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Chapter 1. Introduction

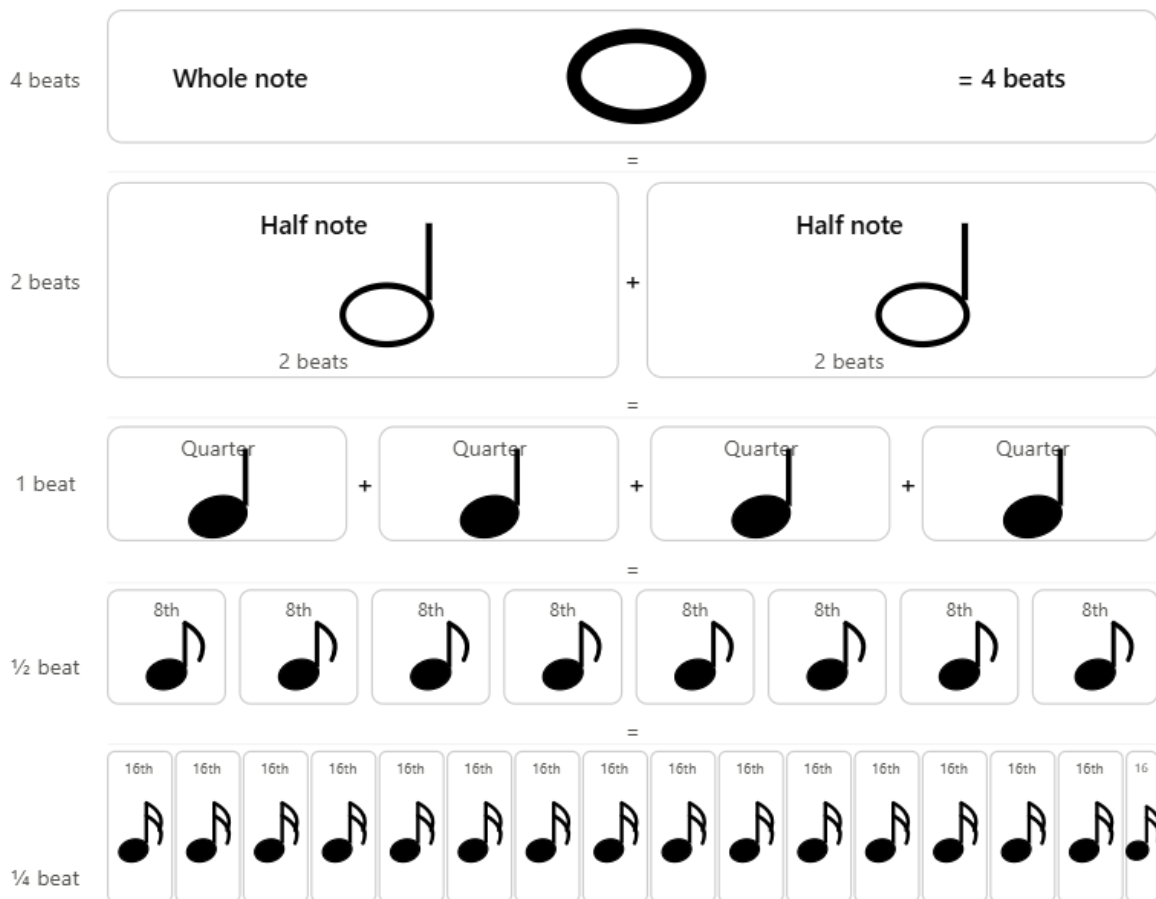
- What is ABRSM Grade 1 Music Theory?
 - Entry-level qualification in the ABRSM syllabus. It is designed for beginners who are new to formal music study – and covers the foundational building blocks of written music.
- Why music theory is important for musicians.
 - It is important to learn how to write down music clearly. As a musician, unclear manuscript can waste valuable rehearsal time and might lead to performance mistakes.
 - It deepens understanding of what you are playing. Without theory, you're essentially memorizing shapes and sounds. With it, you understand *why* a piece resolves the way it does, why a chord progression feels tense or restful, and how a composer built the emotional arc of a piece. This makes learning new music much faster.
 - It strengthens sight-reading and ear training. When you recognize a ii-V-I progression or a modulation to the relative minor, your brain groups patterns instead of reading note-by-note. This is why theory and aural skills are inseparable – your ear learns to *expect* what your eye sees.
 - It enables improvisation and composition. Theory gives you a vocabulary. A jazz musician navigating chord changes, a classical pianist ornamenting a repeat, a songwriter choosing whether to go to the IV or the vi – all of these decisions are fluent theory in action. Without it, creativity is limited to trial and error.
 - It allows meaningful communication with other musicians. Theory is a shared language. Analyzing Bach's counterpoint, Beethoven's motivic development, or Chopin's harmonic language reveals craft that would otherwise feel like magic. That understanding feeds back into your own playing and interpretation.
 - It builds musical independence. Students who understand theory can self-correct, self-teach new repertoire, and make informed interpretive choices rather than relying entirely on a teacher's instructions.
- Overview of topics covered in the Grade 1 syllabus.
 - Time values, Bar-lines and time signatures, Notes on the staff, The treble (G) clef. The bass (F) clef, Rests, Ties, Dots, Accidentals, Semitones and tones, The scales and key signatures of C, G, D and F major, Canceling an accidental, Degrees of the scale and intervals, The tonic triad, Composing an answering rhythm, Performance directions.

