

# Using textmidi

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The textmidi language to MIDI translator

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# 1 Overview

The `textmidi` program translates a text representation of a standard MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) file into a binary standard MIDI file. Using `textmidi`, it is possible to write very precise MIDI files, with delays down to the MIDI tick, in a way that GUI-based tools may not offer. Previously-created MIDI files may be converted into `textmidi` language using the `miditext` tool, and then edited for re-translation by `textmidi`. The goal of `textmidi` and `miditext` together is to permit the specification of any musical events that are permitted by the MIDI 1.1 spec's chapter on Standard MIDI Files. SysEx (system exclusive) is also supported, as are all three filetypes (single track, multitrack and multi-sequence).

No attempt is made in `textmidi` to support either MIDI show control or machine control.

## 1.1 What is textmidi?

The program `textmidi` reads a text representation of a standard MIDI file in what is called here "textmidi" language, and converts it to a standard MIDI file, which is binary. Each item in the text file corresponds to a sequence of command bytes in the binary MIDI file, more or less.

Developing MIDI files as text in `textmidi` language can offer advantages in that text files can readily be hand-edited, automatically-generated, searched with search tools, and enriched with macro processors, such as `m4`.

`textmidi` is a language translator for the `textmidi` language. It does not create or use graphical musical scores. `textmidi` does not record or play over a MIDI interface.

## 1.2 MIDI Summary

Standard MIDI files are generally used to represent conventionally scored music, usually instrumental music. MIDI is a means of connecting electronic instruments, sequencers, and computers: A current-loop connection is defined but USB is often used today. MIDI is also a sort of industrial control protocol which assigns (at least) numbers to the keys of a piano keyboard, numbers to the velocity with which the key was hit (giving loudness), and delays between the points of hitting and releasing keys. For example, Middle C, (often about 261 cycles/second), is assigned 60 decimal; the velocities range from 0 to 127. Delays between events can be up to 28 bits in units of MIDI ticks. Since quarter notes are often assigned a duration of 240 ticks, either a note or a rest could be as long as 1118481 quarter notes or 279620 whole notes. Since delays are variable-length quantities (in byte steps), they can range from 1 byte to 4 bytes in size in the MIDI file. MIDI also specifies controls, such as damper pedals and "pressure" (named for pressure-sensitive keyboards that permit making a note louder or softer by changing the force applied to the key), and synthesizer-specific message handling as "SYSEX" or "System Exclusive" messages. As a result of encoding key presses rather than audio signals, MIDI files can be nearly 300 times smaller than a stereo MP3 file of the same piece. A disadvantage is that support for MIDI features and the General MIDI instrument definitions is sometimes poor.

Standard MIDI files are a means of describing a musical performance in time. MIDI files can be created by software that records the MIDI stream received over a MIDI interface as

you play a piano or other MIDI controller. MIDI files can also be created on sequencing or scoring software.

## 1.3 History

`textmidi` was developed in 1999 and improved in 2020 and 2021 in order to add support for more of the MIDI specification. It was used in 2003 to create the MIDI file for the Quintet for piano and strings by Robert Schumann, which was added to the Classical MIDI Archive at that time.

## 2 Invoking textmidi

### 2.1 Options

```
textmidi [-i|--textmidi] textmidi_input_file -o|--midi standard_midi_output_file
[-a|--answer] [-d|--detache numticks]
[-l|--lazynoteoff] [-h|--help]
[-V|--version] [-v|--verbose]
```

**-h, --help**

Print the options summary.

**-v, --verbose**

Write some informative messages to the screen. Errors are printed regardless.

**-V, --version**

Print the version of `textmidi`.

**-i, --textmidi textmidi\_input\_file**

The input file: a text representation of a MIDI file in `textmidi` language.

**-o, --midi standard\_midi\_output\_file**

The output file; a binary standard MIDI file.

**-d, --detache num**

A small number of MIDI ticks to separate consecutive notes. It always is shaved off the end of preceding note events and made into a rest (but not taken from preceding rests). The default is 0. Originally, the default was 10 and was based on experience with MIDI synthesizers from the 1980's that could behave poorly with high rates of note events with no delay between note-off and note-on events. The time is stolen from the preceding note's duration, not added.

**-l, --lazynoteoff**

In LAZY mode, for the ends of a note's duration, use a MIDI note-off with the global velocity rather than a note-on with a velocity of zero.

**-a, --answer**

If the output `textmidi` file already exists, ask before overwriting it.

