

# Standard Music Notation for Mountain Dulcimer Players

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## Introduction

### Purpose

One of the most common requests one sees in the [EverythingDulcimer Discussion Groups](#) is request for Mountain Dulcimer tab for this or that piece of music. Although MD tab is very easy to read, there are some problems with it:

- There is only a limited set of tabbed pieces, compared to the (perhaps) millions of music pieces that have been composed. On the other hand, professional composers use Standard Music Notation (SMN), and almost all folk tunes have been scored in SMN somewhere along the way. Thus, one can find SMN for just about any piece on the earth. (The only exceptions might be original pieces that the composer just hasn't committed to notation, yet.)
- Player preferences in tuning cause there to be tab for different tunings (Ionian, Mixolydian, and so on). Thus a single piece requires several different tab notations, based on tuning preferences.
- Tab is not standard. Some tabbers put the lowest pitch at the top of the tab, whilst others put it at the bottom. Standard Music Notation is standard all over the world. No one does it uniquely *their way*.
- Tab leaves out some important musical concepts, such as rests, dynamics, complex timings, and so on.

This article is specifically for those who already read Mountain Dulcimer tab. It is intended to allow the MD player to quickly begin to use some Standard Music Notation, integrate it into their regular playing habits, and eventually be able to *significantly* expand their repertoire, without having to wait for (or work out tab for) each piece.

### Approach

I've taught SMN for years. But it was always with the intent of having the student learn *all* of it, and be able to use it for multiple instruments. And I had a lot of time to do it.

This article purposely does not teach every symbol in the SMN set. The key letters (A through G), assigned to each staff position, are purposely *de-emphasized*. It is the *relative position* of notes on the staff that tell the MD player which melody note to play, just as the numbers in tab do the same. To avoid confusion from different tunings, only Mixolydian tuning is used in this article, DAD in the first part, and GDG in the second part. However, the concepts, once learned, can be extended to Ionian tuning.

Note also that I say *melody*. This article does not deal with chording on your MD. We will assume that you are going to drone the other strings whilst playing the melody; or you can work out chords to your satisfaction later.

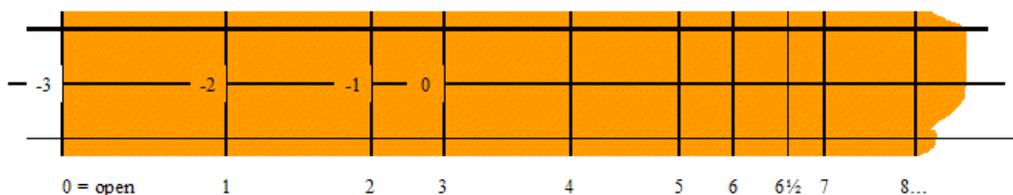
All pieces in this article are in Major keys (modes). Again, once the concepts are learned, they extend easily to the relative minors.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Rod Westerfield for valuable comments on the material given during the first workshop where it was presented. I value other comments that would help the reader to understand the concepts and be able to use them to their fullest.

### A Clarification of Nomenclature

Before I present the first piece, I need to go over one bit of nomenclature that is not typically used with the MD, but which will help when reading the SMN and trying to find certain melody notes on the MD. This chart explains this nomenclature:



This applies to Mixolydian tunings, either DAD or GDG.

As an MD player you are all familiar with using open, first fret, second fret, etcetera on the melody string. However, if the melody goes below the pitch of the open melody string, you have to steal the melody from the middle string. (This is one reason that some folks prefer Ionian tuning, which is the real Major key tuning. But Mix is probably more common.)

As you can see by the diagram, in Mixolydian tuning, the third fret in the middle string is the same as the melody string played open. Put your finger on the middle string at the third fret and strum across. All strings will sound the same "note" (albeit in 2 different octaves). We won't need to do this whilst playing the melody. But the point is that we will need a minus one (-1), minus two (-2) and minus three (-3) position for playing melodies, which are played on the middle string, rather than the supposed melody string. For example, the first note (typically D) of *Amazing Grace* is actually -3 notes away from the key that the tune is played in (typically G).

