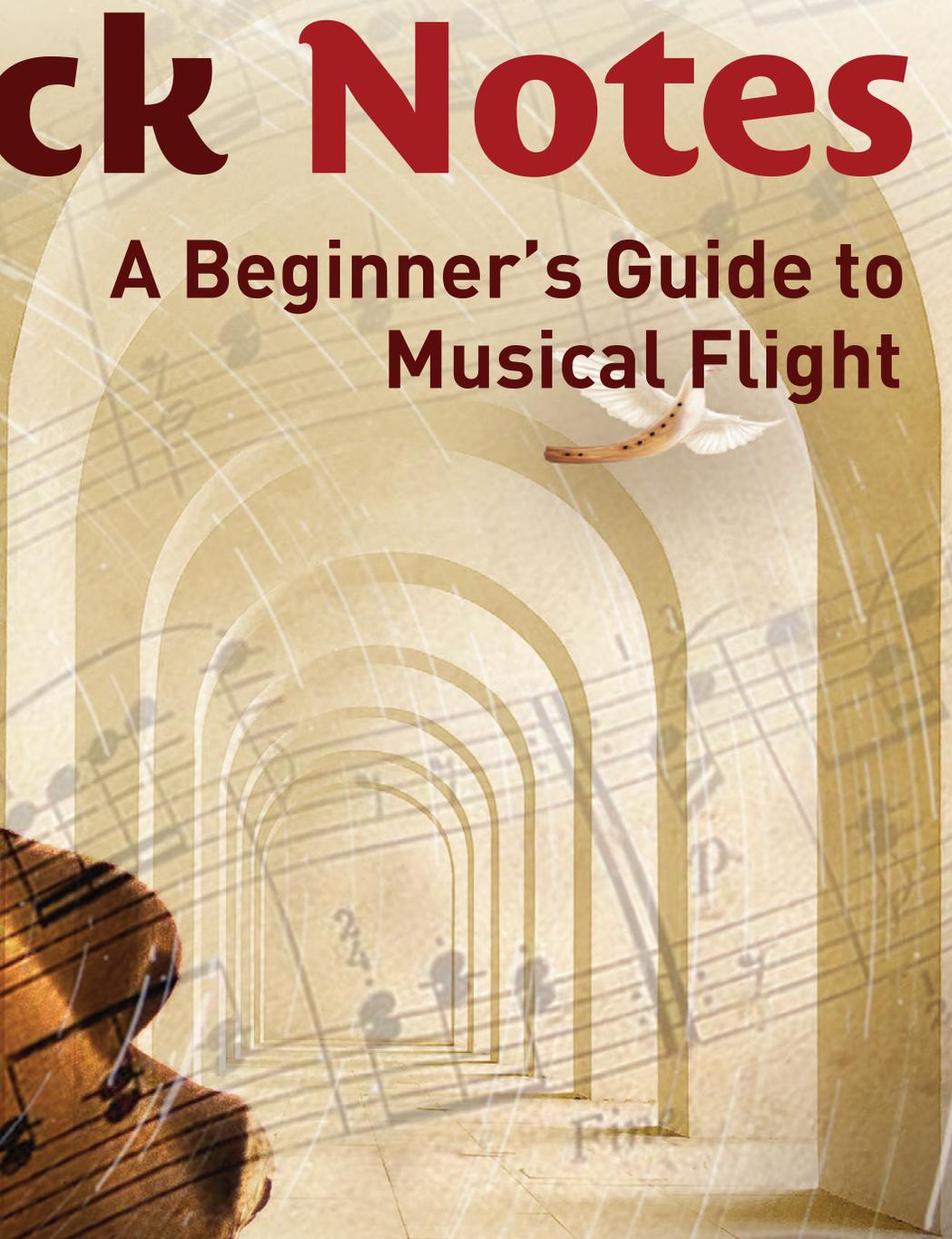


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The

# Black Notes

A Beginner's Guide to  
Musical Flight



A dear friend of mine is the father to a brilliantly gifted boy named Daniel. Daniel was studying oboe and piano. During one visit to their home, when Daniel was 12 years old, his mother asked him to play piano for me. She thought I might be able to help Daniel develop more discipline with his musical studies by helping him better appreciate the importance of practicing. Daniel had a good ear, so he didn't have to practice much to learn new pieces. He also had an extremely active and intelligent mind and, like most 12-year-olds, was a bit impatient.

I took a seat at their beautiful Steinway grand piano and looked at the open piece of music he had been practicing. I asked him if he would play for me. Daniel sat down next to me on the piano bench, with his mother watching from the couch, and started playing the piece from his latest lesson. He rushed through the difficult passages, getting frustrated with himself and stopping when he made a mistake. He then quickly picked back up where he left off and rushed through to the end. It was almost as if Daniel was playing notes to score points in a video game. His brain was highly engaged and his fingers were following suit, but his body and breath were completely disconnected.

