

# Hymns at Home

## How Can I Keep from Singing?

February 21, 2021



### **Lenten discipline – what are you thinking?**

We are now in the season of Lent, the forty days (not including Sundays) of penitence and preparation before Easter. As part of our Lenten discipline and penitence, many of us give up something, usually something they enjoy like chocolate. I mentioned Lent to Kate, my wife, not long ago, and she said, “it feels like we’ve been stuck in Lent for a year now.” She’s right. This pandemic has caused many of us to give up things we enjoy, for much longer than forty days. So maybe we’ve had enough of giving things up. Another thing we can do during Lent is take up some new spiritual practice. Thinking about that gave me an idea.

“I can’t read music.” I’ve heard that so many times. A choir member in another church I served told me that. She swore she couldn’t read a note of music. One Sunday morning as I was walking to the choir room, I heard someone playing the piano and singing softly. I recognized the music as the anthem we were singing that morning. When I got in the choir room, I saw that it was the woman who told me she couldn’t read music. She was not only playing her part and singing with it, she was

also playing the accompaniment! She jumped up from the piano when I walked in, and I said, “I thought you said you couldn’t read music.” She said, “Oh no, I can’t REALLY read music.” She was doing a pretty good job of faking it. Others have said, “I can’t read music. Well, I do know that when the notes go up and down, my voice should go up and down.” Well, that’s reading music.

Several times over the last year, I’ve had parents ask me about teaching their children music at home. Some are doing just that. I always teach music reading skills in our choirs, from children to adults, and when I get the chance, which isn’t very often, I try to offer music reading to members of the congregation. Maybe that’s a good discipline to take up for Lent for several reasons.

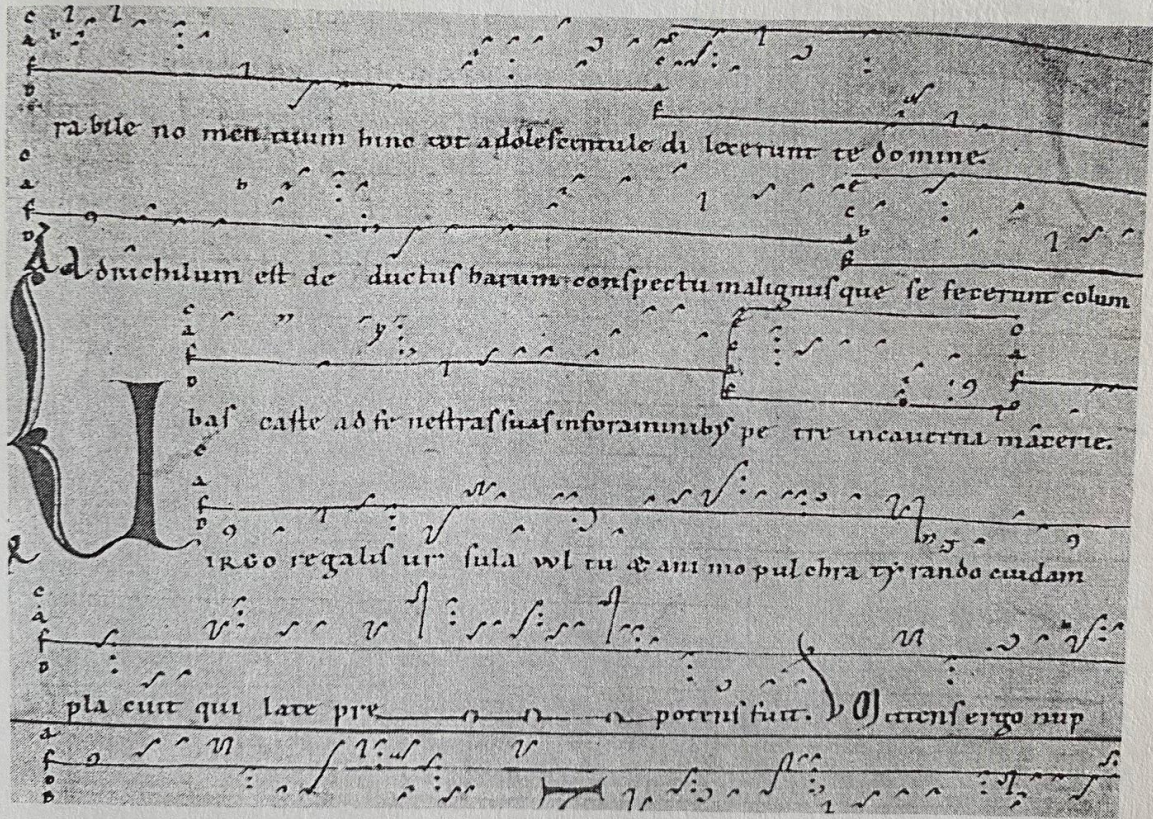
One of the things we’ve had to give up during our year-long “Lent” is group singing. I’ve encouraged you to sing along with the hymns during our livestream worship services. I’ve heard people express worry that they won’t be able to sing by the time we finally do get back together. Of course you will. Your voice is the only instrument you carry around with you wherever you go. Keep singing now, and you won’t have any trouble when we get back together.

