

TUTION TIP: YOU CAN READ MUSIC!

Hello and welcome to the second in the new series of Tuition Tips brought to you by Guitar-X – part of Tech Music Schools in London. For the full Tuition Tip archive including sound files and videos, visit the website: <http://www.guitar-x.co.uk> - Interact – Tuition Tips. Each issue I will be focussing on a specific class taught at the school, giving you a bite-size chunk of the lesson, and an insight into what it's like to be on a full-time course.

This time the featured lesson is from our One-Year Diploma: **SIGHT READING – NOTATION**. On this course there's two reading lessons a week; one that deals with reading chord charts (to be featured later), and this one that concentrates on reading actual music notation.

Sight reading is a subject that causes fear for many, and is something that most people are looking to improve when they embark on a course of study. I can't teach you how to read in one column, so instead I'll give you a few tips, some explanations and dispel a few myths surrounding the subject. Hopefully this will make you more confident in your abilities and make the prospect altogether less daunting.

- **'Sight Reading' is not a good name.**

Say 'sight reading' and the mental image most people get is of someone at the very last second putting a sheet of music in front of you that resembles 20,000 squashed ants, and you playing every single note perfectly at a blistering tempo. In reality, having to read music on 'first sight' is a fairly rare occurrence and a skill you should only worry about when you have been reading music for some time. To start with, when presented with a new piece of music ask yourself, "Can I work this out?" If it takes 5 hours it doesn't mean that you can't read music - you can.

- **You will sound rubbish.**

If, like most people, you are learning to read music after you have already been playing bass for a while, the sort of things you have to read first are nothing like what you want to be playing. Given a free reign to play your best stuff and you might be ferociously carving up the neck, slapping like crazy and ripping off the latest hot Wooten licks that make everyone in earshot think you are the ultimate bass hero. But, when presented with sheet music you become an awkward fumbling buffoon that can't even make *Mary Had a Little Lamb* sound good. Well as they say, Rome wasn't built in a day so swallow your pride, accept that it ain't gonna sound any good to start with, use headphones or whatever, and practice reading music every day – that's the only way it's going to improve.

- **Notated music is just a 'picture' of the sound.**

The principle is simple: when notes get higher they are further up the page, when they get lower they are further down the page. When notes are faster they take up less space and are closer together, when they are slower they are further apart and take up more space. Notated music is a graphical representation of the sound you hear. Try finding a transcription of a bass line and following the written music as you listen to the

recording. Even if your reading skills are limited or even non-existent, you should be able to see how what's written represents the 'shape' of what you are hearing.

- **Why the hell do they use all these strange symbols and squiggles?**

Music notation was invented by an Italian monk called *Guido* from Arezzo in Italy, some time in the 11th Century – a very long time ago. Although it has evolved and changed over the last 1000 years, most of the signs and symbols have their origin in this era of mad monks, beautiful calligraphy and religious dedication. If it was invented today it would probably look completely different and be a lot more logical, but 1000 years of tradition is hard to shake. A millennium's-worth of musicians have managed it so who are we to complain?!

- **TAB is very limited.**

Music notation is universal, can be applied to any instrument, and is the established language for musicians to converse with. TAB is quick and easy, useful for showing you where to put your fingers, but is only useful for bass players communicating to other bass players. It is also limited in terms of rhythm and phrasing so would only really help if you had already heard the piece already. I'm fairly sure that in the professional world, no bass player has ever been handed a written part that had TAB – feel free to prove me wrong!

- **Transcribing is the same skill but in reverse.**

Reading music involves deciphering written symbols and converting them into sound. When you transcribe music you convert sound into written symbols. This process requires exactly the same skills but in reverse, so doing one will help the other. Be warned though – the first transcription you do will probably take you about 20 hours! Start small and just do a few bars. Listen to a short section again and again, learn to play it, then try writing it down. This will really help you to associate written music with the end result.

- **'Reading' soon becomes 'recognising'.**

When you learnt to read English, you started with the alphabet, one letter at a time. After this you build up to reading small words by working out each letter, then what they sound like combined. Once you've seen the word a few times, you don't need to think about the individual letters any more, you recognise the familiar group of letters and remember what it sounds like. It's exactly the same with reading music. You spend time learning the alphabet, and the more music you read, the more you are building up your internal library of bass lines. After a while you'll look at a bass line and know roughly what it sounds like before you start playing.

- **Do I really need to do this?**

No. Of course not! Many musicians have made a successful career without ever looking at a note of music. However, being able to read music opens up another form of communication and therefore more opportunities. There is paid work for people who read well (sessions, theatre etc.), and not only that but any piece of written music becomes something you can benefit from and understand, regardless of what instrument it was written for or what era it is from. Not opening that line of communication may not hinder you in any way, but you'll never know unless you do!

Here's a short piece of music for you to try and play. Even if you've never had a lesson or tried reading before, see if you can work it out – bear in mind what I said about written music just being a 'picture' of the sound. It starts on your open A string and finishes on the open E – see if you can work out the bit in the middle. Any questions or thoughts about this article or anything you'd like to see, email me on andrew@guitar-x.co.uk. See you next time!

READING EXERCISE

