

4<sup>TH</sup> EDITION



BASIC  
MUSIC THEORY

HOW TO READ, WRITE, AND  
UNDERSTAND WRITTEN MUSIC

JONATHAN HARNUM, PHD

author of *The Practice of Practice* and  
*Sound the Trumpet: How to Blow Your Own Horn*

READ WHAT FOLKS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE BEST-SELLING MUSIC THEORY BOOK  
VERSATILE ENOUGH TO BE USED BY KIDS, ADULTS, SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES.

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*“Basic Music Theory is an ideal and highly recommended text for anyone of any background wanting to become proficient in the reading, composing, and performance of written and notated music.”*

—Midwest Book Review  
(5 stars, highest rating)

*“This is a book that covers lots of ground without ever appearing “difficult.” It is written in a breezy, conversational manner, so one “talk” naturally drifts into the next.”*

—KLIATT Library Review Service

*“Finally, someone came up with a basic music theory book that’s actually understandable and readable. This is by far the best music theory book I have ever read!”*

—Remy Durant, Los Angeles, CA (USA)

*“Basic Music Theory by Jonathan Harnum explains the subject in a manner that is light-hearted and easy to follow. For someone in their late forties (like me) who hasn’t had formal music training since the age of thirteen, nor picked up a musical instrument until now, it’s been extremely useful. To the extent that the dots, p’s and d’s on a musical score actually have meaning. I can now say that I’m able to read music and understand some of the more-complex musical arrangements. I’ve been playing the saxophone for about 18 months now and the book has helped to bring me from a level of not being able to read music up to one of reasonable competence at sight reading.*

—Chris Ward (Kendal, UK)

*“Fun and engaging. A real winner!”*

—Terrie Lyons, PhD, PC, Portland, OR (USA)

*“Jonathan Harnum has taken an overly complicated subject matter and made it learnable for anyone. And I do mean anyone! Harnum de-cryptifies all that is involved with music theory for the non-musician. But this book is not just for the non-musician. I have been a student of music for more than 13 years and a teacher for 3 and I found new, interesting and humorous facts about music theory. This book can teach anyone music theory and keep a smile on their face the entire time.”*

—Robin Gibelhausen, music teacher, Illinois (USA)

*“I appreciate the clever and humorous ways that you introduce many of the concepts. The illustrations and pictures are very helpful.”*

—Dave Larsen, elementary teacher, Hawarden, IA (USA)

*“The more I think about your book the more brilliant it becomes. See, the tough part is knowing how to limit the depth to keep it true to your goal of making music theory fun and fathomable. You excelled at it!”*

—Charles Reynolds, music education pioneer, Palmer, AK (USA)

*“Basic Music Theory by Jonathan Harnum, is an excellent book for people of all levels. Whether you are a beginner, or learned musician, this book is a very comprehensive source of material, that is both accessible, easy to read & understand, and very enjoyable. I have played various instruments over 24 years. And because of Harnum’s matter of fact, conversational tone, this book has lent more to my understanding of basic music theory than all my private instructors combined. Easy and completely understandable!”*

—Ruben Tamayo, Los Angeles, CA

### MUSIC EXISTS FOR ITS OWN SAKE. WRITTEN NOTES ARE NOT THE REAL MUSIC.

Music programs in schools across the United States struggle to make the case for music in an effort to raise funds and in some cases, to keep programs from being cut altogether. Advocates often point to extra-musical benefits in an effort to justify the inclusion of music in the curriculum. Some of these claims have been supported by quality research, and some have not. For example, researchers at McGill University in Canada found that kids who take piano lessons showed improved general and spatial cognitive development; studies at a Miami Veterans Administration hospital indicate that music making may improve the brain’s natural production of regulatory hormones like melatonin; piano students who begin studying by age 7 have a larger corpus callosum (the channel through which the two hemispheres of the brain communicate). Musicians appear to be better able to detect emotion in sound, and hear better in noisy settings according to research from leading auditory neuroscientist Dr. Nina Kraus and her research team at Northwestern University.

