

Setting up Orchestral Scores in Sibelius

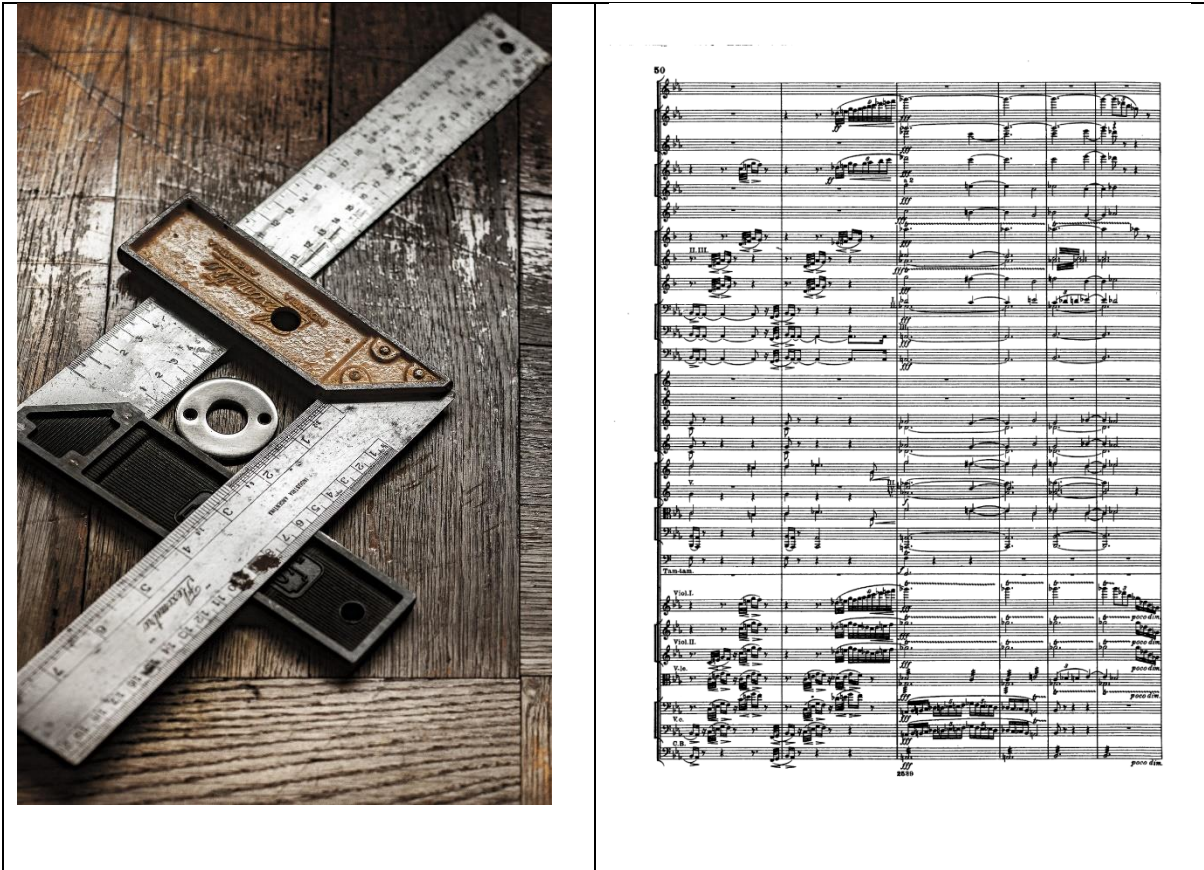


Image Credit: jhuanmanuel from Pixabay

This blog aims to help you fine-tune the initial set-up of your orchestral scores using Sibelius. We will focus on page and staff size, margins, conversion of single staves to shared, and instrument short names.

