

13 - Reading Music for the Guitar

Over the course of history, there have been a number of different ways developed to communicate musical ideas, but the 3 best methods for the modern guitar have been *tablature*, *diagrams*, and the *staff*. Tablature is both one of the oldest and the simplest systems of music writing that is still in use today, and it reveals exactly where to place your fingers on the fretboard.

In tablature:

- ◆ Lines represent the strings of the guitar.
- ◆ Numbers are used to represent the frets to be “closed” by the fingers of your fretting-hand on any given string/line.
- ◆ The bass strings (low pitches) are traditionally on the bottom, while the treble strings (higher pitches) are on the top.
- ◆ The biggest problem with tablature is that you *must have heard the music before in order to know how long to play each of the different notes* (assuming there are no time values present).

Tablature has gone through some transformations since its invention, but it has proven to be a marvelous tool for stringed-instrument players in that it is easy to understand and to use. Tablature is at its best with melodies. It is slightly less useful for chords. The sample of tablature shown below uses the generally familiar melody of “Yankee Doodle” for an example. Standard tuning (*E-A-D-G-B-E*, strings 6-1) is assumed.

Yankee Doodle in Tablature

1st 0 0 0 1 0
2nd 1 1 3 1 3 1 1 3 1 0 1 1 3 3 1
3rd 0
4th
5th
6th

Yan-kee doo-dle went to town a- rid- ing on his po - ny, stuck a fea- ther in his hat and

1st 0 1 1
2nd
3rd 0 2
4th
5th
6th

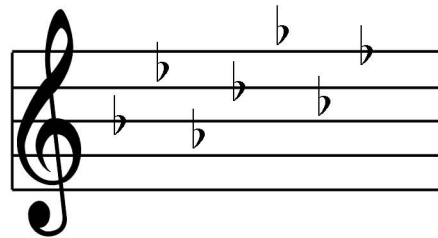
Higher pitches
↑
↓
Lower pitches

called it mac- a - ro - ni!

The Modern Music-Reading System:

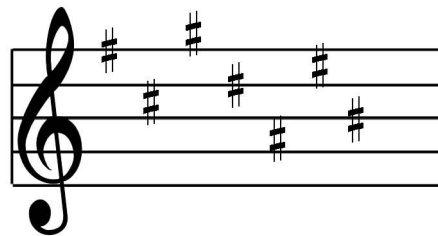
- ◆ Begins with the *Staff*, a collection of 5 lines and adjacent spaces that *look* like strings, but are not. These lines and spaces collectively span a range of different pitches that is determined by the *clef*.
- ◆ There are normally 2 different clefs, each clef representing a different range of pitches. The two most commonly used clefs are the *Bass clef* and the *Treble clef*. Used together, they are referred to as the *Grand staff*.
- ◆ **Keyboard players use the Grand staff**, assigning the left hand to the bass clef and the right hand to the treble clef, respectively.
- ◆ **Guitarists use only the treble clef**, and make use of *ledger lines*, which are truncated lines that save space both above and below the staff to indicate pitches beyond the clef's normal range.
- ◆ *Higher* pitches are located on the *upper* part of the staff. *Lower* pitches are on the *bottom* part of the staff.
- ◆ *Key signatures* inform us of the proper key of a piece by telling us which notes should be sharped (#) or flatted (b).
- ◆ *Time signatures* are a musical notation near the beginning of the staff indicating the number of beats to a measure and which kind of note equals a beat.
- ◆ **An accomplished reader of this system does not need to have heard the music before in order to play that music.**

Flats (b), B E A D G C F



Key signatures are the symbolic representation of the notes that must be sharped or flatted in order to play a scale of either Major or minor starting from the chosen keynote (root). Both sharps and flats are added from left to right on the staff, summing as they are added.

Sharps (#), F C G D A E B



Together, the components of the staff communicate both the pitches and the rhythms of music. However, for the purpose of learning, it is best to separate these issues. *Rhythm* consists of a recurring pattern of sounds in which accents or beats come at certain fixed intervals. Pitch-changes are usually associated with melody. *Melody* is defined as a series of notes that normally vary in pitch and duration which are “ear-catching”, that draw your attention and are memorable. **Rhythm and melody are related, but not the same, despite seeming “joined at the hip”**, so to speak. Consequently, we will look at pitches using time values as a thing separate from sheer rhythm patterns.

Highlighting the open notes of the guitar on the staff makes reading the music much easier. Note-recognition is faster when aided by highlighting. The first example is of “Yankee Doodle” without highlighting, the second example has been highlighted. Younger students really look forward to highlighting all their notes, and their recognition skills improve accordingly.

Yankee Doodle without Highlights

Yan- kee doo- dle went to town a- rid- ing on his po - ny, stuck a fea- ther

in his hat and called it mac- a - ro - ni!

Yankee Doodle with Highlights

Yan- kee doo- dle went to town a- rid- ing on his po - ny, stuck a fea- ther

in his hat and called it mac- a - ro - ni!