Pretty cool stuff. It’s important to remember that the true benefits of music lie elsewhere. Music is its own reason for existence, as is any art form. To justify the existence of music in the schools, or its general importance by pointing to other effects is like saying that eating food is important to the economy. It’s true, but there is a more fundamental importance that lies deeper.

Reasons for the inclusion of music and music education in one’s life has nothing to do with larger brains, better social skills, or better math skills, even if these benefits actually exist. The reason for including music in one’s education is that music is a source of authentic and meaningful personal expression, as valid and important as any other personal expression, whether it be linguistic, mechanical, mathematical or scientific. If providing a balanced education is important, music and the other arts *must* be included.

Written music is a recent development in music history and has only been around for about 800 years in our Western tradition. Many musical traditions, and many highly successful musicians around the world don’t use written music at all. Written music is simply one more tool a musician can draw upon in the pursuit of messing around with sound. Being able to read music is no guarantee that you’ll actually *be* a musician, of course. In your quest, as soon as you can let go of the written note and dive deeper into the sounds themselves, do it.

The best of luck to you!

Jon Harnum 10/15/13

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JUST AS THERE CAN BE NO MUSIC WITHOUT LEARNING,  
NO EDUCATION IS COMPLETE WITHOUT MUSIC.



IN THE LATE FOURTEENTH CENTURY, MUSIC WAS READ FROM  
SCROLLS LIKE THE ONE ABOVE DRAWN BY GIOVANNINO DI GRASSI.

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED  
TO ALL MY TEACHERS AND  
TO MY STUDENTS, WHO ARE  
ALSO MY TEACHERS.  
THANK YOU!



*Basic Music Theory: How to Read, Write, and Understand Written Music, 4th ed.*

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# CHAPTER 0

# THE CHAPTER EVERYONE SKIPS

*A journey of a thousand miles must  
begin with a single footstep.*

LAO TZU

**W**elcome to Basic Music Theory! If you never thought you'd pick up a book on music theory, you're not alone. I never thought I'd write one, and certainly never anticipated a 4th edition. In my experience as a student, a player, and a teacher, I searched for and used many different methods of learning music theory. Some methods were good, most were okay, and a few were bad, but none of them worked with students to my satisfaction, so I wrote this one. Basic Music Theory has been out since 2001, and was the first of its kind. Since the book came out, I've managed to complete a master's and a PhD in music education, and I've learned a lot, as you might imagine. I'm stoked to update the book with better everything!

I've tried to take all the positive things about teaching theory, thrown in many of the tricks I've used with thousands of students, and tossed in a little humor in an effort to make learning music theory both easier and more enjoyable. These methods and suggestions have worked well with all students of all sizes. I hope they'll work for you too.

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Basic Music Theory* is your introduction to another language—the rich and often strange language of music. By the time you've completed even two lessons in this book, you'll have made big steps down the path toward understanding written music.

With this language you'll be able to reproduce sounds from nearly a thousand years ago by someone like Guillaume de Machaut. And with this same language you can play music by contemporary musicians. Name your favorite artist. If it's written down, you'll be able to understand and interpret it!

But let's not get too carried away. Those musicians you look up to have spent thousands of hours learning both their instrument and in many cases, their music theory. Learning theory will take some focus and some work, but that work will be clearly explained, and you'll be surprised to find how easy it can be.

Nobody likes to work on a task endlessly. For that reason, the theory lessons are broken up by Interludes every few chapters. These interludes cover things like practice, conducting, musical terms, and a brief

history of musical notation.

So, if you're interested in the music of Mozart or Metallica, Beethoven or B.B. King, Dizzy Gillespie or Vince Gill, The Clash or Johnny Cash, you've finally found the right book.

