Techniques for Proofreading Pitch

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This blog deals with issues relating to the proofreading of pitch in music. Obviously, there are additional elements you need to proofread too, such as dynamics, articulations, tempi etc. But for now, I am focusing solely on pitch, as this is the parameter that takes longest when proofreading, and is the hardest one to locate errors. It really is like looking systematically for a needle in a haystack.

One question that crops up frequently is: should you check pitches of the individual parts once you have made a score? Surely there is no need.

Publishers always check them. You will be amazed how things can get nudged and changed when moving around the main score. Think how many hundreds of thousands of pitches you are dealing with, all separate objects in the file, and how easy it is to move them around. And

when working at speed, it's so easy to input a command without realising you had selected something on an earlier page not visible on the screen. If you have a deadline, some rehearsal time, sympathetic performers and a good ear, then you might take the risk of not checking pitches in the parts; but I don't recommend it. Also, checking the parts may pick up errors missed first time round in the score, so it's worth it.

My procedure

My preferred method is to work using hard copy, with the source to my left on the table, and the score to be corrected on the right.

But quite often these days, I have to work straight into the computer using two screens, a process which can be both good and bad. It's good in that you can magnify things (useful if the source is a hand-written manuscript scanned into PDF), and potentially time-saving if you are correcting directly into Sibelius/Dorico/or other. It's also very useful for avoiding the unpredictability of snail mail post, especially when clients are in other countries. But it's not quite so good if you are marking up a PDF using Adobe Acrobat Reader. The mark-up method does take more time, especially with large orchestral scores. It's also much easier to deal with a physical score when cross-referencing passages many pages apart.

How can you tell when a note is wrong?

This is the one question I get, without fail, from musicians and non-musicians alike. The answer is not simple. I hope this blog will shed some light on it, but it does involve different approaches to spotting pitch errors.

There are two main modes of proofreading: 1) checking against a source, and 2) a blind read, where you read the score on its own without reference to anything else.

With the first method, assuming the source is reliable, you should spot any pitch discrepancies between the two scores. But with the second method, you have to be more circumspect. You have two tools here: checking any doublings with other instruments; and analysing the harmony.

It has to be said that a knowledge of harmony and counterpoint really does help when proofreading pitch. But some composers are more

chromatic (or non-tonal) than others, which makes it harder. So if you see something that doesn't look right, call the British Transport Police…

(or the composer!).

With doublings, you have to be careful when there is only one other doubling in the score. The discrepant note could be wrong in either of those doublings. Don't assume anything, unless it's a really blatant howler. With three doublings and more, go with the pitch that is the same most often.

With harmonies, if the discrepant pitch does not appear in any other part of the chord (and that includes different octave levels too), it may be wrong. Always worth checking at the piano, but in borderline cases query with the composer (unless that is who you are!).

Proofreading by listening

I have noticed that many composers do this, just playing through their music using the sounds in their setting programmes. As a final check, this is certainly an additional tool in your arsenal, but don't rely on it! This shouldn't really take the place of a slow, careful pass by eye alone.

There are two dangers. Firstly, at what speed will you play back the music? Even at half speed it can go by too quickly to spot all errors. And will you notice the errors of 'false friends' – wrong notes which actually do fit into the harmony? (I deal with these later on.)

Danger number two is the set-up of balancing on your programme. If you have inputted many dynamics, but your mixer is not set up so well, you may find that certain lines are obscured by others, and you simply don't hear the wrong notes. In general, these programmes can never take the place of real instruments for adjusting your balancing. A composer of the stature of Mark-Anthony Turnage rightly warns against over-reliance on Sibelius for listening to your music, and he regularly workshops his own music to try things out. An example to emulate, if you are able.

