

by Norman Weinberg

### How To Improve Your Drum Set Notation

I bought my Macintosh computer in early 1985 because of one program called Professional Composer. Published by Mark of the Unicorn, it was the first high-quality music notation program available for any home computer. I've always had a strong interest in music calligraphy (pre-computer), so seeing word-processor-like tools applied to music notation was like a dream come true. For the first time errors could be deleted, beaming could be altered, passages could be copied and pasted, and multiple staves would have perfect spacing. Yet, with all those advantages, the final page looked really bad! All the stems were flat, the staff lines were too thick, dynamics bumped into notes, and if you didn't like the page layout, well, tough luck!

During the last 20 years, music notation software has evolved into a truly professional tool used by novice composers, professional publishing houses, and all sorts of musicians in between. But just because you've got some great software doesn't make you a great copyist. Music notation is as much an art as it is a science, and putting your ideas down on paper in a way that is both logical to interpret and pleasing to the eye is a satisfying challenge. This article will offer some helps and hints to make your drum set notation clear, accurate, and easy to read. And after all, that's what notation is for!

**The Big Dogs.** Currently two programs dominate the market: Sibelius and Finale. Sure, there are other notation software packages out there, but honestly, I wouldn't recommend them. Many notation programs have come and gone, and it doesn't make sense to work with a program that has a rocky future or an archaic user interface. Sibelius and Finale have become standards and have continued to improve in terms of features, ease of use, and support. They are in strong competition with each other, and this competition benefits folks like you and me. Sibelius and Finale have such large user-bases that they should be around for a good long time. Any other high-end program entering the market will have to be able to import files from these two programs.

Finale has a longer history, but has always



had the reputation for a very deep feature set with a steep learning curve. When Sibelius came on the scene, Finale was forced to improve its user interface, and Sibelius was forced to add features and flexibility. Now, both programs are capable of producing totally professional results with a minimum of hassle. Both are excellent and can make just about anything happen on the page.

If you're watching your expenses, Finale has a wide range of "lite" versions of the program. PrintMusic! (\$69.95) and Allegro (\$199) let you join the Finale family on the cheap, and you can upgrade in the future.

Both Finale and Sibelius offer academic discounts and cross-grade pricing.

#### Step One: Put The Notes Where They Belong.

Even if your audience is one person (you), it makes sense to use a notation system that is based on the general conventions already in place. Generally, you should use a single five-line staff with a neutral clef (sometimes called a percussion or drum clef). You should also use normal noteheads for drums and "x" noteheads for cymbals. Fig. 1 should give you a good start for the most common drum set

instruments and performance styles.

You can indicate special or unique performance instructions by using articulation markings (for example, the open circle for open hi-hat notes), or special noteheads (such as the backslash note for rimshots). Any time an instrument is played in the normal manner, you don't need to specify anything special in the notation.

The most time-consuming aspect of any notation program is simply getting the notes on the page. Both Finale and Sibelius have a number of ways that you can do this. The easiest to learn, yet the slowest to use, is entering both the rhythmic values and the staff positions with the mouse. The process is the same for both programs: click on a tool bar or note palette to select the note value, then click the staff to place that note on the proper line or space. Believe me, after you enter a few dozen measures using this entry method, you'll be disappointed, frustrated, and ready to put a brick through your monitor. You owe it to yourself to take the time to learn one or more of the other note entry techniques.

A faster method of note entry is to use your right hand on the mouse to determine the note value in combination with your left hand on the computer's keyboard to enter the staff position. Both programs use the letters of the musical alphabet to determine the staff location. An even faster method is to use your right hand on the keypad to select rhythmic values. Especially if you're a touch typist, you'll enter notes and rhythms at lightening speed after just a few hours practice. In terms of logical interface and ease-of-use, Sibelius has a slight advantage over Finale using this technique. If you're working on a notebook computer that doesn't have a keypad, you'll have to do a little experimentation with the "num lock" key or with re-mapping other keys to perform keypad functions. A better solution is to purchase a small USB keyboard that will plug in to your laptop. The small expense is well worth the time you'll save.

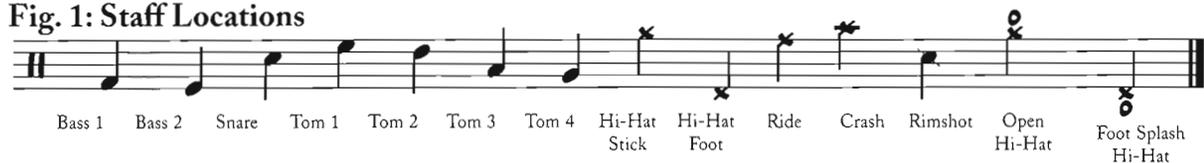
If you have a MIDI keyboard, an electronic drum kit, or multipad, you can put it to use for note entry. Both programs will read MIDI note numbers to determine staff positions

while you select rhythmic values with the mouse, keyboard, or keypad. Simply select the rhythm, then press down a key or hit a pad to see that note pop up on the screen. If you're using a percussion controller, be sure to program the MIDI output to match the staff positions you want to see on the screen.

