

# standard music notation practice

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**Music Publishers' Association  
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Unlike the printed word for which many "style books" exist, music notation practices have traditionally been transmitted by word of mouth and trial and error. To bring order into a situation complicated by the introduction of many fast new processes for note-setting, this study was prepared by the Production Committee of the Music Publishers' Association. It was evaluated by the editors of the majority of the members and represents a reasonable consensus, although it must be said that there was not unanimous agreement on some details.

The Committee commissioned Maxwell Weaner, the autographer and graphic arts expert, to prepare the basic document. The late Walter Boelke, one of the leading music engravers, added his immense knowledge to the working draft. *Most of these rules are not necessarily rigid, and clarity to the performer's eye is always a consideration.* The present revised edition was prepared by Arnold Broido and Daniel Dorff. The music examples were provided by Music Engraving Service.

## PLACEMENT OF GENERAL MATTER

- (a) Title centered on page.
- (b) Dedication centered over title.
- (c) Composer on the right side of the page, flush with the right margin of the music. The arranger or editor under the composer.
- (d) Text source on the left of the page, flush with the left margin of the music. Translator under text source.
- (e) Tempo marks flush left over the time signature. Copyright notice at the bottom on the first page of the composition.

## NOTES AND STEMS

- (a) All single notes with single stems starting on the middle line of the staff and higher are stemmed down. A downstem is always attached to the left side of the note head.



All single notes with single stems starting in the second space of the staff and lower are stemmed up. An upstem is always attached to the right side of the note head.



- (b) Single stems are exactly one octave in length. When there is more than one note head on a stem, as in a chord, the stem length is calculated from the note closest to the end of the stem.



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Stems of notes on leger (ledger) lines, which would normally not reach the middle line of the staff, must be extended to touch the middle line.



Note that the space between each leger line matches the space between each line of the staff.

- (c) To determine the direction for a stem in a chord containing notes both above and below the middle line, the direction of the note farthest from that line governs. When the highest and lowest notes are equidistant from the center of the staff, a downstem is used.



## BEAMS (LIGATURES)

- (a) A ligature is the thickness of half a space.
- (b) Ligatures are parallel to the staff when connecting notes of the same pitch. The normal stem length of one octave will accommodate up two ligatures.



- (c) For each additional ligature over two, the stems must be extended one space.



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(d) Extended stems of notes on high or low ledger lines which just touch the middle line are considered “normal” and must be extended in the usual way for three ligatures.



(e) In a series of notes connected by a ligature, the ligature slants in the general direction of the movement of the notes. If the movement is extreme the slant is modified. The angle either up or down does not exceed one space of the staff.



(f) In cases of multiple ligatures which slant, they are so arranged that the staff lines do not show between the ligatures.



An alternate method uses more slant in the angle of the ligature, and allows the staff lines to show through in multiple ligatures.



(g) Stems are always lengthened and not shortened for accommodating two ligatures.

(h) Stems should not be shortened in cases of crowding between staves, or to fit text between staves. It is preferable to open up space to avoid such crowding.

(i) When a ligature must accommodate notes both above and below the center line of the staff, the stem direction is governed by the note farthest from the center line. When the highest and lowest notes are equidistant from the center line, a downstem is used.



### PLACEMENT OF NOTE HEADS AND ACCIDENTALS

(a) Many musical symbols slant up from left to right at a uniform angle. This makes for easier reading.



This diagonal principle governs the placement of note heads and accidentals in chords where they cannot be aligned vertically.

(b) Thus in an interval of a second, written on a single stem, the lower note is placed on the left and the upper note on the right.



In the case of the upstem, the lower note is in correct relation to the stem, while with a downstem the opposite is true. The note head(s) on the wrong side of the stem are referred to as “displaced” notes. This determines the placement of additional notes on the same stem.



(c) In music using two or more staves, note heads (rather than stems) should be vertically aligned. In aligning chords containing displaced notes with stems going in opposite directions, or on separate staves, the properly placed note heads are aligned.