Minus three is the middle string played open, minus two is the middle string played at the first fret, and minus one is the middle string played at the second fret. Thus, you can think of your MD as being a number line (like back in grade school!), but with the negative pitches working down from the third fret of your middle string (which is a redundant zero). This will be important for translating a straight relative-number notation (like SMN) into melody positions on your MD.

On each of the PDF links, below, you'll want to *right click* on the link and choose *Save As* to save the piece and print it out. That way you can refer to this article whilst viewing the printed music.

# Part 1: Pieces starting from Open Spaces in SMN

## Long, Long Ago

Download and print [this PDF](#) to begin. I apologize that it looks so “busy”. That’s because I left the lyrics in it, and added annotation to help get you started. Each of the 5 lines with notes and other symbols on them is called a staff. The symbol all the way to the left is the treble clef. It is the only clef we will be using in this article, since it adequately covers the note range used in typical melodies.

The key signature is not important at this point, *except* that for part 1 I have chosen keys that cause the base note, which represents which key the piece is written in, to always be on an open space (between staff lines). The sharp symbol looks a lot like a pound-weight or number symbol.

There are only a few time signatures that are of interest to the average musician. 4/4, also called Common Time, simply means that each measure has 4 beats, and the quarter ( $\frac{1}{4}$ ) note gets one beat.

The first line of this piece merely gives you a mini-cheat sheet. It lists the equivalent tab numbers for each note position, and an example of how you would count the notes based on the note’s duration. **Notice that in part 1, all even-tabbed notes** (open, second fret, ...) **are in open spaces, while all odd-tabbed notes** (first fret, third fret, ...) **are on staff lines**. The vertical bar within the staff breaks up the piece into measures, just as a sentence is composed of words. The second measure shows what a quarter note, two eighth notes, and a half note look like. A single eighth note is not illustrated here, but it simply has a single “flag” hanging off of the end of the stem. You’ll see an example of single quarter notes in piece 4.

The notes’ stems are sometimes up and sometimes down. But that is because in SMN notes that are above a certain line have the stem turned down to avoid having it go too far off of the staff, whilst notes below that line have the stem going up for the same reason. Apart from that, the direction of the stem is not important. Notice that a whole note (the last note in the piece) has no stem at all. (A whole note lasts the duration of the entire measure.)

Also, you may ignore the letters that appear just above the staff lines. These let a performer know which chord can be used to accompany the melody. A guitarist, for example, can strum along using those chords.

Try playing this piece using the positions of the notes to indicate which fret to play (or open). Remember that the space just below the bottom line represents open (and is the “base” note or key note of the piece — for the key that the piece is written in); the first line from the bottom is the first fret; the open space between the first and second line is the second fret; and so on.

I have tried to pick a piece that you may have heard but not yet played. An almost impossible task. If you haven’t heard this song before, search for a MIDI or MP3 of it on the web. Listen to it first, then play it. If you have already played it, perhaps by memory or by tab, please try playing it as if for the first time, reading the fret positions from the note positions.

Notice that you will encounter some notes that are *below* the base note of the piece. They are placed on *leger lines* that are used to “extend” the staff beyond its 5 lines. In fact, if you pause for a second to count down from the base note, you’ll see that they are 3 notes below the base note. That is, they are at the minus three (-3) position. Referring to the nomenclature presented earlier, we play those melody notes on the middle string open.

## Darling Nelly Gray

After you feel comfortable with the first piece, download [this piece](#) and print it. Again, if you don’t know it, look for a MIDI or MP3 of it and listen to it before playing it.

The big letter C is the same as 4 over 4, and simply means Common Time. The base note of this piece is still at the open space just below the bottom staff line. So that means the first note of the piece starts on the second fret. The fact that it will be an even-numbered fret can easily be recalled because it is in an open space between staff lines.

How do we know it is in the same key as the previous piece? Well, if you already knew SMN you could tell by the key signature with 2 sharps. But that’s getting ahead of ourselves. The simplest trick is to look at the last melody note of the piece. Most of the time that note represents which key we are in. Even if you don’t know the name of that note (and we have not covered them yet), you’ll notice that it is the same note that *Long, Long Ago* ended on.