Chapter 2. Time, Notes and Clefs

- Time values

Note	Name	Beats	How to remember it
	Whole Note <i>Semibreve</i>	4 beats	Hollow oval with no stem. Holds for 4 full beats.
	Half Note <i>Minim</i>	2 beats	Hollow oval with a stem. Holds for 2 beats.
	Dotted Half Note <i>Dotted Minim</i>	3 beats	Half note with a dot. The dot adds 1 extra beat (2 + 1 = 3).
	Quarter Note <i>Crotchet</i>	1 beats	Filled oval with a stem. Holds for 1 beat.
	Eighth Note <i>Quaver</i>	$\frac{1}{2}$ beats	Filled oval with a stem and one flag. Two fit in one beat.
	Sixteenth Note <i>Semiquaver</i>	$\frac{1}{4}$ beats	Filled oval with a stem and two flags. Four fit in one beat.

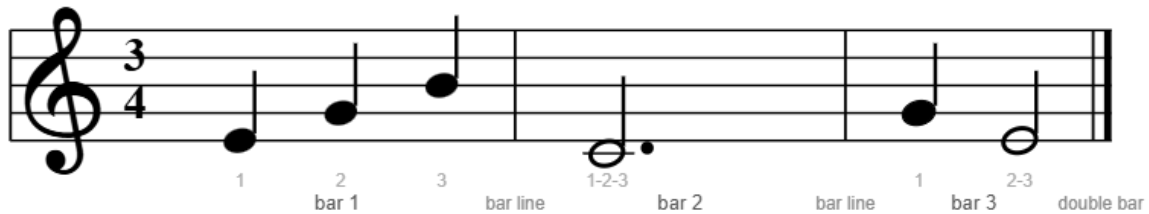
Quick Tip: In 4/4 time, one whole note = 2 half notes = 4 quarter notes = 8 eighth notes = 16 sixteenth notes



1 whole = 2 half = 4 quarter = 8 eighth = 16 sixteenth notes

- Bar-lines and time signatures

All the notes in a piece of music are organized into bars (aka. Measures) by bar lines (aka. Measure lines). The end of a section of music is shown by a double bar line, the 2nd line is slightly thicker than the 1st. At the beginning of a piece of music is a time signature.



In a time signature:

The top number tells you how many beats per bar.

The bottom number tells you what type of beat.

So -

3 – three beats per bar, 4 – quarter note is counted as one beat.

Together, it means there are $\frac{3}{4}$ three quarter note beats per bar.

Sometimes, it is shown as C $\frac{4}{4}$ and it means “Common Time.”

- Semibreve (whole note) , Ledger lines, Crochet (Quarter note) and Quaver (Eighth note)

Note heads are more oval in shape rather than round. If the note is in a space don't let the note overhang the lines. If the note is on a line, the line must go through the middle of the note head.

Notes that extend beyond the musical staff are written on ledger lines which are spaced at the same intervals as the staff lines.

Notes above the middle line of the staff – stems point down.

