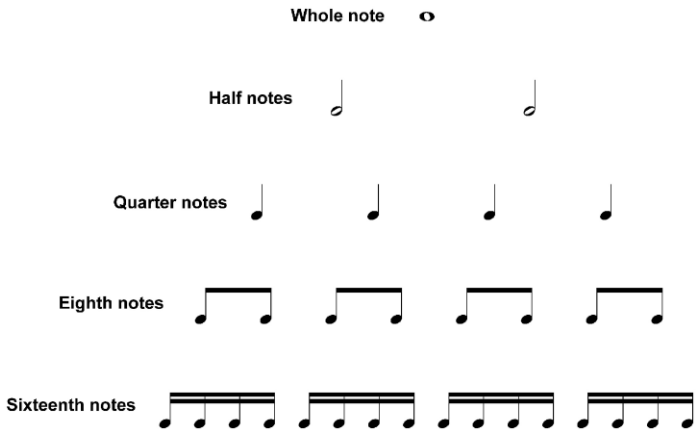
Sharps can change the pitch half a step higher, and flats can change the pitch half a step lower. When you start arranging music, you can turn any note into a sharp or flat. If you want the whole piece of music to have a specific flat or sharp, you just note the **key signature** at the beginning of the staff, like this:



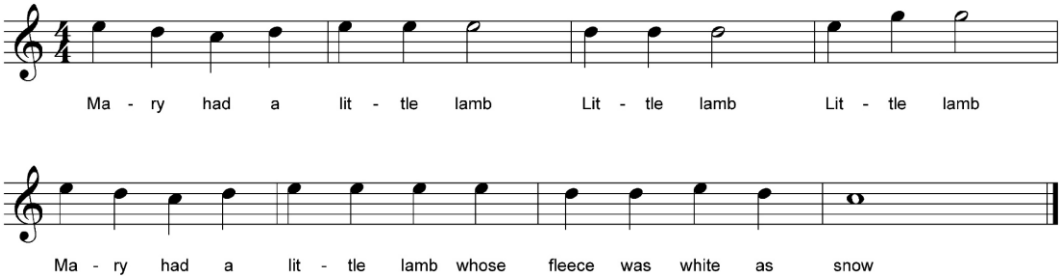
Another indicator that goes at the beginning of the measure is the **time signature**, which indicates how many beats there are per measure and what kind of note is used for the basic beat.

The most common time signature is 4/4 time, which means there are 4 beats per measure (indicated by the 4 on top) and the basic note is a quarter note (indicated by the 4 on the bottom, as in ¼).

When you know the time signature, you know how many beats are in a measure. For instance, in 4/4 time, a whole note is held for 4 beats. In ¾ time, the whole note is held for 3 beats (although the basic note used is a quarter note).

Notes change appearance to demonstrate their length. As you shorten the note, the beat is exactly half the length of the previous one. So, a whole note is the longest note and is written as a circle with a hold in it. If we divide by two, we get a half note; a circle with a flag. Divide again by two, and you have a quarter note; a filled circle with a flag, etc.



Here is an example of a simple melody to bring together what we've learned so far:



Every song has a **melody**, which is like the heart of a song. It is common for melodies to set up some tension in the first half which is then resolved in the second half. In the example of Mary

Had a Little Lamb, the first half of the song ends on a high, unresolved note (a G), which is then resolved by gradually going down in pitch and ending on a C. Songs often finish where they started, or somewhere close to it. This gives the listener a sense of completeness. Listen to a few songs to see if you can find this pattern.

What we have covered so far applies to all types of music across all genres. You might be interested in different types of music or different instruments, but the theory is universal.

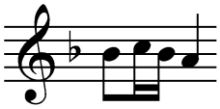
Before moving on, ask yourself these questions:

- What type of music do you enjoy listening to the most?
- What makes music interesting to you?

While you can place notes all over the staff and call it a song, you may not get a very pleasing sound. The best songs come from inside of you, from a place that is uniquely you, shaped by your life and experiences. It is also good to know where your song is going. The best melodies tell a story, even without words.

Having a motif can be useful in making a memorable melody. A **motif** is just a few notes that grab the attention of the listener. This catchy set of notes includes a rhythmic melody and can be repeated as often as you like.

For example, you will recognize a motif in this clip from *The Good, the Bad, and The Ugly:* https://youtu.be/h1PfrmCGFnk.

Example of a four-note motif:

Now we have learned the technical side of composition, it is time to get to the creative side.

ACTIVITY

Materials:

- Computer or smartphone with Wifi/Internet connection

Create a free account on https://www.noteflight.com.

You will need to sign up with an e-mail address. Once you click on “Create,” look at the different buttons and functions. Create a simple tune and use the Guide if you get stuck. Experiment with lengths of notes, key signatures, and timing. Come up with a name for your song and even lyrics. Have fun with it!

Now, create a new project. Make this your signature piece. Hum a few notes that come to you and repeat them until they are stuck in your head. Now use the piano keys on the program to find them. It might take some playing around, but you shouldn't give up. Alternatively, you might discover another melody that resonates with you. Don't forget to save your work.