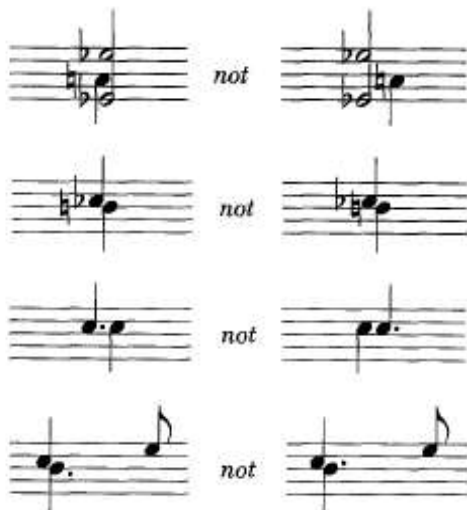


(d) Chords of whole notes which require displacement are to be treated as if they had stems.

(e) When an interval of a second is written with opposite stems, the stems must be in alignment, thus reversing the above rule (c).



(f) Other rules concerning opposite-stemmed voices are shown below.



(g) Placement of accidentals in a chord, when they cannot be aligned, is accomplished by placing the highest accidental next to the chord in the normal position. The second highest accidental (if it cannot align) is placed to the left of the second and so on. As soon as an accidental can align with the top one, the procedure is started over again until all accidentals are placed.

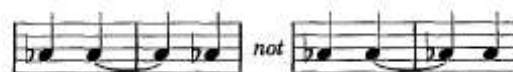


(h) When two notes occupy the same place on the staff in a chord but differ in pitch because of accidentals, they are placed with the lower note on the left. The stems are then drawn at a diagonal to meet at a point from which a common stem is added.



In some cases, enharmonic transposition may be preferable to the above.

(i) Accidentals remain in effect when tied across a bar line.



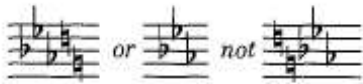
(If a tied note starts at the end of a line and goes to the first note of the next line, it is often preferable to repeat the accidental.)

(j) Key changes and cancellations are shown as follows.

Sharps to fewer sharps:

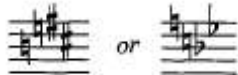


### Flats to fewer flats:



When cancellations occur at the end of a line as a warning, the cancellations are not carried over to the next line.

For flats to sharps and vice versa, the cancellation is not necessary—just the new signature, or alternatively:



When going from a key signature of sharps or flats to the keys of C major or A minor, it is necessary to use naturals to cancel the original key signature.

### PLACEMENT OF DYNAMICS

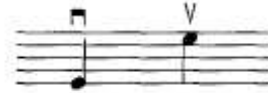
- (a) In single-staff instrumental music, dynamics are placed below the staff.
- (b) In two-staff instrumental music, such as harp or piano, dynamics are placed between the staves.
- (c) In vocal and choral music, dynamics are placed above the staff to be separated from the text.

### MODIFYING SYMBOLS

- (a) In single-voice or single-chord writing, modifying symbols such as dots, accents, stress marks, fermatas, etc., go on the side of the note head opposite that of the stem.



Bowing marks are placed, if possible, above the staff regardless of the direction of the stems.



- (b) Slurs are placed under the note heads if all the stems go up. Slurs are placed over the note heads if all the stems go down. Slurs over or under the notes should contain any modifying marks such as dots, accents, etc.



When a slur covers notes with both upstems and downstems, it is preferable to place the slur over the group.



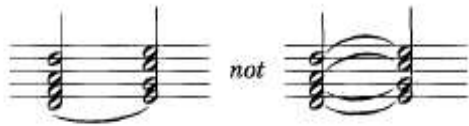
- (c) When the first and last notes of a group are downstem, the slur must point to the first and last note heads.



If either or both the first and last notes in a slurred group are upstem, and the slur is over the notes, the ends of the slur on the stem side must point into the stem, below the end of the stem.



(d) In cases of chords on a single stem connected by a slur, played by a single instrument, it is not correct to use more than one slur.



(e) When a staff contains opposite-stemmed voices, all modifying symbols should be placed on the outer, or stemmed, side of the notes.



Note that the fermata is inverted, while the bowing marks are not.

(f) Ties must always go from note head to note head regardless of the direction of the stems. In a chord containing two or more tied notes a tie must be used for each set of tied notes.



(g) When two notes are tied within a slurred group, the slur must encompass the tie(s).



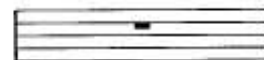
(h) Fingering is preferably placed out of the staff above or below the notes but may also be placed within the staff to the left of the notes; maximum clarity should be the prime consideration.