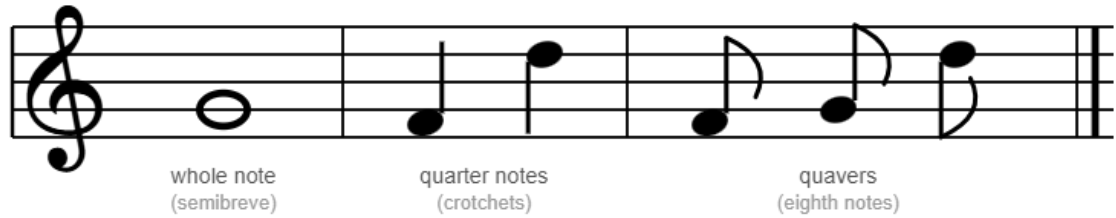
Notes below the middle line of the staff – stems point up.

Notes on the middle line of the staff can have stems pointing either up or down.

For quaver (eighth note), the tail always goes on the right-hand side of the stem.

Stem lengths should be equal.

ALWAYS use a sharpened pencil so that mistakes can be easily erased.

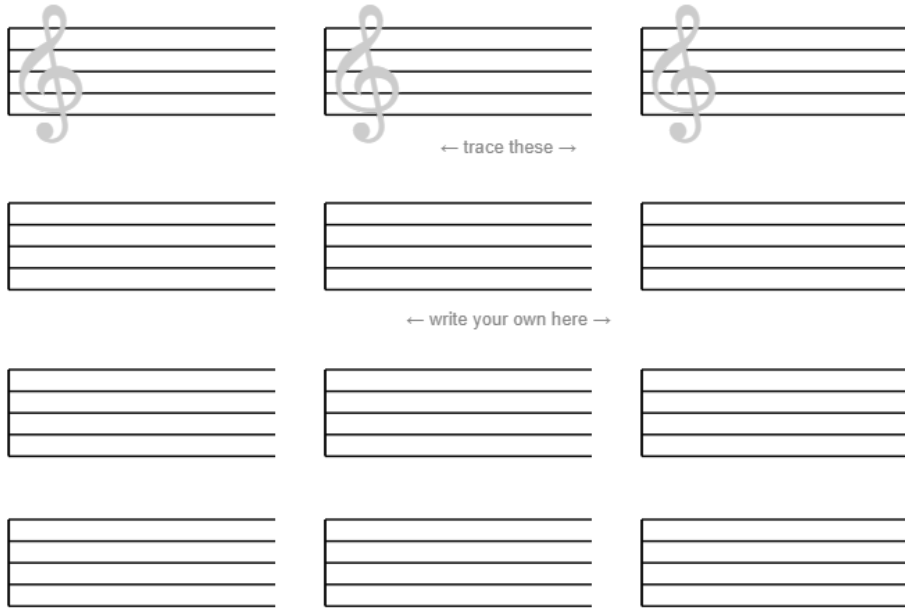


- The treble (G) clef. Middle C (C4) sits on the ledger line below the staff. You can add as many ledger lines as you want to extend the staff. The treble clef represents notes which are in the higher pitch range.



Treble Clef — Trace and Practice

Trace over the faint clefs, then write your own in the empty spaces



← trace these →

← write your own here →

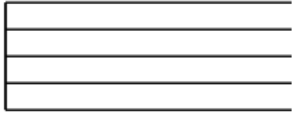
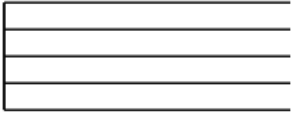
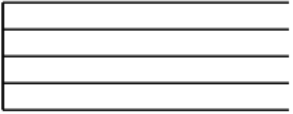
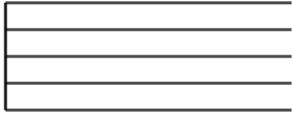
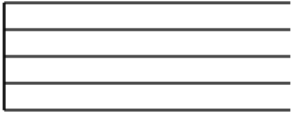
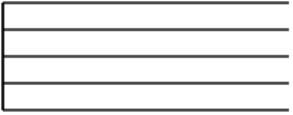
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- The bass (F) clef. Middle C (C4) sits on the ledger line above the staff. You can add as many ledger lines as you want to extend the staff. The bass clef represents notes which are in the lower pitch range.



