

NOTATION: SOME BASIC GUIDELINES

Bibliography

A few resources you might find helpful:

Stone, Kurt. *Music notation in the twentieth century: a practical guidebook*, Norton; New York; 1980

Gould, Elaine, *Behind Bars: the definitive guide to music notation*, Faber Music, London 2011

Heussenstamm, George, *Norton Manual of Music Notation*, Norton; New York; 1987

Read, Gardner. *Music Notation: A Manual of Modern Practice*. Taplinger Publishing; New York 1969

Ross, Ted. *The Art of Music Engraving and Processing*. Hansen Books; New York; 1970 (out of print)

Professionalism

The finer points of musical notation are not particularly thrilling, and careful notation can sometimes seem like a tedious chore. However, professional presentation of your scores and parts is crucial to your success as a composer, particularly as a young composer. Composition opportunities, calls for scores, awards and the like receive hundreds of submissions. It's far too easy for a competition jury, artistic director or search committee (or doctoral defense committee!) to quickly dismiss scores which are indecipherable or hastily thrown together. When you submit your music to someone else, you hope they appreciate its intrinsic worth and quality. Maybe they will, maybe they won't. But there is no reason why your score shouldn't be clear and elegant. Nothing says "I don't really care about my music" more emphatically than a score which is poorly notated and assembled.

Efficient Communication:

When you create a score, you're writing out a recipe for its realization. So it's in your interest to make it as clear and specific as possible. Or as clear and specific as it needs to be to get what you want. Perform it for yourself (or conduct or sing it), then make sure the nuances you hear are notated in the music. Remember that when pianists perform say, Chopin, they have lots of musical associations they draw on when learning a piece: stylistic conventions, recordings, performance practice traditions, etc. There are plenty of ways in which they don't play exactly what's on the page (whether more or less than what's notated). With new music, these associations aren't so rich or so obvious to a performer. It's up to you to indicate exactly what you want in a performance, even if it's to indicate: *play with Chopin-like rubato*.

We're also used to working directly with the performers who realize our music. But it's useful to think of your music as standing independent of you and your personal coaching. Your score should be accurate and informative enough to recreate your music without you, to whatever degree of detail and specificity you are comfortable with.

The Most Basic Principle of Notation: Ease of Reading

Your music should be as easy to read as possible. There are plenty of reasons for this, not the least of which is that it makes for efficient use of rehearsal time. Always consider your music from the performer's perspective. Make things as visually simple and transparent as you can, without of course sacrificing any of the musical precision. Be practical. Don't use three piano staves if two will do. Then again, if seeing three or even four piano staves is easier to read or comprehend, then by all means use them (see, e.g., Scriabin's late Sonatas or Rachmaninov's c# prelude). Notation can also help visually in the interpretation or understanding of your music. This is just as true of common practice music as it is of contemporary music. Some good examples of this analytical use of notation are: double-stemmed or opposite stemmed notes to show voice-leading; enharmonic note spellings; beaming over barlines, etc. Also, your music should "look like it sounds" as much as possible (or at least not contradict its sound in some counter-intuitive way).

SCORES

Try, if at all possible to make a standard 8.5x11 score. If you're tempted to make an oblong score in order to fit more measures per system, consider using portrait format with a smaller percentage reduction. Many people make score notation too large (the Finale defaults are ridiculous: what I call "baby's first notepad" size). Look at engraved examples from the repertoire. The point size is smaller than you might think. This of course applies to a "study" score only, one you might send around for perusal. When you make a conductor's score, that can be oversized (indeed, it *should* be in the case of an orchestral score). Parts are also a different matter (see below).

PRELIMINARY PAGES

- title; name (both you and text author); date of composition;
- instrumentation (including percussion list and any non-standard requirements); duration (including movements); set-up diagram if necessary
- program notes, commission, funding/grant support; first performance (date, location, ensemble, personnel including conductor)
- your contact info! (and/or on the cover, front or back)

FIRST SCORE PAGE

- concert or transposed score (if applicable);
- full list of instruments in the first system (in correct score order, with full names and transpositions)
- your name, text author's name; date of composition; dedication/commission if applicable

FOLLOWING PAGES

- instrumental abbreviations on every page (esp. if the number of staves on each system changes—even if it doesn't, conductors like to see this)
- measure numbers (in a large point size, preferably enclosed) atop or abottom every system (atop strings also if large ensemble/orchestra); rehearsal letters as well if you think it will help rehearsal; also possible to label every measure (bottom)
- make tempo changes, general expressive indications very large
- page numbers

PARTS

- Parts should be produced with a big enough point size to read easily, with paper between 9x12 and 10x13 in size. (For more specific info, see the orchestra librarians guidelines at: <http://www.mola-inc.org/musicprepguide.htm>).
- performance notes should be reproduced in the parts, if applicable (also any of the other information above, as you see fit); include percussion list and mute needs (for brass)
- Parts should be double-sided, taped or bound (not loose!)
- Get the page turns right; avoid the wall-of-stands and the guerilla-page-turning syndromes. If you need to leave a page blank or a page less than filled, do it.
- Label staves when using multi-part string divisi
- Each wind and brass part should usually have a separate part. If you must combine parts (e.g., Flutes 1 & 2) put them on separate staves (this will, of course, make the part longer and it may be more difficult to find page turns). Timpani is a separate part from Percussion. In a multi-percussionist set-up, unless you have carefully figured out the player assignments, percussionists like to read from a "score part" which includes all percussion instruments.
- Be generous (but sensible) with cues. They save a lot of time in rehearsal. In more complicated pieces, consider writing a "cue part" in a second line above the individual part (just make sure it is a smaller point size). Cues should be written in smaller noteheds, with all stems ascending/descending, transposed to the key of the part (though possibly in a different octave) and with an instrument indicated.
- Break up multi-measure rests over section breaks, tempo changes or important ensemble events.

