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Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered
Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41
Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Proceedings of the Musical Association

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rma18>

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Published online: 28 Jan 2009.

To cite this article: T. Helmore M.A. (1877) Suggestions for a More Expeditious Mode of Writing the Time-Notes in Music, Proceedings of the Musical Association, 4:1, 49-55, DOI: [10.1093/jrma/4.1.49](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrma/4.1.49)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jrma/4.1.49>

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FEBRUARY 4, 1878.

GEORGE ALEXANDER OSBORNE, Esq., IN THE CHAIR.

*SUGGESTIONS FOR A MORE EXPEDITIOUS MODE
OF WRITING THE TIME-NOTES IN MUSIC.*

By the REV. T. HELMORE, M.A.

THE title of my paper seems to forbid any tedious method of bringing its subject before the Musical Association.

It would be incongruous, in the advocate of greater expedition in writing music, to weary you by any unnecessary beating about the bush in explaining the proposed method of attaining it.

The fact is, that what I have long thought of, and some years since proposed (not without their commendation) to some eminent composers, as a lessening of the actual manual labour of recording their inspirations, has so little that is either a mystery, or difficult of acquirement, that its very simplicity precludes the necessity of any long explanation.

At the same time, I am not willing to suppose that the learned musicians and scholars whom I have the honour of addressing will despise any invention, however slight its claims to so honourable a name, if, simple as it is, it at all answers to the promise it holds out in the title of my paper. I must, however, ask you to follow me in a few remarks on analogous improvements of former ages, which first suggested to me the kind of musical *stenography* I am going to describe. The additions, first of one line, afterwards of three, and afterwards again of more, to the doubtful pneumes of the ages prior to that of Guido Aretino were an incomparable improvement in the mode of noting the sounds, previously so uncertainly indicated without them.

And lines were, I venture to affirm, an undoubted advance, if not towards greater precision as to the actual identity of the sounds represented, yet towards facility in deciphering them, and consequently of singing from them, over the fifteen letters of the earlier Roman nomenclature.

And why, I would further ask, if I carry the sense of the

Association with me thus far—why was it that the lines of the stave, when invented, soon took the place of every other system of representing (together with their clefs) the various pitch of notes in music?

Was it not because the lines and spaces of the stave, far from being mere *arbitrary* characters, which the letters of the alphabet, however employed, whether simply in septenaries (as from A to G) or by the two diapasons of the fifteen notes named by the first fifteen letters of the alphabet, from A on to P, must always remain (even with Mr. Curwen's skilful manipulation of substituted syllables)—the stave was, and is, a *symbolical* representation; in which there is a natural affinity between the sign and the thing signified—a *pictured embodiment* of the natural metaphorical terms descriptive of those qualities of sound which, by a common consent of civilised nations, we all understand by the terms *high* and *low*?

This—let me be pardoned for reminding you—is by no means so obvious, however, as that other metaphorical views might not have reversed the terms. If, for example, the sounds of the pandean-pipe in the earliest ages, and in the latest those of our greatest organs, were taken according as their tops are high or low in measurement from the foot of each, the sound of the organ-pipe 4 C with its some 32 feet would be a tremendously high note, while a twice-marked *c'* with its few inches would be a very low note. So also as regards the strings of a harp—the *shorter* the string, the *lower* the sound of it might have been called. But we all feel that the metaphor corresponding with the natural phenomena of acoustics, viz., the higher number of vibrations, as sounds are produced from shorter pipes or strings, is that most acceptable to our imaginative conceptions; and the artless warblings of the lark, no less than the soaring notes of some inimitably artistic 'prima donna,' impress us with the idea of rising towards the ethereal vault of heaven, rather than as a downward descent to the solid foundations of the earth, or to the unfathomable depths of the roaring ocean. What then I wish particularly to notice is, that the stave is distinctly a symbol of the rising and falling of sounds, according to this most fitting view, in which the perceptions of the eye are metaphorically used to describe those of the ear, and the more rapid vibrations are accordingly assigned to the *higher*, and the slower vibrations to the *lower* place, both in our ordinary language and also in the ordinary notation of music.

