

When you join a choir, it is important that you can find your way around the pieces that you sing. Here is a guide to some of the musical terms and symbols that you will come across.

Staves and systems

Music is written on lines called **staves** and these are grouped into **systems**. This extract has two systems and each system has six staves:

The image shows a musical score with two systems. The first system (measures 13-15) consists of six staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, and Organ. The lyrics for the first system are: "Lead me, Lord, lead me in thy". The second system (measures 16-18) also consists of six staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, and Organ. The lyrics for the second system are: "right-eous ness, make thy way plain be - fore my face." A box labeled "Staff" points to the Soprano staff in the first system. A box labeled "System" points to the entire group of staves in the second system.

If you are a soprano you sing the top staff. You read from left to right (as you would a book) but when you get to the end of the first line you don't just move to the next staff, as that is sung by the altos. Instead, you jump down to top line of the second system and sing that.

1. Go through each vocal part in the example to the right and follow the words with your finger. When you get to the end of the first line, make sure you jump to the right part on the next system!

Voice parts

Soprano

The highest part. It can be sung by women, boys or girls.
Young sopranos are often known as trebles.

Alto

The second highest part. It can be sung by men or women.

Tenor

Between alto and bass. It is usually sung by men.

Bass

The lowest part. It is sung by men with low voices.

Voice parts are always written in this order from top to bottom with piano or organ parts underneath.

Sometimes the voice parts can be subdivided: soprano 1 is higher than soprano 2, for example, but soprano 2 is still above alto 1.

Hymns

Traditional hymns are usually written on two staves. The top staff is shared by sopranos and altos; the notes with tails pointing upwards are sung by sopranos and the notes with tails pointing down are sung by altos. Tenors and basses share the bottom staff: tenors sing the notes with tails pointing up and basses those with tails down.



2. Label each note in the first chord of this piece: **S** for soprano, **A** for alto, **T** for tenor, **B** for bass.

Bars

Each staff is divided into small units called **bars**. Each bar is separated by a vertical line known as a **barline**.

3. Circle each of the four barlines in this well-known tune.

Thine be the glo - ry, ri - sen con-quer'ring Son,

Bar numbers

In rehearsals we often refer to bar numbers in order to find our place in a piece of music.

4. Number bars 2-4 on the musical example above.
Write the numbers above the staff just after each new barline.

Instead of labelling every bar, bar numbers are often marked at the start of each line of music. This means that if you want to start at bar 60 you can quickly find it, without having to count every bar from the start of the piece.

5. This musical extract begins at bar 40. What is the number of the very last bar?

40
down be - fore him, Dwell - ers all in time and space.

43
Praise him! Praise him! Praise him! Praise him! Praise with us the God of grace.

Upbeats

Sometimes musical phrases begin part the way through a bar. The last beat of the bar has a special name – it's known as an upbeat or an anacrusis. If your choir trainer says 'Let's go from the upbeat to bar 14', this means start from the last beat of bar 13.



6. Above is an example of a well-known hymn-tune that starts on an upbeat. Imagine your choir trainer tells you to start on the upbeat to bar 3: circle your starting note.

Repeats

Before you start singing a new piece of music, check to see whether there are any repeats. The start and end of sections to be repeated are often marked like this:



Sometimes at the end of a repeated section you will see these signs:



These are known as **first** and **second time bars**. The first time you sing the music you end at the first time bar and go back to the start of the repeated section. The second time through you miss out the first time bar and jump straight to the second time bar.

Here are some other types of repeat – and these are always written in Italian:

Da Capo or **D.C.** go back to the beginning

Dal Segno or **D.S.** go back to the sign: S

Fine means 'finish' and marks the end of the repeat

Codas

Some pieces end with a section called a coda. If you see the coda sign, you should jump to the coda section the last time through to end the piece.

The coda sign looks a bit like a hot cross bun: \oplus