

# Who's Afraid of Braille Music??

A Short Introduction and Resource Handbook for Parents and Students

By

Richard Taesch  
William McCann

Dancing Dots Braille Music Technology, L.P.  
PO Box 927  
Valley Forge, PA 19482  
[www.dancingdots.com](http://www.dancingdots.com)

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William McCann



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*“The great teacher never strives to explain his vision--  
he simply invites you to stand beside him and see for yourself.”*

Rev. R. Inman



## ***FOREWORD***

The purpose of this little book is to dispel ill-conceived notions that have discouraged students from learning to read braille music, or have caused teachers to think music reading is only for their sighted students. We'll give you a starting point for exploration, and we'll have some fun too.

Try the few simple lessons that follow and complete the assignments that we have provided. Watch how doors to new musical freedom and independence begin to open.

Richard Taesch - *Braille Music Division*,  
Southern California Conservatory of Music

William McCann - Founder and President,  
*Dancing Dots Braille Music Technology*, [www.dancingdots.com](http://www.dancingdots.com)

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **- Getting Ready to Read -**

### **OUR FIRST LESSON**

*Things you will need:*

A small keyboard or a piano

There are many sighted people who desire to teach or learn braille music who have never seen print music - or who know very little about music in general. For this reason, we will not include print music for the sighted tutor (or student) in this book. The location of Middle C on the piano is all that is needed. Translation from print to braille music will come later.

Remember that you are not learning to play the piano here, but to understand how music is made. Once the notes are understood on the piano keyboard, you can apply what you have learned to any instrument you like.

#### **Where is Middle C?**

- Find the center of the piano or keyboard you are using. Middle C is the first key to the left of the two raised black keys in the middle of your keyboard.
- Let's call Middle C "**do**" (pronounced *dough*) for now. Play *do* and sing the word **do** at the same time. (We'll explain the syllables later)
- Play and sing the next note to the right of *do*, which is "**re**" (pronounced *ray*). Use any finger you like in order to play the

notes for now. But if you use the thumb of your right hand for Middle C, then you can use your index finger for *re*, and so on. In this way, the five notes up to your pinky are quite easy to play.

- Play and sing “*mi*” (pronounced *mee*) to the right of *re*.
- Play and sing the last two notes that you can reach in the right hand, which are “*fa*” (pronounced *fa* as in *father*) and “*sol*” (as in *soul*).

## OUR SECOND LESSON

These notes also have alphabet letters, and since *do* is Middle C, *re* becomes **D**, *mi* is **E**, *fa* is **F**, and *sol* is **G**. These are the first five notes of the famous “C Scale” in music. Since Middle C is the first note of the C scale, we also refer to this group of notes in order as numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

It is well to learn all three ways of naming musical notes, as different people may use one or the other name for them. No matter what, the notes from Middle C up the scale to G or *sol* are scale steps one through five.

*Do - re - mi - fa - sol*  
**C - D - E - F - G**  
*1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5*

### *Workshop Assignments:*

1. Ask someone to call out different notes in random order while you find them on the piano. Mix them up, calling out “*do, re, mi*” in syllables, then by letters and in numbers. See how fast you can play a note as it is called out to you.

2. Now - just for fun - reverse roles while you drill your teacher or tutor. Fair is fair, you both need to know the rules.

3. Try this game:

one of you calls a note in syllables, while the other identifies it in either a number or a scale letter. For example -

Question: *mi*?

Answer: 3

Question: *sol*?

Answer: 5

Question: F?

Answer: 4

Question: D?

Answer: *re*, and so on.

Think from Middle C or *do* as the starting point, then continue to work out little drills for practice.

4. Now comes the hard part. Have the teacher play different notes up to *sol* on the keyboard. When the note is played, the student must identify it.

Teacher plays Middle C or *do* ...

Student says "*do*"

Teacher plays G, and the student says "*sol*," and so on.

This assignment is a perfect example of how people "play by ear." Once a note is heard, the player must be able to reproduce it. Be sure to use syllables, numbers, and letters to identify the notes that are played.



## OUR THIRD LESSON

*Things that you will need:*  
a braille writer

One of the best ways to be proficient at reading music is to be able to write a melody down when you hear it. Have the teacher play different notes and melodies on the piano while you write the scale steps in braille numbers on your braille writer. This is called *melodic dictation*.

