

Sign Before Symbol for Speed and Clarity

Do you know what this \$ is called? You probably said a money **sign**. Actually, it's a money **symbol**.

You may not think that this is such a big deal, but this fundamental confusion of signs and symbols creates many problems in the future.

The basis of this confusion is to think that **sign** and **symbol** are one and the same. They are not. Each has a very different meaning.

Why is it that these two different words are thought to have the same definition? It's because they are both considered to be **symbolic**.

When the suffix "**ic**" is added to the end of a word it means: "of, or belonging to." In other words, "ic" creates a group or category of things that are similar - but different. There are many "ic" words. Here are a few: music (mus-ic, of the Muses), melodic, harmonic and numeric.

Sign and **symbol** are similar because they are both symbolic, but as was said before, they have very different meanings and applications.

Let's begin with **symbol**. A symbol **represents**, but the symbol is *not* what it represents. That is why this \$ is a money *symbol*, because it represents money, but it isn't real money.

Re means: "again," **pre** means: "before" and **sent** means: "that which has been given." So, represent (re-pre-sent) means: "to send again that which was previously given."

In contrast to a symbol, a **sign** is "a call to action." In other words, a sign tells you "to do or not to do something." Think of a stop sign. What does it tell you to do? Stop. The stop sign makes you act.

Now, what does all this have to do with music and the bass? Plenty! Let's continue.

Most would agree that sound is the basis of music, but you can't see it. So, to make sound visible we must use symbols and signs.

The first **symbol** of a musical sound is a **letter**. There are 7 letters used in music: A B C D E F and G. Every letter represents the sound of that letter - but the letter is *not* the sound. Music uses many other symbols of sound, such as: numbers, numerals, notes and marks.

Traditional "**staff-note**" music notation places a **note** of rhythm on the **staff** of letters to indicate the duration of that letter (pitch). It's the musical equivalent of the child's game: pin the tail on the donkey, "pin the note on the staff."

The following illustrates a **quarter note** placed on the second line of the **staff** to indicate **one beat** of the sound of the letter G. Figure 1.

Figure 1.



Music uses many **signs**. For this lesson, we will only use three signs: the **natural** ♮, **flat** ♭ and **sharp** ♯ signs. As was said before, signs tell you to do or not to do something.

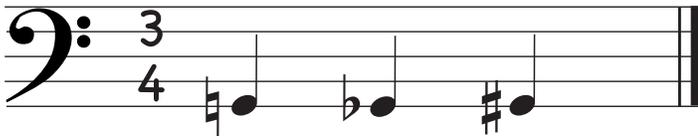
For example, the **flat sign** tells you *not* to play natural or sharp, but it does tell you to play one fret lower from any natural letter. This last part of the definition tells you that there are 7 flat letters.

In tradition music, the natural, flat and sharp signs are taken as a group and are called

accidentals. I don't know why, they are not really accidents, but rather they are consciously used, so I tell my students they are **intentionals!**

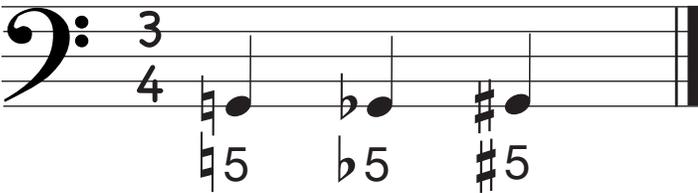
No matter what you call them, these three signs: ♮, ♭, # are used to introduce pitches that are *not* of the key signature. Here are the three signs added to the staff-note G. Notice that the natural, flat and sharp signs are placed **before** the staff-note symbol. Figure 2.

Figure 2.



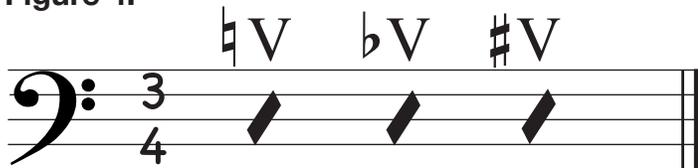
As was said earlier, music also uses **Arabic number** symbols called *scale degrees*. Here are the scale degree numbers below the staff-notes in the key of C Major. Again, notice that the natural, flat and sharp signs are placed **before** the scale degree number symbol. Figure 3.

Figure 3.



Music also uses **Roman numerals** to indicate the *function* (placement) of a particular harmony within a progression. Once again, the signs are placed **before** the harmony numeral symbol. A **quarter mark** is placed on the staff to indicate one beat of harmony sound. Figure 4.

Figure 4.



Now, let's place the accidental signs **before** the **harmony letter symbol**. Figure 5.

Figure 5.



To a traditionally taught "chord symbol" reader, this harmony letter notation looks weird and wrong! However, we are just following what was traditionally done to the staff-note, scale degree number and the harmony numeral - placing the sign **before** the symbol.

By placing the sign **before** the letter symbol, we will be twice as fast as traditional "sign **after** letter" harmony notation. This is because we will not go to the natural letter first before going on to the flat or sharp of that natural letter. In other words, we go directly to the flat or sharp letter!

Another very important benefit of placing the sign **before** the letter symbol is that it makes harmony notation less confusing and more clear.

Contrast this to traditional music notation which places the sign **before** the staff-note, scale degree number and the harmony numeral, but **after** the harmony letter symbol. This makes reading traditional harmony letter notation uncertain, confusing, and slow!

For example, what is this traditional harmony notation G ♭ ♭ 5? This is confusing and unclear. Is it G flat, flat five; or is it G double flat, five?

In closing, to bring clarity and speed to music notation, place the sign **before** *all* music symbols. Here's one last example. What is this harmony symbol: ♭ G ♭ 5? That's easy, it's flat G flat five.

Till next time, have some fast and clear symbolic fun...I'll be listening. 🎵

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