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NMC SPECIAL FRIENDS BLOG

Exclusive articles for NMC Friends

Notes from a New Music Editor

'I sing through each line in my head': Notes from a New Music Editor

Elaine Gould, NMC Supporter, Senior New Music Editor at Faber Music Ltd, and author of Behind Bars, The Definitive Guide to Music Notation, tells us about all the steps she takes to transform a manuscript into performable scores and parts.

A few years back I received a message from an eminent player: 'The composer tells me he's finished his piece today. Could you post me the solo part 1st class so I can have it to practise tomorrow?'

The player should have known better. When the composer finishes their piece, that's when the editor's work begins. We oversee the life of the piece from manuscript to first performance, through any revisions – the composer may have some second thoughts after hearing it – to its final form.

I never tire of the thrilling moment I set eyes on a new piece – am I looking at the next masterpiece? The editor is privileged to be often the first pair of fresh eyes to look over what the composer has written.

Most pieces now arrive as Sibelius files although some are still hand-written manuscripts. We read the score as if conducting or playing it ourselves for the first time, checking that what's on the page makes sense – most of the time scores are very accurate – and it is what we think the composer intends. A score is a set of instructions and these need to be crystal clear. An editor is looking for what might be missing: will the performers need further instructions? Often it's a case of adding more information.

I'm hot on practicalities: is the writing fit for purpose? A piece for an amateur choir, for instance, must be of an appropriate level of difficulty so that there's a realistic chance of a decent rendering: I will sing through each line in my head to check there are not streams of intervals too tricky to pitch.

In an instrumental piece we check parts don't disappear over a page turn, or lines move instrument mid-phrase. It's worth noticing at this stage if a 2nd harp part suddenly appears on page 98 when not on the commission brief (ensembles will be reluctant to pay for extra players not budgeted for); that pitches are not written inadvertently out of range, or super-human technical difficulties such as impossible stretches left in. Asking percussionists to dash around the platform playing a number of large instruments is very impressive to watch – but no composer wants to have their piece remembered for that reason!

We plan what materials the piece needs for performance: A piece with voices or an instrumental soloist may need a piano reduction of the instrumental parts for rehearsal purposes.

How will each individual copy look? What size does the music need to be in the conditions it's to be played in? Where is there time to turn a page? On one occasion a composer was surprisingly resistant to my plea 'the violinist is playing non-stop for 14 minutes: please could we add more than one crotchet rest so he can turn the page?'

Our job is to ensure the player has any other information he needs to play his part, since he may not have reference to a score. He'll need to know where to enter after rest periods, so entry cues from other players are very important. Choosing the appropriate cue is quite a skill.

Once the editor has marked up a hard copy of the score, a music typesetter sets about tidying or reformatting it and then extracting instrumental parts. Publishers tend to have a small team of treasured experts who do this painstaking work. Proofs go back and forth from typesetter to editor until the score and parts are formatted for purpose and looking good.



NMC Special Friends Blog



Dai Fujikura on... [\(// nmc-special-friends-blog/dai-fujikura-boulez/\)](http://nmc-special-friends-blog/dai-fujikura-boulez/)

In between times, each instrumental part is checked meticulously against the score by the editor or a proofreader, and any further anticipated problems or discrepancies sort out. Our duty is to save musicians from wasting their time. Problems not addressed in advance irritate the musicians and take up valuable rehearsal time to sort out. When I talk to organisers about 'workshops of new works' invariably everyone remembers the half an hour sorting out some finer point rather than the qualities of the new piece – which is a great shame.

How music looks on the page is terribly important. Sometimes a composer is carried away with the beauty of the score, adding layers of complexity that look frightfully impressive. Are these really necessary? How will they come off the page in performance? Is it realistic for the musician to absorb masses of detail while following the conductor (or other players) and trying to project the musical line across to the audience? Is there too much distraction in the notation that's likely to stifle his musicianship? Whilst the editor ensures the musician has sufficient notation in the copy, these questions are of equal concern. It's a fine balance.

Complexity on the page doesn't necessarily mean a piece sounds complex. A simple idea may require copious instructions, a complex musical structure may look almost bland on the page. A composer needn't feel any pressure to make the page look erudite. Masterpieces come in many forms and we look forward to discovering them!