

“Mark Your Parts!”

A System and Suggestions for Marking Parts

~ Thom Proctor

A former member of the Greater Miami Symphonic Band once said, “The day that I have to start marking parts is the day I’ll stop playing.” Soon after, he dropped out of the band. When you are assigned a part, you should feel responsible for your part, whether you are in attendance or not. Marking parts is not only for you, but also for your stand mate who may be absent, or for a substitute who may need to play your part when you are not available. I have sight-read concerts for a player who had food poisoning, for another who ran over his foot with a lawn mower, and for two young horn players in college who were robbed and murdered. You never know when sickness, mishaps, or tragedy will happen, but the show goes on.

Also, even if you think, “I’ll remember that,” why make yourself have to think about it? Mark in a little reminder. The more that you can rid your mind of things that you have to consciously think about, the more “brain space” you have left for concentrating on listening and playing musically.

However, overdoing marking parts is as bad as not marking them enough. If you mark every key change, every meter change, and everything else, it becomes meaningless. On the other hand, the fewer rehearsals and the less time available for preparation requires more markings. There is no substitute for knowing the piece of music well, but judicious, well-placed, easily-read, and clearly understandable markings will help to make a better performance. I have parts marked from conductors’ previous indications, and years later, when we play the piece again, if the conductor hasn’t changed interpretation, I know how to play the piece. This saves valuable rehearsal time.

Here are some suggestions and a system of markings to help you understand, be reminded of, and not be distracted from reading the music. And remember, make markings in pencil only, so they can be erased.

Circling: Circling everything is distracting and messy. Circling often covers other musical terms or symbols and interrupts the flow of the music, disrupting the eyes as they scan across the staff. I once had a pit musician say that circling meant not to play it. The first thing I do when I get a piece of music with everything circled is erase it all. Dynamics and tempo changes (rit., accel.) can be underlined.

Fingerings: Don’t be afraid to write in fingerings, especially alternate fingerings to help intonation

and technical facility.

Key signatures: An arrow pointing to the key signature should be enough, but not on every one. Only mark troublesome changes. When a sharp or flat is added or deleted, find the first note effected in this new key signature and mark that note with the appropriate sign. If the notes are too close together to insert an accidental, put it above or below the note. Mark accidentals if you miss the note more than once.



Figure 1.

Meter signatures: Above the meter signature, mark what the beat is if it is out of the ordinary. A 3/4 (in 1 or in 3?) can be marked,



Figure 2.

(in 2 or in 6?) can be marked for clarification.

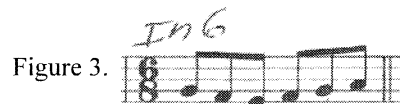


Figure 3.

At slower tempos, if the conductor is subdividing the beat, write “subdiv”.

Odd meters or rhythms: Use a vertical line to mark beats, especially troublesome afterbeats.

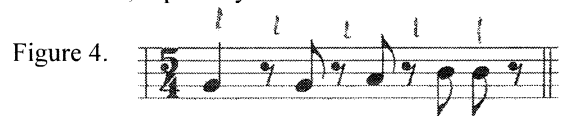


Figure 4.

For intricate rhythms, say 2+2+2+3, use two sides of a triangle for the two, and a full triangle for the three.

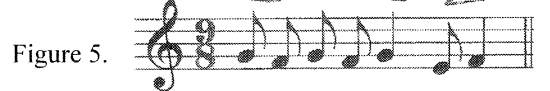


Figure 5.

Fermata: A conductor may cut off, continue, or (hopefully not) be undecided after a fermata. For a cut off, use two slash lines (//), a caesura, after the fermata.



Figure 6.

To continue without a cut off, use a curved line (tie/ slur) from the held note to the next note.

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...Mark Your Parts

Figure 7.



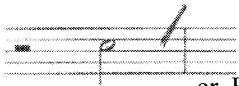
If you are not sure (anytime that you must watch the conductor), draw a pair of eyeglasses above the fermata to remind you that you have to watch to see what the conductor will do.

Figure 8.



Interpretation of note values: A conductor may want the band to play a note shorter or longer, despite its value. Mark a shorter or cut off note with a single slash (/) after the note.

Figure 9.



or Figure 10.



To show a note to be held full value (say, to the beat of the next measure), use a curved line (tie/slur).

Figure 11.



Dictated notes: Sometimes a conductor will not conduct the actual beat, but will conduct each note. The end of “America the Beautiful,” arranged by Carmen Dragon, is a good example of this. For this situation, write “dictated” or “subdivided” above the series of notes. Here is another example where eyeglasses could be used

Figure 12.



Note playing style: The style of music sometimes dictates the style of playing notes, especially in the case of quarter notes. Generally, it seems that quarter notes in orchestral music (including band transcriptions) are held the fullest value; in concert band pieces, they generally are a “medium” length; and in jazz-style pieces, they are usually shorter. Contemporary composers are prone to include more articulations to convey exactly what they want. Articulations, accents and combinations of both will also indicate or imply note length.

Figure 13.

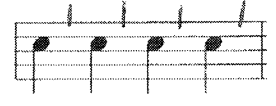


Use these markings when the conductor suggests how to articulate certain notes. Mark tenuto/legato (-), staccato (.), or both to convey long, detached, or in between length notes (figure 14). Another marking to show that notes should be separated, is a short vertical line between the notes (Figure 15).

Figure 14.

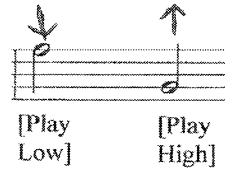


Figure 15.



Intonation: The conductor may indicate that on a certain note your pitch may be flat or sharp and to keep it low or keep it high. On those notes, use a vertical arrow facing up or down above the note to remind you of this.

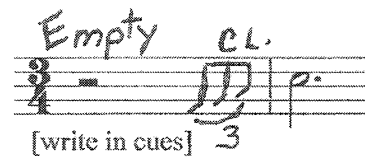
Figure 16.



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Incomplete first measures: It sometimes happens that a piece of music is notated with a rest in the first measure in some parts, even though the instruments starting the piece do not start on the first beat. These are “empty” beats, and the conductor may or may not conduct them. In order not to be confused, write “empty” above the measure if the conductor will not conduct these beats, but will start conducting the anacrusis, or “pick ups,” into the next measure. It can also be helpful to write in cue notes for whatever instrument is playing.

Figure 17.



Music teachers, private or public, may or may not convey the idea of marking parts to their students. But too often all I hear is, “Mark it” or “Circle it.” Marking parts seems to be something that is picked up over the years, and everyone has their own system – or not. Effective marking of parts can make rehearsals more efficient and performances more affective.

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