In the meantime, maybe we can make productive use of this time and learn more about reading music. That way we can more fully participate by singing at home, and we can sing even better when we get back together. Before we start, let me tell you this is not rocket science. I’m no genius and if I can learn this, so can you. In music, the alphabet only has seven letters, and you never have to count past four.

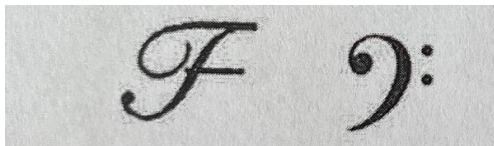
Let’s start with a little history lesson.

A long time ago, on a continent far, far way, people in the church were singing. It was plainsong or what we sometimes call “Gregorian” chant. At first, they just had words since most people singing knew the chant tunes fairly well. At some point, they started writing little symbols above the words to remind them of the tune, a little line going up to show when the chant went up or down when it went down. Eventually a scribe drew a single horizontal line in red. That line indicated the pitch or note *f*. Notes on that line were *f*, notes above the line were higher than *f* and notes below were lower. Eventually a second line was added, usually yellow, that indicated *c*. Then a third line which indicated *g*. Other pitches in this early system could be indicated as well, but they didn’t always have lines. It looked like this:

Guidonian notation, using colored stafflines to mark the pitches (yellow for C, red for F), permitted exact pitch notation and ready sightsinging of new melodies. From the identifying letters in the left margin (c, a, f, d), the later clefs evolved. (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek)

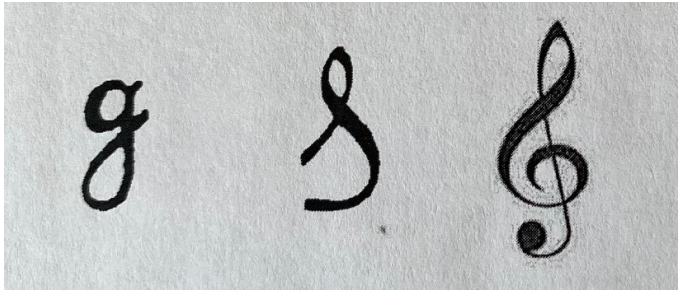


The simple letter *f* got fancier and evolved into this:



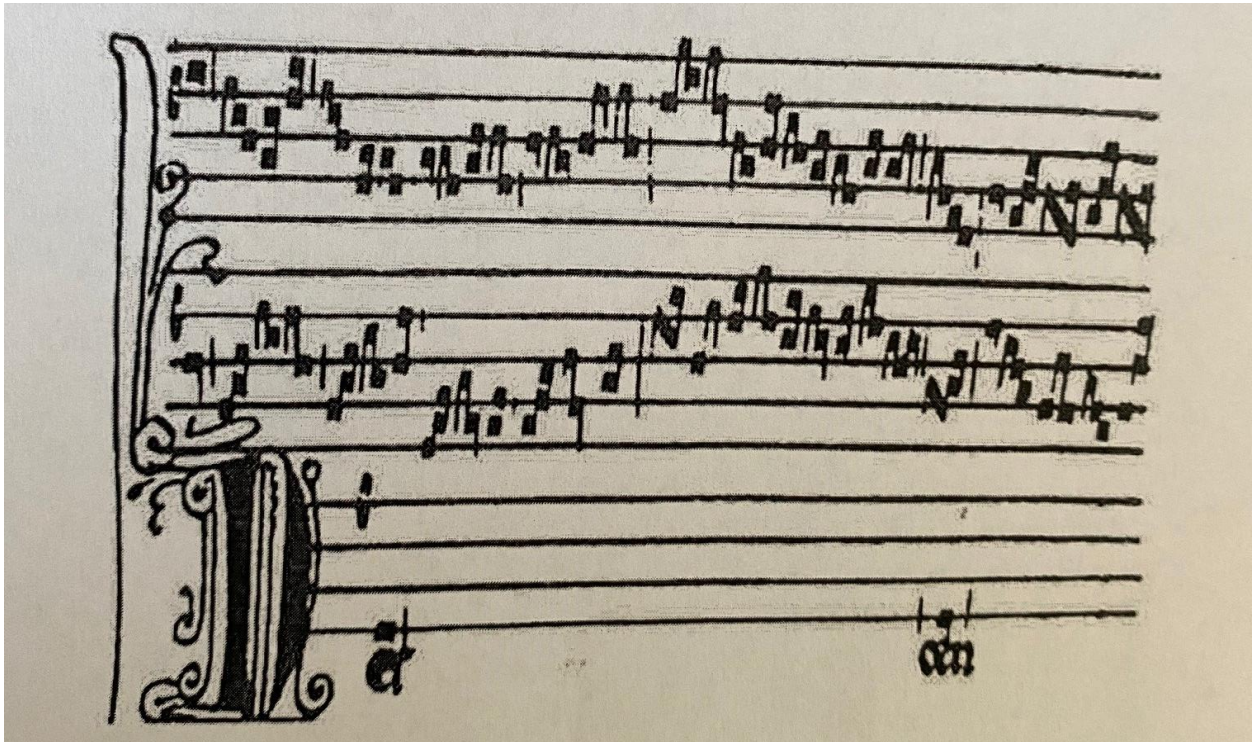
which is our modern F clef or bass clef.

The *g* was combined with a sign called *signum* which evolved into this:



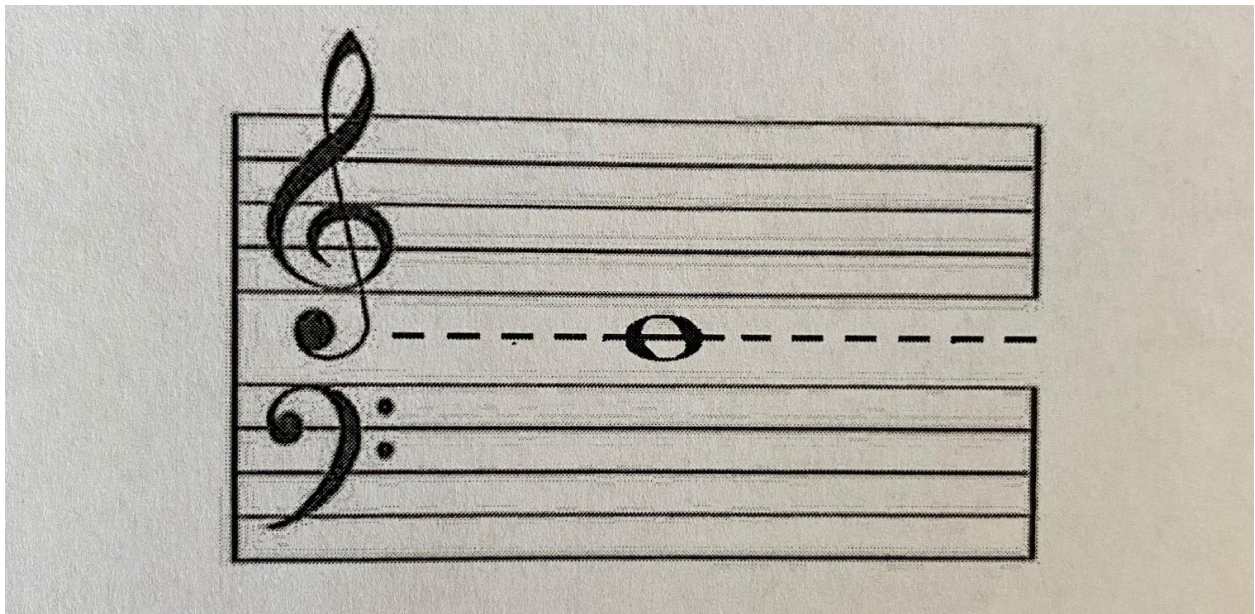
our modern G clef or treble clef.

