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PRO SESSION

Proper Music Preparation Promotes Excellence

by Robert Nowak

In any production, whether it's a recording date, club gig or live TV performance, good music preparation plays a significant role in saving money, producing a better product and promoting artistic excellence. Music preparation encompasses arranging, orchestrating and copying, and often refers specifically to the many aspects of copying music by hand or by computer.

Poorly prepared music promotes mistakes, which take time and money to fix. It means additional recording or rehearsal time, facilities rentals and the rehiring of engineers, staff and performers.

The following musical examples portray both bad and good music preparation as well as the steps arrangers and copyists can take to communicate music clearly and ease the burden on sight-readers.

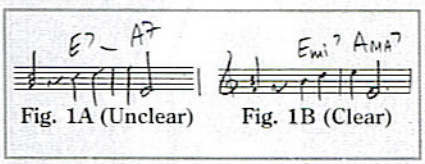


Fig. 1A (Unclear) Fig. 1B (Clear)

One of the principal problems in Figure 1A has to do with the chord symbols. The first is supposed to be an Em7, the second an Amaj7. However, both symbols look like dominant 7th chords. There is no clef on the staff, so the pitches are unsure. The last two note heads of the first measure and the last note head of the second measure cover more than one line or space. In Figure 1B, there is no question about the chord symbols. The dangling minus sign was replaced by "mi" and properly positioned. Some American writers have adopted the European 7 (the numeral 7 with a slash through it) as a stylized symbol meaning major 7th. It's easy to misinterpret. Using "MA" makes it clear that the writer wants a major 7th chord here. The treble clef defines the pitches, and the note heads are accurately placed on a line or space without overlapping.

In figure 2A, the rhythm slashes and style marking give the general manner in which to play, but there could be many interpretations. In figure 2B, the rhythmic pattern is succinct, so there is no need for trial and error or explanation. If a player is improvising, he can see the proper rhythmic direction and incorporate it. The neutral clef identifies it as a drum or percussion part.

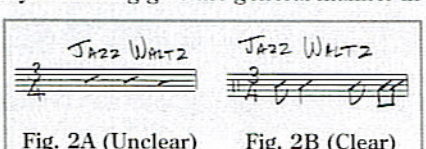


Fig. 2A (Unclear) Fig. 2B (Clear)

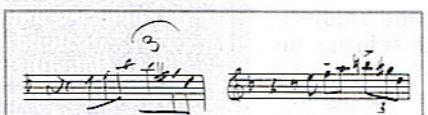


Fig. 3A (Unclear) Fig. 3B (Clear)

In figure 3A, the rests aren't clear. The odd symbol after the flat is supposed to be a quarter rest followed by an eighth rest. Some stems aren't connected to note heads or beams. The notes look like two groupings of triplets because both beams connect three notes, and the "3" with its curve does not clearly encompass either grouping. The sharp is placed in the top space, but the note it affects is either on the top line or in the space above the top line. Other note heads also straddle lines and spaces. It's difficult to read this passage without mistakes. Figure 3B shows the rests clear and well-spaced. The eighth-note grouping is broken up to distinguish it from the following triplet, which is clearly marked with a "3" centered at the beam. Note heads are placed accurately, and the treble clef defines the notes. Stems are connected to their note heads, beams and flags. Accidentals are properly attached to the notes they affect. Missing articulations (and the B natural) have also been added.

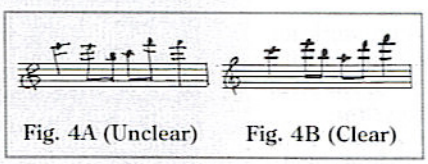


Fig. 4A (Unclear) Fig. 4B (Clear)

There's a problem with ledger lines in figure 4A. The vertical spacing is irrational and the ledger lines don't line up with each other on the same plane. Notes that are higher or lower pitched than the previous one look the opposite. In figure 4B, it's easy to see the proper relationships among the notes. When the pitch goes up or down, so does the written note.

Irrational horizontal spacing makes it difficult to assess the rhythmic relationship among the notes in figure 5A. The space between the 16th notes gives the impression that they go by leisurely. The half note looks like it has no time at all because it is crowded by the eighth note. In figure 5B, the horizontal spacing is proportional to the rhythms. The visual relationship of the notes matches the actual rhythms so readers can understand it at a glance.

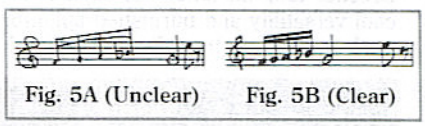


Fig. 5A (Unclear) Fig. 5B (Clear)

Squeezing as many bars as possible into a staff or score page (figure 6A) is difficult to read and leaves no room for changes or additional markings. When preparing hand- or computer-written parts or scores, it is wise to leave visual breathing room in each measure (figure 6B). It's easy to read and it allows room for changes and markings.

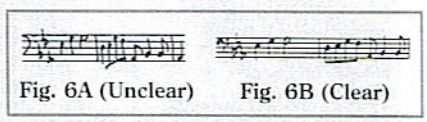
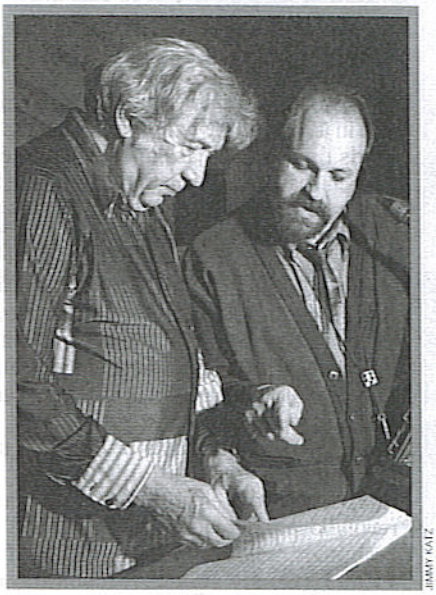


Fig. 6A (Unclear) Fig. 6B (Clear)

Good music preparation isn't a panacea. But consider how having your music properly prepared will benefit your project. You expect professional standards from performers, engineers, studios, concert halls, sound and lighting people, producers, manufacturers and marketers. You should expect the same professional standards to apply to the heart of your project, the music. It can make the difference between a frustrating or failed production and an artistically and financially successful one. **DB**


JIMMY KATZ

Gunther Schuller (left) and Joe Lovano inspect a score during a recording session. Well-prepared and clearly notated scores help musicians avoid production hassles and achieve performance excellence.

Robert Nowak has prepared music professionally for more than 25 years. He has arranged and orchestrated music for Pat Metheny and Maurice Hines. As a copyist, he has prepared music for David Sanborn, Maria Schneider, Luther Vandross, Liza Minnelli and Burt Bacharach.