Follow these sample steps, changing the order of notes frequently:

1. Teacher plays *do, re, mi*; student writes 1, 2, 3
2. Teacher plays *mi, do, re*; student writes 3, 1, 2
3. Teacher plays *sol, fa, mi*; student writes 5, 4, 3

More advanced dictation:

1. Teacher plays *do, sol, mi, re*; student writes 1, 5, 3, 2
2. Teacher plays (letters) E-D-C-D-E-E-E (Mary Had a Little Lamb); student writes 3212333
3. Try different variations of the dictation lesson just for fun. The student can also write letters of the notes, and the syllables as well.

The lesson here is all about “ear training” that will lead to hearing music effectively, and reading braille music accurately. Once again, hearing and reading go hand-in-hand.

# CHAPTER TWO

*- Let's Read Music! -*

## LESSON ONE

In this chapter we will first learn to read braille numbers that represent little musical melodies. In this way, you will see what it is like to read braille with one hand and to play with the other. We will also try to sing the musical numbers as we read. This is known as "sight singing." Once you can read the numbers as you sing or play, actual braille music notation will be very easy.

### *Workshop Assignments and Exercises:*

Thinking of Middle C up to G as numbers 1 through 5, place your thumb on C at the piano and play the following melodies. Take it slow and steady! Pause or breathe between number groups, and when following a hyphen.

#### *Exercise 1*

1231- 345- 432- 121-

Braille:

The Braille representation of the numbers 1231- 345- 432- 121- consists of four groups of numbers. Each group is written across two lines of Braille cells. The first group '1231-' is followed by a hyphen. The second group '345-' is followed by a hyphen. The third group '432-' is followed by a hyphen. The fourth group '121-' is followed by a hyphen. Each number is represented by a standard Braille number sign followed by the digit's Braille representation.

#### *Exercise 2*

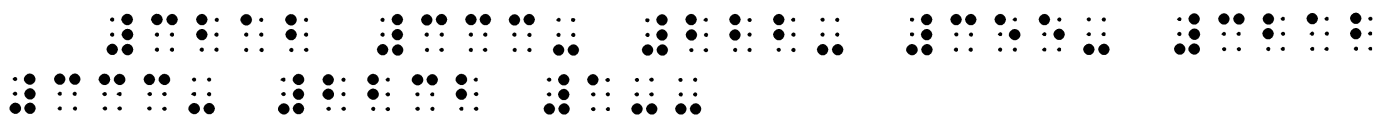
155- 155- 3454 312- 155- 155- 1431 251-

Braille:

The Braille representation of the numbers 155- 155- 3454 312- 155- 155- 1431 251- consists of eight groups of numbers. Each group is written across two lines of Braille cells. The first group '155-' is followed by a hyphen. The second group '155-' is followed by a hyphen. The third group '3454' is followed by a hyphen. The fourth group '312-' is followed by a hyphen. The fifth group '155-' is followed by a hyphen. The sixth group '155-' is followed by a hyphen. The seventh group '1431' is followed by a hyphen. The eighth group '251-' is followed by a hyphen. Each number is represented by a standard Braille number sign followed by the digit's Braille representation.

### Exercise 3

3212 333- 222- 355- 3212 333- 2232 1--



Now read the same melodies in different ways. This time as you read the numbers, sing the tunes. First, play along on the piano, then try it without the piano.

1. In syllables (*do, re, mi*, etc.)
2. In numbers
3. In letters (C, D, E, etc.)

Perhaps you and your teacher might write out some little melodies of your own for practice. Remember that the idea here is to touch the braille while you make music. Feel free to use either hand on the piano, depending on which hand you prefer for reading braille. If you read with your right hand, then Middle C will be played with your pinky in the left hand, ending with your thumb on G or *sol*.

## LESSON TWO

### *Real Braille Music*

That's really all there is to it! Sure there are many new things to learn, but reading is simply a matter of turning the dots you touch into notes - either with your voice, your guitar, trumpet, clarinet, flute, nose harp, jaw harp, electric bass, synth, oboe, piano, musical saw, Hammond B3 organ, or whatever!