Daniel didn't need my help to become more disciplined or to learn better performance techniques. He already had a classically trained, qualified piano teacher for that. What Daniel needed was a way to experience his relationship with the piano differently—to step back from his drive to score points with me, his teacher, and his mother. My challenge was to help him let go of his self-judgment and experience playing his instrument like he experienced listening to his favorite piece of music: in a way that filled him with joy and resonated within every cell in his body.

## **A New Kind of Music Lesson**

I asked Daniel if he would try something new for me. He agreed. Still seated next to him on the piano bench, I instructed Daniel to close his eyes, sit up tall, and start breathing deep and long into his diaphragm. Once he was relaxed and more in touch with his breath and body, I asked Daniel to place his hands on the piano, but without depressing any keys.

Next, I asked Daniel to play one note or interval at a time, restricting him to only playing the black notes. Meanwhile, I controlled the piano's sustain pedal with my foot. Because the black notes are arranged in

a pentatonic scale with no dissonant intervals, this meant that Daniel couldn't play a wrong note. More importantly, it meant he didn't have to think and could continue to stay mindful of his body and breathing. Once out of his thinking mind, Daniel could relax and let the sound from the piano wash over him, fill him up like his breath, and draw him more deeply into the resonant field of music moving through him.

Daniel's mom looked on while for the next several minutes Daniel's fingers glided across the black keys and he surrendered to the beautiful, almost unpredictable, melodies and harmonies emanating from the piano. It was as if the piano were playing Daniel. The look on his face was a mixture of awe and bliss.

When he finally took pause and opened his eyes, ten full minutes had passed. Daniel's mom, looking on from the couch with amazement, asked him, "What did that feel like?"

A glossy-eyed Daniel replied, "I was flying! It's like I was flying. I never felt like that before."

"What Daniel experienced is something anyone can tap into while playing music—but only when they are not trapped by expectations set by themselves and others, by the dissonant vibrations that can come from mismatched notes, or by the technical challenges of becoming competent with a musical instrument. This is a feeling we can all discover once we get out of our own heads. This is a place beyond performance—an experience of the love music has for us. And for you.

When you let the sound of an instrument become one with your breath and allow it to resonate through your body, you can awaken the genie within you. You can unleash one of your most powerful human attributes: your imagination. And yes, you can even learn to fly.

## **Letting Music Play *You***

When I was in college, I heard a song by Graham Nash called "The Black Notes."<sup>1</sup> The lyrics go like this:

*Sit yourself down at the piano*

*Just about in the middle*

*Put all your fingers on the black notes*

*Anywhere you want to  
Sing along, write a song  
And understand that you can play*

I have since adopted the principles of this song for the exercise I taught Daniel. It is meant to help people experience the love music has for them. This is a state that often takes a masterful musician years to learn: to move beyond performance and let the music play *you*.

I have used this exercise on many occasions: to show non musicians how to play, and enjoy playing, the piano in just ten minutes; to help highly trained musicians shift out of their automated and highly critical performance mode so they can more deeply connect to the essence of music within them; and to help clients take a reprise from their busy days, open up their creativity, or learn to meditate using the piano. If you have access to a piano, you can create this elated experience, too.

## **Why the Black Notes?**

You may recall the story I shared in Chapter 1 of singer Bobby McFerrin leading an audience through an exercise using the pentatonic scale. Everyone knew the last note before he sang it. The pentatonic scale is at once simple and universal, and can be heard in a myriad of genres, from folk to pop to traditional music.

The relationship to your emotional state, or mood, is also fascinating. While there are five variations (also known as modes) of a given pentatonic scale, they all use the same five notes and intervals (relationship between the notes). The only difference is that you start on a different note. Where you start changes the mode, or mood, created by the scale.

While many theories and countless debates exist on the universality of the pentatonic scale and its effect on our state of being, we need only look at the laws of nature and the scientific principles of physics to understand it. The first step is to unwind the linear scale and stack the notes in the way they already exist within nature, using their natural harmonic relationship, or the overtone series. When any given note is played (the root note) and allowed to fully resonate, a stack of typically inaudible pitches known as the overtone series resonates above the original pitch in a perfect harmonic relationship.

This natural harmonic architecture relies on an organizing principle and set of building blocks known as the perfect fifth. The perfect fifth is the next most common harmonic interval to the octave. The overtone series is nature's way of organizing sound. It is one of the reasons a single note masterfully played on a violin can sound so rich—at once simple and complex. This complexity exists because there are additional harmonics resonating from the note you predominantly perceive.

