

Abbreviated Instrument Labels in Sibelius



Image credit: stanbalik from Pixabay

This blog is not about herbs and spices as per the picture above(!) but a guide to setting up abbreviated instrument labels for Sibelius scores. Sibelius calls them 'short names'.

Formatting abbreviated instrument labels

On the first page of any score, instrument names are laid out in full. From the second page on, they are abbreviated to short names. For the abbreviations themselves I must refer you to Elaine Gould's *Behind Bars* p.511 (main instruments) and p.273 (for percussion). It's worth looking at that, as composers sometimes invent their own versions which can be a tad misleading. Be careful with abbreviations suggested in orchestration manuals, as they are not always helpful. Adler's *The Study of Orchestration* has t.t. for both tam-tam and tom-toms, which Gould warns against for obvious reasons!

However, this blog will concentrate on the formatting of whatever label you choose!

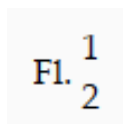
Sometimes abbreviated labels can appear in Sibelius by default like this:

F1.1 – F1.2

By clicking on this in the score and manually retyping, it's easy enough to change to the more concise form:

F1.1.2

While that's acceptable, it's not quite as good as:



But no amount of fiddling manually will make that happen easily! So we have two options; we can either do the process again and code the name, or use a plug-in. It's easier to use the plug-in called 'Edit Instrument Names' created by Bob Zawalich. If you want to set it up yourself by coding, see my previous blog: [Setting up Orchestral Scores in Sibelius](#) where you will find this longer method on p.5. But for now, let's find the plug-in.

Install plug-in

Go to the File tab.

Go down to Plug-ins.

Click on 'Install Plug-ins'. This will bring up a list, including recent updates.

Where it says 'Find Plug-in' type 'Edit Instrument Names' then press 'Find'. You should then be able to install it with no problem. Now, where do we look when we need to use it?

Locating plug-in when you need it

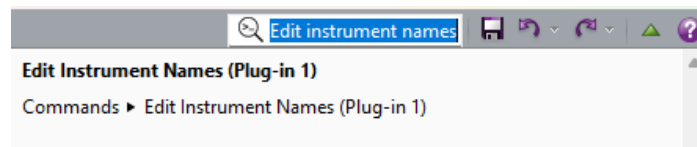
Not an intuitive one, this, I'm afraid, but simple at least.

Click on the current short-form instrument label in the score.

Go to the Home tab.

Look to the right where the magnifying glass icon is.

Type in 'Edit Instrument Names'. Here you will find your new plug-in:



Clicking on this, we get to the plug-in itself:

Edit Instrument Names - Version 02.22.10 - by Bob Zawalich

This plug-in allows you to edit full and short instrument names, even if the name is empty, and difficult to click on.

Type a new Full or Short name into the text boxes for a staff. Type ^b for a "flat" accidental, or \n\ to split onto 2 lines. See Help for more options.

If there are more than 30 instruments in the score, use the Next and Previous buttons to edit more staves. Changes made will be preserved when you edit Next or Previous staves. Choose OK to apply all changes to the score.

All but the first staff of multi-staff instruments such as Piano will be grayed out. See Help.

Staff Number	Full Name	Short Name	Staff Number	Full Name	Short Name
1	1\n\Flute 1 \n\2	Fl. 1	16	Violin I	Vln. I
2	Flute 2	Fl. 2	17	Violin II	Vln. II
3	1\n\Fl. 1 - Fl. 2 \n\2	Fl. 1 - Fl. 2	18	Violin II	Vln. II
4	Oboe 1	Ob. 1	19	Viola	Vla.
5	Oboe 2	Ob. 2	20	Violoncello	Vc.
6	Clarinet 1 in A	Cl. 1	21	Violoncello	Vc.
7	Clarinet 2 in A	Cl. 2	22	Contrabass	Cb.
8	Bassoon 1	Bsn. 1			
9	Bassoon 2	Bsn. 2			
10	Horn 1 in F	Hn. 1			
11	Horn 2 in F	Hn. 2			
12	Trumpet 1 in B\text.character.musictext\b	Tpt. 1			
13	Trumpet 2 in B\text.character.musictext\b	Tpt. 2			
14	Timpani	Timp.			
15	Violin I	Vln. I			

Help... Format Names... < Previous staves Next staves > Cancel OK

Formatting the short name

You'll see that the table above divides into full names and short. Let's directly set up a new short name for combined Flutes 1 & 2 (under the third staff number). Where you see the blue box above, change that label to Fl.

Short Name
Fl. 1
Fl. 2
Fl.

Next, click down below where it says 'Format names' (in the red box above). This will come up:

Format Instrument Names

You can add numbers, line feeds, and spaces to one or more Instrument Names as described in the Sibelius Reference in section '5.4 Instrument Names - Format and style of names – Advanced Name Formats'. This is accomplished by choosing one or more Instrument Names, picking a formatting preset, and choosing 'Apply formatting'. Presets that use \n\ assume that line spacing for the Instrument Names text style is set to 50% as described in the Reference.

If you select a preset, its formatting characters and description appear below the list box. Presets use Sibelius formatting wildcards and special characters to represent the name or parts of the name. '@' is the complete name. For instruments like Trumpet in Bb, '%' is the portion of the name up to 'in', and \$ is the portion from 'in' on. 'Split' presets that use % and \$ will only format instrument names that include a key, such as 'in Bb'.

Undo Formatting will restore the formatting string to the value it had when this dialog was brought up before making any changes. It will not undo formatting made in a previous session. You will need to edit the formatted name in the main dialog to remove such formatting.

Names with 'X' after the staff number are not editable. Changes will be kept only if you choose 'Accept changes.'

Instrument names with staff/type headers. Use ctrl/cmdnd+click to multi-select names

1__Full: 1\n\Flute 1 \n2

1__Short: Fl. 1

2__Full: Flute 2

2__Short: Fl. 2

3__Full: 1\n\Fl. 1 - Fl. 2 \n2

3__Short: Fl.

4__Full: Oboe 1

4__Short: Ob. 1

5__Full: Oboe 2

5__Short: Ob. 2

6__Full: Clarinet 1 in A

6__Short: Cl. 1

7__Full: Clarinet 2 in A

7__Short: Cl. 2

8__Full: Bassoon 1

Presets for formatting names

Name 1-2

Name 3-4

Name 1-2 grand staff

Name 3-4 grand staff

Split in key 1-2

Split in key 3-4

Split in key 1

Split in key 2

Split in key 3

< Apply formatting

< Undo formatting

Edit, Add, or Delete Preset...

The blue box above shows the label you have just changed.

Click on it.

Select the Preset marked 'Name 1–2' on the other side (in my red box).

Press <Apply formatting.

OK it down at the very bottom (not shown here).

OK the next panel that comes up. Then, with a bit of luck, this should be the result in your score:

$$\text{Fl. } \frac{1}{2}$$

You are good to go. Happy herbs and spices!

Ivor McGregor July 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