

Universal Notation

When the mandolin craze swept the United States in the early years of the 20th Century, music publishers, such as Remick and H.F. Odell began printing and selling music for mandolin ensembles. The Gibson company, sensing a way to increase mandolin family instrument sales, invented a new musical notation system called the 'Universal' notation method, which was adopted by many of the publishing houses.

Then, as now, native violists and violincellists were much less available to fill out the sections, so Gibson assumed that the tenor and baritone (mandola and mandocello) players would be *drafted* from the ranks of the mandolins, who were (it must be assumed) supposed to be well-versed in the standard treble clef system.

Violists cut their teeth on music in alto clef:

Fingering: 0 1 2 3 0 1 2 3 0 1 2 3 0 1 2 3

Note: C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C D

4th str. 3rd str. 2nd str. 1st str.

ALTO CLEF

Detailed description: This diagram illustrates the 'ALTO CLEF' system. It shows a single staff with an alto clef (C-clef on the third line). The notes are C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D. The notes are grouped by string: C-F (4th string), G-C (3rd string), D-G (2nd string), and A-D (1st string). Fingerings are indicated above each note: 0 for C, 1 for D, 2 for E, 3 for F, 0 for G, 1 for A, 2 for B, 3 for C, 0 for D, 1 for E, 2 for F, 3 for G, 0 for A, 1 for B, 2 for C, 3 for D.

Likewise, violincellists all learn bass clef:

Fingering: 0 1 3 4 0 1 3 4 0 1 2 4 0 1 2 4

Note: C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C D

4th str. 3rd str. 2nd str. 1st str.

BASS CLEF

Detailed description: This diagram illustrates the 'BASS CLEF' system. It shows a single staff with a bass clef (F-clef on the fourth line). The notes are C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D. The notes are grouped by string: C-F (4th string), G-C (3rd string), D-G (2nd string), and A-D (1st string). Fingerings are indicated above each note: 0 for C, 1 for D, 3 for E, 4 for F, 0 for G, 1 for A, 3 for B, 4 for C, 0 for D, 1 for E, 2 for F, 4 for G, 0 for A, 1 for B, 2 for C, 4 for D.

Gibson began writing the parts for the mandolin-family equivalents on a staff marked with a treble clef with one or two strikes on it, like this:

Fingering: 0 1 2 3 0 1 2 3 0 1 2 3 0 1 2 3

Note: C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C D

4th str. 3rd str. 2nd str. 1st str.

MANDOLA UNIVERSAL CLEF

Detailed description: This diagram illustrates the 'MANDOLA UNIVERSAL CLEF' system. It shows a single staff with a treble clef (G-clef on the first line) that has two horizontal lines drawn through it, effectively creating an alto clef. The notes are C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D. The notes are grouped by string: C-F (4th string), G-C (3rd string), D-G (2nd string), and A-D (1st string). Fingerings are indicated above each note: 0 for C, 1 for D, 2 for E, 3 for F, 0 for G, 1 for A, 2 for B, 3 for C, 0 for D, 1 for E, 2 for F, 3 for G, 0 for A, 1 for B, 2 for C, 3 for D.

or, for the mandocello:

Fingering: 0 1 3 4 0 1 3 4 0 1 2 4 0 1 2 4

Note: C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C D

4th str. 3rd str. 2nd str. 1st str.

MANDOCELLO UNIVERSAL CLEF

Note that the note placement on the mandocello universal clef is exactly like the mandola universal, except for the two strike marks, which indicate an octave below one strike mark.

These are transposing notations and they mean for you to 'play the note as if you were playing a mandolin', and the transposition (mandolin to Gibson style tenor mandola is drop a fifth and mandolin to mandocello is drop an octave and a fifth) and is built right into the notation.

For example, let's assume you're a mandolinist and I asked you to play a C scale on the mandola. *You have no idea where that low C note is*, so I say read the mandola universal staff above. The first note tells you (as a good mandolinist) to play the open 4th string. You think 'that's a G', but it's not! It's a C! Likewise, if you're playing a mandocello.

The universal clef system would permit mandolin players to fill out the voices and remove the impediment of re-learning a new clef. The only trouble came if you happened to be a 'native' reader of alto or bass clef! Then, you'd notice that the native alto clef notes and their universal clef representation were separated by a *half-step* on the staff and the bass clef-to-mandocello-universal was separated by a *whole-step*. Unless you're a much better reader than me, this will drive you bonkers!

However, the problem of finding players for the mandola and mandocello still remains, so the parts for these voices were left as-is. Transposing them is not hard... print and use the clefs above as examples.

[Close this window](#)

[Print these instructions](#)