

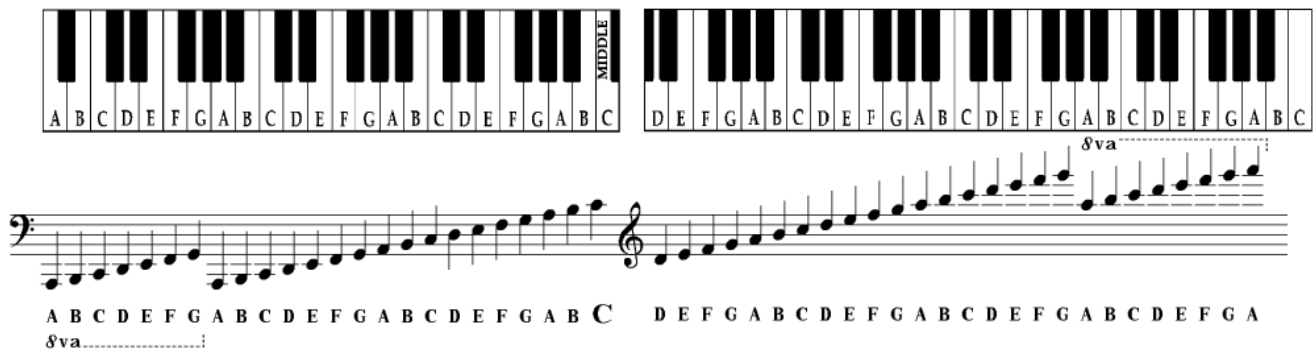


Tips for young composers on writing for the piano

So how do you start writing a piano part? Piano is one of those instruments that is really tricky to write for - things on the piano can feel very natural...or they can feel very weird when you play them. We'll take a look at three different ways that composers typically write for the piano.

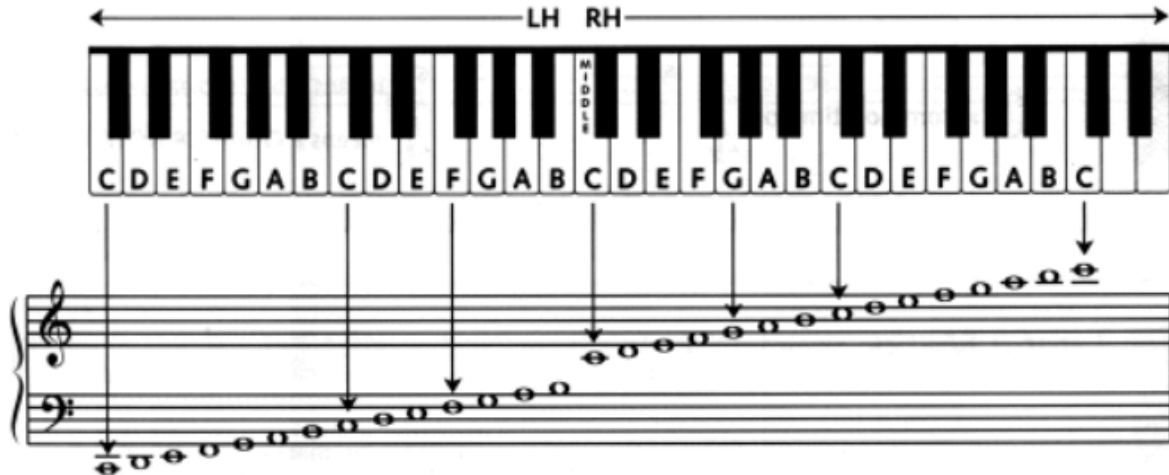
But first, let's look at the whole range of the piano. It's *HUGE!* It has the biggest range of any instrument and can go higher or lower than anything else.

Here is the full range of the piano, which starts very low and moves up in into the stratosphere of very, high pitches.



Notes in the lower range are typically notated in **Bass Clef**, and notes in the upper range are notated in **Treble Clef**.

It's such a big instrument with so many notes, which are the ones used most frequently?



Here are the most frequently used notes of the piano. They extend for two octaves above middle C to two octaves below middle C. As a general rule of thumb (although it often changes), the right hand (RH) plays in treble clef the pitches above middle C and the left hand (LH) plays the pitches below middle C.

