



Analyzing Visual Mappings of Traditional and Alternative Music Notation



Matthias Miller*

Johannes Häußler*

Matthias Kraus*

Daniel Keim*

Mennatallah El-Assady*

University of Konstanz

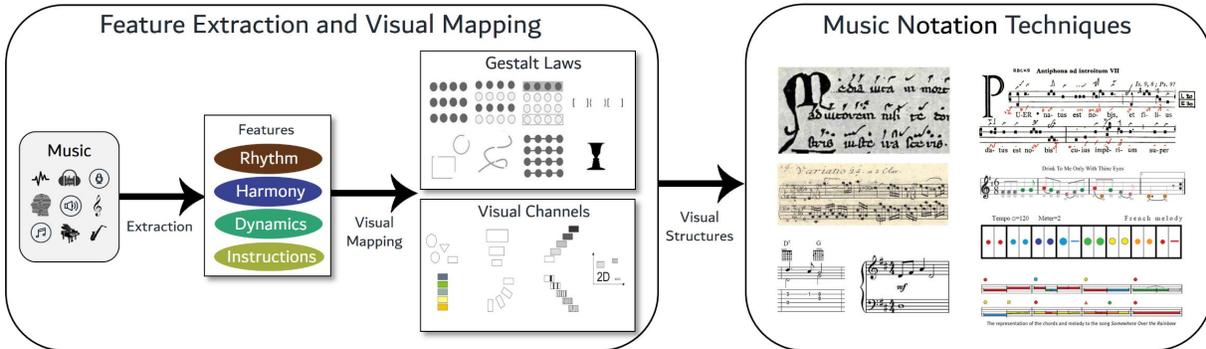


Figure 1: Segmenting music into its basic features to design and apply task-dependent visual encodings, based on visual channels and Gestalt laws. Exploiting the whole range of the *music notation design space* enables a variety of novel music notation techniques.

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we postulate that combining the domains of information visualization and music studies paves the ground for a more structured analysis of the design space of music notation, enabling the creation of alternative music notations that are tailored to different users and their tasks. Hence, we discuss the instantiation of a *design and visualization pipeline for music notation* that follows a structured approach, based on the fundamental concepts of information and data visualization. This enables practitioners and researchers of digital humanities and information visualization, alike, to conceptualize, create, and analyze novel music notation methods. Based on the analysis of relevant stakeholders and their usage of music notation as a mean of communication, we identify a set of relevant features typically encoded in different annotations and encodings, as used by interpreters, performers, and readers of music. We analyze the visual mappings of musical dimensions for varying notation methods to highlight gaps and frequent usages of encodings, visual channels, and Gestalt laws. This detailed analysis leads us to the conclusion that such an under-researched area in information visualization holds the potential for fundamental research. This paper discusses possible research opportunities, open challenges, and arguments that can be pursued in the process of analyzing, improving, or rethinking existing music notation systems and techniques.

Keywords: Music analysis, music notation, visual mapping, visualization pipeline, information visualization, design guidelines

1 INTRODUCTION

Ever since the earliest recordings of ancient cultures and societies, music has been an evident and integral part of the cultural experience and societal identity [19]. Musical instruments and tools have been discovered in archaeological sites, while paintings, scriptures, and folktale records form an indisputable trail that highlights the development of music through human history [35]. However, as evident as the human desire to express feelings and emotions through music

is part of our history [18], the preservation of the melodies of our past has been a continually changing, unguided process, influenced by many factors [25].

To preserve music as part of their culture and to form a distinct identity, human societies strove to find methods that would allow them to pass such knowledge on, to later generations. Music was initially only transmitted orally [42]. However, due to the fading collective memories over centuries, there always existed a desire for a more accurate method of capturing and preserving musical creations [31]. Consequently, the development of the first musical notations emerged and started with a simple approach: curved lines, also called neumes [43], were displayed over text to indicate the relative pitch for singers. Over time, the methods for music notation were altered and refined, depending on the purpose and objective of the music notation [39]. This serendipitous development in different cultures and times in history led to a diversity of notation systems for various application areas and instruments.

