

How to read piano tabs

Piano tab notation is a tool that can help you learn melodies fast. They are not a complete substitute for sheet music notation but is an easy way to learn melodies as you develop your sight reading skills.

Piano tabs tell you how to press down the keys on your keyboard to play a melody even if you do not know sheet music.

The middle C

There is an established system for reading and writing piano tab notation. In this system you will have to learn the names of the white keys on your piano. The first note to find is middle c. This note is located at the middle of a piano keyboard. If you take a closer look at the black keys you will find that they are organized in groups of two or three keys.

The middle c is located immediately to the left of a group of two black keys at the middle of your keyboard. It is sometimes called 44 as it is in the fourth octave of an ordinary piano. On a keyboard with a less number of keys the key at the middle of the keyboard will still be called c4.

What is an octave?

If you start with the note c and play the notes to the right of c you will play a c-major scale. The notes are c d e f g and b. The note that comes after b is the next c. As you can see the next c has the same position to the left of two black keys as the middle c. This c is called C5 because it is in the fifth octave of a piano or grand.

The notes you play from c to the next c is called an octave. Octave means eight and you have played eight notes when you play from c to the next c. This interval is repeated all over the keyboard. c3 is the c to the left of middle c and so on.

The rules

The piano tab notation we will use is an established way to notate melodies used on the internet. Here are the rules:

1. The white keys we will use are notated with lowercase letters. That is, c d e f g a and b.

2. The octave in which you are to play the notes are indicated with a number written in the beginning of a line. If you play in more than one octave you will have more than one line.

3. If you are to play a black key it is indicated with an uppercase letter. The note C means the black key immediately to the right of c. In traditional sheet music notation this note is notated c#.

4. If you are to play two notes at the same time it is indicated by placing the notes at the same horizontal position, that is, above each other.

Mary Had A Little Lamb

Here is an example of playing Mary Had A Little Lamb in the key of C with the lyrics written above:

Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb

4|-e-d-c-d-e-e-e-d-d-d-e-g-g-

The number 4 at the start tells you to play the notes in the fourth octave. Now we will play the same melody with some bass notes added. These are meant to be played with your left hand.

This means that we will add one more line for the third octave.

4|-e-d-c-d-e-e-e-d-d-d-e-g-g-
3|-c-----c-----g-----c-----

Remember, two notes at the same horizontal position are to be played at the same time. As you play the first note e with your right hand you are to play the note c with your left hand.

To illustrate the use of the black keys on your keyboard we will play the same melody in the key of D. This requires us to use the note F which is the black key immediately to the right of the note f. In traditional sheet music it is called f#.

4|-F-e-d-e-F-F-F-e-e-e-F-a-a-
3|-d-----d-----a-----d-----

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