## WHY BASIC MUSIC THEORY?

Learning music theory doesn't have to be a long and difficult process. It does take some work, but with this book you can make that work much easier. I've suffered through some of the most boring music courses a person should be forced to suffer, and before this book was available, I've had experience inflicting such boredom on others as well. Believe me, it's not fun on either side! Whether you're a teacher or a student, I'd like to spare you any of that frustration and difficulty.

Music theory is a language that is used by all Western instruments. Whether you play the kazoo or the krumhorn, voice or vibraphone, French horn or nose flute, pignout psaltery or percussion, trombone or triangle, bagpipes or bass fiddle, Sousaphone or Saxophone...you get the idea. Whatever instrument you play, reading music will be a useful tool in your studies, and this book will give you that tool.

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## WHAT'S INSIDE

*Basic Music Theory* is divided into seven Parts and in each Part are several chapters. Between some of the Parts are Interludes — stand-alone sections giving information on aspects of music other than theory.

### PARTS

Each Part is made up of four to seven chapters. The division isn't arbitrary. Information in each Part is related and the reviews come at a point where a review will do the most good.

### PART REVIEWS

At the end of each Part is a comprehensive review in the same format as the chapter reviews. Cross-references below the questions allow you to quickly find and re-read any section that you haven't quite remembered yet.

### CHAPTERS

Each chapter is fairly short and contains detailed information on one or two topics. When an important term appears for the first time, it is in bold and italics so that when you do the chapter review and need to go back to the chapter, you can find the information easily.

### CHAPTER REVIEWS

At the end of each chapter is a brief review covering the material in the chapter. The reviews are generally very short, the longest being around fifteen questions.

### PRACTICAL USE

Also at the end of each chapter is a short list (often only one item) of written exercises to hone your music-writing/reading ability using the material you've just studied.

## ABOUT THE REVIEWS

After each chapter and Part is a section that contains questions on the information presented. The reviews are arranged as quizzes, but with one important difference: the answers are in the margin! That's right, the answers are right there.

The best way to learn is to get immediate feedback. There is no better way to get feedback than to have the answer right there with the question. Of course, this does you no good if you can see the answer before reading the question, so you have to cover up the answers while you give yourself the quiz. In the back of this book is a cut-out bookmark with a piano keyboard on one side and a guitar fretboard on the other. If this is a library book, please photocopy the keyboard and leave the original for others to copy as well. Use the guide to cover up the answers while you test yourself.

After you answer the question, simply uncover the answer in the margin and kiss yourself on the elbow for giving the correct answer. If you didn't get the answer correct, at least you have the answer right there to remind you.

Voilà. Instant feedback, and your memory of the material is enhanced.

Once you're confident you know the information, you can either go on to the next chapter or take the written quiz. You can find the free quizzes and a whole lot more in the *Basic Music Theory Teaching Packet*. For more information go to [www.sol-ut.com](http://www.sol-ut.com).

*Basic Music Theory* is meant to be used as a textbook and study guide, with written work taking place on the blank staff paper you'll find throughout the book, or printed from the free printable files available online. If this book is from the library, photocopy the blank music staves or print the online files, so the book can be used over and over again. Of course, if you've bought this book for your own personal use, mark it up! It's kind of fun to write in a book; it feels like you're breaking some kind of unwritten rule. You can find the free resources on the Web at <http://is.gd/guhuga>



## HELPFUL ICONS



### MEMORY TIP

This icon is placed near methods to improve your memory of terms, notes, and other fun stuff. These little memory tricks will save you some brain strain.



### TAKE NOTICE

This icon is placed near information that is particularly useful to know. Heed this information and you'll avoid common mistakes.



### THEORY GEEK ALERT.

This icon is placed near information that isn't especially necessary, but which you might find interesting.



# OVERVIEW OF BASIC MUSIC THEORY

## CHAPTER 0: THE CHAPTER EVERYONE SKIPS

In addition to what you've already read, this part will give you an overview about the book as well as tips on how to study the information.

## PART ONE: START ME UP

Prelude, Chapter 1. This section is where the fun begins. And what better way to start than with something other than music theory! The first chapter is an ultra-ultra-brief history of written music. It'll be painless, I promise.