Musical notation standardizations emerged due to the predominance of some representations, which finally led to the western, *traditional* music notation that has been established as the norm we are used to all over the world. This well-known **Common Music Notation (CMN)** [37] allows experienced musicians to understand how a composition should sound, solely by reading musical expressions [20]. Such expressions are commonly represented as notes on paper that are structured in a predefined notation system. Thus, one central purpose of music notation is to assist musicians with the accurate communication, interpretation, and reproducibility of compositions [7]. CMN enables the capturing of musical aspects for creators and composers likewise to conserve their ideas, unambiguously. Hence, composers use music notation to communicate with performers, providing instructions on how a composition should be musically interpreted and reproduced [22]. However, the creation and standardization of a seemingly universal notation is challenging [10]. For example, depending on the instrument, musicians use different notations [16]. Due to the varying pitch ranges between instruments, different types of clefs exist to facilitate the discrimination of music notations between instruments. Likewise, singers require other musical representations compared to instrumentalists to understand their parts.

* e-mail: lastname@dbvis.inf.uni-konstanz.de

Due to the gradual development of notation over multiple centuries, the CMN is a result of a long-term, historical development process. For instance, one bottleneck for a wide distribution was the lack of availability of printing color at the beginning of mass printing for the reproduction of music scores on paper. Similarly, the technological progress and digitization had not yet reached the point of using interactivity or motion. From the information visualization research perspective, these historically grounded limits on the design space of music notation may have led to an established representation which does not exploit the full potential of all available techniques and encodings. For example, according to Flach et al. dyslexic individuals benefit from using an alternative notation exploiting other visual cues, enabling them to better distinguish the pitch of notes which is more difficult using the CMN [13]. Current research in the domain of information visualization provides means for a more structured approach to the design of music notation.

Hence, we postulate that bridging the domains of information visualization and music opens up space for a structured analysis of music notation and a thorough exploration of its visual design space. Such an endeavor opens up paths to novel and original research, tailoring music notation to different users and their tasks.

Considering different application fields and existing music notation techniques, this paper contributes a structured analysis of the visual design space of music notation. We define the span of the design space to integrate and analyze the state-of-the-art visualization techniques of various music notations. In doing so, we obtain means to identify benefits and drawbacks of different visual encodings. In addition, our approach enables a systematic and comparative analysis of different concepts, concerning their effectiveness by applying the Gestalt laws. Finally, these considerations reveal potential research gaps and opportunities in the domain of music notation visualization.

2 BACKGROUND

Depicting music in a visual form is a complex task containing several representation issues [10]. The existence of a vast variety of different music notations shows that it is overly complicated to encode all musical features into a single and consistent system because of the limited number of visual encoding channels. Designing a notation system requires one to make fundamental design decisions that depend on the target audience and the application area. Making such design decisions limits the range of possible applications which is acceptable if some use cases are well-supported even though other tasks are not. One reason why specialized notation is restricted is loss of information. For instance, tailoring a notation system to a specific instrument makes reading more difficult for musicians who are not acquainted with the instrument. A further reason is that music is subject to a continuing progress due to the development of new instruments, genres, and even rearrangements of existing works, making it impossible to take features into account that will be introduced at a later point in time. The range of application of music notation can be divided into categories (examples are given by reference), which contain but are not limited to (live) performance [15, 40], analysis [28], art [21, 32], education [45], instrument support [34], composition [3], and entertainment [14].

Dannenbergh states that the diversity between the single categories requires one to view music and its structure based on different levels of representation, since each notation design may contain information that is not available in other systems [10]. For instance, to analyze music, often abstract transformations are used to provide means of comparison that enable analysts to detect patterns and differences of musical pieces instead of focusing on single details [36]. Among others, music analysts are interested in understanding the harmonic progressions and relationship of a musical piece. Malandrino et al. propose a visualization approach to emphasize the harmonic structure of a composition by employing color to indicate tonal

progressions [27]. Many approaches that propose an instrument-oriented design can also be assigned to the category ‘Education’ since visual metaphors that are based on the visual appearance of the respective instrument provide high potential for learning a new instrument. For example, Dascăluș et al. utilize the keyboard design to create an instrument teaching platform for adult learners [11].

To summarize the broad range of music notation systems into a single framework, we first span a *Music Notation Design Space*.

3 MUSIC NOTATION DESIGN SPACE

Visually representing music requires a suitable mapping from heterogeneous input formats to visual channels. If music exists in audio format, extracting structural features is necessary before applying a visual encoding. Since the visualization or notational representation of music is ambiguous, even existing visual representations can be examined and altered to be restructured to support different situations. Music is an intricate form of art containing both structural, as harmony or rhythm, and non-structural properties like emotion and imagination. The former is mathematically formalizable. Nevertheless, there are multiple attributes of music that hardly can be communicated using formal notation. For instance, performing music often involves a specific level of expressiveness when interpreted that is difficult to formalize or to visually encode. Consequently, dealing with music as notation entails several representational issues. This problem of representation is responsible for the existing variety of different musical representations. To analyze existing music notation specifications, we necessitate extracting musical features that are commonly used to visually represent music. Due to the hierarchical structure of music, we introduce a determined level of abstraction in subdividing music into four meta-features which comprise concrete musical dimensions each of which can be subject to visual representation in musical notation systems.

