

KLAVARSKRIBO, an alternative system of music notation, is a cult phenomenon. Jeremy Nicholas discovers that there's more to its dotty displays than meets the eye

THE MORE YOU READ MUSIC, the better and faster you get at it. That's the theory, anyway. Start young enough and the act of transferring what you are reading to your two fingers and feet becomes as simple and natural as reading the cooking instructions on a ready-made meal packet. You read from left to right, bar by bar, decoding the vertical arrangements of black and white notes.

I've listened to musicians providing a running spoken commentary on a difficult piece of music while sight-reading it at tempo. I've watched more than one international pianist play the beginning of the last stave on the right hand page having already turned to read the next page of music. Envious? Of course. Most of us can be flummoxed, momentarily at least, by clusters of notes and accidentals in keys with five or more sharps and flats. Yet with all its challenges, shortcomings and limitations, traditional music notation is a system that most of us enjoy working with.

Some people, however, find reading conventional two-stave piano notation so difficult that it puts them off playing music at all. Their brains simply can't or won't process the separation of bass and treble staves and allow them to transfer the notes to their fingers. One such person is my music-loving friend Michael. A few months ago, just after I'd finished playing *Marche aux Flambeaux* by Scotson Clark on the organ, he asked me what it was called. 'I want to try and play it he said. I'm going to see if it's available in Klavarskribo:

That was the first I had ever heard of this alternative method of notation. It was invented in 1931 by Pot, a wealthy member of a Dutch ship-building family. After extensive research into other means of notating music, acoustics, optics and the mathematics of

sound vibration, he launched his new system based strictly on scientific principles. He named it Klavarskribo (pronounced 'Klaverskreebo'), the Esperanto word for 'keyboard writing'

Disappointed that the world did not rush to discard a system that composers and musicians had found satisfactory for several centuries, Pot set about promoting Klavar (as it is usually abbreviated) with his own resources. He founded the Klavarskribo Institute, employed transcribers, copyists and artists, wrote courses in a range of languages and established an international distribution network. Currently, there is a library of over 30,000 compositions from Bach to the Beatles available in Klavar notation.

So how does it work? The stave consists of vertical lines in groups of two and three, drawn to correspond to the black keys of the keyboard, with a vertical perforated line drawn through middle C. Bars are shown by solid horizontal lines, the division of each beat by horizontal dotted lines. The duration of a note is determined by its position within the bar. The black keys you have to play are indicated by a black dot, white keys by a white (open) note. Notes to be played by the right hand have a tail pointing to the right, left hand notes a tail pointing to the left. An excellent full introduction is available as a free download at www.klavarmusic.org/explanation.pdf.

For those of us brought up on conventional notation, it is a difficult

concept to grasp initially. First, you have to get over the 'what's the point?' mindset, having accepted that there really is no point in learning Klavar if you have already mastered conventional notation. Second, you have to clear your mind of any knowledge you may have of bass and treble clefs, sharps, flats, crotchets, quavers and even note names. They are superfluous. Then you have to grasp the concept of reading notation not from left to right but from top to bottom.

But for those who have never learnt the traditional system, Klavar offers immediate results. Michael is a typical devotee. As a teenager, he taught himself the piano through a Klavar correspondence course of 76 lessons. 'Play the piano instantly' said the ad. He found that piano-playing friends who were playing from conventional notation were amazed when he could sit down and easily play pieces with which they'd been struggling for months. 'People who have studied hard but found the old notation a bit of a grind come across Klavar and ask why they didn't know about it before; Michael says.

Like many people, Michael learned the piano as a child, gave it up until later in life and then wished he hadn't. Eight years ago, in his sixties, he unearthed his old Klavar scores, found a teacher and started again. 'The notation was very easy to understand and because progress seemed quite quick, it maintained my interest; he says. 'In a few months, I was playing Grade 6 pieces — not

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because I'm a brilliant musician. Far from it. My nephew was able to pick up *I Vow to Thee, My Country* in 15 minutes, never having played a keyboard before. I play for fun. The fun isn't spoilt by wading through what seems to me a very complicated and difficult-to-read notation. People are encouraged because they see results right away. The skill is not in reading the music. It's in putting your hands and fingers in the right places. That takes time to learn but at least there isn't the added aggravation of struggling to read the whole thing. You can see where the fingers

are meant to be — even if you can't always get them there fast enough! The music's very easy to get hold of. I only have to ring up Holland and they send it by return to post. And it's cheaper than buying the same pieces in conventional notation:

The evangelical tone of some Klavar literature is off-putting. According to one introductory booklet, our system of notation was already out of date in Bach's day. 'To play a conventional score requires mental contortions that have nothing to do with musicianship, so that millions of music

lovers are held back from making their own music, not by any lack of ability, but by the absurdities of an obsolete system' It's amazing how Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt achieved what they did saddled with this handicap.

Ignore the proselytizing, however, and the advantages of Klavarskribo speak for themselves. It is, whatever its shortcomings, the only alternative system of musical notation that has ever had any lasting success. Will it ever replace the traditional system? I'd say it has about the same chance as Esperanto replacing English.

The image displays a sample of Klavarskribo musical notation, consisting of 24 measures arranged in four staves. Each measure is represented by a vertical line with horizontal dashes indicating finger positions and movements. Numbers 1-5 are used to denote specific fingers. The notation is designed to be easy to learn and play, focusing on physical placement rather than complex reading.