Don't get stuck in the middle of the piano only! For dark and heavy or very percussive sounds, focus on the low register. For mysterious or light sounds, try out the upper register with both hands. Or spread the hands apart and include both high and low notes. When you're writing try to remember how big the range of the piano is and use sounds that fall in the low, middle and high parts of the piano.

Examples of common ways to write for the piano

Example #1: Playing both the melody and the accompaniment

One of the coolest parts about the piano, is that unlike so many other instruments it can play both the melody and the accompaniment at the same time. The first example of great piano writing we'll look at is from a classic Mozart sonata.

If you look at what Mozart does, the left hand plays the chords of the music in a "broken" style. This means the notes of each chord/harmony (C,E,G or F,A,C or G,B,D - which are the main chords of C major) are broken apart. So the left hand is responsible for the harmony, while the right hand is responsible for the melody. Breaking the chords up provides a much more interesting texture than if the chords were in only whole notes.

Sonata in C
K. 545
for piano solo

W.A. Mozart (1756-1791)

Allegro (♩ = 132)

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-4) shows a melody in the right hand and a broken chord accompaniment in the left hand. The second system (measures 5-7) features a more complex melodic line in the right hand with a simpler accompaniment in the left hand. The third system (measures 8-10) continues the melodic development in the right hand with a crescendo in the left hand accompaniment. Fingerings and dynamics like *mp*, *p*, and *cresc.* are indicated throughout.

Example #2: Long, held chords in the piano

Next, take a look at this piece from the composer Cesar Franck. It's for piano and violin. There's a four bar introduction where the piano has both the harmony and the melody, and then the violin enters.

The piano holds long chords under the beautiful melody of the violin - it's very simple, and perfectly matched for the music. The piano is providing the harmony for the piece, while the violin is providing the melody.

Now take a look at the range of the piano chords. They are mostly in the middle/low end of the piano, while the violin plays higher than the notes of the piano chords. In fact, once it starts playing, the violin never goes lower than the highest note of the piano. This separates the instruments out and gives them room to breathe and be heard. If the piano and the violin were in the exact same range and their notes overlapped it would feel a bit more crowded in the music.

Sonata

1st Movement

César FRANCK
(1822-1880)

Allegretto ben Moderato.

Violin

molto dolce

Piano

pp

6

Example #3: Making a rhythmic accompaniment with the piano

Finally, let's look at how you can make the piano part very rhythmic while providing the harmony of the music. This example is from the Beatles song Hey Jude. The voice has the melody of the music, and the piano both takes care of the harmony and (unlike the Franck above) adds a rhythmic element to the music that drives the sound.

The right hand simply plays the chords of the harmony (which are F, Bb and C major chords) as quarter notes. Rather than having the left hand play exactly the same rhythm as the right hand, it plays the **root** of each chord in a **syncopated** or off beat pattern so the rhythm in the left hand hits the "and" of each beat. If you wanted a more straightforward rhythm, though, it could also be a simpler rhythm in the left hand that plays straight quarter notes, half notes, or whole notes on the root note of each chord.

Hey Jude

Words & Music by John Lennon & Paul McCartney

♩ = 78

The musical score for 'Hey Jude' is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 78. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The time signature is 4/4. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes in the right hand and a syncopated bass line in the left hand. Chord diagrams are provided above the vocal line for the following chords: F, C, C7sus4, C7, F, Bb, F, and C. The lyrics are: 'Hey Jude, don't make it bad, take a sad song and make it bet-ter. Re-mem-ber to let her in - to your heart then you can start - to make it - bet-ter. Hey Jude, don't be a - fraid, you were'.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

Have you thought about the form of your piece yet? A good sense of form is important when writing music. It helps the listener understand your music and also helps you as you're writing!

When we talk about form, we often use uppercase letters to represent sections of the music. For example, A can be the first section, and B can be the second section. What does your form look like?

- Is it **ABA** form? Do you have one section, go to something else, and then return to your first section to end the piece?
- What about **AB**? Your piece starts in one spot, and then moves to something totally different.
- Or maybe it's **ABCD**? You have entirely different and new sections one after another.
- Or perhaps it's **ABACADABA**? Your music has parts that keep coming back (the A section), and then something new and different is in between each section.

What does the form of *your* piece look like?