But by far, the fastest method of getting notes onto paper is to simply play them in. No software will "listen" to drum set music and put notation on the screen. But Finale and Sibelius will read MIDI messages and turn those messages into notes and rhythms. First, a word of warning: Getting software to provide sound from notation is easy; getting software to provide notation from MIDI messages is a lot more difficult. While both packages are getting better and better at making this difficult transition, don't expect a perfectly notated representation of your playing if: a) you can't play in time or b) you play at a highly complex rhythmic level.

Here's what happens: The program will "see" MIDI messages in relation to a time base and automatically place the note-on messages

**Fig. 1: Staff Locations**



**Fig. 4**



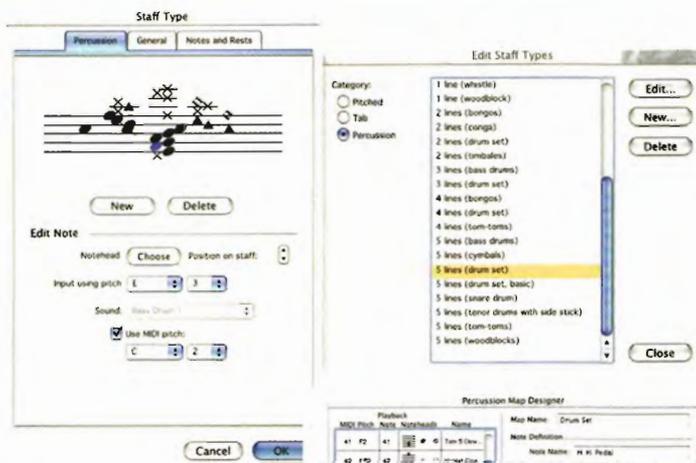


Fig. 2 (above): Sibelius percussion map

Fig. 3 (right): Finale percussion map

on the staff as pitches. The time base can be either an internal or external metronome. In Finale, you can ask the program to follow tapped tempo, or even a tempo that is defined after the recording. Sibelius has a "flexi-time" feature that recognizes if you speed up or slow down. You can use any brand of electronic drum kit, multipad, or even triggers attached to your acoustic drums running through a trigger-to-MIDI interface (unfortunately, external triggers don't work very well on cymbals and will put a lot of garbage in the score). So how does the software know where to put the bass drum notes or cymbal notes? You define a drum map.

Both Sibelius and Finale let you define your own map for drum set notation. There are two big advantages to using a custom map. First, a map lets you play your kit or multipad and have the notes automatically appear in the proper position on the staff. A drum map will even let you define a custom notehead for that staff position. Second, it assures that the proper sounds will fire when you have the software play back your score. If you want to change the input or output assignments anytime in the future – perhaps to fire a different sound set from the same notation – it's a simple matter to edit your map for necessary changes.

Here's how it works in Sibelius: Once you enter the Edit Staff Types menu, you can select the notehead shape, its position on the staff, the input pitch, and the sound for playback (using either general MIDI drum names or the precise MIDI note number). By moving through the various tabs available in the window, you can also adjust the bar lines, staff lines, stem length, the stem direction, and a number of other variables. In Finale, you'll go to the Percussion Map Designer where you can also select the input pitch, the playback note, and the notehead shape.

While both maps work just fine, the percussion map designer in Sibelius is certainly easier to use (see Fig. 2). Sibelius also offers many aspects of staff design in a single location. With Finale, you'll need to visit several different dialog boxes to arrive at a similar look (Fig. 3).

### Step Two: Fine Tuning Your Notation

There's a wonderful quote in the Sibelius manual. It reads: "Music engraving rules are imperfect (and sometimes need adjustment by eye). Sibelius uses music engraving rules. Therefore Sibelius's music engraving is imperfect (and sometimes needs adjustments by eye)." In a nutshell, that's it. If you rely on nothing more than the software's built-in defaults,

## SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

### FINALE 2004

MAC: OS 10.2 or higher; EPS export and OS9 coming soon.  
WINDOWS: Windows 98/2000/NT/ME/XP; EPS import and export under 98/NT 4.0/ME only.  
BOTH: 128MB Ram (256MB recommended), 200MB hard disk space for software and manual.

### SIBELIUS 3

MAC: OS 9.1/9.2/10.1.5 or later, iMac/G3/G4/G5, 128MB+ RAM (OS 9) or 192MB+ RAM (OS X), 70MB hard disk space.  
WINDOWS: Windows 98/2000/NT4/ME/XP, Pentium or faster, 64MB+ RAM (128MB+ for Windows 2000/XP), 70MB hard disk space.

