

Music Notation for Mandolin Family Instruments

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Music for mandolin family instruments is notated in a variety of clefs. This document covers the majority of clefs that a modern player might encounter. Where possible, examples are drawn from the CMSA Starter Music Library.

Mandolin-family instruments have four (sometimes five) “courses” of double strings normally tuned in unison.¹ For convenience in this document, courses are referred to as strings when appropriate.

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Mandolin

The standard tuning for mandolin is the same as violin: $G_3 - D_4 - A_4 - E_5$. Music for mandolin is written in treble clef, the same as violin.²

Mandola (US and Canada), Viola Tuning

In the United States and Canada, a “mandola” commonly refers to a four course instrument tuned like the viola: $C_3 - G_3 - D_4 - A_4$. Outside the United States and Canada, the same instrument is called the tenor mandola, alto or contralto mandola, mandola in C, or mandoliola.

¹ Exceptions are so-called “scordatura” tunings in which one or both strings of a course are tuned to a different note from the standard tuning. Music for mandolin in scordatura is always written as if standard tuning is used; otherwise it would be impossible (or nearly so) to read properly. Another exception is when octave stringing is used on larger mandolin family instruments, for example, in Celtic music.

² If a mandolinist is playing from an original bowed string part, the mandolin #1 part will probably be labeled “violin #1” (and so on). See, for example, the various parts for the Bach Brandenburg Concerto #3 in the CMSA Starter Music Library.

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If the viola tuning is intended, the mandola part will almost always be notated in one of three ways: alto clef, “universal notation,” or transposed treble clef.³ It is not uncommon for mandolin ensembles to play a transcription or arrangement of a work composed for string quartet or string orchestra directly from the original parts, in which case the part for mandola will be in alto clef, having been written originally for the viola. Modern compositions or arrangements may also be notated in alto clef. However, mandola parts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were almost never notated in alto clef.⁴ Instead, “universal notation” or transposed treble clef was commonly used.

Universal notation

The phrase “universal notation” first appeared in mandolin music in the early twentieth century United States.⁵ The notation is said to be “universal” because a treble clef sign always appears on the page and a written C will always sound as a C, just not necessarily at the octave where it is notated. As such, universal notation is functionally equivalent to notation using the octave treble clef.

A mandola part in universal notation is the same as one written in “8vb treble clef”: a C will sound one octave below written. For parts from the early twentieth century the player should be able to tell instantly if universal notation is used because the phrase “universal notation” or “non-transposed” will appear on the score and there should be a single slash mark (“/”) through the treble clef sign.⁶ Modern arrangers and composers may also use the 8vb treble clef instead of alto clef, in which case an “8” or “8vb” should appear just below the treble clef sign.

³ There are rare examples, chiefly from central Europe, of parts for the viola-tuned mandola written at pitch in treble clef (as opposed to 8vb octave treble clef). Such parts necessarily make extensive use of ledger lines below the staff and may be difficult to read.

⁴ Counter-examples, however, do exist. See, for example, Stellario Cambria’s “Trio for Mandolin, Mandola, and Mandocello” (New York: Plectrio Publishing Company, 1914); Salvatore Falbo Giangreco, “Quartetto a plettro” (Milan, Italy: Il Plettro, 1922); and G Sirlen Milanesi, “Tema con Variazioni” (Milan, Italy: Il Plettro, 1925).

⁵ The logic behind universal notation is that the viola-tuned mandola and mandocello share three strings with the same pitch class – G, D, and A – as the mandolin, suggesting that mandolinists would be able to instantly locate the proper notes on the larger instrument. This logic is incorrect because the left hand fingerings are not the same on the different instruments..

⁶ See, for example, the mandola part for “Bull Frog Blues” in the CMSA Starter Music Library.

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Transposed notation

A part intended for the viola-tuned mandola may also be written in transposed treble clef notation. In transposed notation, the treble clef sign is used and the key signature is transposed up a fifth (or, equivalently, down a fourth). For example, if the original key signature is C major, the transposed part will be in G major. This allows the viola-tuned mandola to be played “as if” it were a mandolin.

For example, suppose a mandola player “sees” the note G_4 on a transposed treble clef part. On the mandolin, this would be the note at the fifth fret of the D string. Accordingly, the player stops the fifth fret of the third (G) string of the mandola and plucks, which sounds a C_4 .

Although transposed notation may seem odd to the non-mandolinist, an analogous system is used for some other instrument families, such as the saxophone. The advantage is that the mandolinist need not be familiar with the specific left-hand fingerings of the viola-tuned mandola; she simply plays it as if it is a mandolin, albeit larger in size. The disadvantage is the music will sound in a different key than indicated on the page, which may be confusing to the player’s ear.