If you are struggling to figure out how to represent a melody on paper, get help from a friend or refer to a book like *The Idiot's Guide: Music Theory*. Also, sites like www.musescore.com have playable sheet music for classical and contemporary songs, so you can follow along and listen to what different notes and symbols do in music.

Tips to writing a memorable tune:

- Pick a motif and feel free to repeat it as many times as you like.
- Let the melody come from you, rather than copying an already-existing song.

After writing your first line of music, think about these questions:

- What was it like composing music?
- Did you become frustrated with the process? If so, at what point?
- What was the most satisfying part?

You've done it! You have composed your first piece of music! Give yourself a pat on the back and keep on composing. The more you do it, the better you will get.

Recap:

1. Anyone can compose music with easy-to-use online software.
2. The best melodies tell a story without words. Tell your story!

Glossary of Terms *(from The Idiot's Guide: Music Theory)*:

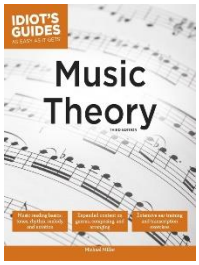
- **Staff** – horizontal lines and spaces that represent different pitches.
- **Pitch** – the highness or lowness of a note.
- **Clef** – a symbol at the beginning of the staff to indicate the pitch of the notes on the staff.
- **Treble clef** – a clef, used by higher-pitched voices and instruments, that places middle C on the first ledger line below the staff.
- **Bass clef** – a clef that is used by lower-pitched voices and instruments, that places middle C on the first ledger line above the staff.
- **Grand staff** – treble and bass clef shown linked together.
- **Scale** – a sequence of related pitches, arranged in ascending or descending order.
- **Octave** – two pitches, with the same name, located 12 half steps apart.
- **Flat** – the lowering of any pitch by half a step.

- **Sharp** – the raising of any pitch by a half step.
- **Key signature** – the sharps or flats that are placed at the beginning of a staff to indicate the key of the music.
- **Time signature** – indicates how many beats there are per measure and what kind of note is used for the basic beat.
- **Melody** – the combination of tone and rhythm in a logical sequence.

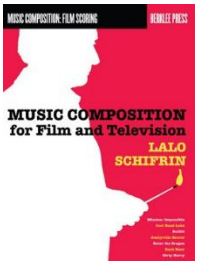
DIGITAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE THROUGH LA COUNTY LIBRARY

eBooks & Audiobooks

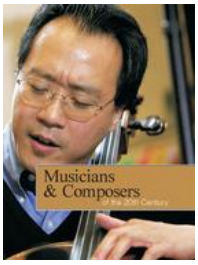
LA County Library offers numerous resources that can help you learn more about music composition. Here are just a few, all of which are available as eBooks on OverDrive and Libby:



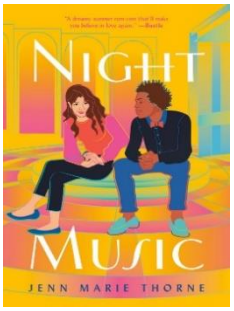
Idiot's Guides – Music Composition **by Michael Miller**
Miller explains the important concepts of music theory in an understandable way, beginning with the basics, and includes exercises at the ends of each chapter to reinforce learning.



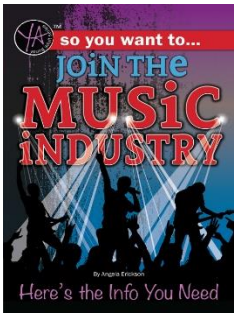
Music Composition for Film and Television **by Lalo Schifrin**
Learn everything you need to know if you have been dreaming of writing music for films or television. Schifrin discusses anecdotes from his extensive composing career and includes examples from classic and current movies.



Musicians and Composers of the 20th Century **by Alfred W. Cramer**
This searchable 5-volume e-book includes information on musicians and composers from all genres of music, from guitarist Will Ackerman to composer Hans Zimmer.



Night Music **by Jenn Marie Thorne**
Music has always been a part of Ruby's life, but when has a horrible audition for the prestigious music school where her father is on the faculty, she decides to give it up for good. Then there's Oscar, the wunderkind teen composer and her father's new protégé. When they meet and sparks fly they realize they'll have to decide what's important in their lives.



So You Want to Join the Music Industry **by Angela Erickson**
Learn about the history of the $130 billion music industry and find out what it takes to make it as an artist, producer, composer, sound recorder, or the many other career opportunities available in music.

More Library Resources

- *Freegal*. Download 3 free MP3s a week that you get to keep on your device. https://lacountylibrary.freegalmusic.com/home

- *Hoopla Digital*. Stream free music on your smartphone, tablet, or computer. https://www.hoopladigital.com/

- *Universal Class.* Take a free online course led by an instructor such as, "Introduction to Music Appreciation." https://library.universalclass.com/i/librarycourse/music-appreciation.htm

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *NoteFlight*. Explore music composition using NoteFlight, a free site for composing your own music. Registration with an e-mail address is required. https://www.noteflight.com