Braille music notation is just as logical as the "one-two-three" system that we have explored in our lessons so far. Dear old Louis Braille himself was the inventor of the braille music code, and since he was born in Europe, like most of the world, he referred to music notes in the "*solfege*" system of syllables that

we've been using (do, re, mi, etc.). Mr. Braille was a blind organist and piano teacher who simultaneously devised his music code and literary code during his teen-age years.

It's important to realize that even today, the use of letters for the names of music notes is not recognized in most of the non-English-speaking world. English speakers learn to call the first degree of the scale C. Louis Braille called it "*do*" So, if Middle C is the first note of the basic C scale, then *re* corresponds to D, *mi* is E, *fa* is F, and *sol* is G. Furthermore, *la* is A, and *ti* is B.

You now know all the names of all the notes of the musical alphabet which is A B C D E F G, and back to A. Thus, the names of the seven degrees of the C scale can be written in the following three ways:

C D E F G A B C or: *do re mi fa sol la ti do* or: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1

In actual braille music notation, the notes for the basic C scale begin with the dots that also represent the literary letter D as in "*do*" then move forward using the same dots we use for other letters. There are only 64 unique ways to arrange the six dots of the braille cell, and so Mr. Braille found it necessary to reuse the same dot patterns he used to represent literary characters to also stand for musical symbols. Call them as solfege syllables at first, and you will soon learn to recognize them as musical notes, not as alphabetic characters. The ability to make this important distinction between dot patterns that could be read as literary or musical characters is called "*code switching*". Although it feels a bit strange when you first are exposed to it, this skill quickly becomes second nature to braille readers. Code switching is similar to how we learn to differentiate between the words we call homonyms such as the word "sink". From the context of the sentence, "He washed the dishes in the sink," you know that the word "sink" in this context does not mean to slip below the surface of the water. There are a number of formatting rules that help the braille reader to know whether the dot patterns shown on the page represent literary or musical information.

<u>Solfege Syllable</u>	<u>Braille Character</u>	<u>Letter Name</u>
<i>do</i>	⠠ dots 1-4-5	C
<i>re</i>	⠡ dots 1-5	D
<i>mi</i>	⠢ dots 1-2-4	E
<i>fa</i>	⠣ dots 1-2-4-5	F
<i>sol</i>	⠤ dots 1-2-5	G
<i>la</i>	⠥ dots 2-4	A
<i>ti</i>	⠦ dots 2-4-5	B
<i>do</i>	⠠ dots 1-4-5	C

Always refer to the braille note by its syllable name or by its dot numbers. That is, call Middle C *do* or dots 1-4-5. Never, ever, ever call it “**D**”! It just happens to use the same dot pattern as the literary letter “D” but, as music, it has an entirely different meaning. Like so many other new things that you learn, this fact is something that you will have to think about consciously at first, but soon it will become second nature to you and your marvelous brain!

## LESSON THREE

### *Reading Music in the Braille Music Code*

How do we know when we are seeing music notes, and not letters? That's easy too. There are many C's other than Middle C on the keyboard, Therefore, an *Octave Mark* will always precede notes in the Middle C range for each new line of music in braille.

There are several octave marks that are used for other ranges outside of the Middle C scale, but a **dot 5** will mean that the note is in the fourth octave range. Middle C is the fourth C you will find when counting up from the bottom, or lowest C on the piano keyboard.

Here is the Middle C scale in braille music notation:

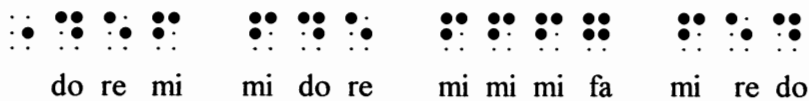


Don't worry about the missing dots 3 or 6 in the braille cells. They will be used for note values and timing later on. Now that you know **ALL OF THE NOTES**, let's read music!

*A little practice - do to sol only:*

1. Don't sing or play yet. Just say or recite the note groups that follow. Use **ONLY** the solfege syllables at this time so as not to confuse notes with literary letters.