### 2.2 Invocation Examples

The following command will read the hand-edited `prelude.txt` and convert it to the standard MIDI file `prelude.mid`, with no separation between the end of notes and the notes that follow them. If LAZY mode is used in the `textmidi` file, end notes using a note-on event with a velocity of zero.

```
textmidi --textmidi prelude.txt --midi prelude.mid --detache 0
```

The following converts `prelude.txt` into `prelude.mid`, using the default 20 ticks between notes and a MIDI note-off event with the current velocity to end each note in LAZY mode rather than a note-on.

```
textmidi --textmidi prelude.txt --midi prelude.mid --lazynoteoff
```

## 3 textmidi Language

The language used in `textmidi` text files represents binary events and commands of MIDI standard file; multiple bytes typically represent a MIDI event or command. There are two modes: Detail mode and LAZY mode. LAZY mode can contain only notes, rests, durations, dynamics, and the `chan` (channel) command. The `textmidi` language is case-insensitive except for the "b" used for a flat sign. The b for a flat sign as in Ab3 must be lower case. ab3 is the same as Ab3, but there is no note name aB3. A semicolon is the comment character and marks the remainder of a line as comment not to be converted into MIDI stream bytes. C4 is middle C. A new octave begins with C, so the B below middle C is B3 or b3. Note that all channel numbers and program numbers are 1-based in the `textmidi` file. They are adjusted to be 0-based in the binary file. This reflects practice as it appears in the MIDI specification. An example of the format follows:

```
FILEHEADER 3 240
STARTTRACK
END_OF_TRACK
{
    NOTE_ON 1 C4 64
    DELAY 960
    NOTE_ON 1 C4 0
    NOTE_ON 1 C4 64
    DELAY 960
    NOTE_OFF 1 C4 0
    LAZY
    C4 1
    END_LAZY
}
STARTTRACK

END_OF_TRACK
```

### 3.1 FILEHEADER

**FILEHEADER** takes three arguments:

- An integer number of tracks
- Ticks per quarter (ignored)
- An optional file format: MONOTRACK | MULTITRACK | MULTISEQUENCE. The default is MULTITRACK.

### 3.2 Tracks

A track contains the musical data in a MIDI sequence. In `textmidi` language, a track is defined with either `STARTTRACK` and `END_OF_TRACK` or by braces:

```
FILEHEADER 1 384
STARTTRACK
TEMPO 120
TIME_SIGNATURE 4 4 24
PROGRAM 1 1
NOTE_ON C4 63
DELAY 960
```



```

NOTE_OFF C4 63
END_OF_TRACK

or

FILEHEADER 1 384
{
    TEMPO 120
    TIME_SIGNATURE 4 4 24
    PROGRAM 1 1
    NOTE_ON C4 63
    DELAY 960
    NOTE_OFF C4 63
}

```

Track data can be expressed explicitly in DETAIL mode, the default mode, or in LAZY mode, which makes it possible to type in musical more quickly.

### 3.2.1 DETAIL track mode

#### 3.2.1.1 Note Events

NOTE\_ON channelnum pitchname velocity

NOTE\_ON events put a note-on event into the MIDI file.

```
NOTE_ON 1 G4 57
```

The pitch may be given with a letter a–g,

- sharps: “#”
- flats: “b” (must be lower-case b)
- double-sharps: “x”
- double flats: “bb”

an octave –1 to 9 (MIDI pitches range from C–1 to G9).

NOTE\_OFF channelnum pitchname velocity

```
NOTE_OFF 1 G4 57
```

#### 3.2.1.2 DELAY

```
DELAY ticksnum
```

```
DELAY 960
```

Note that textmidi is not line-oriented except for some uses of the text events. You may write

```
DELAY 72 NOTE_ON 1 B4 53
```

and follow it with as many more events as you like.

A delay in MIDI ticks inserts that delay into the MIDI file. DELAY times are not events; the accumulated delay is not written into the MIDI stream until the next event. If no DELAY events are inserted in DETAIL mode, then the mandatory delays inserted into the MIDI file will all be zero. That is allowed, but the music will be unexpectedly quick. LAZY mode calculates and inserts the delay values before each event for you. DELAYS may be zero to 268435455 in MIDI tick units.

