How to play Hymns on The Guitar

Including a new method of notating guitar chords on the musical staff.

By

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Most guitarists have never attempted to read *or* play music from a hymn book.

Why?

- Because most guitarists are taught chords *before* they learn all the rest of music. (notes, sharps and flats, rhythmic notation, key signatures etc.) I have this to say about that...

“Trying to learn music by learning chords is like trying to learn chemistry by reading product labels” -I.Bridges

- Secondly, piano music doesn’t *seem* playable. For instance some chords are made of half steps, or spread out so far that your fingers can’t reach all the notes.
- Third, hymns are written so that each sung syllable is a different chord. If the chords you know are from the C-A-G-E-D system, then playing hymns seems impossible.
- Finally many hymns are written on the left half of the circle of fifths. You know, they keys of B♭ through C♭**.** The ‘average’ guitarist has not been trained to play in those keys, so they seem foreign and difficult. That is an additional barrier to many.

So, considering all of the above, it is no wonder that guitarists don’t attempt to actually read the hymns, and play them.

Let’s begin by discussing *Chord voicings.*

If you can read crazy chord names like Cm7♯5add11, you still have to make decisions about *where* on the neck to play the chord. Which inversion should use? Should you use a drop chord voicing? The list goes on….

To address this issue, I have created a technique which allows me to write guitar chords directly onto the staff in such a way that guitarist can ‘see’ the shape of the chord. It is a mnemonic aid which I you may find useful.

Given all of the above, lets see how the guitar maps onto the grand staff (piano notation).

We begin by realizing that the guitar is a *transposed instrument*. If a pianist and guitarist played the same *WRITTEN* note, they would not *HEAR* the same note! That’s what ‘transposed instrument” means.

Knowing that, we find that *this note* in ‘guitar’ music:

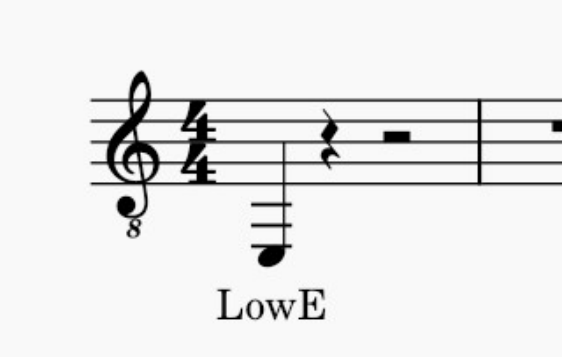


Figure 1

is t*his note* on the piano:

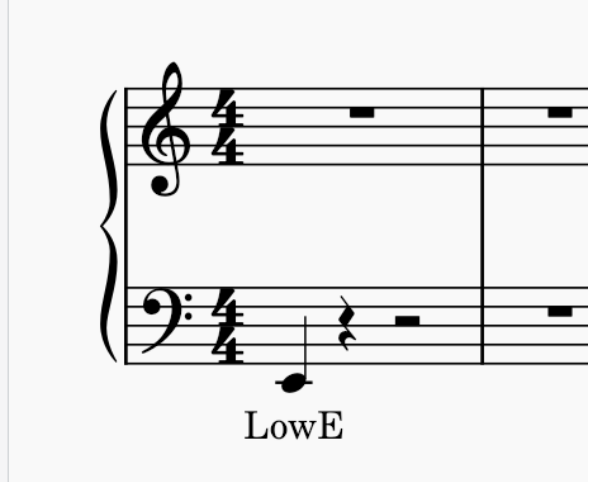


Figure 2

The explanation (in terms of the sheet music) is simple. In figure 1, did you notice the little ‘8’ on the bottom of the guitar musics treble clef? That little ‘8’ means “this instrument sounds one octave lower than written”. If you have access to a piano, you will find (if your instruments are properly tuned) that the low E in figure 1 for the guitar and the “piano E” in figure 2 are the same.

Now you are ready for a quick tutorial for how to read music.

There are three parts to reading music:

- the names and locations of notes on the staff (singular) or staves (plural)
- key signatures, and accidentals
- rhythmic notation

First the names of the notes:

The note names are controlled by symbols called “clefs”. They determine the names of the lines and spaces of each staff.

