

# SIMPLIFIED MUSIC NOTATION

**John York**

If we had to rethink and re-invent music notation, what would we do the same today and what differently? Alphabetic steps up and down the lines and spaces from A to G? No problem, as it only takes seven letters to cover every note. The different clefs? Easily understood, and attractive to the eye. Five lines and four spaces? So clear, even at a glance. More lines would only make reading harder; fewer would limit chord writing and counterpoint. Leger lines? A necessary evil. Note values - minims, crotchets etc.? Just about acceptable once learnt, though I can't understand why the shortest of notes illogically requires the most ink!

I am betting that the real problem for many students early in their learning career (and later) is the sharp sign and its brothers, the flat and the natural. How often does a pupil misread accidentals, playing sharps for flats and vice versa! How often do they forget that accidentals apply through the whole bar! How often do we hear the not unpleasant diminished triad D-F-Gsharp rendered hideous as D-F sharp- G because they can't see which note is affected by the sharp sign and don't listen to the awful result! And just how often do I have to explain why a composer hasn't changed F double sharp to G, even if we do in the lesson!

If only *all* these signs could be done away with... Well, good news! In the wonderfully practical and brilliant '**Simplified Music Notation**' invented by Peter Hayes George, they have been, totally. A note which needs sharpening simply assumes a flag-shape instead of the usual oval but is still, at a glance, recognisable as a crotchet or semiquaver etc. A flattened note becomes a sort of

Symbols	Traditional Notation	Simplified Music Notation	Sharps and flats are each represented by their own unique symbols.  Double sharps & flats, are written at the pitch at which they are actually played.  Such notes are marked by a 'History Sign' which signals how they were originally written but can be ignored whilst playing.
Sharps	SHARPS 		
Flats	FLATS 		
Double Sharp History Sign	DOUBLE SHARP 		
Double Flat History Sign	DOUBLE FLAT 		

Traditional Notation



Simplified Music Notation



Labels in the simplified notation: Flat Key Signature, Flat Note Head, Sharp Key Signature, Sharp Note Head.

oblique oblong. For those irritating but rare double sharps and even rarer double flats, unavoidable in the keys of G sharp minor, D sharp minor and the like, you get the *actual pitch* note – F double sharp becomes G - plus a tiny symbol of its true history. Now we can see which note to play instantly, with no need to pencil in the letter name, as we all surely do occasionally.

And that is the whole story. The music still looks much the same as it always did. The difference is in the clarity, the immediacy of understanding. With a little practice, you can switch from one system to the other quite easily.

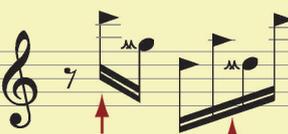
Pedants like me should be appeased to find that key signatures are still there in the usual place at the start of each line, in flags (sharps) or oblongs (flats), meaning that key recognition, such an important part of sight reading and accurate learning, can still be instantaneous and subliminal. The use of those little 'history signs' mentioned above works well to maintain the proper, theoretical sense of key where a double sharp or flat is altered in letter name. There is absolutely no clutter between the notes, no unclear alignment or misalignment of accidental against note – the curse of French and Spanish editions particularly - no overlapping or piling up of accidentals, no need for cancellation of accidentals either in the bar or after the bar line. Essentially there is no room for error in reading or printing – and that can't be a bad thing, can it?

The question arises though: who is going to adopt the new notation and spread the word? I asked that question many years ago – Simplified Music Notation has been around for well over two decades – and declared back then that it would need to be adopted *from the start*, with beginners. To that end, John Kember and I are in the process of compiling early-grade repertoire books brimful of old and new repertoire pieces, featuring compositions in Simplified Music Notation and some in standard score. The aim is to build students' confidence and sight-reading skills in more complex and chromatic keys right from the start. There are,

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Labels in the simplified notation: Sharp Note Head, Double Sharp History Sign.

moreover, plans for such repertoire standards as the Beethoven Sonatas and the Bach 48 to be produced in Simplified Music Notation. That is a big, but far from unreasonable, ambition. There have been many positive comments from people saying that they would welcome the use of SMN in *all* contemporary and more intricately chromatic scores. Imagine Fauré or Szymanowski, for example, without all those vexing accidentals ... Meanwhile it is hoped that, by the time the

single and double sharps and flats are really beginning to pile up on the standard page, pianists – and all musicians generally, because this SMN is not just for pianists – will be reading fluently and flourishing fearlessly.

For full instructions, books, downloads and free samples:  
[www.SimplifiedMusicNotation.org](http://www.SimplifiedMusicNotation.org)

More information: The Creative Arts Research Trust, 245 Kingsway, HOVE, Sussex, BN3 4HE