There is also a C clef but we won't go that far right now. More lines were also added, which ended up looking something like this:



That was going a bit too far.

The modern version of that would be this:



Still too much, but you can see where this is going. The 11 lines had *c* in the middle, (middle C), and that line was eventually taken out leaving 5 lines on each staff.

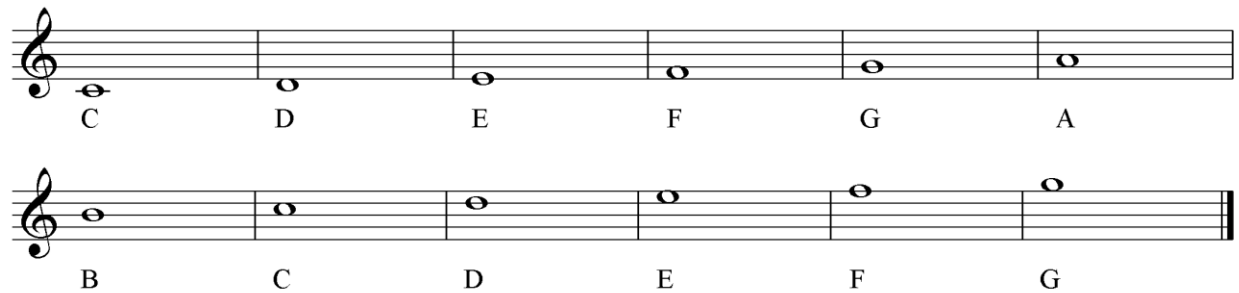
So, our system of musical notation was developed in the church. What better place for us to learn to read music?

Here is our modern staff of 5 lines with a G clef. It is also called the treble clef, but knowing that it's a G clef is helpful because it shows us which line is G:



We count the lines on the staff starting from the bottom, so G is on the second line (up from the bottom).

As I wrote earlier, the musical alphabet has seven letters: **A B C D E F G**, then it starts over with **A**. These are in order going up:



Confused? If so, don't worry. I'll go back to the beginning (with only modern notation) next time. This is just a brief history of how we got here. It all came from people singing in church.

If you can, before tomorrow morning's service, print out the hymns if you don't already have a hymnal at home. When we're singing the hymns (we includes you), look at the notes. Hymns are often written in harmony, but look for the top notes, which are the tune. See if you can follow along with your finger while you sing. If you're not careful, you might learn something.

One note about tomorrow's service – by now you have probably seen t-shirts or pictures of music with difficult time signatures saying, “these are difficult times.” I wasn't thinking of that when I chose the solo for tomorrow, a paraphrase of Psalm 51, but it seems fitting this year. Look at the time signatures:

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# Create a Pure Heart in Me

SAB and Organ

Susan Matsui

from Psalm 51

Hushed and contemplative  
♩ = 112

Organ *pp*

Alto (or all women)  
*mp*

5  
A. Cre - ate a pure heart in me, O Lord.

These are difficult times, but we will get through them. We will sing together again, and we can keep singing in the meantime at home.

God be with you till we meet again.

John