Morse Code for Musicians

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A	S
B	T
C	U
D	V
E	W
F	X
G	Y
H	Z
I	1
J	2
K	3
L	4
M	5
N	6
O	7
P	8
Q	9
R	0

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Practice this passage to learn every letter!

If you can read music, you have a superpower for learning the rhythm of Morse code!

Morse code is made up of short dots ("dits") and long dashes ("dahs"). Telegraph operators were originally meant to read marks visually on paper tape, but they soon learned to decode ("copy") more quickly by ear.

The international standard for Morse code includes timing requirements that give the code a distinct rhythm, and learning this rhythm is an important part of learning Morse code.

- dot: one time unit
- dash: three units
- intra-character space: one unit
- inter-character space: three units
- inter-word space: seven units

Assigning a quarter note to the time unit results in a precise representation of Morse code in music notation. This is perfect when first learning, but it is very slow. To achieve even a beginner speed of 5 words per minute (WPM), this notation must be read at a blistering tempo of 250 beats per minute (BPM).

Notice that every mark (dot or dash) starts on a beat, even if you read the rhythm in cut time. Also notice that every mark is followed by a quarter rest.

To increase speed we could assign a sixteenth note to the time unit, but that would produce a dense sea of sixteenth rests, one after every mark.

We can omit those sixteenth rests with the understanding that Morse code is played in a staccato style. Instead of a sixteenth note followed by a sixteenth rest, a dot is written as an eighth note. Instead of a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth rest, a dash is written as a quarter note. This greatly improves readability, eliminating intra-character spaces and shortening other spaces.

In cut time, this concise, syncopated notation yields a respectable speed of 20 WPM at 125 BPM.