In Chapters 2-5 you'll learn some of the most basic terms and symbols (no, not cymbals) of written music, how they look, what they mean, and what they do. Included are note lengths and rests. You'll be reading music in only one or two lessons.

Once you're done with Part I, peruse the Comprehensive Part Review and see how much you remember.

## PART TWO: YOU GOT RHYTHM

Chapters 6-10. The party continues. In this section you'll find more symbols used in written music including more note lengths, a counting system, time signatures, dotted notes and triplets. And of course, a comprehensive Part Review.

## INTERLUDE: THE PRACTICE OF PRACTICE

Chapter 11 and it's time for a break. This Interlude is all about practice. How to go about it, how to structure it, how to record it in a journal and on a tape recorder, equipment you'll need and how to use it, and how to do what must be done to become a better player.

## PART THREE: CLEF NOTES

Chapters 12-17. For the first two chapters of this section you'll learn about the letter names for notes and how pitch is shown in written music. The other four chapters are devoted to clefs. You'll learn treble clef, bass clef, percussion clef, and a few other clefs as well.

A Comprehensive Part Review

## INTERLUDE: MUSICAL TERMS

Time for another break with Chapter 18. This Interlude is all about musical terms, most of which are in Italian. You'll learn the terms, what they mean, and what they tell you to do.

## PART FOUR: SEE SHARP OR BE FLAT

Chapters 19-22. Once you've got the basics of reading music down, we go into more advanced concepts. This section shows you how to use the piano keyboard, covers whole steps and half steps, sharps, flats, and naturals, the chromatic scale, enharmonic notes, and key signatures. And of course, a Comprehensive Part Review when you're ready for it.

## PART FIVE: INTERVALS AND MINOR SCALES

Chapters 23-26. In this section you'll learn how to measure the interval from one note to another, and

using that information, you'll learn how to construct a minor scale beginning on any note. From there you'll move on to modes, and finally to several other types of scales.

A Comprehensive Part Review.

### INTERLUDE: CONDUCTING YOURSELF

Chapter 27 is your final Interlude. In this Interlude you'll learn the basics of conducting, conducting patterns, body and facial language, and the work it takes to become a good conductor. Also learn how to use conducting patterns to enable you to write down what you hear.

### PART SIX: CHORDS

Chapters 28-31. Here you'll learn about how chords are constructed and the many different types of chords. You'll also learn about chord extensions and the symbols they use, chord inversions, and several basic chord progressions.

A Comprehensive Part Review.

### PART SEVEN: MORE OF THE SAME

Chapters 32-34. In this final short section are some concepts that go further than when they were originally introduced. Included are double dots, double sharps and double flats, faster notes, 6/8 time and odd meters.

A Comprehensive Part Review.

### EXTRAS

Teacher Information: A quick summation of the free Basic Music Theory Quiz-Pack.

Piano Keyboard: One side with the note names, one side without. Also used with the End-of-Section Reviews as mentioned later.

Guitar Fretboard: Guitar is one of the most popular instruments around, so here's a fretboard labeled with note names to help you guitarists out there.

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## HOW TO USE THE SPECIAL FEATURES

### QR CODES

A lot has changed for us technologically since 2001, when this book first came out. This book takes advantage of greater access to knowledge, providing live links in the PDF and e-book versions of the text, but also in the print version by using QR codes like those you see here.

With a smart phone and a QR reader, you can see, hear, and read more. *Scan* is a great free QR reader you can get online at <http://is.gd/puzuwa>. If you have another kind of QR scanner, you should give *Scan* a try. It's cleanly designed and easy to use. Its QR code is to the right.



Fire up the app, focus on the code, and you'll go to this book's online page, where you'll find all kinds of extras: videos, pictures, and links to cool related stuff. Whenever there is a relevant link to share, you'll see one of these QR codes. Don't want to hassle with the smart phone? Written links in the PDF and e-book will also take you to the associated page. Just

click on the address and off you go. Or go old-school and type the address into the browser yourself. Find this book's extras page at <http://is.gd/ofasiq>.