It is true that the symbolism of the stave with the various clefs does not meet all the exigencies of the case—it simply shows that sounds rise and fall in a general way—but has to be helped out as to the actual amount of tone or semitone, partly by the general feeling of the diatonic scales, partly by the aid of the arbitrary signs,—flats, sharps, and naturals.

Still, I maintain that the Stave system of symbolic risings and fallings is preferable to any system in which such symbolism is

entirely done away. I admit the partial defectiveness of the stave, but cling with a kind of affectionate gratitude to its abundant excellence as far as it goes.

I have in former years attempted, for the sake of young learners, to show the places of the semitones by additional coloured modifications of the stave; but this is not the time to say more on that head.

Now then, in spite of the difficulty of representing in an equally symbolical manner all the varied successions of diatonic tones and semitones (which, as I have said, is met by the use of the mere arbitrary signs,—sharps, flats, naturals, and double flats and sharps) in spite, I say, of this, while fully recognising the convenient and most admirable symbolic representation of the ascent and descent of musical sounds, afforded by the stave itself, it has not to any great extent been as yet accompanied by the adoption among us of any similarly symbolic representation of the *duration* of these sounds.

I guard myself from overstating this fact, by the qualification ‘to any great extent,’ because there are some approximations (hereafter to be noticed) to the plan I am now to suggest for introducing, at all events for the composers of music, what I consider a similar improvement *for time* in music, to that which I have been referring to, by way of parallel in the eleventh-century improved notation of the *pitch* of musical sounds.

My plan, then, is this: Provide a special kind of music paper. The five-line staves, in number, collocation, size, colour, and all other respects exactly as they are now usually ruled for us, and sold in the shops, are to remain; and clefs and sharp and flat signatures are to be made as heretofore. Time signatures may also continue the same, if not exchanged for a simpler and more suitable form, suggested by the new way of representing the time-notes.

For this last purpose, let the music paper be also provided (in the way found practically most convenient) with ready-ruled bars, dividing the staves into equally measured portions, which may serve for our bars or (more accurately speaking) measures either of duple, quadruple, or of triple and compound triple time. Say these staves and bars are ruled in black. I then propose that each bar or measure should be subdivided into two, four, eight, sixteen; three, six, twelve, nine, or eighteen smaller parts; about a quarter or the eighth of an inch wide for the less numerous divisions, and the sixteenth of an inch—more or less—for the bars that are to contain many quavers, semiquavers, and demisemiquavers;—these subdivisions to be ruled either entirely through the page, or partially through the staves, and perhaps a little above and below them, to meet the case of ledger lines. These petty-bars, as they might be called, should be visibly distinct from the bars, and this might be provided for by the use of different colours, as red or blue, or by being of the same colour as the bars, only ruled much lighter and

less thick. These are all accidental details, which would soon be settled by general experience, supposing any number of composers adopted the use of such paper, and there were consequently any market for its production and sale.

When you have got your paper thus ruled, all for the pen of the composer to do would be to draw a straight horizontal line over the particular line or space each of his notes required, and through all the fractions of the bar for which each was to last.

Signatures of key, as I before said, would have to be made just as at present, and the time of each movement would also be indicated in the same manner as usual, or, as I think might be better, by a fractional form, followed by the sign = for *equal to*, and the particular time-note of our present arbitrary system which was to be the *unit* in each measure of the movement. Paper would have to be chosen according to the requirements of the composition;—a movement in common or compound common time would have its corresponding rulings, and so also in triple or compound triple time.

If a sudden change from one kind of time to another were wanted, I own a difficulty would occur, in which I should rely much upon the ingenuity of the composer to aid mine in determining the best mode of extrication. I could suggest several, but will defer them now, to go on, as expeditiously as I can, with the regular straightforward method of writing on my stenographic music paper.

