

An Introduction to Proofreading Music



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Proofreading music has many differences (but a number of similarities as well) to working with text. The main difference is that printed music has two main stages: performance and final publication.

What's the distinction in the actual material?

Basically, music that is to be prepared only for performance needs to be edited largely in aural terms; it doesn't matter if the score and parts are not the most beautiful and perfect in layout, so long as they are legible, correct and practical. The main issues at this stage that you need to look out for include the following:

- pitch/doublings
- key signatures
- time signatures
- tempo indications
- rhythm
- articulations
- dynamics
- con sord/senza sord (mute) continuities
- pizz./arco indications (plucked notes)
- correct transpositions
- cues (when players have very long rests)
- page turns
- rehearsal numbers/letters (for navigation)
- clefs

For non-musical, curious readers, let me just explain a few things about the above, which may be mysterious.

People often ask me how I notice that a note is wrong. There are a few red flags for this. Obviously, if you are checking a score against the composer's manuscript, that is where you will first notice any problems. When reading 'blind' (without the original), doubling is perhaps the easiest way to spot a discrepancy. In orchestral scores, many of the lines are duplicated. For example, upper woodwind might be playing the same music as violins at certain moments. You just check for any small differences there, and go with the majority lines. If there are only two lines (an either/or situation), you have two options: 1) query it with the composer; or 2) analyse the harmony and make a decision. But that's not so easy with extended tonal music (atonal, as it is often called)!

And what about 'continuities'? What does that mean?

If a composer marks a passage 'con sord.', which means put a mute on the instrument, it's all too easy to forget to mark when that mute must be taken off: 'senza sord.' That's a continuity

issue, one of many which usually involve a separate proofreading pass. In the context of other muted instruments, the solution can be guessed, but quite often you must query.

So, performance proofreading involves a lot of issues which can take many passes, but what more can be added beyond that?

I'm afraid, plenty! Publication introduces what I call 'cosmetic' issues, mainly visual in nature, and the process corresponds to a final typographical proof for a book. Such issues may include:

- formatting of systems (lines of music running on)
- proportions of bar lengths
- stave proportions
- collisions of objects
- beam angles
- positioning of accidentals in chords
- consistency of fonts
- use of italic for instructions
- use of bold for dynamics
- indention of first system
- titles, title pages and other written material
- text for vocal underlay

Music proofreading therefore consists of 'levels' of attention, which doesn't mean to say that a basic check of the essentials is something less than its later published equivalent – the notes have got to be right from the word go for the performers! It's similar, in a way, to the copyediting/proofreading distinction in text, where editing precedes the final check. But music must also go through its own copyediting process prior to the two stages of proofreading.

Sounds complicated? Alas, yes, which is why it is a very specialist form of proofreading, and there are as yet no courses

equivalent to the ones out there on offer for text. Music proofreading ideally needs a background in composition and performance, which is how people move into it. I got into it quite by accident when someone who knew I had proofread a published score out of exasperation with the mistakes I was finding introduced me to a music editor.

If you are a composer or an arranger, you will already be doing some proofreading of your own work. Unfortunately, the added familiarity you have with your creation can blind you to what is actually there! This is why a publishing house edits and gets proofreaders in to help.

In later blogs, I will go into some more detail about proofreading methods in music and suggest some techniques for checking.

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