### 3.2.1.3 Text meta events

Text meta events (a sort of MIDI pseudo-event that appears only in MIDI files) take string arguments. These events may repeat throughout the track within Detail mode. The string data the follows text event commands must either use the remainder of a line, or be double-quoted.

```
TEXT "Rewrite this measure" TIME_SIGNATURE 3 4 24
```

or

```
TEXT Rewrite this measure
TIME_SIGNATURE 3 4 24
```

```
TEXT [string]<EOL> or TEXT "string"
      TEXT "See above"
```

```
COPYRIGHT [string]<EOL> or TEXT "string"
The copyright notice meta event.
      COPYRIGHT Copyright (c) 1823 Ludwig van Beethoven
```

```
TRACK [string]<EOL> or TEXT "string"
The track name.
      TRACK "Trumpet stings"
```

```
INSTRUMENT [string]<EOL> or TEXT "string"
The instrument name for the given track. This is only a string and does not
effect the General MIDI instrument preset.
      INSTRUMENT "Flugel Horn or best substitute"
```

```
LYRIC [string]<EOL> or TEXT "string"
A lyric string.
      LYRIC "No lyric could be cleared"
```

```
MARKER [string]<EOL> or TEXT "string"
      MARKER "Letter A"
```

```
CUE_POINT [string]<EOL> or TEXT "string"
      CUE_POINT "Letter A"

It is not entirely clear what the MIDI spec meant, or how studio musicians use
these.
```

### 3.2.1.4 Non-text meta events

Non-text meta events.

```
TEMPO num TEMPO is set in beats per minute for a quarter note. The tempo is per quarter
note even if the time signature has designated the beat as an eighth note. This
restriction to quarter notes comes from the MIDI spec. You can still use any
time signature, but you need to compute the tempo for a quarter note in that
time signature.
```

```
TEMPO 72
```

**KEY\_SIGNATURE note\_name**

KEY\_SIGNATURE is given as a note name like the pitch names, but with no octave. Lower-case keys are minor keys and upper-case keys are major keys. The flat sign (a b) must always be lower-case.

C-flat major:

cb

C-sharp major:

C#

C-sharp minor:

c#

F-minor

f

**TIME\_SIGNATURE {beats\_per\_measure} {beatduration} {ticksperbeat}**

The value beats\_per\_measure is the traditional musical value and must be an integer. It can be 1, 2, and up. The value for beatduration is the traditional musical part of a time-signature giving the value-per-beat, such as 4 for a quarter note, or 1 for a whole note. Note that beatduration must be a positive integer. The value for ticksperbeat is MIDI ticks in a beat. It is often 240, but 384 is common as well.

TIME\_SIGNATURE 3 4 240

**SMPTE\_OFFSET HH:MM:SS:Frame:framefraction**

SMPTE\_OFFSET 07:47:13:07:11

**SEQUENCE\_NUMBER num**

SEQUENCE\_NUMBER 1

**MIDI\_CHANNEL num**

MIDI\_CHANNEL 1

**END\_OF\_TRACK or }.**

MIDI tracks must end with either an END\_OF\_TRACK or }.

**SEQUENCER\_SPECIFIC num...****3.2.1.5 MIDI Events**

MIDI events

**NOTE\_ON channel\_num pitch velocity\_number**

NOTE\_ON 1 G4 57

**NOTE\_OFF channel\_num pitch velocity\_number**

NOTE\_OFF 1 G4 57

**POLY\_KEY\_PRESSURE channel\_num pitch velocity\_number**

POLY\_KEY\_PRESSURE 1 G4 100

A succession of POLY\_KEY\_PRESSURE commands, with delays between them, can create swelling and fading effects if the player used supports poly key pressure.

CONTROL channel\_num control\_num value\_num

CONTROL 13 64 10

Some MIDI controls have synonyms:

RESETALL channel\_num

This would probably not be used in a MIDI file, but only by a MIDI player.  
Nevertheless it is available in `textmidi`.

ALLNOTES\_OFF channel\_num

This would probably not be used in a MIDI file, but only by a MIDI player.  
Nevertheless it is available in `textmidi`.

ALL\_SOUND\_OFF channel\_num

This would probably not be used in a MIDI file, but only by a MIDI player.  
Nevertheless it is available in `textmidi`.

BREATH channelnum value

BREATH 1 32

DAMPER channelnum value

The damper pedal on a piano.

DAMPER 6 64

SOFTPEDAL channelnum value

The soft pedal on a piano.

SOFTPEDAL 7 121

PORTAMENTO channel\_num ON|OFF

PORTAMENTO 8 ON

PORTAMENTO 8 OFF

SOSTENUTO channel\_num ON|OFF

The sostenuto pedal on a piano: only the keys being held at the time are sustained, not notes following the pedal.