The Mandola in Rest of the World; or “Octave Mandolin”

Outside of the United States and Canada, the “mandola” refers to a four-course tuned one octave below the standard mandolin: $G_2 - D_3 - A_3 - E_4$. In the United States or Canada and sometimes elsewhere, this instrument is called an “octave mandolin”. Other names for the same instrument are “octave mandola” or “mandola in G”.

Music for the octave mandolin has always been written in 8vb treble clef, as indicated by an “8” or “8vb” below the treble clef sign. Equivalently, parts for the octave mandolin are in universal notation.⁷

In theory, a part written for the octave tuned instrument can always be played on the viola-tuned instrument. The reverse, however, is not true because there are five

⁷ Note that the range of the octave mandolin is very similar to the guitar and that guitar parts are also written in 8vb treble clef. Although the octave instrument was not in common use in the early twentieth century United States, occasionally one will encounter parts from this era with “octave mandolin” or “octave mandola” written on the score and a single “/” through the treble clef sign; see, for example, the mandola part for “Bull Frog Blues” in the CMSA Starter Music Library.

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notes (G_2 through B_2) present on the G string of the octave-tuned instrument that are below the range of the viola-tuned instrument.⁸

Mandocello

The mandocello is a four-course instrument tuned the same as the violoncello: $C_2 - G_2 - D_3 - A_3$. Another name for this instrument is the “mandoloncello”.

A part for the mandocello may be written in bass clef, the same as for the violoncello.⁹ Alternatively, it may be written in universal notation or transposed treble clef.

A mandocello part in universal notation is the functional equivalent of using the 15mb octave treble clef – the music sounds two octaves below where written.¹⁰ If a mandocello part from the early twentieth century is in universal notation the phrase “universal notation” or “non-transposed” should appear on the score with two slash marks (“//”) through the treble clef sign.¹¹ If a modern part for mandocello is written in 15mb octave treble clef, a “15” or “15mb” will appear below the treble clef sign.

Analogous to the mandola (see above), a mandocello part may be written in transposed treble clef notation, allowing the mandocello to be played as if it were a (very large) mandolin. If the part is written in transposed notation, the key signature will be transposed up a fifth (equivalently, down a fourth) and the music will sound an octave and a fifth below where written.

⁸ A player could, of course, omit these notes or play them up an octave on the viola-tuned instrument but this is not always satisfactory from a musical point of view.

⁹ See, for example, the mandocello part in bass clef in Walter Kaye Bauer’s arrangement of Bach’s “Bourree” in the CMSA Starter Music Library. If a mandocello player is reading from an original bowed string part for violoncello, the music may be notated in bass, tenor, or even treble clef, depending on where it sits on the instrument. It is uncommon but not unheard of for original music for mandocello to be notated in these clefs, for some examples, see Sol Goichberg, “Studies for the Mandocello, Volume 1” (Kensington MD: Plucked String, Inc. 1999).

¹⁰ Occasionally one finds mandocello parts in 8vb treble clef --for example, German scores from the early to mid-twentieth century in which the parts for mandola and mandocello are written together on the same page. In such scores an “8” or “8vb” may not appear below the treble clef sign; the player is expected to know the custom; see, for example, the mandocello/mandola part for “Gavotte im alten Stil” in the CMSA Starter Music Library.

¹¹ See, for example, the mandocello part for “Bull Frog Blues” in the CMSA Starter Library.

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Liuto Cantabile

The liuto cantabile (or liuto moderno) is a five course instrument that combines the mandocello and the octave mandolin. It is tuned: $C_2 - G_2 - D_3 - A_3 - E_4$. Music for the liuto cantabile is written in a mixture of bass clef and 8vb treble clef.¹² Generally the notes on the C string (and occasionally, the G string) will be in bass clef while those on the G and higher strings will be in 8vb treble clef.

Mando-Bass

A mando-bass is a four (single) string instrument generally tuned in fourths, the same as the orchestral double bass or acoustic bass guitar: $E_1 - A_1 - D_2 - G_2$. Parts for the mando-bass may be written in bass clef as for the regular double bass, or in universal notation as for the mando-cello (15mb octave treble clef with two “//” through the treble clef sign).¹³

¹² An 8 or 8vb may not appear below the treble clef in a liuto score; the player is expected to know the custom. For examples, see any of the scores for liuto by Raffaele Calace at http://www.federmannolino.it/listing/spartiti_raffaele_calace/02-liuto_solo/.

¹³ See, for example, the mando-bass part for Louis Tocaben’s arrangement of Johannes Brahms’s “Hungarian Dances Nos. 7 and 8” in the CMSA Starter Music Library.