Each note, I have explained, is to be represented by a single horizontal line occupying the same portion of the measure ruled on the music paper as is required for the minim, crotchet, or quaver, or dotted note, &c. &c. which has to be noted. As these representations of sounds will, on each stave, occupy the entire fractional, or whole portion answering to the time-notes required, the absence of any horizontal stroke from any bar or portion of a bar is all that we should want to indicate silence, during the bar or bars, or portions of a bar, which in our present notation would require corresponding rests. So my *musical stenography* would get rid of the necessity of writing rests altogether, in the ordinary course of composition. It would, however, still be competent, in separate parts, where instruments or voices were required to be silent during some movement to be performed by others, for the composer to write, '*Tacet 144 bars*,' or any other number, just as at present.

And here let me point out a singular advantage of my plan, viz., that no sign, nor mode of writing, which any composer preferred to employ, as usual at present, need be excluded from the special music paper. In fact, any piece of music written upon it in the ordinary notation, by a transcriber of any neatness and accuracy, guided by the bars and petty-bars of this paper, would, if I am not mistaken, present to the eye of a performer so clear a MS. that he would find it equal to, or even preferable to ordinary printed music.

In fact, one argument in favour of such accurately measured

music paper is, that it introduces into MS. some of the clearness of division secured by careful engraving, or music-type printing.

And, similarly, the mode of short-hand writing I propose would easily be translated by engravers and printers' compositors into the present notation, which I, for one, have no wish to supersede, unless it be found by experience that the shorter mode of writing I have now explained, in its general principles, is at the same time easier to learn, and more easy, when learnt, to be deciphered.

To redeem the promises I have made, of referring at the close of this paper to one or two points before passed over, I may mention that in much of the Plain Song music printed both abroad and at home, the long black breves or longs, representing many monotonous recitation notes, are an approximation in symbolic feeling to my stenographic notation, without any profession of accurate measurement.

Now, as to the change from Common to Triple time. The music paper printed with bars for the one would (as we observed) offer a difficulty if the writing were continued on the same sheet; and to change from one to another frequently would be very annoying.

One way of getting over it would be to make fresh bars, as we write on, thicker than the printed ones, taking these as only subdivisions of the new measures.

Another which occurs to me is, to put in the new-time bars with another coloured ink.

But the difficulty would not occur at all if we used paper simply divided by vertical lines—on which the bars would be written in (as usual) by the composer as he wanted them.

I am sorry that I have not been able to exemplify the system by fuller and better diagrams; in fact, I owe very much for the larger diagrams to the kindness of Mr. Somers Clarke—without which I could not have explained my plan nearly as well as, in this respect, I trust I have done to the satisfaction of my hearers.

If in any degree I have suggested what may lighten the severe labours of our great benefactors, the composers of sublime and beautiful music, my own time will not have been wasted in this attempt to enable them to save theirs.

DISCUSSION.

Mr. STEPHENS asked how repeated notes would be marked; for instance, how would 8 crotchets in a bar instead of a semi-breve, be written?

The Rev. T. HELMORE said there was a specimen on the board consisting of the first two bars from the hunting chorus in *Der Freischütz*, in which the semiquavers occupy one-eighth each of the entire measure; if the one-eighth of a measure were a crotchet it would be represented in the same manner. In handing round a MS. specimen in which room enough had not been taken

in the ruling of the 'petty-bars' to note the division of the measures without crowding, he remarked that he once heard a celebrated lecturer on chemistry say that you might learn as much from failures as successes, and he had endeavoured to do so from this experiment. One of the difficulties he found was where there were notes on the line and space close together, e.g. where the chord of $\frac{4}{4}$ was followed by $\frac{3}{4}$. He proposed to overcome this by using a lozenge-shaped note instead of an oblong one.

The CHAIRMAN said that last year Dr. Stainer read a paper on a new notation, and he, the Chairman, actually wrote the method for Dr. Stainer, in which a diamond-shaped note was used for a ♯, a square note representing a ♭. He showed some music written in this way to a pupil, a piece of Chopin's in seven flats, and another in seven sharps, and after the system had been explained, the pupil read it off at once. The system seemed very complete, but before it was finished, Dr. Stainer received a letter from a country organist, claiming it as his invention. He should like to know, therefore, whether this was really Mr. Helmore's invention, or whether he was at all apprehensive of some letter coming from the provinces claiming it.

