

Reading a Score

A score is every part of a piece stacked on one page, so that a single vertical line through it shows you everything sounding at that instant. The order never changes: woodwind at the top, then brass, percussion, keyboard and harp, and strings at the foot. Learn the order once and you can find any instrument on any score in the world without reading a single name.

The standard order of a full score

G, F and C name the clef on each stave WOODWIND BRASS PERCUSSION KEYBOARD STRINGS

WOODWIND

BRASS

PERCUSSION

KEYBOARD

STRINGS

Piccolo

Flutes 1 · 2

Obocs 1 · 2

Clarinet in Bb
TRANSPOSING

Bassoons 1 · 2

Horns in F
TRANSPOSING

Trumpets in Bb
TRANSPOSING

Trombones · Tuba

Timpani

Percussion
UNPITCHED

Harp
TWO STAVES, BRACED

Piano

Violins I

Violins II

Violas
ALTO CLEF

Cellos

Double basses
SOUNDS 8VE LOWER

Other kinds of score The same music, laid out for a different reader

SCORE	WHO READS IT	WHAT IS ON THE PAGE
Full score	The conductor	Every instrument on its own stave, transposing parts written as the players read them
Study · miniature score	A student or listener	The full score reduced in size for reading away from the podium — same content, smaller print
Short score · condensed	The composer, while drafting	Four staves or so, families grouped together, before the ideas are spread onto full staves
Vocal score	Singers and a rehearsal pianist	Voices on their own staves above a piano reduction of the whole orchestra
Lead sheet	A band	One stave of melody, chord symbols above, words below — everything else is left to the players
Part	One player	That instrument's line alone, with rests counted in numbered blocks and page turns planned

Opening a score for the first time Five minutes, in this order

- 1

Read the instrument list down the first page. It tells you the size of the piece before you read a note.
- 2

Find the key and time signature, and check whether either changes later — flick to the last page and look back.
- 3

Follow one single line right through: usually Violin I, or whichever stave has the tune at the opening.
- 4

Look for the rehearsal letters or bar numbers. They mark the sections, and they are how a conductor will speak about the piece.
- 5

Scan the vertical density: where the page is black, everyone is playing; where it is white, a few instruments are exposed.
- 6

Only now read downwards at a single moment, and work out the chord the whole orchestra is sounding.

Four things that catch everyone out Worth checking before you trust what you see

The written note is not the sound

Clarinets, trumpets, horns and saxophones are written in their own keys. A concert-pitch chord read straight down a full score will look wrong until you transpose them back.

Clefs change mid-piece

Cellos, bassoons and trombones rise into tenor clef when the line goes high, and drop back without warning. Violas stay in alto clef throughout.

Two parts, one stave

Flutes 1 and 2 often share a stave: stems up is the first player, stems down the second. "a2" means both play the same line together.

Blank does not mean silent

An empty stave means that instrument is resting, not that the system has been cut. Some publishers omit silent staves entirely — count families before you assume.