2. Now go to the piano and play the same groups above. Pause slightly between note groups.
3. Now sing the notes using the solfege system of syllables.
4. Again play the notes, but this time say the numbers of the scale steps as you play .

## LESSON FOUR

That’s about all there is to it! You read the notes, hear the sound in your mind, then make music on your instrument. You have now learned how to read all of the note names that exist in music - print or braille!

Spend time doing some little exercises in order to become more skillful at your new music code. Before we begin, check out the following signs. They add new meanings to the notes that you will read.

*Some common signs found in basic braille music:*

- Add a **dot 6** to the note to make a “Quarter Note” for one musical count.

*quarter note do* or middle C is

- Add a **dot 3** to the note to make “Half Note” for two musical counts.

*half note do* is

- A music note without dots 6 or 3 is called an *eighth note*.

- A space between note groups indicates a *measure*. Each *measure* in a piece normally has the same number of counts.
- Dots 1-2-6, 1-3 is an *ending double bar* which is at the end of a piece.

Here's a group of Middle C's shown in quarter notes, separated by measures, and ending with the *double bar*:

Count: 1 2 3 4 Ending Double Bar

Of course, there's more to counting and note values, but let's stick with simple eighth notes and quarter notes for now.

Once you are ready for a more advanced course of music, you will find the answers to many musical mysteries. For now, relax and enjoy reading the notes to the little songs that follow.

## LESSON FIVE

Feel free now to use any method of playing or singing you prefer. Perhaps a good way to start is to use the piano and simply play the notes as though you were singing or playing on your own instrument. Don't worry about piano fingering - just find the notes the best way you can. Later we will become more concerned about which fingerings to use. For now, just enjoy!

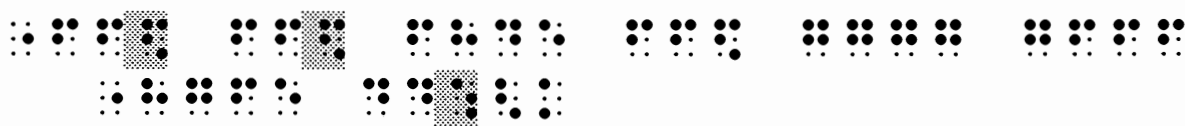
### A little Piece



Notice the **dot 6** on quarter notes. Be sure to hold this note longer, which is at least as long as two eighth notes.


Translation: mi mi mi do - mi sol **re (quarter note)**  
 Do re mi fa - sol sol re (quarter note)  
 mi mi mi do - fa fa fa re -  
 sol fa mi re - do do do (quarter note) - ending bar

### Jungle Bells

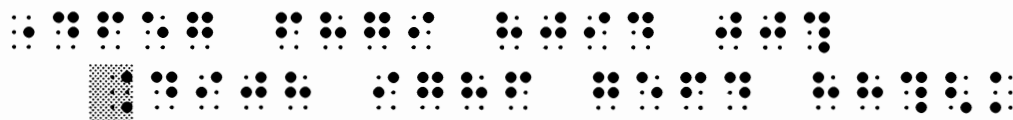


### A Little Drill




On the second braille line of the music below, dots 4-6 tell us to use the C or *do* that is in fifth octave. This is the next C that is eight white-key steps above (to the right of) Middle C. 


### A little Workout



Fifth Octave ▲

## *A Note About Rest Signs*

An *eighth rest* takes the place of an eighth note, and looks like the braille letter X. 

A *quarter rest* takes the place of a quarter note, and looks like the braille letter V. 

Read the little exercise below while you tap out the rhythms on a table. When you encounter an eighth rest, wait for one count. When you see a quarter rest, wait for two counts. In other words, when an eighth note has been assigned a value of one count in a piece, quarter notes and quarter rests will be held for two counts each. More on “Time Signatures” later.

       
say: C C C rest C C rest-rest, etc.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Band Music Anyone?*

So many newcomers to braille music reading are trying their best to play in orchestras and bands. Unfortunately, many band directors and school resource teachers are not aware that a blind musician can, in fact, read band music. In many cases, a blind student - once introduced to the braille music system - will learn his or her music before the other performers do! Braille band parts are sometimes even easier to learn and memorize than print music of comparable levels.