The first 2 notes look funny. They are a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note. In SMN, a dot after a note means to add  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the length of the note to the note’s duration. In 4/4 (common) time, an eighth note lasts  $\frac{1}{2}$  beat, and a sixteenth note lasts  $\frac{1}{4}$  beat. Adding one half of  $\frac{1}{2}$  to itself causes that first note to last three-fourths ( $\frac{3}{4}$ ) of a beat. When combined with the sixteenth note, their sum is exactly one beat ( $\frac{3}{4} + \frac{1}{4}$ ).

If this is too confusing (especially if the song is new), play the first two notes as if they were each an eighth note. The way they are written (a dotted eighth and a sixteenth) gives a syncopated feel to the first two notes. You will encounter either this combination or ones like it (dotted quarter followed by an eighth, for example) often. They become idiomatic and automatic, once you get the feel of them.

The curved line between the first two notes is called a **slur**. For different musical instruments it has different meanings. For example, a trumpeter would play these first two notes without using the tongue to cut off the first note before playing the second; thus slurring from one note to the next just by pushing different valves. For an MD player, this is sometimes a good place to try a hammer-on, or a pull-off.

The curved line between notes of the same pitch, as in the second measure, is called a **tie**. It is not the same as a slur. Usually it means to simply hold that note for the sum of the durations of the individual notes. That is often required when a note must be held from one measure to the next. In this case it is used in an idiomatic folk-tune sense. Looking at the lyrics you’ll notice that sometimes a single word or syllable covers a full beat (quarter note duration) in one verse, while in another verse there are two syllables or words in

the same beat. Thus the tie here represents that sometimes the note is simply held, while at other times it is repeated, depending on the lyrics. For all practical purposes, you can ignore the ties here and just play each note, especially when you consider the short sustain of an MD string.

The “bird’s eye” in the second to the last line means to hold that note a little longer for effect.

## Down in the Valley

I’ve purposely transposed [Down in the Valley](#) into an odd key to show that the principle still holds the same. If you look at the last note of this piece it is at the same place as the first two pieces. Never mind that it has flat symbols (they look like little b letters, but crooked). You can play this piece as if it were still in the key of D, like the other two. Also notice that the very first note is -3 compared to the open space just below the bottom staff line. You should already know what to do about that by now. In the second line you’ll also see a note that is -1 from the base note. Recall that 0 is also the same as the third fret in the middle string, so -1 is the second fret.

This piece also introduces a new timing. There are only 3 beats in each measure, but each quarter ( $\frac{1}{4}$ ) note still gets one beat. This is also known as waltz timing. The dotted half notes get  $\frac{1}{2}$  of their duration added back into themselves, which is 2 beats plus 1 beat equals 3 beats. Thus, a dotted half note lasts an entire measure.

When writing the name of a key that is either sharp or flat, the sharp or flat is placed *after* the letter, as in C# (not #C). (Which is opposite of how an “accidental” sharp or flat is introduced in the staff, where they are placed *before* the note they apply to.)

## Buffalo Gals

Now it’s time to “play pretend.” Download and print [this piece](#). There isn’t a whole lot of new ideas here; but there is an important one. We’ll still be playing even frets (and open) when notes are in a space and odd frets when notes are on a line.

The difference is that this piece ends with a note that is between the bottom 2 lines of the staff, rather than just under the bottom line. To handle this new key, we simply pretend that the staff got shifted underneath our notes! The notes are now a whole space (2 positions) higher than they were. The “base” note is between the bottom 2 lines.

The open position is now between the bottom 2 lines, the first fret is on the second line, the second fret is on the second space, and so on. Play this piece using the key of D, as usual. The relative positions have shifted, but they look very much the same. I’ve included the fret positions for the first few melody notes to avoid confusion. Because the first note is 2 open spaces above our new “base” note, it is at fret 4.

A footnote in the PDF explains the new time signature symbol, a C with a line through it. You can think of it as being much the same as 4/4. It just “feels” a little faster and rolling.

## Amazing Grace

This time I didn’t try to pick a piece that was new to you. However, do not cheat and play [this piece](#) by memory, or in the key of G. I deliberately transposed it to an odd key. You will play it in the key of D (not G).

Notice that the last note is between the second and third lines (from the bottom) of the staff. So it’s time to pretend again. The open spaces are still the even frets and the lines are the odd frets. But now you have to pretend like those staff lines shifted again.

