

neue musikzeitung (May 2015)

Vom lesbaren zum schönen Partiturbild

<http://www.nmz.de/artikel/vom-lesbaren-zum-schoenen-partiturbild>

Translation by Arne Muus, Edition Peters Group

From merely legible to beautiful notation

Elaine Gould's guide to musical notation is a delight also in German

If one takes a look at any random stack of music in a music shop, one will soon begin to doubt if there is in fact such a thing as "notational rules". Music does not have an official orthography, partly due to the wide diversity of notational styles, traditions and customs, which can be codified in a fixed set of rules only to a very limited extent. Nevertheless, many attempts have been made, and continue to be made, at formulating, assembling, and generalising notational rules, and putting them down in writing. Particularly since the middle of the 20th century, there has been a constant focus on this problem. Textbooks such as the technical manuals by Austrian engravers by Karl Hader and Herbert Chlapik provide a detailed account of many different notational aspects and offer solutions for many of the tasks at hand.

Then, in 2011, came the publication of "Behind Bars" by British music editor Elaine Gould – surely the most extensive reference book on the subject to date, and covering in detail a wide range of issues. At the end of 2014, a German version was then published by Edition Peters under the title "Hals über Kopf". Happily, this is not just a translation of the English original, but a skilful adaptation which – despite the plethora of aspects covered – also specifically addresses and identifies "German" notational traditions. (For instance, it mentions the custom, in this country, of using separate flags for each syllable in vocal music, as opposed to beams for several notes sung on the same syllable). The wide spectrum of topics ranges from general notation to idiomatic notation for wind instruments, percussion, guitar, vocal music etc., and includes the layout of scores and parts, even in electroacoustic music.

The author masterfully succeeds at setting out a vast number of rules in a clear, structured, and easily accessible manner, using helpful music examples to illustrate her points. Naturally, even an author as skilful as she occasionally reaches certain practical limits, e.g. in the chapter on vocal music, where it is simply impossible to cover every single minute detail. In these cases, however, her general "rule of the trade" applies, which is that there will always be, and need to be, deviations from the usual custom if there is good reason for it, in order to achieve a sensible solution. Addressing highly specific issues such as square notation or other non-standard notational styles would have gone beyond the scope of this book, and would have been an unnecessary addition for the average user.

One final comment on the subtitle: in contrast to the original version, “The definitive guide to musical notation”, the wording of the German subtitle, “Das Handbuch des Notensatzes”, remains pleasantly neutral. The rules of notation are based on traditions that have evolved over many years, and will continue to evolve in future. “Definitive” – at least to the German reader – seems to imply a kind of “ultimacy” which Simon Rattle, in his preface, (and probably the publisher, too) may well hope for in the years to come, but which is at odds with the nature of these “rules”.

Modern notation has been shaped significantly by the development of notational programmes (both high- and low-end), which are easy to use, have a wide range of functions, and with which even a beginner can produce a decent result. In spite of such sophisticated software, however, it is still a large qualitative step from “legible” to “beautiful” notation. This is exactly where Elaine Gould, with her “wonderful monster volume” (Simon Rattle) comes in, underlining that even in the computer age, rules of craftsmanship should not be forgotten – or, as Chlapik said 25 years ago, “By means of computers, it is possible to automate the purely mechanical part of the work, but not the conceptual part of it”.

“Hals über Kopf” is a reference book that every professional music setter, but also ambitious amateurs and particularly publishers should have on their desks at all times, and that should never be left to gather dust on a shelf. With a view to the stacks of music mentioned at the start of this review, one would hope that there will now be fewer editions that have clearly been published “head over heels” [i.e. “Hals über Kopf”] and leave one with the urgent desire to see the music setter “behind bars”. Therefore: an utterly recommendable book.

[End]