

# THE Musical Times

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The Evolution of Clef Signatures

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June, 1894, and dedicated 'to the Philharmonic Society and its conductor Sir A. C. Mackenzie,' the work being first performed at the Philharmonic Society's concert of March 20, 1895.

The printed music includes Dr. Arne's 'Musick in the Masque of 'Comus,' brought out at Drury Lane Theatre in 1738, lent by Mr. Edward J. Dent, and entitled :

The | Musick | in the | Masque | of | Comus. |  
Written by Milton. | As it was Perform'd at the  
Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. | Composed by |  
THOMAS AUGUSTINE ARNE. | *Opera prima.*

London; | Printed by William Smith, at  
Corelli's Head, near St. Clement's Church in the  
Strand; and sold | by the Author, at his Lodgings,  
at Mr. West's, a Frame-Maker, in Duke-street,  
by Lincoln's- | Inn-Fields; and at the Musick-  
Shops in London and Westminster.

There is also a pasticcio 'Comus,' consisting of music by Arne and Handel with additions by Bishop. Dr. Mann lends an original word-book of 'Samson' (London: 1743), 'set to music by George Frederick Handel,' and there is a Cambridge printed libretto of the same oratorio dated 1782. Another feature of musical interest is the copy of Dr. Johnson's 'Lives of the poets,' which the great lexicographer presented to the gifted daughter of Dr. Charles Burney, and bearing the inscription: 'To Miss Frances Burney from the author.'

It only remains to be said that the catalogue of this excellent Milton Exhibition at Christ's College, Cambridge, has been most attractively got up. Its chief contributors are Dr. G. C. Williamson, who treats of the portraits and the early editions of the poems, and Mr. Charles Sayle, who has furnished an appendix on the various editions of the poet's works and on books about Milton to be found at Cambridge. Various well-produced portraits and facsimiles add to the value of a publication which is worthy of the event which has called it forth, an Exhibition upon the success of which all concerned in its promotion are to be warmly congratulated.

To Mr. Passmore Edwards, the thanks of the writer are specially due for his kindness in permitting his boy-portrait of John Milton, the poet, to be photographed expressly for this article and, in all probability, for the first time.

Milton and the musical settings of his poems will form the next instalment of these papers during this tercentenary year of the poet's birth.

F. G. E.

*Why is it that people with imperfect acquirements are often so much more enthusiastic than those who know more?*—SIR GEORGE GROVE.

(Written, in pencil, on the back of his copy of the word-book of the Crystal Palace Saturday Concert, December 12, 1868.)

## THE EVOLUTION OF CLEF SIGNATURES.

The growth of the staff and the evolution of clef signatures are matters which do not appear to have greatly attracted the attention of the average musician. In regard to the evolution of those eccentric signs which indicate clefs, I know of nothing that either adequately, or even inadequately, deals with the subject. Dictionaries of music and text-books tell us, all too briefly, that the wild convolution which marks the G clef is merely a corruption of a Gothic letter  $\mathfrak{G}$ ; and that probably the other signs are similarly derived from the letters F and C. But, so far as I am aware, no attempt has hitherto been made scientifically to trace the stages of their evolution.

In the first place, let me totally deny that the sign  $\mathfrak{G}$  is derived from a Gothic  $\mathfrak{G}$ ; moreover, it is absolutely certain that the present forms of the bass and tenor clef signatures do not readily suggest their real origin.

An examination of old music reveals the fact that the G clef was not greatly in use before the 15th and 16th centuries. The C clef is that most frequently found, this being followed by the F clef, both singly and in conjunction with it. The reason for the general use of the C clef in early music is naturally due to the fact that at the birth of the staff the C line was the original single line drawn above the words to be vocalised, and used as a point from whence, in regard to interval, the other notes were calculated. Other staff lines followed in due course. Now that the bass and treble clefs are mainly used, strangely enough the C clef line is the one that is so often absent. Early vocal music—especially that of the Church, where the range was limited—frequently extended to no more than four lines: 'Summer is i cumen in,' exceptional in many ways, is noted on a six-line staff. In this class of early music the C clef was placed on any line in order to avoid leger-lines, then almost unknown.