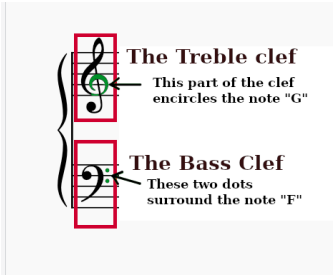


Figure 3

As you might imagine, those characteristics give the clefs ‘nick-names’. The treble clef can be called the G-clef, and the bass clef can be called the F-clef. However they are usually just called “the treble clef”, and “the bass clef”.

In the image below, I mapped all the notes from the guitar (up to the 5th fret) onto the Grand Staff.

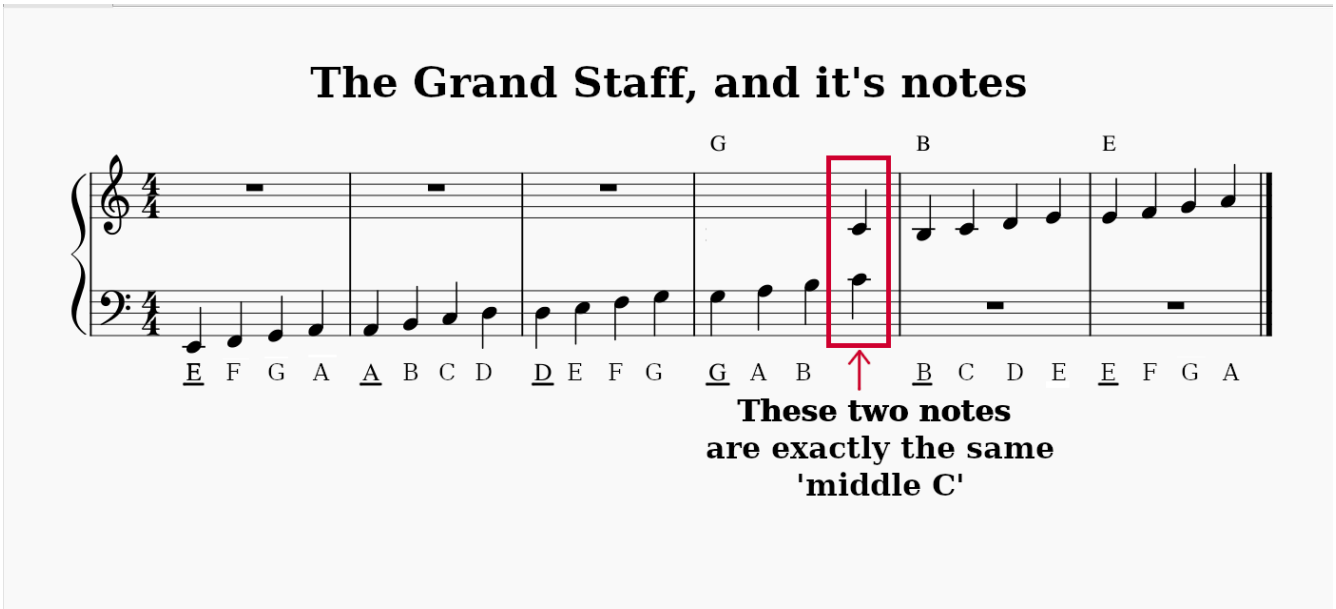


Figure 4

Notice that I have labeled each note according to the names of the strings on the guitar.

Ledger Lines

If you want to write a note beyond the range of a given staff, you simply extend it by drawing little lines called “ledger lines”. You can add as many as you like, each line has an invisible “space” above it, *and* below it. Also notice, that if the high E string is the lowest line on the *treble clef*, that the *fourth space* of the treble clef, is the note E, which is the *octave* or *twelfth fret* of the high E string! Kinda cool! The entire guitar mapped out on two staves! (staves is the plural of staff)

Notice in the diagram above, the Low E is written on a ledger line below the bass clef, and that the treble clef has been extended in the lower direction by ledger lines. Also notice the names of the spaces above and below those lines. *Each space and each line contain one note name.*

Note: To *correctly* name each of the notes in the figure above, you would add the word “natural” to the note name. So, “F” becomes, “F natural”, and “D” becomes “D natural”. “Natural” means that the note does not have a sharp or flat in front of it.