SOSTENUTO 11 ON

SOSTENUTO 11 OFF

BREATH channel\_num value\_num

BREATH 12 53

PAN channel\_num left|center|right|{-64..63}

When using the numeric pan values, note that -64 is left-most, 63 is right-most, and 0 is in the center.

PAN 13 left

PAN 13 center

PAN 13 right

PAN 13 33

PROGRAM channel\_num program\_num

PROGRAM selects a General MIDI instrument. The program is 1-based.

PROGRAM 14 47

**CHANNEL\_PRESSURE** channel\_num pressure\_num

A per-channel pressure. Pressure is on the velocity scale from 0 to 127.

**CHANNEL\_PRESSURE** 15 120

**PITCH\_WHEEL** channel\_num wheel\_num

**PITCH\_WHEEL** 16 16000

Bend values are in 14 bits, 0 to 16383.

**MIDI\_PORT** num

### 3.2.1.6 SYSEX

SYSEX, or System Exclusive, is a way of inserting proprietary synthesizer commands into a standard MIDI file. There are two types of SYSEX commands:

SYSEX byte byte...

Note that the bytes can in decimal or hexadecimal. Hexadecimal bytes must start with "0x". Do not include the SYSEX command, F0, the length, or the final F7. The `textmidi` program will add those. Note that the values of the bytes should fit in a byte, and have values from 0 to 255 decimal, or 0x00 to 0xFF hexadecimal. One particular synthesizer permits setting the metronome using a SYSEX command:

**SYSEX** 0x43 0x73 0x7f 0x32 0x11 0x00 0x1B 0x03

The `textmidi` program will add F0 and a length of 9 to the front of the message, and an F7 to the end. (The length includes only the functional data and the terminating F7).

SYSEXRAW byte byte...

SYSEXRAW also takes either decimal or hexadecimal byte values. It permits sending a more freely-formatted block of data, and it fully specified by the synthesizer or effects box vendor. Do not include the F7 at the start, or a length unless the synthesizer manufacturer specifies it, or an F7 at the end unless the synthesizer manufacturer requires it. Some manufacturers use SYSEXRAW to continue long messages that start with a SYSEX block.

### 3.2.2 LAZY track mode

At any time in a track, during DETAIL mode, a LAZY (or BRIEF) command can be inserted in order to enter LAZY mode. You can leave END\_LAZY mode and return to DETAIL mode at any time. There may be as many LAZY or DETAIL mode sections as needed. For example, in some music, it is necessary to reset the time signature in mid-track, especially the rhythm track (often the first track in a multitrack file). Since the TIME\_SIGNATURE command is only available in DETAIL MODE, then if the track is in LAZY mode, a short section of DETAIL mode can make it possible to set the time signature and return to lazy mode:

```
LAZY
C4 E4 G4 4
END_LAZY
TIME_SIGNATURE 3 4 24
LAZY
D4 F4 A4 4
```

...

There are some directives available in `textmidi` DETAIL mode.

**ticks** When this directive is encountered, print the accumulated MIDI tick value to the screen. This is a `textmidi` file debugging feature. If the tracks get misaligned by a small number of ticks, then the ticks directive can help find where they go out of sync.

**Symbolic dynamic**

Set the dynamic with symbols {pppp|ppp|pp|p|mp|mf|forte|ff|fff|ffff}. The dynamic must appear between events and delays.

**vel num** Set the velocity (dynamic) for following note events. Num is in (0..127). Relative dynamics permit changing the dynamic without referring to the current value. This is helpful for accents.

```
ff C4 4 vel -10 D4 4 vel +10 E 4
```

**chan channel\_num**

Set the MIDI channel.

END\_LAZY, END\_BRIEF, DETAIL

### 3.2.2.1 Notes

LAZY mode note events. In LAZY mode you simply type in the notes followed by musical durations. To march a C-major scale in quarter notes you would simply write

```
C4 4 D4 4 E4 4 F4 4 G4 4 A4 4 B4 4 C5 4
```

Lower case notes are allowed:

```
c4 4. d4 8 e4 4. f4 8 g4 4. a4 8 b4 4. c5 8
```

To use accidentals, add a lower-case b for a flat, or a # for a sharp.

```
c#4 e4 4. d4 f4 8 e4 g4 4. f4 ab4 8 g4 b4 4. a4 c5 8 b4 d5 4. c5 eb5 8
```

### 3.2.2.2 Chords

To make chords, merely add the chord notes before specifying the duration:

```
c4 e4 4. d4 f4 8 e4 g4 4. f4 a4 8 g4 b4 4. a4 c5 8 b4 d5 4. c5 e5 8
```

### 3.2.2.3 Rhythm

Rhythm in LAZY mode is given in duration ratios, that is, fractions of whole notes, just as in traditional music notation. In addition, if the numerator is 1, then the denominator alone may be given instead.

