

Chinese Music Notation Explained in Western Terms

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The writing system is pretty straightforward. It's like "do-re-mi" in singing. The notes of the scale are written as numbers: 1234567. The octaves are designated by dots below or above the numbers, so a typical scale could be:

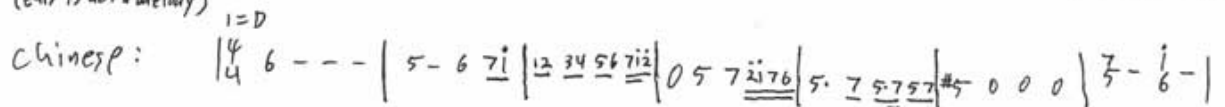
1̇ 2̇ 3̇ 4̇ 5̇ 6̇ 7̇ | 1̇ 2̇ 3̇ 4̇ 5̇ 6̇ 7̇ | 1̇ 2̇ 3̇ 4̇ 5̇ 6̇ 7̇ | 1̇ 2̇ 3̇ 4̇ ...

Unlike Western music, the written note does not always correspond to the same pitch. That is, the whole piece is written out in numbers and at the beginning of the piece, it will say "1 = D" or "1 = G" or "1 = F", etc. So Chinese musicians are very good at transposing; you could have a whole orchestra playing a piece written in the key of D and they could decide to play it in the key of A instead. A western orchestra could never do that! There is no distinction between major and minor keys. If a piece is really in a minor key, say in the key of A minor, it will be written as "1 = C" but the melody will be based on the note A.

Quarter notes, eighth notes, etc. are designated with lines that are similar to the western system. Here are examples:

western: 

(this is not a melody) 1=D

chinese: 

Note: The key could be different; if it said 1=A, then the first note would be "2" - etc.

Rests are written as "0"

Sharps and flats are like western music

How do you know which octave on the piano keyboard corresponds to a number with no dots below or above? You pretty much have to guess by the context of the piece; if you make sure none of the notes in your part are too low for your instrument, you probably have it right!