

SPS A guide to musical notation using our Spring 2026 repertoire

We appreciate that some singers join us who don't have extensive experience of reading music and understanding musical notation. This is a practical starting point to help you navigate the pieces we are singing for the concert in March 2026.

First, a few basic terms:

Stave: A line of music where notes are arranged on 5 lines and 4 spaces. Notes can also go above and below the stave.

Pitch: The higher the note is on the stave, the higher the pitch you sing.

Clef: To allow for a bigger range of pitches, staves start with a clef marking. We usually sing in the treble clef (higher notes) or the bass clef (lower notes).

Key signature. Western music is written in different keys to correspond with a musical scale (notes ABCDEFG). The key signature on the music gives you a clue as to what notes to expect. For example, Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring is written in the key of G major, so you can expect the notes GABCDEF#.

Time signature: tells you how many beats in a bar. For example



Tells you there are the equivalent of 3 crotchets in a bar.



Now look at the music in more detail for some more musical terms:

Key signature = 1 sharp = G major

Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring

Choral from Cantata #147
SATB (choral parts only) Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

voice part
Soprano Alto
Tenor Bass

7 bars rest
repeat sign
time signature = 3/4 = 3 crotchets per bar
bar line
crotchet rest
one bar rest
slur = join together (2 notes on one syllable)

13
N.B. time signature not repeated unless there is a change.
Ho - ly wis - dom, Love most bright,
Hark, what peace - ful mu - sic rings,

18
bar number
6
Drawn by Thee, our souls as - pir - ing,
Where the flock in thee con - fid - ing,

28
slur = 3 notes on one syllable
soar to un - cre - at - ed light.
drink of joy from death - less springs.

N.B. In this score there are 2 voice parts per staff. It follows the usual convention: note stems pointing up are sung by the upper voice.

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Note stems going down are sung by the lower voice.

The second extract is from Moon River. It is interesting that this version is basically in the key of C major (no sharps or flats in the key signature), but it is a jazzy piece, so has lots of "accidentals".

In this score, note stems up or down don't always show which voice sings which part. It needs to be decided by singer or conductor.

6

53 *p* = piano (Italian) = quietly
cresc. = crescendo = get louder

We're af - ter the same

p *cresc.*

A dot after a note makes it $\frac{1}{2}$ as long again. Dotted minim = 3 beats

mf = mezzo forte = quite loud

An "accidental" = a change to the note not in the main key signature. It lasts for a whole bar.

mf = E^b = E^b = E (natural)

rain bow's end, wait - ing 'round the

Do, wait - ing 'round the

quaver rest

cresc.

bend, my huck - le - ber - ry friend,

cresc.

bend, Do, huck - le - ber - ry friend,

62

This is a "tie" = one note going across the bar line on this syllable

Moon riv - er and me.

62

but this is a slur! (2 notes per syllable)

another way of slowing diminuendo

= ritardando and diminuendo

get slower and quieter

rit. e dim.

Ah Ah do do

rit. e dim.

p

double bar line at the end.

Pause mark. Hold the note on until the conductor brings you off.

MOON RIVER - SATB

These are extra sharps and flats added to individual notes in the score which give the piece its unique atmosphere and emotion.

Just note that, when you are singing the music, the extra sharp or flat applies to all the same notes in that bar and that bar only (as with the two E flats in bar 56, but in bar 57 we go back to E natural).

It is more tricky to tell which voice part sings which note on the staff in this music. The classical convention is for note stems to point up for the higher voice and down for the lower voice (as in the Bach music) but here it is ambiguous, hence the discussions we have in rehearsal as to who is singing what!

Musical tradition holds that indications of loudness, quiet, speed changes and expression are written in Italian. Translations are shown in the two extracts above.

You can find lots more about musical notation on the internet, e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_musical_symbols

Making Music has a couple of useful guides too:

<https://www.makingmusic.org.uk/resource/getting-started-sheet-music>

<https://www.makingmusic.org.uk/resource/reading-sheet-music-choir-beginner%E2%80%99s-guide>

Sue Partridge, February 2026.