Sharps and Flats:

The note names and sounds can be altered by using symbols called sharps, flats, and natural signs. This gives rise to the following rules:

- if a note has a sharp sign (♯) before it, it is played one fret higher on the guitar *and its name changes to “note name”+ “sharp”. For example D would become D sharp.*
- *if a note has a flat sign (♭) before it, it is played one fret lower on the guitar and its name changes to “note name”+ “flat”. For example D would become D flat.*
- *If a note has a natural sign (♮) before it, it reverts to is natural location, and it’s name changes back to “note name” + “natural” (D flat (or sharp) would become D natural)*

Here is a chart where some notes that have been sharped, and flatted.

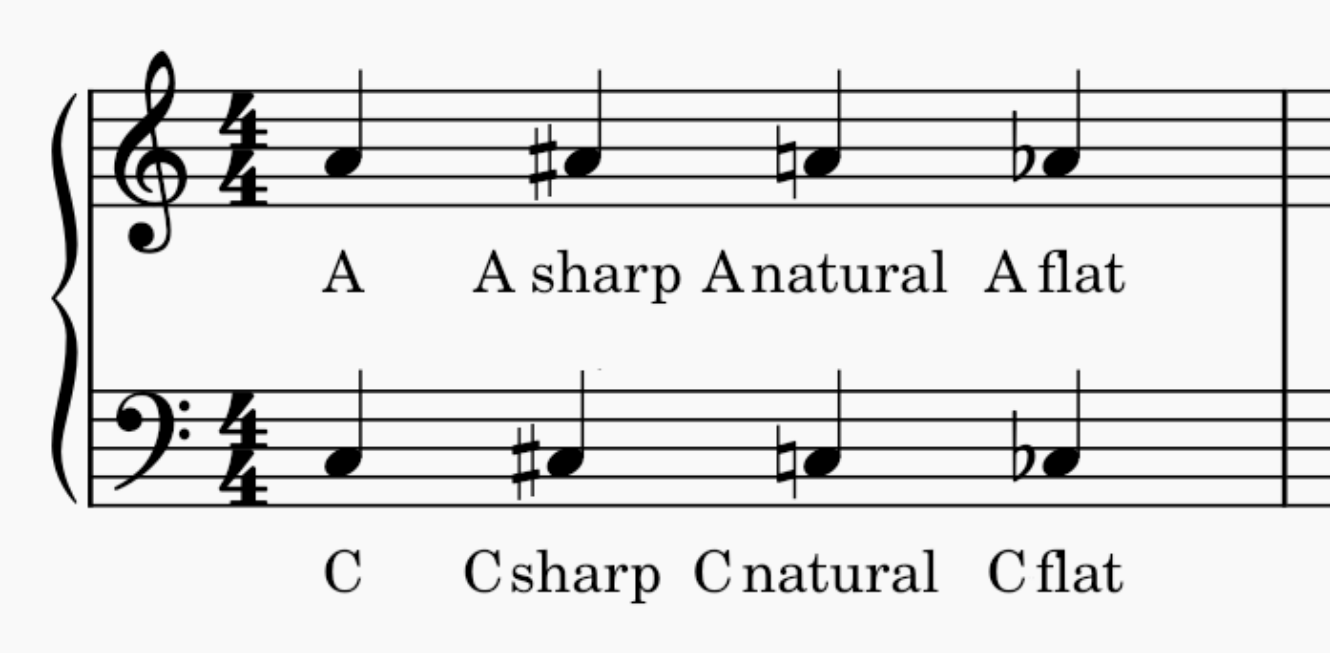


Figure 5

Key Signatures

Major scales are based on the “do re mi fa sol la ti do” sound. Since that sound naturally occurs with the notes C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, we encounter a problem. How to create that sound starting on another note. In order to create that pattern (the do re mi sound) starting from some note other than C, it is

necessary to raise (♯), or lower *(♭),* certain notes. Rather than scattering these notes all through the music, ***the notes that must be altered to achieve that sound are gathered together on the left hand side of every occurrence of the staff. THIS IS CALLED A "KEY SIGNATURE".*** When reading the music, it is understood that any note that is sharped or flatted in the keys signature will be played sharp of flat throughout the music.