Common errors

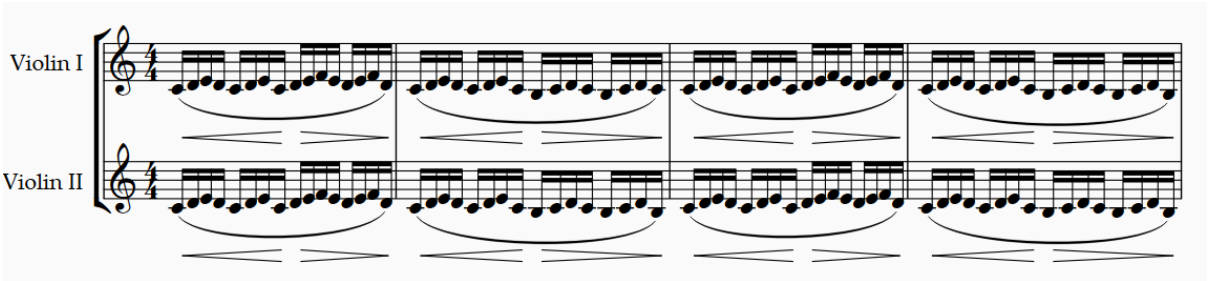
Copying and pasting

Be wary of passages that repeat. If there's a pitch error in the original paste, it will be repeated elsewhere. Assume that copying and pasting has taken place, as most composers like to save time when doing the

boring work of setting music! This applies to transposed passages as well, so be a good copy-editor in your proofreading practice and get to know the structure of the piece from the outset; work out which passages recur. (That's much easier to do with a physical score; onscreen it's very cumbersome to navigate around.)

Ostinati and fast motion passages

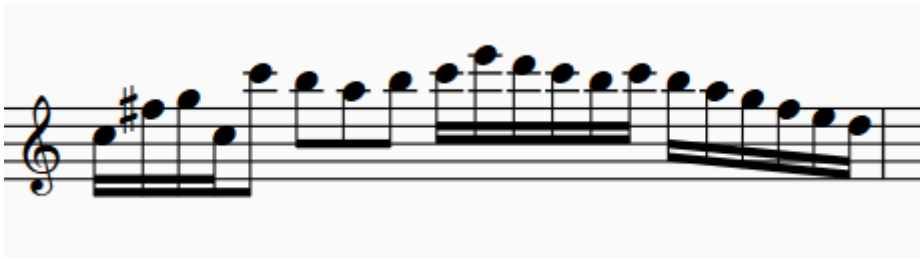
It is very tempting to gloss over these once you've checked the original pattern. But accidental nudges of the mouse do happen. The following is one such example; can you see where the setter nudged a note accidentally, or only corrected one line, forgetting to update the other?



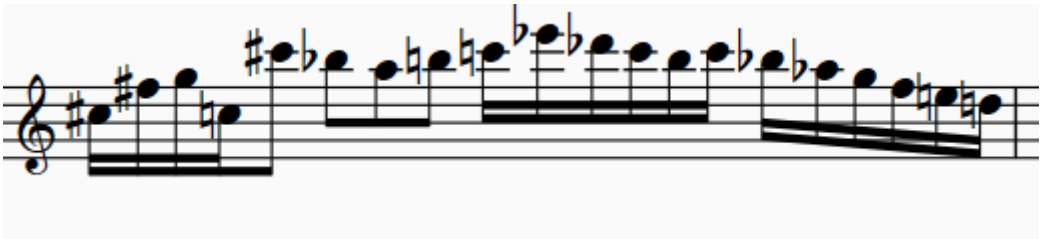
Semiquavers, demisemiquavers, what have you; be sure to check the final notes of beamed groups as it is so easy to overlook them.

Uncancelled accidentals

A long bar which repeats a note used (and chromatically inflected) earlier in the bar – can you be sure there's not a cancelling accidental missing later? Knowledge of harmony and voice-leading can help in a situation like the following, which may have to be queried if there are no doublings to refer to. Is it F sharp all the way through the bar, or should the later F be natural?

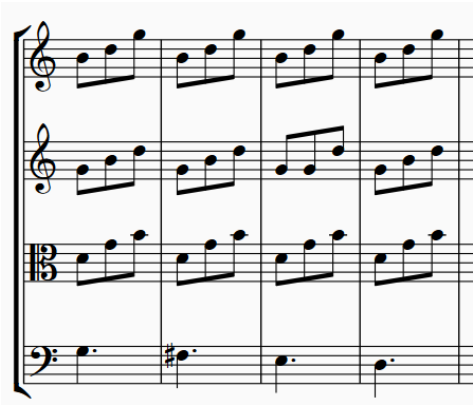


With this more eccentric version, you may well need to query:



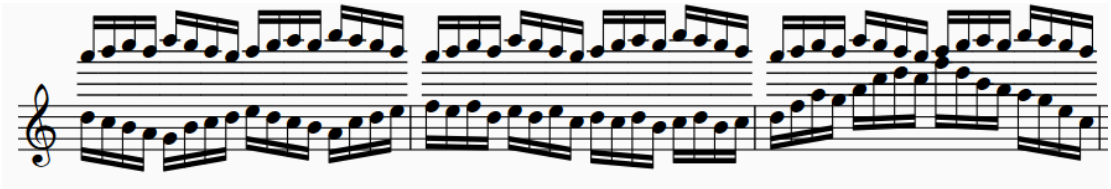
False friends

These may look more obvious to the eye, but if you were just proofing by listening to playback, the lack of the B in bar 3 below might just pass you by, as the harmony is not adversely affected there. This is one reason why a thorough visual pass often beats the riskier listening approach, but if you have time to do both, then do so:



Density of ledger lines

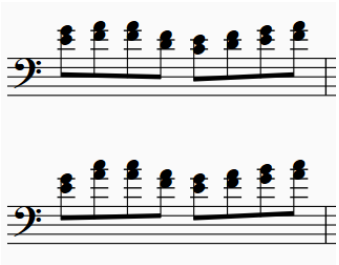
The following example is admittedly extreme, but I did come across something very similar recently. Sometimes, you will find ledger lines that merge into each other, looking like old German keyboard tablature staves. This can happen if two parts are sharing one stave, making it hard to use 8va lines unambiguously for the top part only:



It’s straightforward to proof once you have fixed the original pitch and work the others out from that, but be careful if you are looking back and forth to another score for reference; it’s easy to get lost again!

Misreading ledger lines

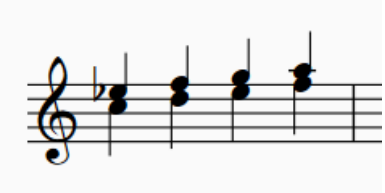
It is surprisingly easy to misread ledger lines by the interval of a third, especially when moving from source to correction copy over a distance. Compare these two bars, and imagine if they were even smaller:



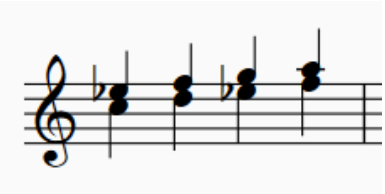
Two instruments sharing one stave

In orchestral scores, wind and brass instruments often share staves with second (and even third) players, for example, Oboe 1 with Oboe 2. Strings too, might have divisi lines where inside players take the lower line.

So what happens when you encounter the following?



Is the second E a flat or a natural? If you ‘explode’ the two voices in Sibelius to make two separate staves, it will interpret the second E as flat. But for clarity, the original should really be notated like this:



(See Gould *Behind Bars* pp. 79–80.)

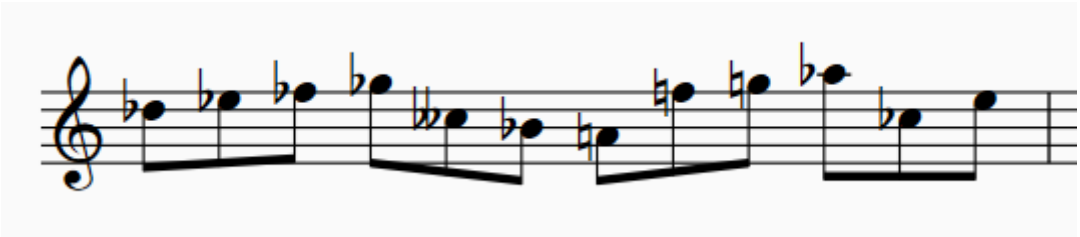
You should also check if there are any doublings of these lines elsewhere in the score, which will confirm the matter. Otherwise, check with the composer, especially if they are fond of false relations (not the same as false friends!).