Although we cannot go too deeply into the many aspects of band and orchestra music here, it might be well for us to look at common band “charts” to see just what the stir is all about. Yes, you can read and learn band music without someone recording your part for you. And yes, you can take “first chair,” and learn your music even before other students have had a chance to work through their print parts.

Below is a simple band “chart” for a wind or brass instrument. Let’s pretend it is for a second clarinet or even a second violin player. The letters in parentheses on the lines above the music are meant to show “sections” or main divisions for rehearsal purposes. A conductor will often refer to these sections during a rehearsal.

### JAZZ FOR JONATHAN

The musical score for "Jazz for Jonathan" is presented in Braille. It consists of three systems of music. Each system begins with a shaded rectangular area containing a key signature and time signature. The first system has a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The second system has a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. The third system has a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The music is written in a single staff using Braille notation, with various rhythmic values and accidentals represented by Braille characters. The score is divided into sections by shaded areas at the beginning of each system.

In some music for band or orchestra, the number of the measure is shown at the margin. This helps a player to keep the place. *Jazz For Jonathan* is shown again below; this time measure numbers 5 & 13 have been added.

## JAZZ FOR JONATHAN

Braille musical notation for *Jazz For Jonathan*. The notation consists of four staves of music. The first staff has a measure number '5' in the margin. The second staff has a measure number '13' in the margin. The notation uses standard Braille musical symbols for notes, rests, and bar lines.

### *A Workshop Project:*

1. It isn't necessary to sing or play *Jazz for Jonathan* unless you would like to try it on your own. Instead, simply see how fast you can recite the piece in solfege syllables, numbers, and in letters. Say the notes evenly while you pause slightly on the quarter notes. Wait on quarter rests for two counts.

If you can do this, the rhythm of the music will feel natural to you, and you will be reading braille music just like reciting poetry. Playing the music on your instrument will then be only a matter of a little practice.

2. Copy the music in band style as above, using your braille writer.

3. Go back and write out all of the other pieces in this book, then compare your work with the book for accuracy.

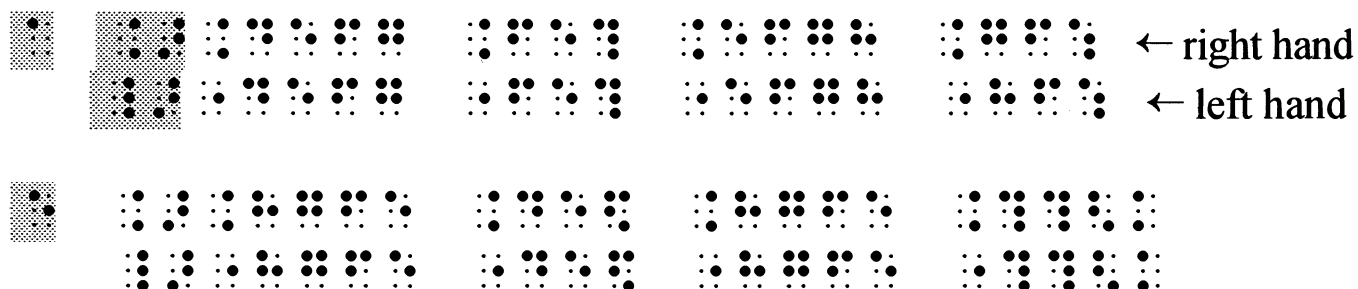
***Congratulations! You've completed your first course in braille music!***

## *SOME OTHER FORMATS TO LOOK AT*

It might be fun for us to see what some other types of music look like in braille. Here are just a few along with some explanations.

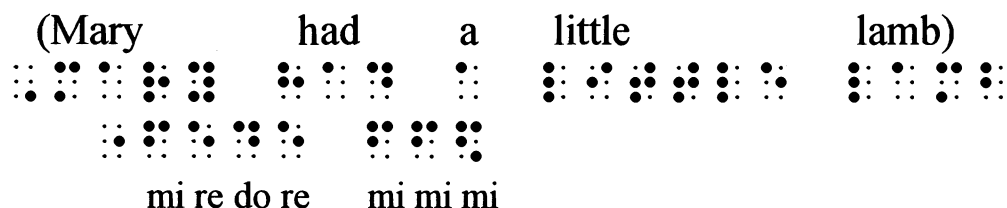
### *Piano Music - (bar-over-bar)*

Piano music is written with the right hand line over the left hand line just as in print music. You will see the right and left hand signs at the beginning of each hand part. Measure numbers without braille number signs begin each new parallel. Octave marks must begin each new measure in piano music.



