People tend to give a lot of authority to what is written down, and they lose sight of what is not. But every notation system only notates some things and not others. There are many positives to music notation: we can preserve music over time, and we can compose much more complex pieces than before. But there are also some negatives: we are transfixed by the notation and our performances, we do not know how to perform songs from oral traditions, and we neglect all those aspects of music that cannot be notated.

Throughout music history, there have been many different notation systems. The earliest notated music we know about was in Cuneiform and dates back to two millennia BC. In the European Middle Ages, monks used “neumes” as a mnemonic tool to give an idea of whether the melody went “up” or “down,” but music was still learned orally. Today’s staff notation can notate pitch, the length of notes, rhythm, dynamics. It does not notate tone color, expression, and phrasing.

In my own experience, music is at its best when whoever is playing it truly feels the emotion of a piece and they are able to convey that emotion through their performance. There is no feeling on earth like the feeling of a piece of music being so impactful and emotional that it moves you to tears. This class has caused me to think critically about notation and has helped me realize that when writing is introduced, we allow ourselves to focus too much on what is printed and focus too little on how music makes us feel.