The pentatonic scale is simply the first five notes we get when we play that overtone series—that stack of perfect fifths—in the closest proximity to one another. The vibrational field of each note and the relationship between them exist within nature and within us, whether or not we play the additional four notes. Our systems, however, innately understand this relationship, which is why McFerrin's audience all knew the missing note.

While the further intricacies and applications of overtones are beyond the scope of this book, you can begin to see how the harmonious relationship of a natural system—be it your own mind and body, the world of nature, or the cosmos—and that of music are fundamentally one and the same. And why there is much more to the Black Notes than a random set of pitches.

It also helps us see why so many great scientists and philosophers, from Pythagoras to Einstein, looked to the structures of music to understand the nature of the universe. And more importantly, why they chose to use music to personally and fully experience its wonder. Nikola Tesla reminded us, "If you want to find the secrets of the universe, think in terms of energy, frequency, and vibration." These are the underlying physical principles of sound, life, and music.

## **A Beginner's Guide to Musical Flight**

Whether you are a musical pro or have never placed your hands on the piano before, I highly recommend the Black Notes exercise that follows. It is a great way to introduce someone to the piano for the first time or reintroduce yourself to it with a different experience than you might have originally had. Think of it as a meditation or mindfulness exercise, but through music. Rather than being the performer, you become a receiver of healing sounds played by the piano.

Go ahead, try it. Take a leap of faith and see if you, like Daniel, can feel what it's like to fly on the wings of music.

*“Prayer is when you talk to God. Meditation is when you're listening.*

*Playing the piano allows you to do both at the same time.”*

*—Kelsey Grammer*

## **Exercise: The Black Notes**

**Note:** You will need a piano for this exercise; an acoustic piano is highly recommended. This can also be a fun exercise for two people to do together, sitting side by side at the piano.

1. Set aside ten minutes of uninterrupted time, and find a piano in a quiet room, where you will not be disturbed.
2. Sit up straight on a bench or chair at the center of the piano, with your feet flat on the floor.
3. Place your hands on the keyboard so your fingers rest on the black notes. Position your arms slightly wider than your shoulders, with your elbows relaxed at your side.
4. Close your eyes and begin to breathe deeply through your nose, filling your abdomen with air and then rolling the breath up into your chest and up and over your shoulders.
5. As you exhale, pull your naval in toward your spine, sit more deeply in the chair, and relax the area around your jaw and throat.
6. Do three to five of these breaths. If you wish, you can add movement by gliding your fingertips along the surface of the black notes. Open your arms on the inhale by gliding your fingers out to the extremities of the keyboard, and then gliding them back to your starting position on the exhale.
7. Place the ball of your right foot over the sustain pedal (the pedal on the right).
8. Keeping a relaxed but steady breath and an upright seated position, play some of the black notes and depress the sustain pedal. Allow for a long pause following the first few notes, during which you should listen as deeply as possible to the slow decay of the sound, breathing the sound into every cell of your body.
9. Listen deeply and let your intuition guide you on which notes to play. Keep enough time between notes, chords, or phrases to tune back into your breathing and the tailing off of the sound from the notes.

10. Don't open your eyes, and don't play any white notes.

As you do this exercise, imagine the music is playing you, filling you with the vibration of sound and guiding you. Keep in mind that there are no mistakes and no wrong notes. If the sound starts to cluster and become muddy, release the sustain pedal and depress it after you play more notes. Let go of any judgment, distractions, or impatience—and remember to smile! If you lose track of your breath or find yourself tensing up or slouching, pause or slow down until you can re-center yourself and reconnect to your breath and to a totally relaxed state.

You may create melodic figures or combinations of notes that form harmonies. You may repeat patterns, create longer phrases, or stay formless. Let the music guide you, fill you, surround you.

When you feel complete, play a closing note or chord, and let it ring out as long as it will. Notice as it transitions into silence and know that it is still resonating in the microscopic chambers of your trillions of cells. Return to your breath and your body. Keep your eyes closed for a few moments and return your hands to their starting positions, with your feet firmly on the floor. Feel the difference in the energy inside and around you.

Not everyone plays music, but music plays within everyone. The organizing principle of music is fundamental to your essential nature and to the natural order of the universe. If you play music or sing, you may have already experienced that moment when you are no longer simply playing the music, but rather it is playing *you*. I spoke about this change of roles in my story about writing the song “Call on Me” in an earlier chapter.

When you have achieved a level of ease with your instrument or your voice, you can surrender to the music. You might feel as if you have become the instrument of some higher, more intelligent force that has taken charge and is playing through you. If you become too caught up in the psychological aspect of performing, the mental processing in your head, or the physicality of playing, however, you can miss out on some of the most rewarding experiences of playing music. But if you give yourself permission, you become the instrument through which the music expresses herself.