There is an exception to this rule.

Accidentals

If a note must be changed in only place in the music. A sharp or flat (or natural sign) is placed in *directly front of it* to indicate the alteration needed. The rule is that that sharp or flat instruction will remain active for → *the rest of the measure*, or → until *that note* is given a new sharp, flat, or natural sign – *in that measure.*

In figure 5 above, the note A is first played as A natural. The sharp raises the the note to A sharp. Because the accidental affects the rest of *that* measure, the next note required a natural sign to make it natural, and then that natural sign was over-ridden by the flat sign.

In the Church Modes (The Church invented this music writing system), there are seven notes to a scale, therefore a key signature can contain no more that seven sharps or flats. When you list all of those key signatures you get fifteen possible keys, three of of those keys have *two different* names, even though you play the exact same notes. Those keys are listed and explained below.

C♭ is the same as B natural

F♯ is the same as G♭, and

C♯ is the same as D♭

All fifteen keys can be described on the circle of fifths. This chart was created long ago. Someone was trying to figure out the relationship between key signatures and scales (or something like that). That person listed the scale with no sharps or flats at the top, then added one sharp (F#). That produced the scale G. G was listed one point to the right. Two sharps (F#, and C#) produced the scale D. That was listed to the right of G. Starting from C again, adding one flat (B♭) yielded the key of F. Two flats, (B♭ and E♭) produce the key of B♭, & etc. By going through this process, the inventor discovered that the scales could be laid out in a circle, that is, by adding sharps or flats, they keys could be connected in a cycle. This circle contains a great deal of information beyond simply indicating which keys have which sharps or flats. It reveals harmonic relationships, the exploration of which will be detailed in a separate document.

For now, this chart will help you learn to recognize all the key signatures, and show you of the correct way to write them (there *is* a 'correct' way – more of a 'standard' way, but that is splitting hairs).

Finally, notice that All the Major keys are listed in red (umber?), as well as their associated minor keys in green. That will be discussed in a later document as well.

