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Techniques for Non-Specialist  
Teachers

Understanding simple  
rhythmic notation

A Guide

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of MusicTeachers.co.uk's Resources and  
Journal sections.

Please feel free to photocopy as many  
booklets as you find necessary.

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## Introduction

Despite the existence of improvised forms, an understanding of notation is central to the performance of Western music. But the implementation of a practical course in which children can proactively learn notation and apply this to composition- and performance-based activities through non-specialist teachers, is a difficult, if not a seemingly impossible, task. This article is not geared to the providing teachers with an armoury of tasks that can be used in National Curriculum-based activities, since to do so would do much to diminish the teacher's need for development; instead, the following will provide a series of starting points from which non-specialist teachers at Key Stage 2 and, where necessary, Key Stage 3, can begin to develop their children's knowledge and understanding of conventional notation.

Initially, we must assume that all teachers have a modicum of musical talent, whether this be the result of basic musical activities as a child (e.g. playing the recorder or singing in a choir), or a simple love of music. The latter is especially important, since if there is no love for the art, there is no interest and, if this is the case, then it is suggested that alternative arrangements be made for the tuition of a class's musical activities. The first thing we need to get to grips with is basic rhythmic notation.

### 1. Duration – simple rhythms

There have been all sorts of methods devised for the tuition of rhythm, which have included the use of symbols, colour codes and pictures rather than the simplest and most direct method, the use of conventional staff notation. The problem is, however, that staff notation puts people off; I would like

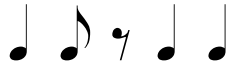
added together, which equals three beats in length.

### Remember:

1. The only way in which you can be a success in teaching any aspect of music is to be sure of what you are doing. Always prepare any activities carefully before giving them to your class.
2. This is only the very basics of rhythm notation, but should provide plenty of experience for your class. For more complex issues, it is worthwhile looking at the theory booklets provided by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, which will provide you also with a host of information suitable for teaching this tricky subject.

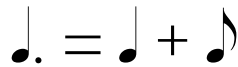
The education staff at MusicTeachers.co.uk hope that this has proved to be a successful project; it has certainly been tried and tested over a long period, but if you have any suggestions for improvement, extension and support activities, please do let us know by emailing, telephoning or faxing the numbers found on the last page of these notes. Alternatively, you might wish to write to us at the address supplied. We will be pleased to hear from you.

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When teaching a rest to your class, a) try using the syllable *ti* when sounding the note out; b) use a similar (but quicker) physical movement to the one suggested for the crotchet rest.

A dot makes the duration of the note longer by a half. Thus, a dot after a crotchet, will add to it the value of a quaver, and a dot after a minim will add to it the value of a crotchet since:



When teaching a note like this to your class, in context, the syllabification will be this:



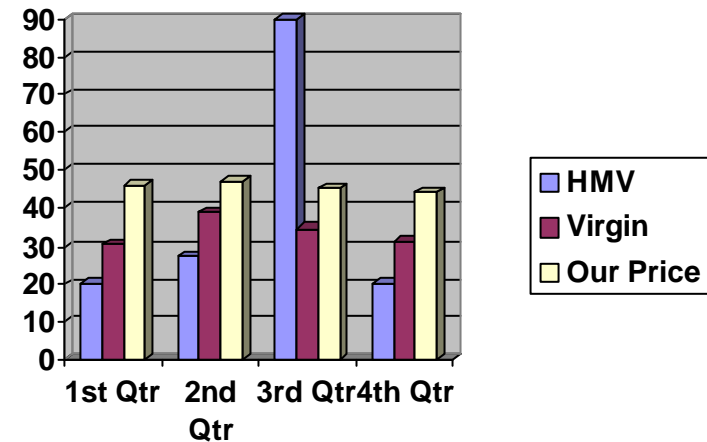
where the 'a' attached to the first note is the equivalent of a silent quaver:



A dot after a minim has the same effect, for which we should count *ta-a-a*. This is the same as three crotchets

to suggest that the reason for this is, in most cases, a form of musical dyslexia, but the fact remains that with many of the teachers I have dealt with over the past years, the reason is one of simple laziness. The old adage of 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks' seems to stand and, in a profession where a basic requirement is flexibility, it is surprising to find that so many are unhappy about learning a few basics and putting these into practice. Taking the time to make sure that the language is learned is very important: it is not difficult, but as with all languages, needs a modicum of understanding before anything can be done. So let us start by taking a look at how rhythms work.

