

How to notate music when you don't read music January 2020 - Allegra Rivett Sloman

If you have a laptop or tablet please feel free to fire it up during this talk so you can check the links and get comfortable with them. If we have time we'll try to notate a song while we're here.

Question number one! Why can't I just sing my song into an app on my phone and have it transcribed?

Because you don't produce pure tones and the overtones in your voice confuse the software. That's why they want you to enter the song on a keyboard, to provide a pure tone.

Question number two! Is there any other way of doing this that doesn't involve so much work?

Yes, but it will cost money, and this method does not. This way has the distinct advantage of being under your control, even if it's slow.

Question number three! Are you sure about that?

Someone who can play an electronic keyboard by ear, if they know your song well enough, can play it directly into notation software. You will then spend hours cleaning it up unless they play with the perfect beat of an eight bit soundtrack; possibly as much time as it would have taken you to enter the song the hard way.

Beginneth the lesson

Sheet music gives a specific, replicable and globally accepted understanding of what notes, rests and intervals occur during a melody, or in the instrumental accompaniment for a melody, aka a tune, a song, an air.

Sheet music is *always approximate*. Don't let snobs sit for free in your musical creativity and poison it just because you can't read music or easily write it. The map is not the territory, the alphabet is not the language, and the live performers - you - get the last note. However, humans forget things as

hard and fast as they create them, so sheet music's a memory aid for you, as well as a hard copy for the world, and it means that you're serious about sharing or archiving your music, for current cultural values of 'serious'.

However.... if your music is never written down, that just means you're not participating in a colonial musical methodology which does not take all aspects of culture and performance into significance as it is recorded. If you want to know why some Indigenous music creatives are leery in the extreme of musical notation, that is why. More to the point, once written down it's way easier to steal, kind of a sore subject with Indigenous people.

There is no dispute in my heart either way. I can see both views as valid, and others besides.

But if you're committed, in order to get specific and able to convey this melody to someone else, you need to know at the outset:

- a. The beats per minute aka tempo
- b. the key - which is shown two ways, as demonstrated in this diagram of the circle of fifths from wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circle_of_fifths#/media/File:Circle_of_fifths_deluxe_4.svg
- c. the time signature - four four, two two, three four, six eight, cut time, common time. Every bar of a song is a bucket, and that bucket is designed to carry a mathematically perfect sum of notes and rests. Notation software will not let you put too many notes and rests, or too few, in a bar, but hoo boy there are plenty of other mistakes you can make. Slow and steady is good.

To obtain the beats per minute, you sing or play the song aloud while tapping <http://www.all8.com/tools/bpm.htm>. Sing at least one whole verse of the song so you get a solid average.

So, for example the song "Way up in the Sky" is 118 beats per minute.

The key is harder. But! there's a dodge.

Unless

you specifically do a key change in the middle of the song, like the G to A in the middle of Barry Manilow's classic "Can't Smile Without You" which was the first key change song I could think of, thank you classic AM radio

from the 70s,

OR

you do something bizarre in the last bar of the song which throws this trick off, there is a very simple way to tell what key your song is in. Sing the song to the end and the last note of the song is either the key the song is in or part of the major chord (or minor chord) of the key the song is in. I am assuming if you've gotten this far you can tell the difference between a minor and a major song by ear.

ACK but HOW do I tell what KEY it is in.

Go to the <https://chordbook.com/guitar-chords/>, and strum around until the last chord sounds right. Play with it until you're virtually plucking the right note – the last note of your song. The strings, as you change the chords or move the virtual capo up and down, also change in value, so you can record the notes.

While you're there, you can figure out which guitar chords go along with the song you wrote and strum like you know what you're doing, it's very satisfying. All those chords my sausage fingers will never play! (insert gif of Louise from Bob's Burgers laughing maniacally here.)

Those B chords I will never play. Sigh. Anyway.

So you know how fast you're going and what key you're in. Now you have to figure out the time signature. I won't lie, this is not my favourite part. But we'll get through it.

If you can count four, you're in four (one two three four). If you can count two, you're in two (one two one two one two – literally the two step rhythm, or as I like to call it with all the sarcasm in my flabby corpus, 'white man's rhythm'.) Everybody knows what waltz time sounds like, one two three, one two three. If you can count ticketa-ticketa-ticketa you're in six-eight. Don't believe me? *The Campbells are coming burrah burrah, they're totally drunken and big and braw!* Ticketa ticketa! Yup, not hard at all to figure out six eight. *She set her sister's hair on fire, sing rickety tickety tin*, yup, six eight.

