



Exhibit message

Floor Piano is a fun way of demonstrating modern Western musical notation.

By stepping on a piano key, users can view the pitch of the notes being played on a staff or staff.

Quick Fact

Homer Simpson played (and destroyed) a floor piano in episode 514 of *The Simpsons*: "Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy" (first aired in the United States in February 1994).

Want to know more about the history of musical notation?

Different cultures around the world have different methods of 'writing' musical pieces.

Musical notation uses symbols to make a written record of musical sounds and the Western or European style of musical notation used in the *Floor Piano* exhibit is one of many different styles of written music.

Notation commonly used today in Western or European music developed during the Middle Ages and it shows:

- rhythm (how long each note should last and how many beats in a cycle)

- the pitch of the note (by the position of the note on the five-lined staff or stave).

The earliest surviving examples of a staff date from the end of the 9th century. A five-line staff was widely used from the early 13th century (1200s) onwards.

Four and six line staves appeared in some European countries for certain instruments, and even 18 line staves were used for teaching, but the five-line staff became most commonly used.

Extra for experts

Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese music have used different systems of written music (notation) for several hundred years, while the Western or European style of writing music has also evolved over more than 700 hundred years.

In Ancient Greece and Rome, instrumental and vocal music used the first 15 letters of their alphabet to indicate musical notes.

Music notation called neumes were used to indicate pitch in Gregorian chants (6th century onwards). These neumes represented approximate melodies and assumed that the reader had already learnt the melody by ear.

By the 10th century (900s), neumes were arranged above and below a line to give a stronger indication of melody. The single line was expanded into a multiple line staff by the end of the 12th century by a musician named Guido.

Guido also placed letters on certain lines, then spaces, to indicate pitch. He invented a type of musical scale (for singing) using the Latin syllables "ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la". These are still used in some languages for naming absolute pitches.

The various systems of letters, neumes and symbols used for writing Western or European music before about 1150 did not indicate exact note pitch or rhythmic timing values.

As music became more sophisticated from the late 12th century, with multiple harmonies (polyphony) for voice and instruments, musicians needed a more precise system to communicate this complex style of music in terms of pitch and rhythm.

During the 15th century, printed and handwritten manuscripts had oval-shaped notes, but they were replaced with round-shaped notes by the late 1600s—music historians are unsure why this occurred.

Other attempts were made up to the late 19th century (1800s) to change note shapes, (such as giving each individual pitch a distinctively-shaped note), but these alternatives did not survive.

Mensural notation, where each note has a specific timing or rhythmic value took longer to develop than notation used to show pitch.

The current system of using rhythmic music notes that are coloured or uncoloured and using strokes or dots (such as crotchets, semiquavers, etc), developed from about the 15th century (1400s) onwards.

Red musical notes were used occasionally at the beginning of the 16th century (1500s) for signalling note length and rhythm, but they were probably dropped because of the expense of printing colours as opposed to printing black and white.

Today, the one-beat crotchet is seen as the standard note or pulse value in Western music. In early medieval music, the standard was one-sixteenth to a half beat.

Also in the 15th century (1400s), fraction-like numbers indicating rhythmic values appeared. Modern time signatures (such as 3/4 and 4/4) evolved from these numbers.

Bar lines, expression signs, and Italian terms to indicate tempo and dynamics came into use in the 17th century.

The double bar with two (or four) dots to indicate repetition appeared from the 15th century onwards.

Helpful terms

Pitch: The pitch of the tone is how high or low it seems. Pitch, like loudness, is a perceptual phenomenon and corresponds to frequency. High pitches have high frequencies.

Rhythm: can refer to timing in music, including the beat, accents, measures, groupings of notes into two, threes, fours, etc.

Further information

- ★ World's oldest piano
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/09/eustc/ho_89.4.1219.htm
- ★ *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. Copyright © 2004, Columbia University Press.
- ★ *Grove Music Online*
<http://www.grovemusic.com>
Oxford University Press