- Number the iterations of a pattern which is repeated many times
- In a multi-measure rest indicate the “framing” measure numbers (e.g., in an 8-measure rest, you might indicate 202-209)

SIDE BAR 1

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

- In smaller chamber pieces, in addition to the part, give every performer a score
- Read the performer’s parts after the performance. Consider making adjustments to the piece (bowings, phrasing, etc.)
- Put your contact info on parts as well as scores. Particularly if you have an upcoming performance for which you will not attend rehearsals, a contact phone number is useful.
- Use a higher bond, opaque paper for parts.

FINALE ISSUES

IMPORTANT: Make the notation exactly as you want it to look. There is almost always a way to do it in Finale, though it may be time consuming. *DON'T LET FINALE PUSH YOU AROUND!!*

- Redraw/Recalculate after spacing
- Adjust spacing manually in difficult measures: Finale never gets it right
- Have a fairly consistent number of measure per system
- Don’t leave one giant, stretched-out measure on the last system
- Make your own default file (the Finale presets are horrible)
- Adjust the inter-staff spacing individually on every system
- Space systems evenly on a page
- Avoid including rests in beaming or directional horizontal flags, beamlets, etc. unless it is really necessary. Most often it’s simply confusing and annoying for performers
- If notes and accidentals are crashing even after spacing and recalculating, it means you have too much music on a line
- Put lyrics in a large point size
- Adjust slur/tie ends over system breaks: they tend to be too small or hidden (adjusting defaults will often fix this)
- Careful of “floating” dynamics; they need to be “attached”
- Print your fair copy on a high res printer
- Use the “courtesy accidental” plug-in at the end of the process
- Read the manual!

SIDE BAR 2

SPELLING

Finale is pretty unhelpful when it comes to enharmonic spellings, no matter what your defaults are set to. There are several things to keep in mind when making spelling decisions (in rough order of importance):

- What’s the easiest *interval* to read? (e.g., A#—D \flat versus B \flat —D \flat or A#—C#)
 - What’s the *direction* of the line? (as very basic default, flats go down, sharps go up)
 - What’s the *function* of the note? (e.g., a double-neighbor note situation might be: B \flat —G#—A)
 - What’s the *most common note* to read? (e.g., F# versus G \flat)
 - Any intonation issues (e.g., for strings)?
 - Is a certain pitch important in the music (thus you’d want to label it consistently)?
 - Be consistent across measures, in repeated sections or within parts transposed to another “key.”
- However, it’s perfectly idiomatic, particularly in scores with transposing instrument, to have one part mostly sharps, another mostly flats.

- It's sometimes a good idea to specify at the beginning of your score the accidental "rules" in your piece, esp. if it's other than the conventional "after the barline" rule. (One question that comes up often is whether accidentals continue to apply in another octave.)
- If you use layers or cross staff notation in Finale make sure to proof for accidentals—Finale doesn't take care of this so well.

CONVENTIONS OF NOTATION

- Tempo markings (or other markings which apply to the entire ensemble) should appear above the score in large point size. They should also appear in all the parts.
- Technical information to the player is conveyed in Roman type above the staff. This includes: pizz., arco, sul pont., played with the fingernail, etc.
- Expressive information to the player is conveyed in Italic type, also above the staff. This includes: *espres.*, *lyrically*, *with Chopin-like rubato*, etc.
- Dynamic information is conveyed in Italic type below the staff. This includes: *pp*, *ff*, *cresc.*, *sub.p*, etc.
- In vocal music, all of this goes above the music (to make room for the text)
- Crescendo and Decrescendo marks should not extend over too many measures (use 'cresc.' or 'decresc.' instead) and their opening should be a fairly consistent width (not overly wide) regardless of the degree of dynamic change
- Crescendo and Decrescendo marks should have a beginning and (especially) ending dynamic. You can avoid this sometimes, esp. when things are changing back-and-forth quickly, but consider it. Individual hairpins less so, but think about it.
- Write (or re-write) a dynamic when an instrument has rested for several measures.
- Dynamics should be aligned horizontally in a part within each system.
- Fully articulated triplets do not need a bracket.
- In parts with double (or multi) staff lines place dynamics, etc, below each staff
(Much more detail can be found in the Ross & Stone books above.)

SIDE BAR 3

FINALE FONT AND PLUGIN RESOURCES

There are several alternative fonts which work well with Finale, including percussion symbols from the Ghent Convention (though I've heard mixed reviews from percussionists on using these), figured bass symbols and early music notation. You can find a good list at: <http://www.rpmseattle.com/coda/> (This site has an enormous amount of other useful information.)

Also here: <http://www.gwmp.com/MusicFontsFrameset.htm>

Two good text fonts which incorporates musical symbols (e.g. flat and sharps) are CSTimes (<http://www.music.ucsb.edu/faculty/clevenger/FontFlyer.pdf>) and Sicilian Numerals (http://www.caltabiano.net/shareware/sicilian_numerals.html)

There are several third-party plug-ins which are tremendously useful in conjunction with Finale. The best one is probably TGTools. It can be found at: <http://www.tgtools.de/>

Other useful items can be found here: <http://finaletips.nu/>