## THE END-OF-SECTION REVIEWS

What's different about all the reviews in Basic Music Theory is that the answers are right there with the questions. Below each question in the longer end-of-section reviews you'll see (in itty bitty writing) the page number where you can review the information you didn't quite get.

The answers are on the right side of the page, and the questions on the left. While reviewing the chapter, to cover up the answer, you'll use the piano keyboard in the back of the book.

## THE KEYBOARD

In the back of the book is a piano keyboard on one side and a guitar fretboard on the other, each with all the note names labeled. Use the guide as a bookmark, as a cover for the study guide answers and as a way to visually understand the concepts in the book. If you're borrowing this book, please help keep the book useful for everyone and photocopy the keyboard instead of tearing it out. You can also print the guide from the web site. Here's the address again: <http://is.gd/ofasiq>



## PRACTICAL USE

After the chapter Reviews are Practical Use exercises, most of which will be done on the staff paper you've copied from the back of the book. There may be as many as four exercises, or as few as one.

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## MOVING ON

Okay, enough details. If you've read them, great! I put a lot of thought into them. You'll have a better handle on how to get the most out of this book and you won't be at all surprised or confused about what's next. Speaking of which....

*Part One: Start Me Up* is next, and the first chapter is about how Western music notation came to be.

# DO YOU WANT TO READ MUSIC?

Finally, someone came up with a basic music theory book that's actually understandable and readable. This is by far the best music theory book I have ever read! —REMY DURANT, LOS ANGELES, CA

The more I think about your book the more brilliant it becomes. The tough part is knowing how to limit the depth to keep it true to your goal of making music theory fun and fathomable. You excelled at it! —CHARLES REYNOLDS, PALMER, AK

**W**hat do all those lines and squiggles and dots mean?

*Basic Music Theory* takes you through the sometimes confusing world of written music with a clear, concise style that is at times funny and always friendly.

The book is written by an experienced music teacher using methods refined over more than twenty years in schools and in his private teaching studio. Lessons are fun, well-paced, and enjoyable.

Whether you're a beginner of any age, whether you're an experienced player who wants to bone up on your theory, or whether you teach music and need a fun way to do it, you'll find this book valuable and will refer to it again and again.

## YOU WILL DISCOVER HOW EASY IT IS TO:

- ✓ Learn quickly and efficiently with easy lessons designed by a professional teacher.
- ✓ Learn the symbols used in written music.
- ✓ Understand the terms most musicians use.
- ✓ Use memory devices to learn terms and symbols.
- ✓ Use the study guides to remember it all.
- ✓ Apply what you've learned with short *Practical Use* sections at the end of each chapter.
- ✓ Find examples of musicians making excellent music.

## WITH INTERLUDES ON:

- ✓ How to practice: the author conducted his PhD research on music practice. Learn some great practice tips.
- ✓ Conducting. What does all that arm-waving mean, and how does it help? Find the answers and learn to do it yourself.
- ✓ Learn some Italian. Most musical terms are in Italian. Learn them in this section.
- ✓ Ultra-brief history of music notation.

## SPECIAL FEATURES:

- ✓ Piano keyboard with note names
- ✓ Guitar fretboard w/ note names
- ✓ Chapter & Section reviews
- ✓ Practical use exercises
- ✓ Extensive cross-references



**JONATHAN HARNUM** is a multi-instrumentalist with over 30 years of experience practicing, performing, and teaching music. Harnum earned a PhD in music education from Northwestern University, and is the author of *All About Trumpet*, *Basic Jazz Theory*, *Sound the Trumpet: How to Blow Your Own Horn*, and *The Practice of Practice*.



Since 2001, SOL UT PRESS has given away well over a million free music books to students all over the world. Get one for yourself at [www.Sol-Ut.com](http://www.Sol-Ut.com)