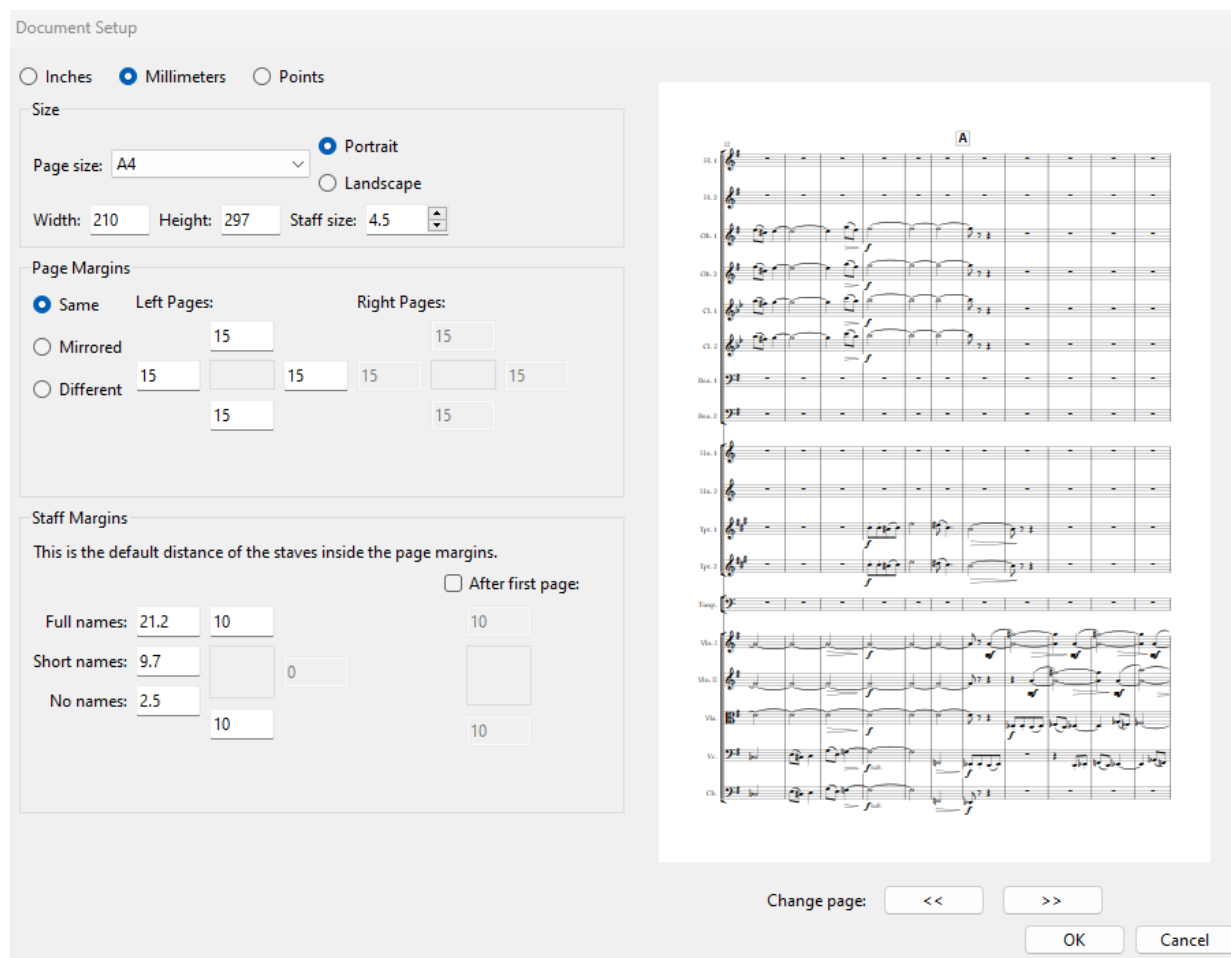
Page and staff size

Large scores should be set on A3 paper, or B4 if space permits. Avoid A4 unless the orchestra is really minimal.

A good recommended staff size is 3.7 mm. Avoid going any smaller than 3 mm. You can increase the size slightly if your orchestra is not huge, but if in doubt, do an early printout of a densely scored page to see how readable it is.

Margins

To control the size of these, press Control + D to go to Document Setup. You can set the page margins here, and a good recommended width and depth is 15 mm. Unify them on all pages by clicking 'Same'.



Be aware of the difference between page margins and staff margins. The image below shows the page margins indicated by a dotted blue line. This is the entire working space. Never place material outside these borders unless absolutely necessary. The staff margins are contained within the page margins, and they include space for the names of the instruments. You will see in the image above that Sibelius has default distances for the staves, so you don't need to change those.