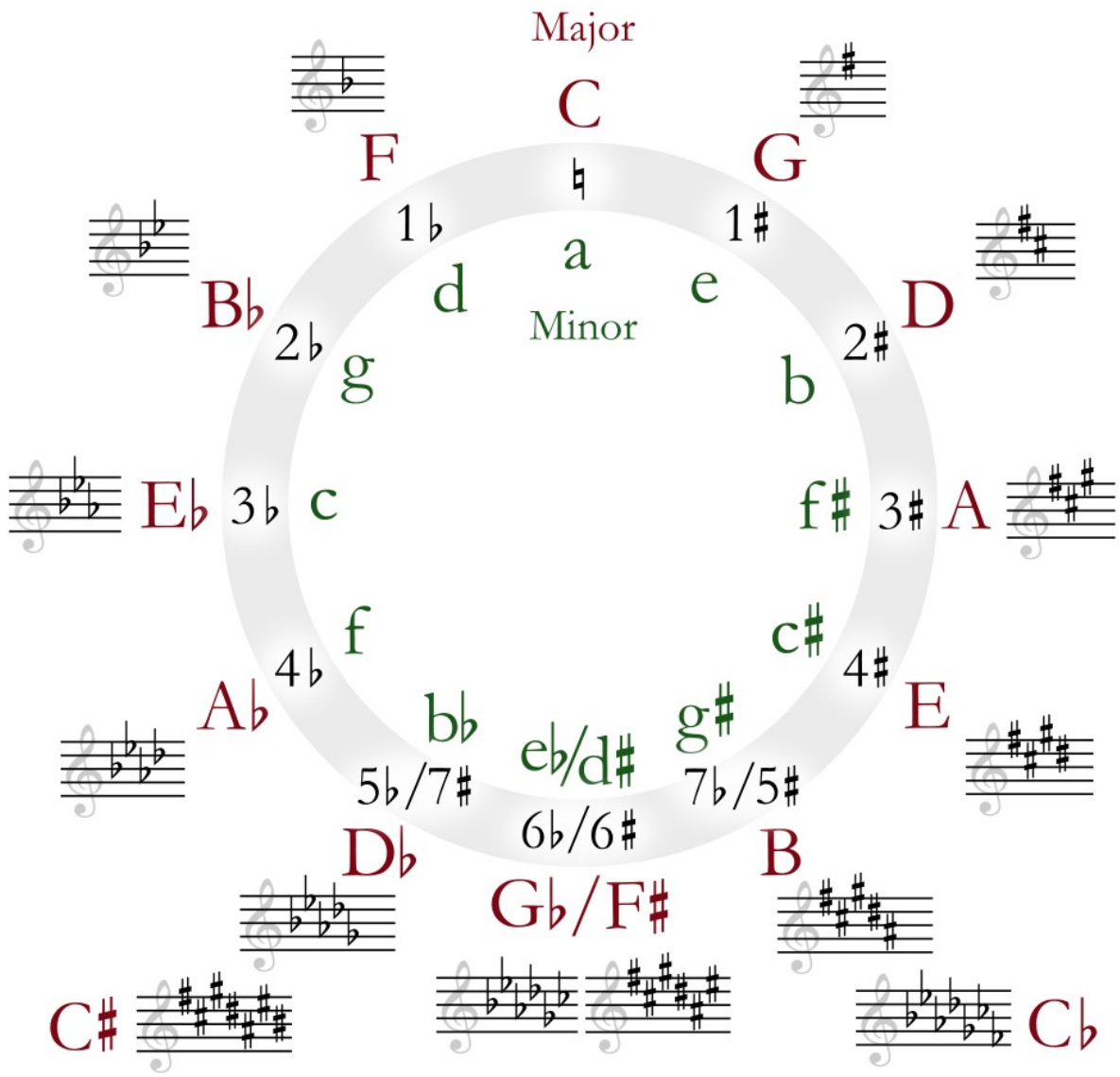


Figure 6

Image courtesy of Wikipedia

The root of each key can be found as follows:

- If the key has sharps: the key name (and root note) can be found "one half step above the last sharp". For example, the key of G has one sharp (F♯), *one half step above F♯* is G. So a key signature with one sharp is the key of G. So your "do re mi" sound begins and ends on G.
- If the key has flats: The key name (and root note) is the "next to last flat". For example, the key of E♭ has three flats, B♭, E♭, and A♭. Notice that E♭ is the "next to the last flat". That means that the root of the scale is the note E♭. Exception: F has one flat (B♭).

Finally: Rhythmic Notation

Most music tends to have a distinct ‘pulse pattern’. The pulses are usually accented in some way. For example, some songs have a “ONE two three, ONE two three, ONE two three” pulse pattern to them. Other music has a “ONE two Three four, ONE two Three four, ONE two Three four” pulse pattern, and some have a “ONE two, ONE two, ONE two” pulse pattern. There are other pulse patterns, such as 5, 7, and 9. But I haven’t found any hymns in those rhythms yet (although they probably exist).

At the beginning of every piece of music is something called a ‘time signature’. It looks kind of like a fraction. The top number describes the ‘pulse type’ as discussed above. And the bottom number indicates what note length will be considered as ‘a single pulse’. Another name for pulse is “beat”.

Below, we have some common time signatures: 4/4 (read ‘four, four’),3 / 4 (‘three-four’), and 2/2 also known as ‘common time’, or ‘cut time’. Occasionally a large C is written to indicate “common time” and signifies 4/4 time. The C with a line through it is called “cut time” and is interpreted as 2/2 time.

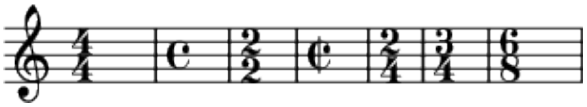


Figure 7

some time signatures

Image courtesy of Wikipedia

The way these time signatures are read is shown in the following chart:

The time signatures shown, read from top to bottom are:

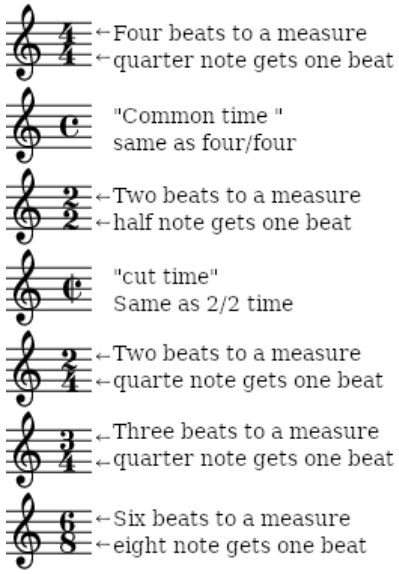


Figure 8

The time signatures shown, from top to bottom, are:

four four time, common time, two two time, cut time, two four time, three four time, and six eight time

The obvious question here is:

What's a measure?

There are two definitions involved:

First, go back to figure 4 and notice that there are vertical bars drawn over the staff in certain places.

That is the most primitive definition of a measure: *The Space Between Two Bars*

Each measure contains one complete set of 'pulses' or 'beats'.

Back at figure 4, you will notice that there are *four notes*, horizontally spaced, inside each measure. That is because the top half of the time signature calls for *four pulses* per measure.

So the second definition of a measure is "a discrete set of beats".

Finally: What are half notes, quarter notes, etc?

The rhythmic notation describes "parts of a measure".

The idea is fairly simple:

A "whole note" lasts for as long as a 'whole' measure.

A "half note" lasts for half of a measure.

A "quarter note" lasts for one fourth of a measure.

I think you can figure out what an eighth, sixteenth, and thirty-second note are.

So we have this language, we now need some notation for it.

Here is a chart which names the rhythmic notes.

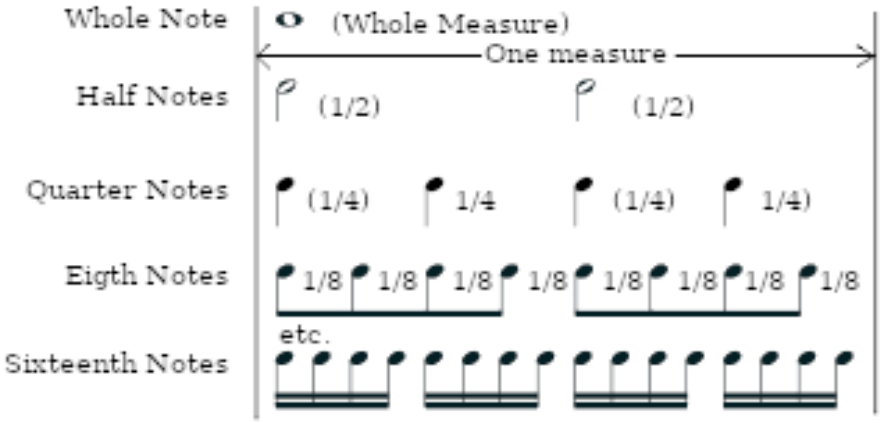


Figure 9

Lastly, placing a small dot after a note increases its value by ½.

That means a dotted half note would be played as long as three ‘1/8 notes’.

This formula can be applied to any of the note values in figure 9.

You have just had a (very, very short) explanation of how to read music. There are many online resources available. Even I plan on starting a channel eventually.

Now for my curious notation…

A typical chord diagram looks like this:

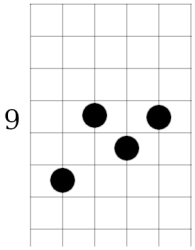


Figure 10

If you rotate it counter-clockwise, it looks like this, *with the lowest sounding note on the ‘bottom’* of the diagram.

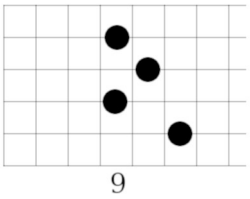


Figure 11

I have never liked the way that fret numbers were called out, because I always thought of a chord as starting from the bass note. So…

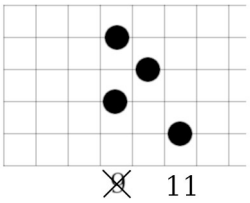


Figure 12

now… imagine connections between these chord tones, and a way to designate how many frets there are between the bass note, and the other notes:

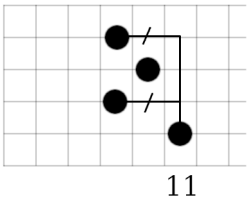


Figure 13

The full description looks like this:

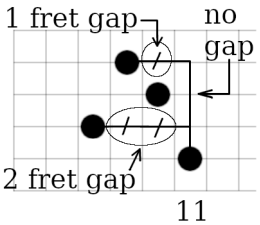


Figure 14

Okay… so let's put this puppy on the grand staff. In order to do that, I need a conversion chart.