## DETAILS

FINALE – MakeMusic!; [finalemusic.com](http://finalemusic.com)

\$600; \$300 academic/theological; \$89.95-\$199 upgrades/crossgrades

SIBELIUS – Sibelius; [sibelius.com](http://sibelius.com)

\$599; \$319 academic/theological; \$119-\$199 upgrades/crossgrades

you're going to have some issues. These problems won't be anything serious. At worst, they are mostly annoyances.

For example, when using Finale's font called Maestro Percussion in a default document, stems will not connect properly to all x-shaped noteheads. In order to fix this problem, you'll have to call up the special stem connections dialog box and build the proper stem connection by hand. In Sibelius, dynamics are entered as symbols centered directly under a note. Most engravers will tell you that dynamics should be entered slightly before the note. This gives the reader a little more time to be aware of the dynamic before the note is actually played. To make this adjustment, enter the Default Positions dialog box and adjust the default horizontal position. There is a way to make these repairs once and never have to deal with them again.

If you compare an issue of DRUM! to an issue of *Time* or *Good Housekeeping*, you'll notice many more differences than just the content. Magazines spend a lot of time and money on design issues so that the final product conveys not only text and pictures, but also mood and style. The look and feel of a musical score is no different than the look and feel of a good magazine. With an experienced eye, you can determine a score published by Universal Edition from one published by Kalmus or CF Peters simply by their designs.

You can make your notation express your individual style by paying close attention to the details of each aspect of the score. Experiment with the features that Finale or Sibelius offer in the areas of font selection (for both music and text), staff size, note spacing, articulation placement, line width, clef design, beam angles, notehead size, number of voices (one or two) and the default position and look of other on-staff objects.

Once you've decided how you want your scores to look, try to be as consistent as possible by saving your master file as a template (or a house style in Sibelius). Then, whenever you want to start a new notation project, just call up your template and all of your tweaks will be pre-programmed into the file. Both programs let you to define an unlimited number of templates, so it's easy to create different looks for different applications (solo, jazz chart, exercise, online publications, etc.).

While very basic in nature, the four examples in Fig. 4 on page 112 show some of the more obvious alterations you can make to your notation. Compare them to each other for visual distinctions and aesthetic differences that help to communicate a feeling.

## Plugged In

**TRICK OF THE DAY.** Neither Finale nor Sibelius offers a percussion map that will automatically place open hi-hat notes on the space above the staff with the open hi-hat articulation (the small circle). Until the software adds this feature, here are two fast work-arounds for Sibelius.

**METHOD ONE.** Since this technique uses true articulations, you will be able to adjust their exact positions on an individual basis.

**STEP 1** – In your percussion map, set the open hi-hat to appear on the staff as a different pitch from the closed hi-hat. Also make sure that this pitch isn't used for any other instruments.

**STEP 2** – After entering your notes with your kit or multipad, select the whole score, then go to the edit/filter/advanced filter menu (command+alt+shift+f).

**STEP 3** – In the dialog box, select notes and chords, the pitch and octave you defined for the open hi-hat, and then press the select button.

**STEP 4** – When the score shows you all the selected notes, click the open hi-hat articulation. Boom – that's it! Now use the up/down arrow keys to put the notes back on the space above the staff. Re-edit your percussion map to have the notes fire the open hi-hat sound on playback.

**METHOD TWO.** If you're certain that you want the open hi-hat articulation in the same exact place for each and every note, you can create an entirely new notehead shape that has both the "x", and the open-circle articulation above the stem and/or beam. This is a little tricky, but easy to accomplish if you follow Robert Puff's excellent instructions at [musicprep.com/sibelius/](http://musicprep.com/sibelius/). See, you can find good stuff on the web!

**To Learn More.** There are many books on music notation, but these are the ones that we recommend the most. You may want to purchase a software-specific handbook to help you get the most out of your notation program. In addition, both Finale and Sibelius have user areas on their web sites where folks offer and receive tons of helpful ideas.

*Guide To Standardized Drumset Notation*, Norman Weinberg, Percussive Arts Society, 1998. ISBN: 0966492811

*Essential Dictionary Of Music Notation*, Tom Gerou, Linda Lusk, Alfred Publishing Company, 1996. ISBN: 0882847309

*Music Notation In The Twentieth Century: A Practical Guidebook*, Kurt Stone, W.W. Norton & Company, 1980. ISBN: 0393950530

*Music Notation*, Gardner Read, Taplinger Publishing Company, 1979. ISBN: 0800854535

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- Drum Center ★ Lexington, KY  
859/276-1827 ★ drumcenterlex@aol.com
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805/543-0338 ★ drumcircuit.com
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314/644-0235 ★ drumheadquarters.com
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636/928-0235 ★ drumheadquarters.com
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207/874-6630 ★ drumsforless.com
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412/771-4060 ★ drumworld.com
- Drums 'n' Moore ★ Monona, WI  
608/222-3786 ★ drums-n-moore.com
- Dynamic Percussion ★ Manchester, CT  
860/647-8887 ★ dynamicpercussion.com
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330/499-1198 ★ zampinos.com

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