3.1 Musical meta-features and notational dimensions

We suggest a set of meta-features that can be extracted from music each of which characterizes a unique musical attribute. Every meta-feature contains multiple dimensions that describe its specific musical part in detail. Subsequently, we consider music to be generally a composition of *rhythm*, *harmony*, *dynamics*, and *instructions* (see Step 1 in Fig. 2).

Rhythm describes the tempo (beats per minute) or speed including meter and time signatures. Pauses also belong to *rhythm*, since they influence the rhythmic movement or flow in music. *Rhythm* is the cause why music can be categorized and analyzed as time-series data and is a fundamental aspect in the design of music notation.

Harmony depends on how multiple tones simultaneously compose specific pitch levels. This co-occurrence of notes determines the harmonic progression of a musical piece. In music notation, one must differentiate between accidental and normal notes. Moreover, the range of a given part is defined by the octaves or height of note. We assign duration to be part of every note since varying tone lengths directly affect the harmonic behavior. Often, dynamics is used to describe the loudness or the development of intensity including the transitions between different volume levels as well as accents and abrupt changes of the musical progression.

Dynamics comprises volume (or intensity), articulation and phrasing since phrasing and volume are frequently combined to partition music into connected segments. Besides, articulation also shapes musical dynamics in combination with intensity and phrasing.

Instructions encapsulate contextual notational information such as timbre, arrangement, baseline and which finger should be used to play a specific note. ‘Arrangement’ includes the structure of a musical piece comprising repetitions and instrumentation. Instrumentation influences the timbre and is regarded as a separate dimension which is often implicitly represented. Depending on the instrument,

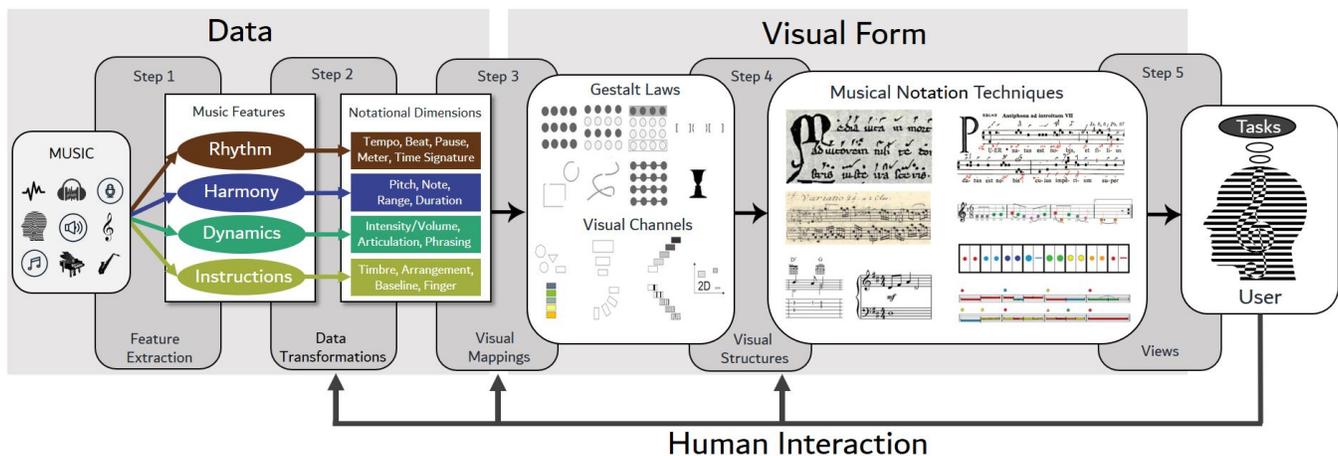


Figure 2: Our proposed *Music Notation Visualization Pipeline* is based on Card et al.’s Information Visualization Reference Model [5]. Transforming musical data into visual music notation as a multi-step process including extraction of musical features (Step 1), data transformation (Step 2), visual mapping (Step 3) and encoding into visual structures (Step 4). Moreover, allowing users to interact with the system and changing the notation enables customization on views (Step 5) and enables notation improvement to fit the users’ tasks.

the CMN uses different baselines encoded by respective clefs at the beginning of the notation indicating the pitch of the displayed notes.