Bass Clef — Trace and Practice

Trace over the faint clefs, then write your own in the empty spaces

		
← trace these →		
		
← write your own here →		
		
		

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- Beaming the eighth notes and sixteenth notes

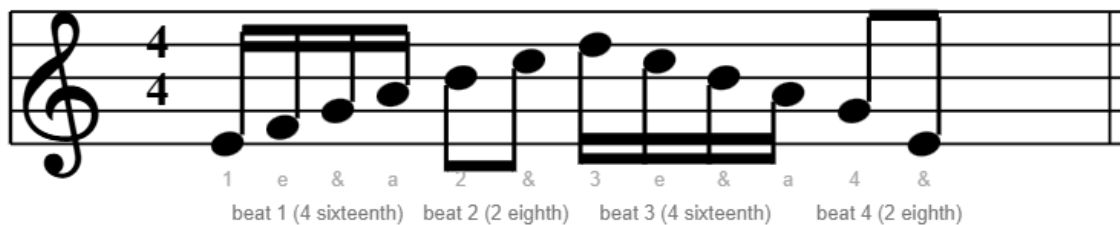
As a general rule, eighth notes and sixteenth notes are joined together at the “tails” in units of one quarter beat. This is always so when joining a mixture of eighth notes and sixteenth notes for the time signatures covered in this grade.

4
4

Never beam together more than four quavers (eighth notes) in a bar of



4/4 — 4 sixteenth notes + 2 eighth notes + 4 sixteenth notes + 2 eighth notes = 4 beats



1 e & a 2 & 3 e & a 4 &

beat 1 (4 sixteenth) beat 2 (2 eighth) beat 3 (4 sixteenth) beat 4 (2 eighth)

Chapter 3. Rests, Accidentals and Tones

- Rests: a moment of silence

Rest Symbol	Name	Beats of Silence	Also known as
	Whole Rest 4 beats of silence	4	Semibreve rest
	Half Rest 2 beats of silence	2	Minim rest
	Quarter Rest 1 beat of silence	1	Crotchet rest
	Eighth Rest ½ beat of silence	½	Quaver rest
	Sixteenth Rest ¼ beat of silence	¼	Semiquaver rest

Tip: whole rest hangs DOWN (heavy), half rest sits UP (like a hat). Quarter rest looks like a zigzag lightning bolt.

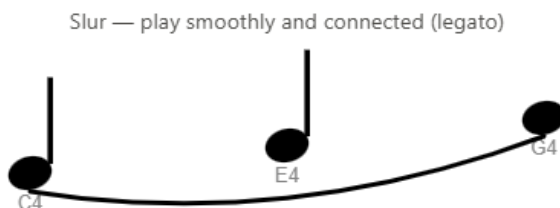
- Ties: A tie spans from individual note head to note head of the same pitch to combine the time values.

Tie — quarter note tied to half note = 3 beats



A tie connects two notes of the SAME pitch — the second note is held, not struck again.

They are not to be confused with *slurs* which form an “umbrella” over both note heads and tails of varying pitch. A slur shows that notes are to be played “legato” – in a smooth, connected manner.

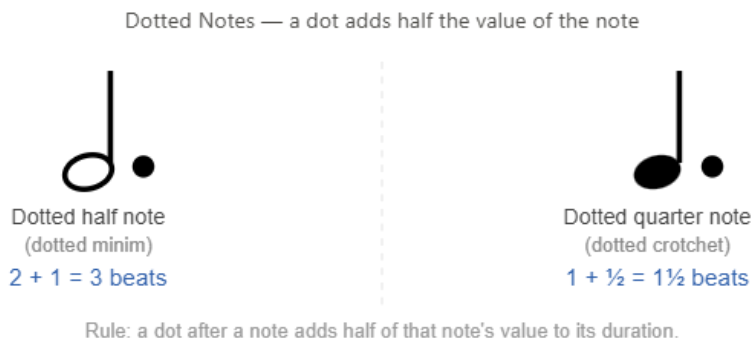


What is a slur?

A slur connects notes of DIFFERENT pitches — play each note smoothly with no gap between them.

- Dots

A dot after a note makes it last half as long again. As such a dot changes value depending upon which note precedes it.



How about a dotted eighth note? How many beat is that?

- Accidentals

A sharp $\sharp$ raises a note by a semitone.

A flat $\flat$ lowers a note by a semitone.

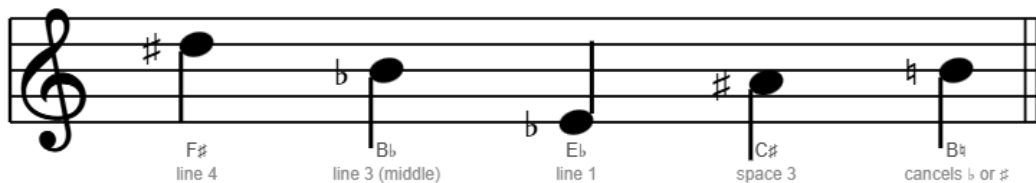
A natural $\natural$ cancels a previous sharp or flat.