### *Vocal Music*

Vocal music words are always shown at the margin in braille music, and the music notation itself will begin directly under the words in cell 3. Unless the singer prefers Grade 2 braille, the music code requires words to be in Grade 1.



## *Jazz Leadsheets*

Leadsheets are simply lines of music with guitar or piano chord symbols written below the notes with which they are played. Many instruments can use leadsheets, and are often used for winds, brass, guitar, bass, or piano. Improvisations can be created by using the harmony of the chord symbols on the line below the melody. Chord symbol letters use literary braille.

⠠⠠⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠	← Notes
⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠	← Chords
<i>C</i>	<i>Dm</i>	<i>E7</i>	<i>Am</i>	

## *Chord Symbol Charts*

A common format for band players who only need to read the chords, is that of placing the chords with a space between them to indicate measures. A blind pianist can learn to read chord symbols in one hand while playing with the other hand. This skill is often used in live performance situations.

In the example below, there are four counts to each measure (four-quarter time). Chords between spaces receive four counts. Two chords without a space between them receive two counts each. Ending double bars and other music signs can also be used in this format.

⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠⠠⠠	⠠⠠⠠⠠
<i>C</i>	<i>Dm</i>	<i>Em</i>	<i>Dm</i>	<i>Fmaj7</i>	<i>G7</i>	<i>C6</i>	⠠⠠⠠⠠

# ***CHAPTER FOUR***

## ***Where Do I Go From Here?***

As you can see, the basics of braille music reading are quite logical and easy to understand. This little course was only an introduction to get you hooked, and could not include enough music for you to become as skillful and functional as possible. There are other signs and concepts in music that you will study, but they will only be expansions of the essentials that we have covered for you here.

You have learned all of the natural notes, and covered some of the ideas needed to understand note values and rhythm. Other aspects such as time signatures, sharp signs, and flats can be covered in a more in-depth study.

### ***Complete Courses***

By now we hope that, if anyone asks: “Who’s afraid of braille music?”, you will answer: “Not me!” If you’re ready to study further, here are some courses from *Dancing Dots* to help you:

*“An Introduction To Music For The Blind Student,”* Parts I and II,  
by Richard Taesch

This is a complete course for the braille music student, and will teach both student and tutor at the same time. There is no real prerequisite for Part I, however, a student working alone should know contracted literary braille in order to follow the “*Lessons*” text. Part I consists of three print books and four braille volumes. There are lessons, specific assignments, and theory exams to finish the course.

The work is intended for preparation on all instruments. It approaches the business of music reading by building sight singing skills, and uses the piano only as a reading tool. Print music is shown together with simulated braille dots for the sighted tutor or teacher. The course is one component of a curriculum developed at Southern California Conservatory of Music, *Braille Music Division*.

Publisher: *Dancing Dots* - order online from [www.dancingdots.com](http://www.dancingdots.com)  
Or call (toll-free) 1-866-336-8746.

### ***Piano Companion Course***

*“Introduction To Piano For The Blind Student,”* by Richard Taesch

Although this is an instructional course and repertoire resource for bar-over-bar piano music reading, it would be well for the student to have had some lessons in braille music basics first. Either the course, *An Introduction To Music For The Blind Student*, Part 1, or *How To Read Braille Music*, Second Edition, is highly recommended as a precursor to the piano books. Neither one needs to be completed first, but a good start will help. The piano course consists of the following pedagogy:

1. *Graded Studies*, Books 1 & 2
2. *Repertoire*, Book 1 (book 2 is currently in preparation)

Publisher: *Dancing Dots* - order online from [www.dancingdots.com](http://www.dancingdots.com)  
Or call (toll-free) 1-866-336-8746.

**For a current list of other resources for the blind musician, the educator, or parent, visit [www.dancingdots.com/tsresources.htm](http://www.dancingdots.com/tsresources.htm) often.**