When instrumental music, other than that written in viol or lute tablature, began to be in written evidence, two separate staves were employed. Virginal music was noted on two staves of six lines each, the G clef being placed on the third line counting upwards, and the F clef on the third line counting downwards. Thus the tenor C line was repeated. Down to the end of the 17th century this pair of six-line staves was in use for all harpsichord and spinet music, including the little book of Henry Purcell's 'Lessons' issued in 1696. These details, and some others, regarding the Gamut cannot well be avoided in any explanation of the evolution of clef signatures.

The Gamut assigned to every note a particular name, or rather a combined designation, viz.: (1) the alphabetical name; (2) the vocal sound for it; and (3) its relative pitch. Thus are derived such nomenclature as 'F, fa, ut'; 'A, la, mi, re'; 'G, sol, re, ut.' These somewhat weird names were

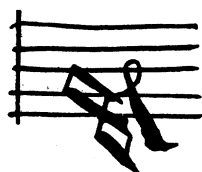


FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.



FIG. 3.

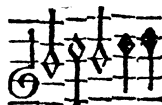


FIG. 4.

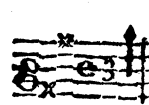


FIG. 5.

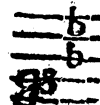


FIG. 6.

A Trip to the Jubilee, as }  
'tis Danc'd at the Play-House. }

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Longways for as many as will.

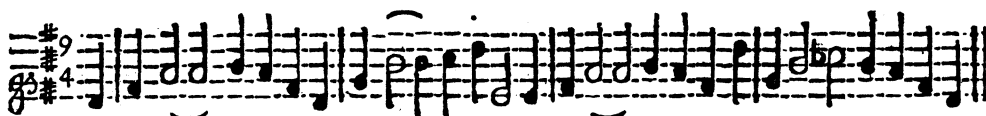


FIG. 7.



FIG. 8.

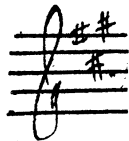


FIG. 9.



FIG. 10.



FIG. 11.

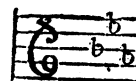


FIG. 12.

sufficient to identify any particular note and its pitch, so far as pitch was a settled matter, and therefore it was natural that as only a section of the great staff was used, one particular note of the Gamut should be so placed as to identify note and pitch, from which other notes could be reckoned. By common usage 'G, sol, re, ut' was employed on the treble staff, and this by abbreviation became G. s, and was placed on its particular line. From the combination of these two letters, gradually corrupted by careless transcription, the present sign  $\text{G}$  was evolved.

As the Gamut nomenclature fell into disuse the added 'Sol, re, ut' appended to the G became unknown, with the result that the s sign became more or less a wild scribble. It must be remembered, however, that in a few early instances the G alone was used, and also that where the letter s was employed it was generally in its long-shaped form, which even in comparatively recent times was used by ladies who retained the old-fashioned style of handwriting.

The following facsimiles will show how the present sign has been evolved :

Figure 1. From a MS., circa 1570, formerly in the present writer's possession, and afterwards in that of the late Mr. T. W. Taphouse, of Oxford, and sold at the sale of his library. This sign and its variations appear throughout the MS.

Figure 2. From 'Parthenia.' 1611. Engraved.

Figure 3. From a facsimile of an undated manuscript given in William Shield's 'Thorough Bass.

Figure 4. From Thomas Morley's 'Plaine and Easie Introduction to the Skill of Musick.' 1597 and 1608.

Figure 5. From 'The Dancing Master.' 1690.

Figure 6. The ordinary sign used in typography during the 17th century.

Figure 7. From 'The Dancing Master.' 1716.

Figure 8. From Bowman's 'Songs for one, two, and three voices,' Oxford, 1678. Engraved.

Figure 9. From a manuscript, dated 1723, in the possession of the writer. The sign is very carelessly written throughout.

Figure 10. From a manuscript, dated 1764, in the possession of the writer.

Figure 11. From another manuscript dated 1738, also in the possession of the writer.

Figure 12. From 'The German Erato or a collection of favourite songs.' Berlin, 1800. Printed from movable type.

In figures 8, 9, and 10 the small head of the letter G is on the line, while the long s, indicating 'sol,' is carried with the tail of the g upwards. In figure 10 the head is filled in throughout. The MS. shows that the significance of the sign was gradually passing away. In figure 11 the s is used in the ordinary form, and not, as in the other examples, in the long-shaped form. Figure 12 is a curious German survival found in several works at the beginning of the 19th century.

Consideration of the evolution of the C and F clef signs must be deferred to a future article.

FRANK KIDSON.