3.2 Users and Tasks

Different types of users need suitable music representations: music composers must be able to expressively communicate their thoughts by symbols, signs and other instructions. They achieve this by mapping musical thoughts to be structured and represented in such a way that the composed music can be reconstructed as imagined by the author. In contrast, performers should be provided with a musical notation that is easy to understand and suitable for the instrument they are playing. The notation of a musical piece can vary between different instruments to meet task-oriented requirements. Imagine a musical director, who must be aware of all instrument parts of a whole orchestra. Providing an overview of all involved instruments in this case is beneficial. On the contrary, single instrumentalists do not profit from such an orchestra notation, but could be even distracted while playing their own part. This example emphasizes the role and importance of different music notations for diverse tasks. Learning an instrument is another field of application: understanding the CMN can be a challenging task. Tailoring music notation to the user while using intuitive representations such as visual instrument metaphors supports novices during the learning process. Rather abstract representations are useful for music analysts who are more interested in patterns, progressions, and general differences between musical pieces than in specific details.

3.3 Visual Mapping of Musical Dimensions

Simultaneously representing multiple features by visual cues is substantial when it comes to providing musical notation information. During the design process of music notation, considering the *Gestalt Laws* is helpful to estimate the effectiveness of a visual cue. Since visual variables are the foundation for information visualization, which musical notation is a subset of, we take Bertin’s seven visual variables into account: *position, size, shape, value, color, orientation, and texture* [2]. Munzner extends this list by *motion, curvature, volume, and spatial region*. Munzner divides the visual channels into *magnitude channels*, which comprise ordered attributes, and *identity channels* that should be used to encode rather categorical data attributes which does not have an implicit and natural ordering [29].

It is useful to order the magnitude channels by effectiveness to reasonably apply visual channels in designing visualizations [6]. Based on Munzner’s discussion, we ordered the different visual

magnitude channels from best to least starting with ‘*position on common scale*’ (top) to ‘*Volume (3D size)*’ (bottom) in Table 1. This sorting facilitates the comparison of different visual encodings by effectiveness. Moreover, readers can get a better distribution overview of how musical features are visually encoded. Applying different visual mappings between concepts avoids confusion when reading a designed music notation.

3.4 Music Notation Visualization Pipeline

We designed a pipeline to model the required transformation steps for the processing from musical data to a visual representation that is based on the Information Visualization Reference Model from Card et al. (see Fig. 2) [5]. In the first step, extracting musical features is required to transform the music information into a finite set of dimensions that can be potentially converted into visual form. Of course, depending on the original data format, music can contain elements such as emotions, nuances, or performance interpretation that cannot be easily visualized and conveyed to the user. During the extraction process, the loss of information should be minimized to preserve relevant information. The visual mapping and the creation of visual structures is a task- and user-oriented process to meet the users’ needs. Allowing the user to alter transformations and to influence the represented music notation provides flexibility. In some cases, users may benefit from restricted modification opportunities to maintain the quality of music representations. For example, fundamental attributes such as beat, notes, pitch, and duration should always be present. Since the traditional visualization pipeline model is designed on a rather abstract level that requires the used data to be homogeneous in order to process transformation and create different views, we state that music features must be extracted before applying well-known visualization techniques. Due to the abstract level it may require additional preprocessing steps to translate musical features to be able to process them using our proposed pipeline.

4 TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE MUSIC NOTATIONS

Besides Common Music Notation, many different approaches have been proposed in different application domains such as research or teaching to reduce drawbacks of the CMN. These rather experimental notation concepts often use different visual channels to exploit the potential of unused visual variables. In Table 1, we provide an overview of different musical notation techniques based on categories of visual channels and Gestalt laws introduced in Sect. 3. Our objective is to indicate possible visual mappings that have not been

We argue that our design and visualization pipeline for music notation (see Fig. 2) is also applicable to develop methods for music fingerprinting to compare music regarding different epochs and styles, or to compare the visual encoding of music visualizations. For instance, a well-established mapping for some notational feature could be deployed in a higher level visualization, showing, for example, the trend of a musical feature throughout the entire musical piece. Visualization techniques as pixel visualizations, glyphs, or others could be applied to visually analyze larger amounts of musical data and enable comparison between musical pieces.

6 CONCLUSION

We introduced a design and visualization pipeline for music notation based on fundamental information visualization research. This approach can be used to compare existing music notation designs and to develop new techniques that are tailored to different users and their tasks. Thus, we bridge the research field of data visualization and the field of music representation in a structured way. An exemplary classification of fifteen notation systems indicates how musical features can be encoded. The table can be used as a starting point for a full survey of existing music notation techniques.

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