Singing through (using the inner ear)

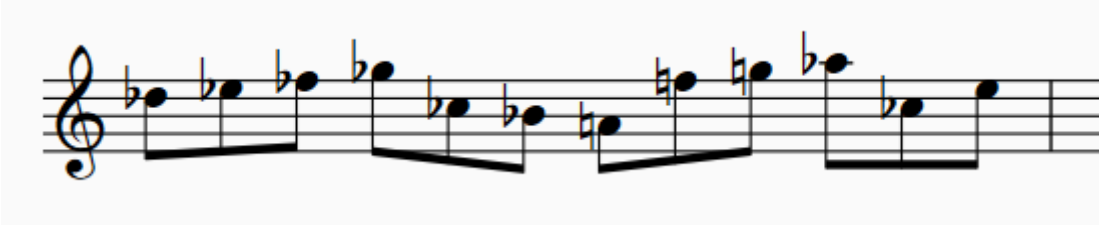
In principle, it's good to be able to hear what you are reading. But be careful when doing this, as singing (or sounding in the inner ear) can make you accidentally speed up when proofreading. You can end up 'performing' the music in your head and seeing what you think is there, not what is actually there.

When instrumentalists play, their fingers respond very quickly to the patterns on the page – faster than the brain 'hears' the music. The finger then plays the wrong note and the performer spots it. But the inner ear of the proofreader (even if well-trained) doesn't have that mechanical extra medium of the playing fingers. It can sometimes make assumptions! So, visual alert needs to be foremost, particularly when using inner singing as well.

Here's an example of the danger of falling into 'performing' mode. Imagine you are reading the line below from a source to the left of you (hard copy or computer screen):



You sing it in your mind, then move your head to the copy you are correcting (on your right). You finish singing the end of the phrase as you read it now in the correcting copy, possibly neglecting to check the first six notes, and thereby missing the earlier error:

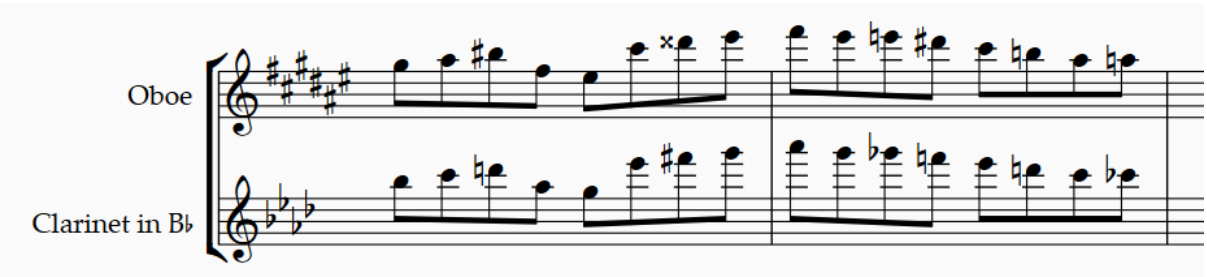


Obviously, in reality, you would be wiser not to ‘chunk’ such a large amount of pitch material (I would be checking in 3-note chunks!), but this exaggerated example should serve to highlight the danger! Also, if you feel you are proofreading ‘in tempo’, maybe think about slowing down!

Transposition and the inner ear

If you tend to sing internally when proofreading pitch, what do you do when it comes to reading transposed instruments? Do you sing/read the written pitch or do you transpose?

I tend to transpose as I read/sing, but very slowly. Mistakes can creep in with transposition, and it’s much harder to spot them by eye. Even though Sibelius or Dorico make the transpositions accurately, you might go on to do some formatting of the transposed score and unwittingly budge a note when selecting or moving a stave. Here’s a thorny example where the clarinet is doubling the oboe, so it can be checked directly on the page. But it’s hard, because although clarinet in B flat is written up a major second, here we have the really painful diminished third version to contend with:



And there is indeed a mistake in the clarinet part, which is really hard to see! So that is why I take the painstaking approach of working out the intervals one by one and transposing in my head at the same time as singing at pitch.

Also, with transposed parts, you might want to make the enharmonic spelling a little easier for the performer to work with. In the example above, the last note of the clarinet could read B natural instead of C flat, depending on what follows, of course. Don't assume the computer always chooses the best spelling for your needs.

These are just some of the pitfalls I have encountered over my many years of proofreading. Fellow proofreaders will doubtless be able to add to this small list, so please do so in the comments below!

Ivor McGregor February 2026
(written without using ChatGPT)

Ivor McGregor is a professional music proofreader, editor and typesetter. Need help presenting your written music? Visit ivormcgregorproofreading.co.uk