A snippet of a musical score for a woodwind section. The score is arranged in a system with eight staves. From top to bottom, the staves are labeled: Fl. 1, Fl. 2, Ob. 1, Ob. 2, Cl. 1, Cl. 2, Bsn. 1, and Bsn. 2. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The time signature is not explicitly shown but appears to be 4/4. The score is marked with a '2' at the top left and a circled 'A' above the first staff. The woodwind parts (Ob., Cl., Bsn.) are active, while the flutes and bassoons are silent. Dynamics like 'f' are indicated.

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You'll see in the example above that the instrument lines are all single. Some composers do this when setting because it feels simpler from the point of view of creating parts. That certainly makes good sense for a parts file (and you should ideally have two files, one for parts and one for conductor's score), but here we want to make the score look like the real thing. We need to economise on space and make it easier to read, so the next stage is to introduce shared staves.

Shared staves

Instruments that share staves include wind and brass, as well as strings when they go into divisi. When material is too independent and complex, then you should introduce separate staves per instrument, temporarily.

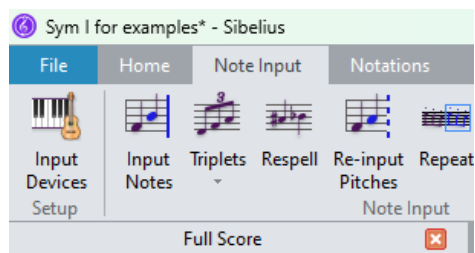
Converting single staves to shared

This can be done quite easily in Sibelius, but it will require vigilance and checking once done. As always, don't assume that one press of a button solves all problems!

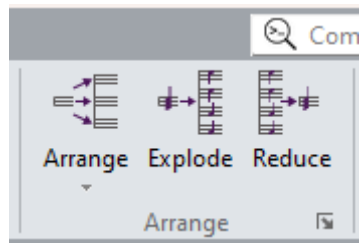
We are going to convert the example below to shared staves:



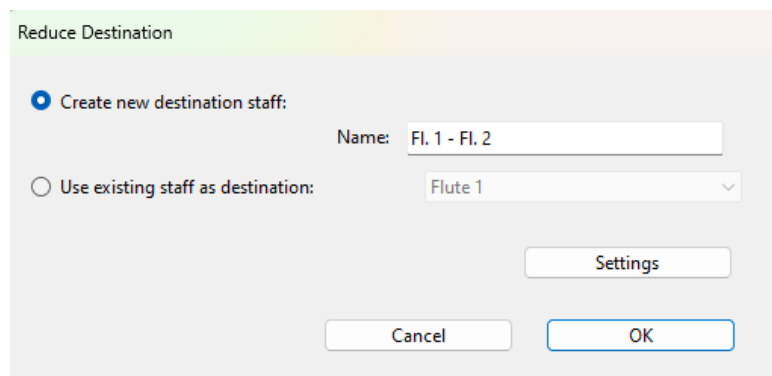
First, select the whole passage that you wish to convert. Then go to the Note Input tab:



Move along rightwards to the Arrange pane with the somewhat alarming options offered as below:



Click on the third option Reduce. This dialogue will then appear:



Always choose a new destination staff, because you might need those separate flute staves again at some point if their music becomes too individual to fit onto the one staff.

Before we proceed to the next stage, I need to pause and explain something briefly:

On the first page of the score, instrument names are laid out in full. After the first page, they are abbreviated to short names.

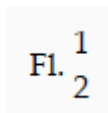
You will see that the instrument short names for the flutes here are in the not-so-ideal format of:

Fl.1 – Fl.2

By clicking on this name and manually retyping, it's easy enough to change it to:

Fl.1.2

While that's acceptable, it's not the standard version, which is:



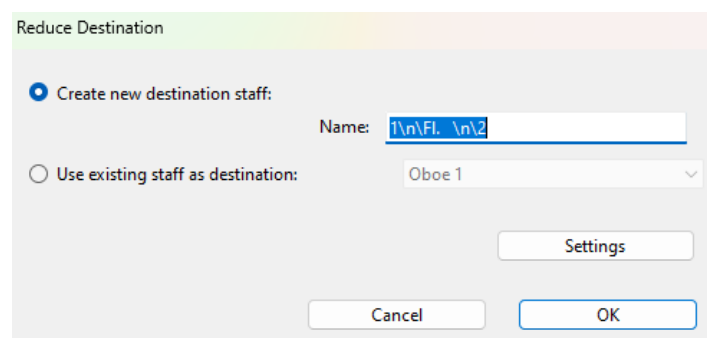
This isn't easy to input here, so to do that, we need to use a bit of coding in the dialogue above. Where it says:

Fl.1 – Fl.2

Change this to:

1\nFl. \n2

The \n\ sign means that the next bit in the code will appear on the line below. And after Fl. I have typed in three spaces to make that name move further to the left.



And, wonder of wonders, here's the result, as a third stave:



The image shows a musical score for three flutes. The top staff is labeled 'Fl. 1', the middle 'Fl. 2', and the bottom 'Fl. 1 & 2'. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The music consists of several measures with notes and rests. Dynamic markings include *sf* (sforzando) and articulation marks like accents and slurs. The bottom staff has first and second endings marked '1.' and 'a2'.

You can also click on the actual label itself in the score, delete what's there and apply the code directly.

The instrument labelling is clear enough here, moving to first flute, then a2, then flute 2 going its own way in the penultimate bar. Do watch out for any obscuring of these labels that is very likely to occur, especially if the notes are high and use ledger lines. This is where you need to do some checking and proofreading.

The next stage in the process is simply to hide the two original flute staves. Don't delete them, as they might be needed at some point if their music is too independent to share on one stave. You will need to select and hide the music on them first (Control + Shift + H), then select and hide the staves themselves (Control + Shift + Alt + H).

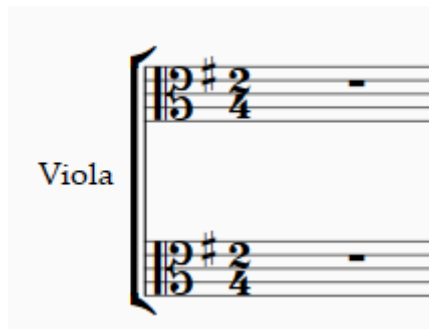
Labelling multiple staves in strings

When you have multiple staves in the strings, how do you specify individual instrument name formats as the example below?

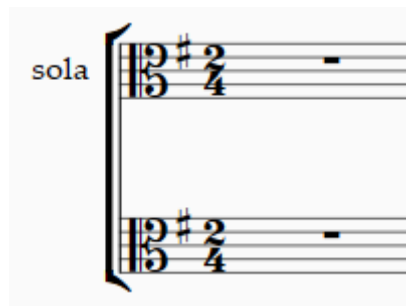


The image shows a musical score for strings. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The score is divided into three parts: 'sola' (top staff), 'Viola' (middle staff), and 'le altre' (bottom staff). Each staff has a treble clef and a whole rest.

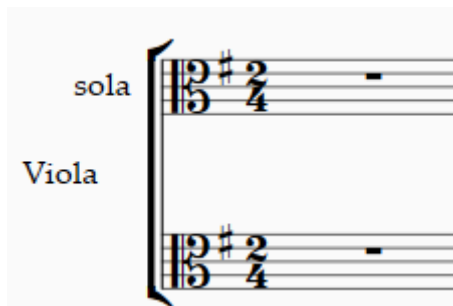
Create the extra stave below the main viola line first (go to Instruments by pressing capital letter I) and follow the prompts there:



Then click on the instrument name, drag it up to the top stave, and change it to 'sola' by deleting backwards and retyping:



Then, clicking after 'sola', press the return key several times to get to the middle of the stave and type 'Viola'. Press the spacebar a few times to move that to the left:



After Viola, press the return key to get down to the bottom stave and type in 'le altre':



You might have to make further adjustments to get it all aligned, perhaps selecting the whole group and moving it manually. Don't forget to do the same for the short name version after the first page.

These points cover the basic set-up for orchestral conductors' and study scores. In my next blog, I will look at the later stages of formatting, balancing page layout, and casting off.

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(written without using ChatGPT)

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