An accidental lasts for one bar only for the given pitch. Other octaves are not affected.

When writing an accidental before a note which is on a line, the line must pass through the center of the sign.

When writing an accidental before a note which is in a space, the center of the sign must fill the space but not overlap the lines.

Accidentals — sharp #, flat b and natural ♮ signs on the staff

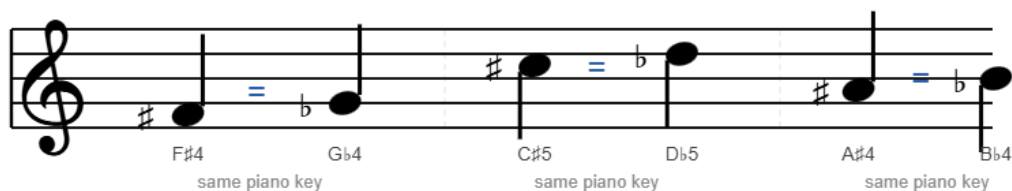


Rules for accidentals:

- Sharp # — raises the note by one semitone
- Flat b — lowers the note by one semitone
- Natural ♮ — cancels a previous sharp or flat, returning the note to its original pitch

Enharmonic: same sound, different name.

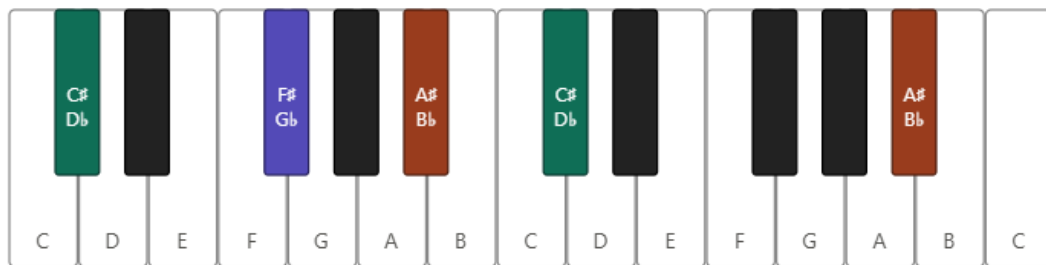
Enharmonic Notes — same sound, different name



What are enharmonic notes?

Enharmonic notes sound identical and share the same piano key — but are written differently on the staff. The sharp note sits one step lower on the staff, the flat note sits one step higher — yet they sound the same. Which name is used depends on the key signature of the piece.

Enharmonic notes on the keyboard — same key, different name



■ F# = G♭
 ■ C# = D♭
 ■ A# = B♭

Each highlighted key has two names — same pitch, played on the same key on the piano.

• Tones and Semitones

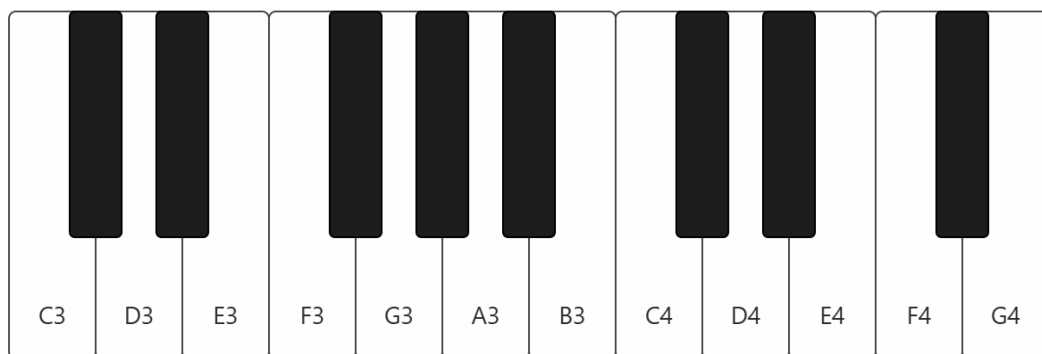
Tones and semitones are the basic units of distance (interval) between pitches. It is the easiest to look at them on a keyboard.

A Semitone (half step) is the closest adjacent note. This is the smallest interval between notes. A tone is made up of two semitones (full step).

The interval between E3 and F3 is a semitone.

The interval between C3 and D3 is a tone.

The interval between C and C# is a semitone.



