The Musical Classroom[†]

When people see music notation

- Some see lines, dots, letters, and other markings
- Some can sing or play the music on an instrument and learn how it sounds
- Some hear the music as they read the notation

Imagine that two groups of students are taught music as a pencil-and-paper subject. They are all shown the five-line stave, with the curly 'treble' sign at the beginning and taught that the marks on the lines are called E, G, B, D, F. Marks between the lines are called F, A, C, E. They learn that the vertical line with an open oval at the top or bottom is called a half note and is worth two similar figures with blacked-in ovals – called quarter notes. The half notes are also worth four eighth notes – vertical lines with tails and blacked in ovals, and so on and so forth: musical multiplication tables if you like.

For one group of students, all their learning is of this kind and nothing more. If they have a music lesson a day, five days a week in school terms, and are told that it is important, these students could in time probably learn to write out the marks for simple melodies like "Ode to Joy" and "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik". They would also be able to solve simple problems such as 'What time signature is this music in?' and even transpose a melody from C major to A major. They would find it boring, and the rules to be memorized would be so numerous that problems like 'Write a simple accompaniment for this melody' would be too difficult for most. They would give up the subject as soon as possible and remember it with dislike.

The other group is taught to connect certain sounds with the marks on paper. For the first few years these sounds are always made in the classroom, which they can make themselves on simple instruments. After a time they can still imagine sound whenever they see or write the marks on paper, and play it or sing it when the need or desire arises. When they see a several marks horizontally on paper, they hear or associate a melody or musical tune – and when they see notes lined up more or less vertically they hear or see harmony. The keys of C major and A major have a relationship they can hear and remember, and so on. Much less memory work is involved, and what has to be remembered is largely in the form of related groups of things (such as melodies and harmonies) which their minds easily retain. All of the exercises mentioned earlier would be within the ability of most. These students would also find their learning pleasant and many would continue it voluntarily, even beyond high school and college.

[†] Adapted from: R. Skemp. *Relational Understanding and Instrumental Understanding*. Arithmetic Teacher, 26(3), p.9-15.