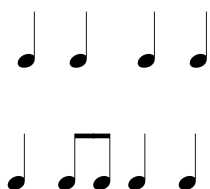
The whole basis of staff notation is the understanding of a simple mathematical graph. The appearance of a note means its duration and the position it holds on the staff represents its pitch: staff notation is nothing other than the interpretation an x and y axes. If I were to ask you to interpret the following graph:



there would be few problems. The x axis refers to the quantity and the y axis to the period. Thus, in the second quarter, Our Price sold more of a particular CD than the HMV and Virgin shops. Simple! Now, lets interpret the following graph:



We have four notes, evenly spaced. That they are all the same suggests that they represent the same duration. Thus, we should play or clap these notes at equal distances from one and other. Although we are all aware that they are **crotchets** (in American, quarter-notes), names are not important: what is important is that they immediately tell us something. If you have the ability to clap this simple phrase, then surely you have the ability to move onto something slightly more complex:



This time we have two lines of music: the first is the same as above, but the second is slightly different in that there is an extra note for the second beat, connected to the first with a thick line. We call these notes **quavers** (in American, eighth-notes) and the thick connecting line, a **beam**. Simple maths suggests that the extra note should be played between the second and third beats. If the notes on the top line repre-

When you come across this symbol when teaching rhythms to your class, rather than just waiting for the duration to pass: a) sound the note using the syllable *tee* rather than *ta*; b) try using a physical movement to represent it, perhaps flicking your hands away from each other.

**Quavers** and **minims** also have their own rest symbols. Respectively, they look like this:



Although the **minim rest** should be treated in just the same way as the crotchet, the **quaver rest** takes a little more explanation, since using one involves an alteration of the shape of the quaver note with which it is paired. Imagine what would happen were we to cut a ribbon that is tied between two sticks. The ribbon would simply fall flapping to the side of the stick. It is the same with the quaver: if we cut the beam between the two notes, we will end up with two separate one that look like this:



Nothing changes, the two keep the same duration and, when played, will also sound the same. The only difference is, that it is rare to find them looking like this in square time signatures (i.e. 4/4), since the beam: a) makes the note value easier to see; b) is easier to write in long passages of quavers.

So, if we remove one of our quavers from a rhythm, and replace it with a rest, the result will look like this:

#### 4. More complex issues

So far, we have only discussed the tuition of square notation, that is notes that easily fit on or within a beat. However, we have also to examine rests and dots. The first are self-explanatory since music relies on silence as much as it does noise for effect.

Let us go back to our first example:



We have four distinct sounds, one on each beat of the bar. However, suppose we remove one of these sounds, the third, for example. The result should look something like this:



However, the space it leaves could be confusing, so we have to fill the gap with a symbol; in this instance, the symbol for a **crotchet rest** looks like this:

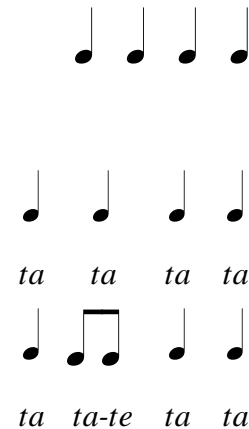


in which case, our rhythm, complete with the missing note, will look like this:



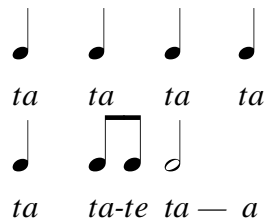
sent 1, then the beamed notes, quavers, represent a half. The whole rhythmic cell here is four beats long; thus, we can say that we have a cell or, more correctly, a **bar** of four beats.

Now before we go any further, let's find a way of dealing in musical terms with these two simple lines of music. We need to find a way to sound these notes out. Clapping is one way, but it is easier for young children to be more rhythmic when speaking than when clapping, since the dexterity required is less exacting. Therefore, for the notes of the first line, we say *ta* like this:



By experimenting with these simple rhythms, it is possible to arrange all sorts of permutations.

There are a couple of extra notes that we also have to investigate. First, let us look at the **minim**. Simply put, this has the same length as two crotchets, as in the following example:



The syllabification of this requires the second *a* of the note to be said where a crotchet would normally be played. (When you come across this symbol when teaching rhythms to your class, rather than just waiting for the duration to pass, try using a physical movement to represent it, perhaps keeping your hands together and making a downward movement.)

## 2. Activities using basic duration

### Activity 1 – Teaching basic note values

Most good music activities occur where there are no desks and where the children are seated on chairs in a circle. It is important for the teacher to be a part of this group, since s/he has to be seen to be taking part in every aspect of the activity. The following is designed to allow children to see the relationship between the syllabification and a rhythmic sound.