If you have a time signature more complicated than these, you're probably a trained musician or grew up with them, and so I must ask you to *leave* or at least *avert your eyes*.

Virtually every filk song ever written is in four/four, so if you can count four you're okay writing it down in four four time. Yes, there is cut and common time. Yes, check into that if you want to experience a level of confusion and irritation that I have learned to associate with every aspect of musical notation.

Supposing for the sake of argument that your song has stretches of time when you are freely singing (or truncating) a note or notes, something that changes every time you sing it. Absolutely none of us know any filk songs like that, so I provide this for your entertainment purposes only.

Stick it in four four, mark 'rubato' *pronounced ru 'ba doh* on the section of the song you're messing with, and pat yourself on the back for panache.

What is rubato? the temporary disregarding of strict tempo to allow an expressive quickening or slackening, usually without altering the overall pace.

Armed with the key, tempo and time signature, now you can open a file in a music notation software program like Musenote (free) or Finale (moderately expensive and oopsie if you have a Mac, they're in the habit of dropping support for Macs if you upgrade your OS), and tell it that you want to enter a song. You only want one clef, most likely, unless you sing bass. Tell it the key, the BPM if requested by the software, and the time signature. It'll ask for a bunch of other stuff, enter the song information like the title and composer in the form and choose the defaults for the rest.

When you first start singing a song, as a general rule you take a breath, sing a note or a couple of notes and then you hit a downbeat—the One in the One two three four. So if you are like me, the first time you start writing songs down (awful, obvious hint: **don't be**, you will feel sorry for yourself) you will somehow miss the obvious-to-every-one else fact that every bar of a song in four four time is a bucket for four beats, and you have to get the right number of beats in the bucket or the entire song notation process runs off the rails.

Get the first bar right and you'll be fine.

I am easily frustrated and this was the worst worst worst part for me. I could not get it right. If I hadn't had a playback function on the software I

never would have gotten it right, and you may find yourself in the same situation; or there may be other cognitive tripwires along the path to writing a song down.

So figure out how many notes / beats go in the 'not full' bar at the beginning of the song, and then you can reasonably divide up the rest of them without chasing your tail/tails for the next thirty bars. Most melodies fit in thirty-one bars.

With few exceptions, the math for any song in four four always has something left over, and the leftover bits are actually at the *beginning* of the song, and it's so you can breathe. Sixers, the aliens I invented for the Upsun series, don't have to breathe, so their songs sound anatomically improbable, lucky them.

Okay, you're now having to master entering notes and rests and getting notes to go past the end of bars with those funny swoopy lines as you're typing in the notes. It's terrifying, but only trial and error does the trick.

It can be very useful at this point to back off and get as much of the contents of the bars – those buckets I mentioned earlier, as clear as you can before you start learning how to enter the notes with. In other words, break the two tasks down so that you know how many notes are going in each bar before you assign a value (note) to them in entry. This will also prevent you from making two different mistakes at the same time while you're entering the notes.

Then, very tediously figure out what the first note is in relation to the last note (which gave you the key). Chordbook ([url above](#)) or a keyboard that shows the note (A, B, C) as you depress the key can be useful here, and **where** the beat is, so that the first note in the second bar is on the downbeat. (The One, of One two three four).

Playback in the notation software allows you to tell if the notes are in the wrong place and of the wrong value; you will be very sick of the song by the time you're done. Depending on verses and chorus and spoken parts it will take an hour or two to finish it the first time, so plan to not be interrupted – pace yourself and stay hydrated, it can be frustrating.

Once finished, if you can get someone who reads music reader to ensure that there is nothing visibly wonky, that's optimal, but if it sounds okay on

playback, *then convert it into a pdf RIGHT AWAY and print it because if it stays in the format of the software you may not be able to recover or print it when that software goes to the bityard in the sky.*

A few tips on entry.

Ensure there are rests in the song for the places where you're taking a breath. Sounds silly to remind you but I wish I'd realized this at the outset.

If you're having to add sharps and flats and naturals to get the notes to sound correct on playback, you have most likely selected the wrong key. Back up and figure out what key the song is really in, 'cause something ain't right.

If you have access to sheet music, enter a favourite song or three as practice, it will speed entry and correction when you come to enter your music.