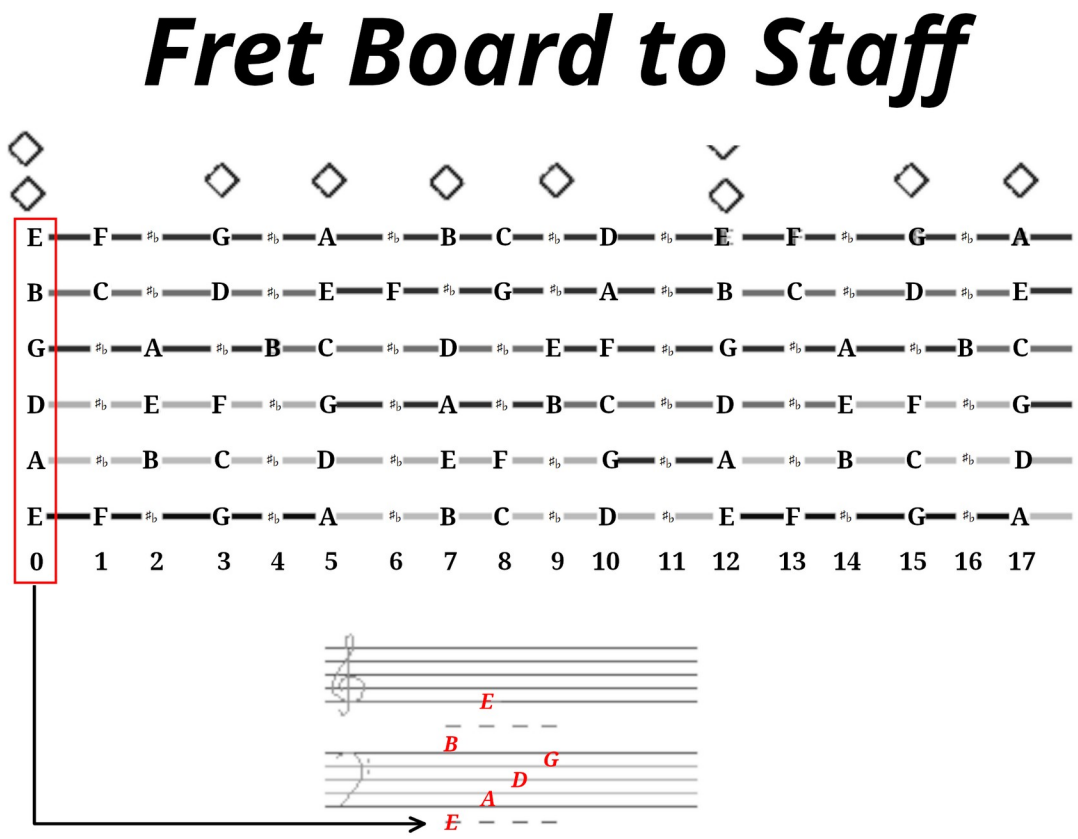


Figure 15

from the above chart: the notes in figure 14 are: A♭, B♭, F, and A♭

low and behold, we get:

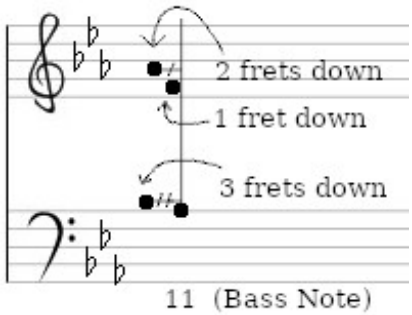
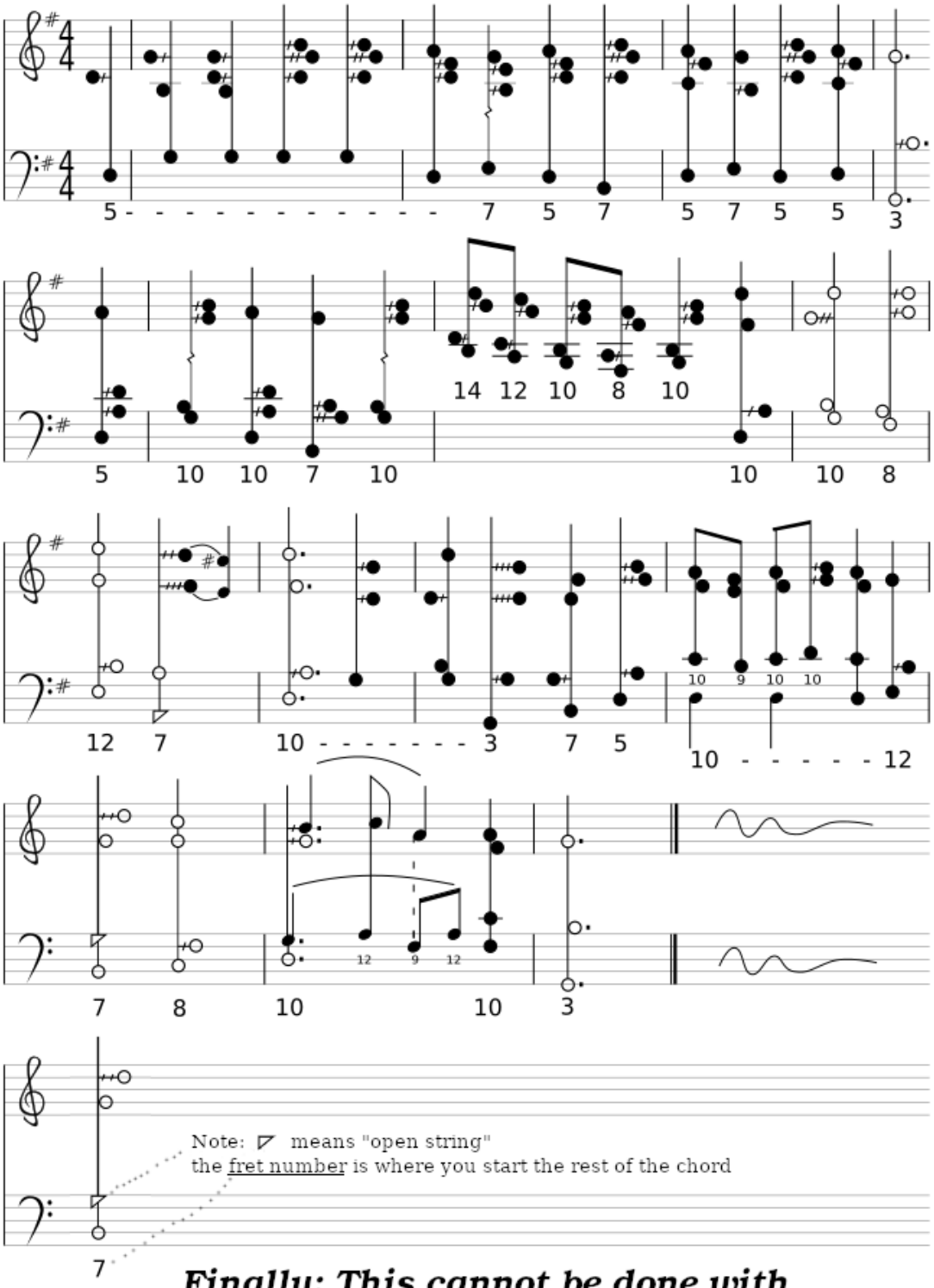


Figure 16

The notes drawn on the staff, with their associated locations.
Voila! Now here is an entire Hymn done in this style::

All Hail the Power of Jesus Name

With Guitar-Chord Notation



Finally: This cannot be done with a pick. Learn to pluck notes with your fingers: QUIT STRUMMING!!!