1. Point to yourself and sound out a bar of four single crotchet beats: *ta, ta, ta, ta*. Without saying anything, point to the children: they copy you; if they don't, wait until the end of the bar and repeat it – sometimes it might take a few attempts to get things going, but eventually they will cotton on. Keeping the pulse constant, come in with another four beat rhythm, such as *ta, ta-te, ta, ta*. And so

beamed together is the equivalent of a crotchet beat, will look like this:



The best syllable to use for these is *ta-fe-te-te*. Examples of how they fit into rhythms will be found in *Forty Simple Rhythms*, mentioned above.

So far, we have seen that all the rhythms are divisions of one and other. We can demonstrate what these took like in the chart on the next page. By simple mathematics, we can divide each note into two as we progress down the chart. A **semibreve** (whole-note) becomes two **minims** (half-notes); a **minim** becomes two **crotchets** (quarter-notes); a **crotchet** becomes two quavers (eighth-notes); a **quaver** becomes two **semiquavers** (sixteenth-notes). As musicians, all we have to do is subdivide the beat – make the duration of each a half or a quarter, depending on the appearance of the note.

	A semibreve becomes
	two minims
	four crotchets
	eight quavers
	sixteen semiquavers

sic – by the end of the exercise, your children might not need a pointer... **don't** allow them to become too reliant on you to help with the reading.

When you are satisfied that the children have succeeded, you might want to question your pupils as to what they have picked up and how it works. If they are uncertain, don't worry...the best way of learning notation is through osmosis. Eventually, they should all be able to manipulate such simple rhythms.

Use this technique with all the examples provided in the Forty Simple Rhythms booklet on our Resources page. By this point, I am hoping that you will also have developed some confidence with this work and will be able to make up your own rhythms.

### 3. Other note values

A few more simple note values: the **semibreve** (in American, whole-note) is four beats long, which, in this instance, lasts a complete bar. The easiest way of dealing with this when teaching it to your class is to count: *ta-a-a-a* and make an appropriate physical gesture. The note looks like this:



There is little to say concerning this: at this stage, it will be the only one you see in a bar.

The **semiquaver** is one half the length of the quaver and is represented by two beams rather than one. Four semiquavers

on, using as many permutations as you can. If you feel uncertain as to what to do next, it is perhaps best to write down the permutations and refer to them. Don't worry about repeating them as often as you like, however, since even composers such as Beethoven repeated the same rhythmic cell over and over again in some of his pieces.

2. This is the same exercise, but this time, when you provide the rhythm, clap it as well and indicate that your children should respond similarly.
3. Try saying the rhythm and asking your children only to clap the response, or clap the rhythm and ask your children to say the response.

### Activity 2 – notation

You can download from the MusicTeachers.co.uk resources page a series of flash cards which, as an extension of the above activity, can be held up as a visual representation of what your children are doing. You might need to make a couple of explanations, or point to each individual note as you say the rhythm; the quicker ones should cotton on quite quickly.

### Activity 3 – longer rhythms

Single bars are fine, but they only teach a modicum of notation skills. This time, we are going to put things into a wider context.

This activity kills two birds with one stone, as it were. It is something that will need to be returned to regularly, since habitual attention to such exercises is the only way to develop your pupils' experience base efficiently. You would be best using an overhead projector for this sort of work,

this time with your class placed in a semi-circle with you at one end.

Examine the rhythm on the facing page.

Don't be put off by its length, or the fact that there is a 4/4 symbol at the beginning of the line. The 4/4 refers to the number and type of beat: the top 4 refers how many beats each rhythmic cell (or bar) contains, the bottom one to the type of beat [in this case a crotchet – the Americans use a more simple system of referring to notes and crotchets are **quarter notes** since four of them make up a bar]. You will also notice that each bar is demarked with a line, which we refer to as **bar lines**.

So, we have four bars of rhythm. (This, and the ones that follow, can be printed onto acetate for the OHP without any infringement of copyright.) You can teach this rhythm quite simply by following the following outline:

1. Clap the rhythm of the first bar. The children should respond.
2. Say the rhythm of the first bar and expect the response.
3. Say the rhythm again, this time pointing (with a pencil) to each note as you say it. Ask the children to clap back the rhythm and, again, point to the notes.
4. Continue with this technique until you have worked on each bar.
5. Repeat 1-4 above, this time putting two bars together, and so on until you have all learned the mu-

