

Bass Clef Notation for Horn Players

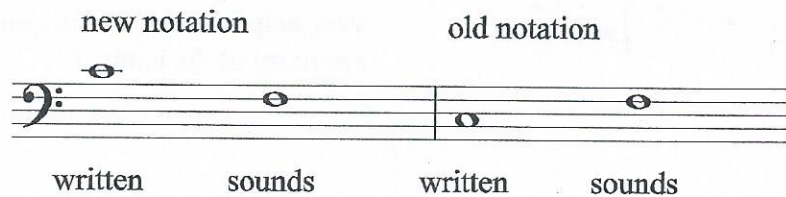
When horn parts are written in bass clef, we must determine whether the notation is “old notation” or “new notation” in order to play the part in the octave the composer intended. “Old notation,” which appears an octave lower than intended, is a misnomer: there is no cut-off date at which composers stopped using “old notation” and started using “new notation.”

To keep the terminology straight, it may help to think of “new notation” as “new and logical,” because it appears in the correct octave, and “old notation” as “an illogical old convention,” since it appears in the wrong octave.

Context and *experience* are the main ways that we know whether a bass clef part is in “old” or “new” notation. Sometimes the composer supplies a note or footnote to the performer either indicating “new notation” or clarifying that the sounding pitch is a fifth below what is written.¹ Remember, because the horn is in F, it sounds down a fifth from what’s written in treble clef.



“New notation” in bass clef also sounds down a fifth from what’s written, but “old notation” in bass clef sounds a fourth *higher* than the printed pitch.



Orchestral composers² who used “old notation”: Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy, Dukas, Dvorak, Haydn, Mahler, Mozart, Ravel,³ Respighi, Schubert, Shostakovich, R. Strauss, Stravinsky, Wagner, Weber.

Orchestral composers who used “new notation”: Mussorgsky, Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff, Ravel,³ Saint-Saëns, Tchaikovsky.

¹ Shoemaker does this in his edition of the Concone vocalises.

² I compiled these lists after a cursory perusal of orchestral parts, which may actually reflect the practices of the various editors or publishers more accurately than those of the composers. *Context* is really the most reliable indicator. I would be interested in seeing any examples that contradict the information I have listed.

³ Notice that Ravel appears on both lists. See previous footnote.

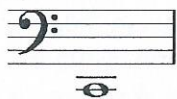
Old or New?

1.



This is most likely “old notation,” because it would be very unlikely that a diatonic line like this would have an octave jump. It would also be unlikely that there would be such diatonic motion in that bottom register.

2.



This must be “old notation,” because composers do not write the fundamental.

3.



With only this much information, we have no idea whether this is “old notation” or “new notation.”

4.

Horn 2

Horn 4

This is probably “new notation,” because that would put Horns 2 & 4 an octave apart, rather than on a unison. Sometimes in orchestral literature, it is very helpful to look at the other parts to see more of the context.

5.

Horn 2

Horn 4

This is probably “old notation,” because it is more likely that Horns 2 & 4 would be only one octave apart, rather than two.