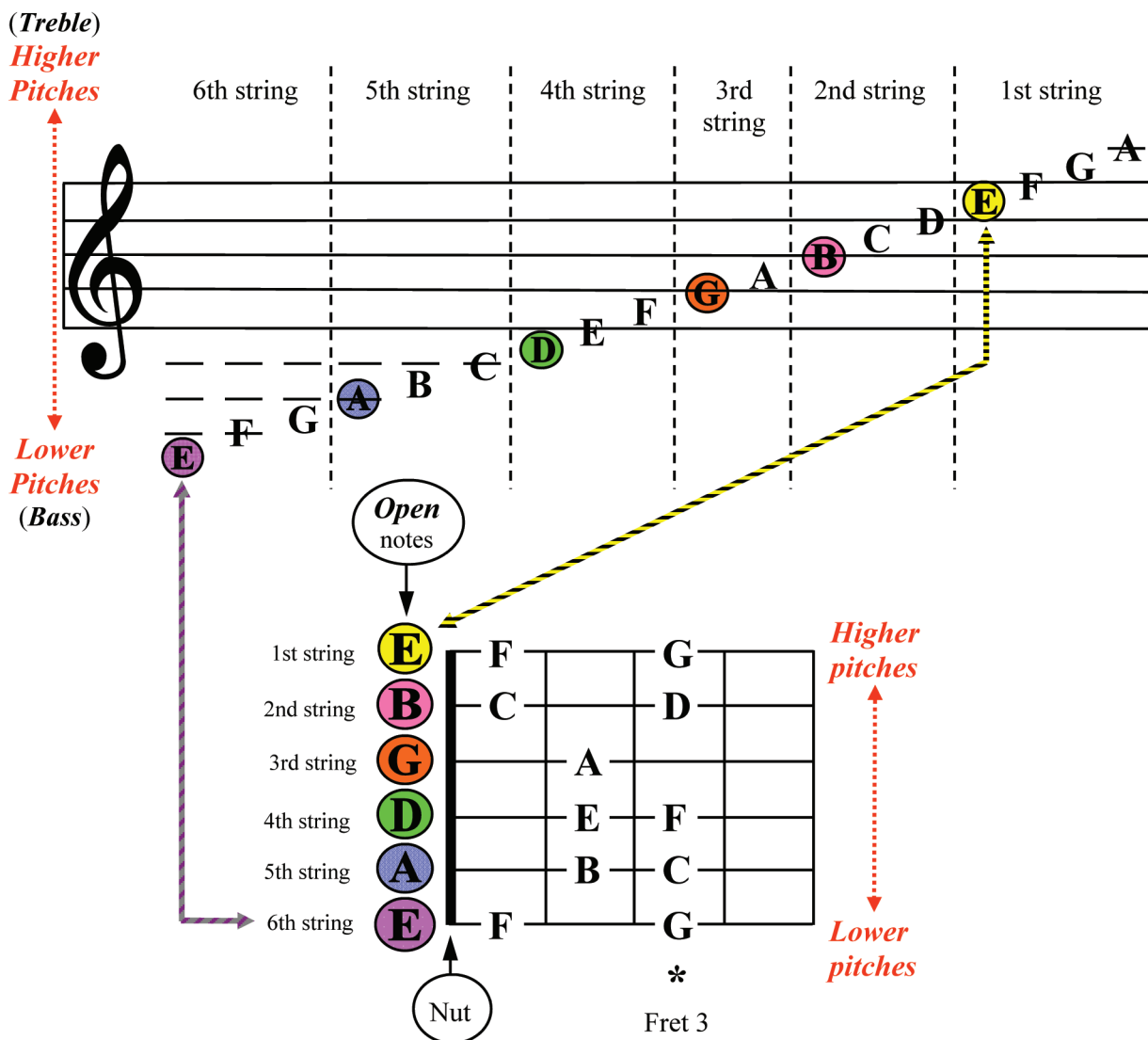
Clearly, the highlighted notes stand out as being different from the rest, and this makes learning to read music for the guitar much easier. If you look back at the “1st Position Reading” page, you’ll see that the darker hues relate to the lower pitches of the guitar, and the lighter hues relate to the higher pitches. Generally, most students don’t seem to need to highlight after the first few months, depending on their age.

In the depiction to follow of *First Position Reading for Guitar*, please notice that:

- ◆ *Darker* colors are *lower* pitches. *Lighter* colors are *higher* pitches.
- ◆ *Bass* is on the *bottom*, while the *Treble* is on the *top* of the staff (as is also the case with all the diagrams and tablature in this book).

First Position Reading for Guitar

First position consists of each string's open note (*EADGBE*, 6th -1st strings) and covers the first four frets. The first fret would be covered by the 1st finger, second fret—2nd finger, third fret—3rd finger, and fourth fret—4th finger of the fretting-hand (which is the *left* hand for most of us).



To read music for the guitar, we need to know the answers to these 5 questions *in this particular order* for each note we see on the staff:

Where? { (1) Which *string* is this note on?
(2) What *letter* is it?
(3) Which *fret* is it on?

How? ↔ (4) Which *finger* should I use?

Time? ↔ (5) How *long* should it last?