

## Behind Bars – The Definitive Guide to Music Notation

Elaine Gould

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I do not often or lightly spend £65 on a book, but as soon as I learned of this one I knew I had to buy it. I have been engraving music by computer since 1992 and, I can assure you, I seldom encounter a music manuscript that does not raise some question or other about notation: what is the correct way to notate such and such an item? or – no less important – what is the most elegant way to do so? I had always meant to get around to buying Ted Ross's Teach Yourself The Art of Music Engraving & Processing (Hansen Books, Florida) but it has eluded me. I shall now abandon the search, for Elaine Gould's new book (which at just over 700 pages is the proverbial 'weighty tome') meets the case very nicely. Her aims and mine are the same: 'Musicians deserve the very best that the language of notation can provide, and the most elegant layout that can be achieved; in this way they will be free to give of their best in performance. Behind Bars aims to provide the tools for this purpose.'

Reviewers and composers alike have queued up to praise this book, the latter including such well-known names as George Benjamin, Elliott Carter, Jonathan Harvey and Nicholas Maw. The foreword by Sir Simon Rattle is equally enthusiastic, praying (no less) 'that it becomes a kind of Holy Writ for notation in this coming century'. Gould is well placed to write this book, having been Senior Music Editor at Faber Music since 1987, and, before that, a free-lance copyist, specialising in copying contemporary music for several leading British music publishers.

For years, I have relied on Alan Bousted's helpful little paperback, Writing Music Down (OUP, 1976), but, like many others, it inhabits a pre-computer world, with quaint reference to dye-line processes, pens, inks, and even Letraset®. Gould's book is in a different league altogether, and the overwhelming majority of its 1500 musical examples were prepared using Sibelius software.

The book is organized into three main sections. The first of these (pages 1 to 240) is entitled General Conventions and, like the rest of the book, is both content-led and progressively more complex. So, we begin with the stave, then clefs, noteheads, stems, tails, beams, and ledger lines, octave signs, rests and barlines. Then, on page 39, we are suddenly plunged into the semi-mathematical complexities of horizontal spacing of notes and the spacing of other symbols. This is the nitty-gritty stuff that a high-end computer application like Finale or Sibelius will take care of for you 97 per cent of the time without being asked. For the remaining three percent I have hitherto relied upon my 'eye' and instinct, but now it will be good to have the support and the authority of sections like this to supplement them. Gould is not dogmatic: where a situation is open to more than one solution she is happy to offer all the options. In fact, the Sibelius manual, which rightfully enjoys a reputation for clarity and ease-of-use, is much less liberal in its views (probably because it needs to reflect the software's default behavior): for example, the Sibelius manual says 'It is a common fallacy among musicians that single notes on the middle staff line can have a stem in either direction, In fact the stem should point down unless the context makes it look particularly out of place.' (page 185) Gould (page 13) says 'When notes are on the centre stave-line, the stems may go in either direction. The direction is determined by context. |Continue the direction of

surrounding stems that are in one direction only... When the stem direction varies within a bar, maintain the stem direction of the notes that are part of the same beat or half-bar... When there is no clear-cut case for either direction the convention is to use a down-stem. Some editions use down-stems exclusively.' I find that rather fuller advice peculiarly liberating. I recently completed the first draft of a major 220-page project in Sibelius, and when I went through it, applying the 'part of the same beat or half-bar' principle, I was astonished both at how many times I needed to flip the stem direction and how much better the music looked for having done so. I'm sure that Sibelius is not alone in its default behavior on this point, but it does demonstrate the continuing need to tweak its output – that last three per cent!

The second main section of this well-organised book is called 'Idiomatic Notation'. This deals with the particular notational demands of woodwind and brass, percussion, keyboard, harp, classical guitar, strings and vocal music. You can imagine what a wealth of information is offered about just the traditional techniques (e.g. transposing instruments, harmonics, etc), but Gould is also very good on the notation of special, avant-garde procedures, such as singing into woodwind instruments or playing multiphonic chords on them (not that that arises often on a Sunday morning; well, not deliberately). I found the section on vocal music especially useful, including such topics as voice-part division on a single staff, two-staff SATB layout, and an extensive treatment of word division (how the syllables are split).

The third and final main section is Layout and Presentation. Once again, the coverage is comprehensive and fascinating. Here we find such matters as page sizes, staff sizes, bar numbers, rehearsal marks, ossia, scores, parts, electroacoustic music, and a final chapter, Freedom and Choice, which 'examines degrees of rhythmic independence, then looks at freedom from metrical definition (proportional or time-space notation); finally it examines individual performer choices'. It is in this last section, more than anywhere else, that Gould's many years' experience as an editor of contemporary music shines through. She writes with great clarity precisely because she has encountered all these notational situations in real music.

This is a beautifully written and beautifully produced book. Perhaps its index is less detailed than it might be – I had to work hard on several occasions to find information that I knew to be there – but, that apart, I cannot fault it. If you need to produce musical notation, whether via pen and ink or computer, then you should consider this book. It will without doubt become a standard work. Suffice it to say that no work session of mine passes without my having recourse to it at least once, and that alone makes it worth every penny.

Alan Smith