- 1/4 – quarter note
- 4 – quarter note
- 1/4. – dotted quarter note
- 4. – dotted quarter note
- 3 – a third note (i.e., a triplet half note, three to a whole note)
- 5/16 – a note five sixteenths long
- 1 – a whole note
- 4/1 – 4 whole notes.

Note that to get 4 whole notes you must write 4/1 (or 8/2), but not a 4 by itself.

To use dotted quarters, add a period to the duration (double dots are also supported):

```
C4 4. D4 8 E4 4. F4 8 G4 4. A4 8 B4 4. C5 8
C4 4.. D4 16 E4 4.. F4 16 G4 4.. A4 16 B4 4.. C5 16
```

Durations are fractions of a whole notes, but if the numerator is 1, as for 1/4 (a quarter note) then just write the denominator (4). Any positive integers are allowed. Using unusual values, for example for trills, might cause the accumulated MIDI tick value to not line-up with what you consider to be the measure bar. That is why the tick directive was added to aid in tick value debugging.

```
C4 111/445 D4 1/4 E4 1/4 F4 1/4 R 4 A4 3/4 B4 2/3 C5 23/17
```

### 3.2.2.4 Ties

To tie a note, add dashes. A dash to the right of the note name means it ties out. A dash on the left means the note is tied in. If there is no tie on the right of a note, the note ends following the following duration. If you forget the tied-in note, the note will be stuck when you play the MIDI file.

```
c#4 e4- 4. d4 f4 8 e4 g4 4. f4 ab4 8 g4 b4 4. a4 c5 8 -e4 b4 d5 4. c5 eb5 8
```

### 3.2.2.5 Rests

An R inserts a rest.

```
C4 4 R 4 E4 4
```

Any LAZY mode directives must be after a duration and before a notename. The chan directive and the vel directive (and other dynamics) apply to all following notes until another directive changes them.

```
c#4 e4- 4. chan 3 d4 f4 8 e4 g4 4. ff f4 ab4 8 g4 b4 4. vel -5 a4 c5 8 -e4 b4 d5 4. c5 eb5 8■
```

## 4 Using m4 with textmidi

It can be convenient to use the m4 macro processor. A trill that is defined as an m4 macro need not be painstakingly written by hand. Note that as the `textmidi` comment character is a semicolon ";", you should change the m4 comment character to semicolon using the m4 directive `changeocom`. A trill in m4 could be defined:

```
define('trill_68_mid','$1 1/16 $2 1/16 $1 1/16 $2 1/16 $1 1/16 $2 1/16 ')
```

Then to use this trill in a file called `prelude.m4` you type

```
trill_68_mid(C4,D4)
```

Then `prelude.m4` is processed by m4 into a `textmidi` file, which can be converted into a MIDI file:

```
m4 prelude.m4 > prelude.txt
textmidi -midi prelude.mid prelude.txt
```

Another example of using m4 is to define in an m4 file all of the General MIDI instruments to the numbers they are assigned, including that into a `textmidi`/m4 file, and then running that through m4 to create the `textmidi` file with the instruments replaced by program numbers.



## 5 File Formats

The input text file for `textmidi` is a free-form text file, with exceptions. The `textmidi` directives for text to be inserted into the MIDI file must either run to the end of the line or have their data strings be double-quoted.

## 6 gvim highlighting for textmidi language

A vim highlighting file is provided for the textmidi language. The file is called textmidi.vim. To install it, copy it to ~/.vim/syntax/textmidi.vim. Edit the file ~/.vim/syntax/filetype.vim to add recognition of FILEHEADER:

```

    if did_filetype()
        finish
    endif
    if getline(1) =~ 'FILEHEADER [[:digit:]]+ [[:digit:]]+$$'
        setf textmidi
    endif

```

In ~/.vim/scripts.vim add support for textmidi:

```

    if did_filetype()
        finish
    endif
    if getline(1) =~ '^FILEHEADER.*'
        setfiletype textmidi
    endif

```

## 7 Installation

This program was prepared for builds using GNU autoconf tools. Unpack the archive. Move to the directory created for the program. Run the configure script and run make.

```
./configure  
make
```

Make yourself superuser (root), or use sudo to run install targets:

```
make install  
make install-info
```

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## 9 Bibliography

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