The Rev. T. HELMORE said it was quite possible that others might have come to the same conclusions, but he had never seen anything of the sort. He proposed to mark an accidental sharp thus $\angle$ by an upward sloping mark, and a flat by a descending one, thus $\searrow$.

Mr. STEPHENS asked how Mr. Helmore would write a chord which occurred in one of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, consisting of $f\sharp g\sharp a\flat$ and $b\sharp$, the signature being in the key of D.

The Rev. T. HELMORE showed on the black board the manner in which this chord would be written, according to his proposed method.

Mr. BOSANQUET said he remembered Dr. Stainer's paper on the subject of notation very well, when he said he believed the subject required a great deal more consideration than it had yet received. At one time he had turned his attention to it, and had long had in his mind a somewhat complete discussion of the whole matter. It must be remembered that there were two sides to the question, the theoretical and the practical. The theory was the theory of symbolism, and the question was the different ways in which it could be employed. Practice was quite a different thing; and how far it was desirable to improve practice from a theoretical point of view was quite another matter. He had never worked out this time-notation practically himself, but the whole details had long been familiar to him, and there was this great advantage if it could ever be introduced, that it was the only system of notation, as far as he could see, which a machine could write; that is to say, you could construct a keyed instrument which as you played should record the whole of the music by the aid of this notation. The great difficulty of properly arranging instruments for the purpose of self-recording had been that you had to seek out the crotchet type and the quaver

type, and so on, which had been almost impossible to do. With a notation of this kind it would be perfectly simple; and he had not the least doubt that if this notation were adopted by composers, they would be able to sit down to a pianoforte, have this instrument in connection with it, play off their ideas, and have them written down in a form intelligible to the printer by the time he had finished playing. The same might be done with the different orchestral parts. This seemed to be the practical value of this method. He would not attempt to deal with the theory, as it would take too long.

Mr. W. H. CUMMINGS thought that some of Mr. Helmore's suggestions were very valuable, and that paper prepared with fine lines might be of great service to composers who had to write large scores, as it would enable them to keep their notes properly one under the other, and thus facilitate the work of the copyist and the engraver. But as a matter of practical use for writing music generally he did not see much to be gained, and did not like the look of the long Gregorian form of notes shown on the diagram. He saw many difficulties in the way; for instance, he remembered a piece of Liszt's in which, while a quaver had to be played with the left hand, sixteen small notes had to be got into the same time by the right hand. It would be rather difficult to put sixteen notes into one of those small divisions. To his eye the present method of writing, with open and black notes, &c. was much more legible.

Mr. STEPHENS said Mr. Cummings had been rather merciful in his criticism, because instances might easily be quoted in which there were fifteen, seventeen, or some other irregular number of notes to be played in the same time as one of the ordinary subdivisions of the bar. Still, apart from the question of engraving music from such a score, he thought this was an eminently practical paper, and if it did no more, would afford composers a ready method of jotting down their ideas. Without it, these ideas might sometimes vanish, for want of being promptly recorded. He did not think it would ever do to introduce it for publication, because it did not seem so intelligible as the present system.

The Rev. T. HELMORE, in reply, said his practical object was to assist composers in their work, not to substitute his notation for the present method in printed music. The system was to be judged by its adaptability to the wants of composers, not by its appearance when presented in a diagram. He understood Mr. Bosanquet to say that he had long been familiar with this method in his own mind, but not that he had seen it in print.

Mr. BOSANQUET said he had never seen anything of the kind in print.

Mr. STEPHENS then proposed, and Mr. OTTO GOLDSCHMIDT seconded, a vote of thanks to Mr. Helmore, which was carried unanimously.

The CHAIRMAN then called on Mr. D. J. Blaikley to read his communication.