## TIME SPACING

(a) The horizontal spacing of the notes on the staff is the means to easy comprehension by the performer. The note head itself indicates when the note begins to sound, while the space after it indicates the duration. Therefore, a quarter note will have a larger space after it than an eighth note and so on. However, the relative time spaces are not mathematically proportioned. The actual spacing is influenced by the number of characters on a staff and other factors. *While there is no hard and fast rule for time spacing, it is essential to show some difference between the spacing of the shorter notes as compared to the longer ones.*

(b) The bar line has no rhythmic significance and should not interfere with the time spacing. The bar line is placed close to the first note of the measure *after* that note has been time placed according to the preceding note. Some engraving has given the bar line a unit of space which tends to isolate each measure and disrupt the flow of the music, a procedure which is both incorrect and disturbing.

(c) Rests are treated exactly the same way as notes in the time spacing scheme. There is however, one exception—the whole measure rest, which is placed in the exact middle of the measure between the two bar lines.

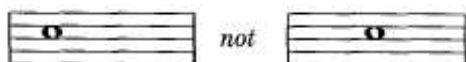


It is the correct symbol for *any* complete bar of rest, and, used thus, it does not carry a specific metric value.

(d) Accidentals have no rhythmic significance and should not effect time

spacing unless the notes are too close, in which case only enough extra space to fit the accidental is allowed.

(e) Since the first beat of every measure falls right after the preceding bar line, the value of the first note does not affect its position as the first beat of the measure. It is therefore incorrect to place a whole note in the middle of the measure.



(f) Text should not seriously affect time spacing. Short syllables sung on one note are centered under the note. Long syllables sung on one note begin a little to the left of the note. All syllables sung on more than one note (including tied notes) begin flush left with the first note. However, in tight places words may be placed so that *any* part of the word is under the note, so as to accommodate the time spacing as far as possible. Slight deviations in time spacing are sometimes necessary when text is involved but these should never be carried so far as to distort the rhythmic meaning of the music.

(g) In putting text to music it is necessary to divide each syllable in a multi-syllable word, placing a hyphen between the separated parts of the word. When hyphenating an English text, use standard dictionary syllabification. When a one-syllable word or the final syllable of a multi-syllable word is sung to more than one note, the word or syllable is placed flush left to the first note whenever possible and an extender is added to

carry the word over to the last note to which it is sung. An extender is a thin line level with the bottom of the letters in the text. When a punctuation mark and an extender both follow a word, the punctuation is placed after the word in normal fashion and then the extender is added to the right.



It is now standard to notate rhythms in vocal music in the same manner as instrumental music, beaming eighth notes and smaller divisions to clarify the beat. A slur is used to connect those notes which are sung to the same word or syllable. (See the example above.)

#### PLACEMENT OF INSTRUCTION WORDS

(a) Tempo instructions (such as *Adagio*, *Allegro*) are placed over the staff and are usually in bold Roman type.

Temporary tempo modifications (such as *rit.*, *accel.*, and *a tempo*) are often in italics.

Tempo headings are usually repeated in a score as many times as needed to be seen easily.

(b) General modifying terms (*dolce*, *dim.*, *cresc.*, etc.) are usually in italics and appear under a single staff, between paired staves as in a piano system, and above staves in vocal music. In scores, these words are usually repeated for each staff.

(c) Playing instructions such as *con sord.*, *pizz.*, etc., should appear in Roman type and are placed over the staff.

## BAR LINES

(a) This is the sign for final ending only:



If there is a *D.C. al Fine*, the final ending bar is placed at the *Fine* even if it is located in the middle of a line.

(b) The two thin bars are called a section bar and are used at the end of a section.



The thin double bar is also used preceding a change of key or tempo, but not before a simple change of meter.

(c) These are repeat marks which enclose the section of music to be repeated:



If the repeat goes back to the beginning of the piece, the first one must be omitted.

(d) This sign is used when sections repeat on either side of it:



(e) This is used at the end of a line when the next line starts with a repeat sign:



## GRACE NOTES

(a) It is always preferable to stem grace notes up.



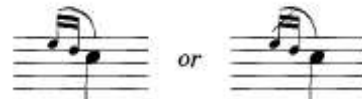
However, in divided voices they must be stemmed with the voices to which they belong.