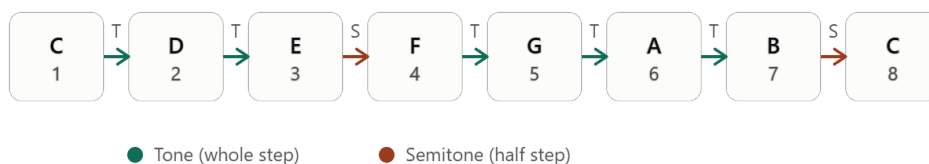
Chapter 4. Scales, Intervals and Tonic Triad

- Major Scales

The major scale pattern is made up of a series of tones and semitones:

TONE, TONE, SEMITONE, TONE, TONE, TONE, SEMITONE

The major scale ascending, beginning on C (C major)



The major scale descends, beginning on C (C major).



Key Signatures C, G, D, F



C Major



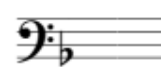
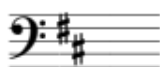
G Major



D Major



F Major



- Cancelling an accidental

A key signature is not cancelled by bar lines and includes any octave.

For example:



An accidental lasts only until the end of the bar and only affects later notes in that bar which are of the same pitch, not any other octave.

For example:



At the end of a bar, the music returns to that of the key signature and all accidentals are cancelled.

For example:



- Degrees of the Scale

Scale degrees are the numbered positions of each note within a scale. In a major scale, there are seven degrees before the pattern repeats at the octave. The most important degrees to remember first are the tonic (1st) and dominant (5th).

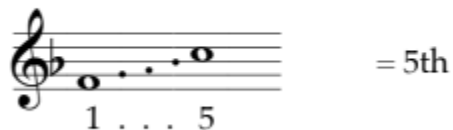
Using C major as the example:

Degree	Note	Name	Role
1st	C	Tonic	Home base — the key note, where the scale feels "resolved"
2nd	D	Supertonic	One step above the tonic
3rd	E	Mediant	Halfway between tonic and dominant
4th	F	Subdominant	One fifth below the tonic (or one step below dominant)
5th	G	Dominant	The strongest pull back to the tonic
6th	A	Submediant	Halfway between tonic and subdominant (going down)
7th	B	Leading note	Pulls strongly upward to the tonic — just a semitone away
8th	C	Tonic (octave)	Same note, one octave higher

- Intervals

Intervals refers to the distance between two notes:

F Major



Melodic interval refers to the interval between two notes played one after the other, i.e. in a “melody”

G Major



Harmonic interval refers to the interval between two notes played together, i.e. as in a “harmony”

D Major

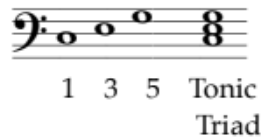
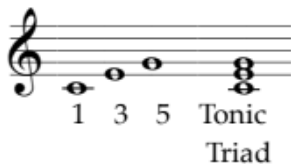


= Harmonic 6th

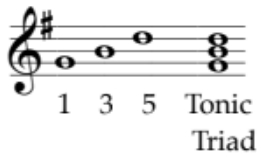
- Tonic Triad

Tonic describes the first note of the scale. A Triad is a chord made of three notes. A Tonic Triad is a chord of three notes built on the first, third and fifth notes of the scale.

The tonic triad of C Major



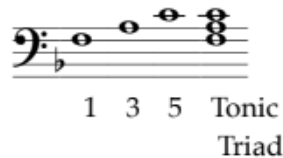
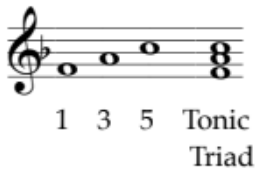
The tonic triad of G Major



The tonic triad of D Major



The tonic triad of F Major



Chapter 5. Performance Directions

It is necessary to learn the Italian terms and the musical direction symbols. A useful way to learn these is to collate the terms into thematic groups, rather than in alphabetical order.

For example:

SLOW

Adagio	- slow
Lento	- slow
Rallentando	- gradually getting slower
Ritardando	- gradually getting slower
Ritenuto	- held back
Andante	- at a medium 'walking' speed

QUICK

Accelerando	- gradually getting quicker
Allegro	- Quick "cheerful"
Allegretto	- Fairly quick (but not as quick as Allegro)

LOUD

Forte <i>f</i>	- loud
Fortissimo <i>ff</i>	- very loud
Crescendo	- gradually getting louder