The first note is 3 positions down from the base note; that is -3. As we’ve seen before, that is played on the open middle string. Take a minute to get used to where the new open melody string position is on the staff (that is, the base note). Then do your best to **read** the music. Don’t play by memory or by ear.

This piece has an example of using a **tie** to make a note last from within one measure into the next. You don’t play the note twice. You just hold it for the overall duration of the two note lengths.

## Part 2: Pieces starting from Lines in SMN

### Go Tell Aunt Rhody

Now it's time to switch gears. The concepts remain the same. But in part 2 we are going to play everything in G. Either tune to G or use a capo on your third fret. **Notice that in part 2, all even-tabbed notes** (open, second fret, ...) **are on staff lines, while all odd-tabbed notes** (first fret, third fret, ...) **are on open spaces.**

Give yourself some time to mentally switch gears as you play [this piece](#). The first measure is another quick reference for the rest of the piece. Notice that we start on the second line of the staff for the open position, and on up.

### Red Wing

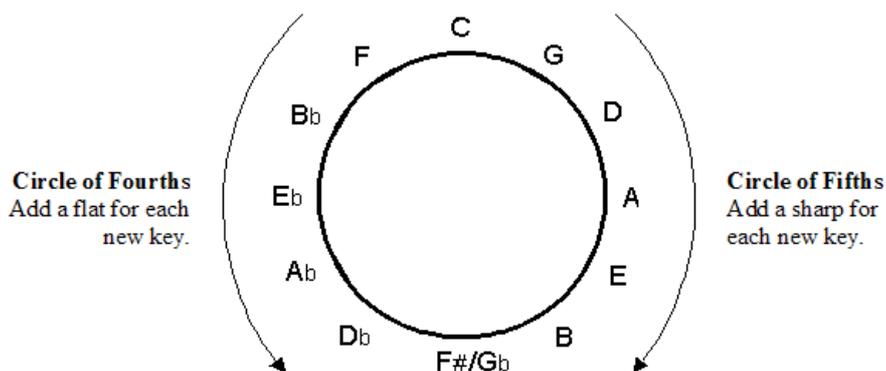
Here's [another piece](#) in G, same as the last piece. So the base note is at the same position. I've added in a description of how this piece is counted. You are probably already familiar with repeat notation from hymn and song books. At the end of the second line you repeat back to the first *full* measure. The second time through you skip to the second part of the repeat instead of the last 2 measures of the second line.

### The Church in the Wildwood

[This last piece](#) is in the key of C. I've added a reference measure at the beginning. As with the key of G, lines represent even frets and open spaces represent odd frets. You'll play this in the key of G. Just pretend that the staff got shifted again (who keeps doing that?!?). Even though the first note of the piece starts on the second line, as with Red Wing, remember that everything was shifted down. So you start on the fourth fret. The last note of the piece ends, not on the open melody string, but on the seventh fret, which is one octave higher. You'll also see a tie used again where the lyrics sometimes have 2 syllables and sometimes only 1.

### Cheat Sheets

The Circle of Fifths...



...is a quick reference that shows how the different keys relate to each other. The key of C has no sharps or flats in SMN. As you go clockwise each new key has one more sharp than the previous. As you go counter-clockwise each new key has one more flat than the previous.

The name *Circle of Fifths* comes from the fact that the key note of each key in the clockwise direction is the fifth interval of the preceding key (intervals in music theory start with I on the key note, II is the next note, and so on). We often call the counter-clockwise direction the *Circle of Fourths* because the key note of each key in that direction is the fourth interval of the preceding key.

A musician playing the real key of F-sharp (not transposing, as we have been doing here) plays the exact same notes as they would when playing the key of G-flat. Most of the time pieces in this "enharmonic" relationship are scored using G-flat. Likewise, the key of D-flat could be C-sharp, but usually isn't rendered that way, except in some classical pieces where C-sharp minor is used; and the key of B could be C-flat, which is even more uncommon.

The following cheat sheets summarize the concepts we've seen in this article, and also explain how you can tell what key a piece is in (for Major keys) from the key signature.

[Cheat Sheet 1](#)

[Cheat Sheet 2](#)

[Cheat Sheet 3](#)