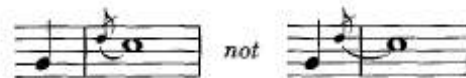
(b) A grace note or group of grace notes is generally slurred to the note which it precedes. The slur is best going from note head to note head. However, when the grace notes appear among many ledger lines, the slurs should be placed to avoid falling in the ledger lines.



(c) When a ligature is used for a group of grace notes, the slash is optional.

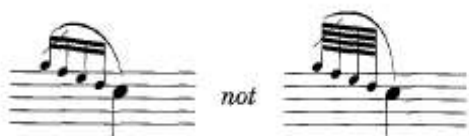


(d) Grace notes preceding the beginning of a measure are notated to the right of the bar line, to be graphically next to the principal note, even though they are actually played before the bar.



(e) Since grace notes are played as quickly as possible, excessive beaming is not needed.





(f) Grace notes occurring at the termination of the trill should be stemmed with the basic note of the trill so that the slur may be conveniently placed above or below the note heads.



### METRIC GROUPS

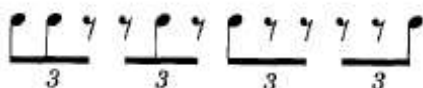
(a) When a metric group is contained within a ligature so that the group is clearly one unit, no bracket or slur is required to delineate the group. The number is preferably on the side of the ligature but may be placed on the other side for the sake of clarity.



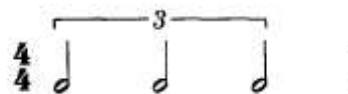
(b) Standard practice requires a bracket and a number over or under the entire unit of a rhythmic grouping when rests are mixed with notes, thus:



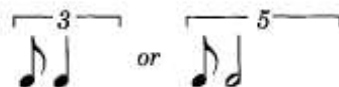
(c) In contemporary music with complex rhythms, some composers extend the ligature of a rhythmic group through the entire unit even when the first or last or both are rests instead of notes. This kind of grouping also requires no bracket with the number.



(d) When a metric group is not contained within a ligature, a bracket must be placed over or under the group to clearly define it as a unit. The bracket begins and ends as shown below.



(e) In complex modern music it is often necessary to place brackets in rhythmically correct positions for clearer reading.



(f) When there are many triplets in succession it is only necessary to label the first few. Once the pattern has been established the numeral may be dropped.

### D.C., D.S., AND ENDINGS

(a) *D.C.* means *Da Capo*, or “go back to the beginning.”

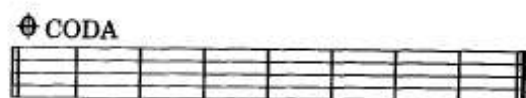
(b) *D.C. al Fine* means “go back to the beginning and play until Fine.”

(c) *D.S.* means *Dal Segno*, or “go back to the sign.” The sign used in this case is: %

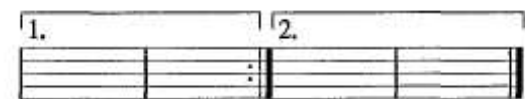
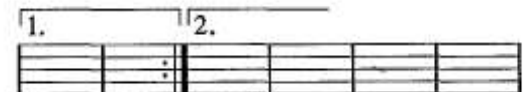
(d) *D.S. al Fine* means “go back to the sign and play until Fine.”

(e) This is the sign used to designate the beginning of the CODA:  $\oplus$

It is used with a *D.C.* or *D.S.* which instructs the player to go back and play to the coda sign and then skip the intervening music and play the CODA.



(f) Endings must be bracketed. When a second ending occurs in the middle of a piece, the bracket should extend for a measure or two and then end without the closing stroke. When the second ending occurs at the end of a piece or section, the bracket must be closed.

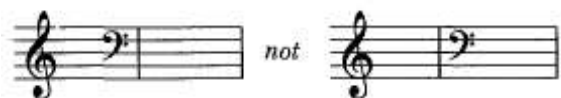


#### MISCELLANEOUS

(a) Meter changes:



(b) Clef changes:



(c) Unmeasured tremolos are indicated by notating the full rhythmic value twice, with incomplete beams between these notes.



(d) No line is used at the beginning of single-staff systems.

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