

LilyPond

The music typesetter

Essay on automated music engraving

The LilyPond development team

This essay discusses automatic music engraving functions within LilyPond version 2.24.0.

For more information about how this manual fits with the other documentation, or to read this manual in other formats, see Section “Manuals” in *General Information*.

If you are missing any manuals, the complete documentation can be found at <https://lilypond.org/>.

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For LilyPond version 2.24.0

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Bärenreiter BA 320, ©1950:

Suite I

BWV 1007

PRÉLUDE

The musical score for the Prelude of Suite I, BWV 1007, is presented in ten staves. The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The score begins with a measure number of 1. The music consists of a continuous eighth-note pattern, often grouped in pairs or fours, with various slurs and ties. Fingering indications (1, 2, 3, 4, 0) are placed below the notes to guide the performer. The score ends with a measure number of 19.

Henle no. 666, ©2000:

Prélude BWV 1007

3

5

7

9

11

13

15

17

19

1.2 Engraving details

The art of music typography is called *(plate) engraving*, a term that derives from the manual process of music printing¹. Just a few decades ago, sheet music was made by cutting and stamping the music into a zinc or pewter plate in mirror image. The plate would be inked, and the depressions caused by the cutting and stamping would hold ink. An image was formed by pressing paper to the plate. The stamping and cutting was done completely by hand and making a correction was cumbersome, so the engraving had to be nearly perfect in one go. Engraving was a highly specialized skill; a craftsman had to complete around five years of training before earning the title of master engraver, and another five years of experience were necessary to become truly skilled.



LilyPond is inspired by traditional manual engravings published by European music publishers in and towards the end of the first half of the twentieth century, including Bärenreiter, Duhem, Durand, Hofmeister, Peters, and Schott. This is sometimes regarded as the peak of traditional musical engraving practice. As we have studied these editions we have learned a great deal about what goes into a well-engraved score, and the aspects that we wanted to imitate in LilyPond.

Music fonts

The images below illustrate some differences between traditional engraving and typical computer output. The left picture shows a scan of a flat symbol from a hand-engraved Bärenreiter edition, while the right picture depicts a symbol from an edition of the same music published in 2000. Although both images are printed in the same shade of ink, the earlier version looks darker: the staff lines are heavier, and the Bärenreiter flat has a bold, almost voluptuous rounded look. The right scan, on the other hand, has thinner lines and a straight layout with sharp corners.

¹ Early European printers explored several processes, including hand-carved wooden blocks, movable type, and engraved sheets of thin metal. Typesetting had the advantage of being more easily corrected and facilitating the inclusion of text and lyrics, but only engraving offered the ability to do unimpeded layout and unanticipated notation. In the end, hand-engraved scores became the standard for all printed music, with the exception of some hymnals and songbooks where typesetting was justified by its ease and economy, even into the twentieth century.

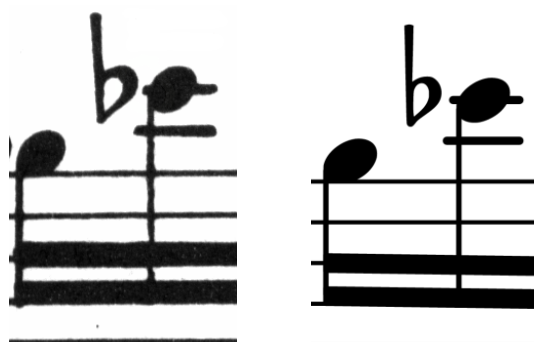


Each bar in the fragment only uses notes that are played in a constant rhythm. The spacing should reflect that. Unfortunately, the eye deceives us a little; not only does it notice the distance between note heads, it also takes into account the distance between consecutive stems. As a result, the notes of an up-stem/down-stem combination should be put farther apart, and the notes of a down-stem/up-stem combination should be put closer together, all depending on the combined vertical positions of the notes. The lower two measures are printed with this correction, the upper two measures, however, form down-stem/up-stem clumps of notes. A master engraver would adjust the spacing as needed to please the eye.

The spacing algorithms in LilyPond even take the bar lines into account, which is why the final up-stem in the properly spaced example has been given a little more space before the bar line to keep it from looking crowded. A down-stem would not need this adjustment.

Ledger lines

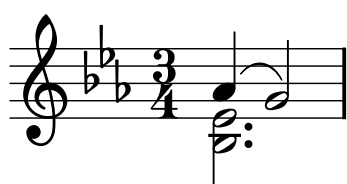
Ledger lines present a typographical challenge: they make it more difficult to space musical symbols close together and they must be clear enough to identify the pitch at a glance. In the example below, we see that ledger lines should be thicker than normal staff lines and that an expert engraver will shorten a ledger line to allow closer spacing with accidentals. We have included this feature in LilyPond's engraving.



Optical sizing

Music may need to be printed in a range of sizes. Originally, this was accomplished by creating punching dies in each of the required sizes, which meant that each die was designed to look its best at that size. With the advent of digital fonts, a single outline can be mathematically scaled to any size, which is very convenient, but at the smaller sizes the glyphs will appear very light.

In LilyPond, we have created fonts in a range of weights, corresponding to a range of music sizes. This is a LilyPond engraving at staff size 26:



and this is the same engraving set at staff size 11, then magnified by 236% to print at the same size as the previous example:



At smaller sizes, LilyPond uses proportionally heavier lines so the music will still read well.

This also allows staves of different sizes to coexist peacefully when used together on the same page:

Why work so hard?

Musicians are usually more absorbed with performing than with studying the looks of a piece of music, so nitpicking typographical details may seem academic. But it is not. Sheet music is performance material: everything is done to aid the musician in letting her perform better, and anything that is unclear or unpleasant to read is a hindrance.

Traditionally engraved music uses bold symbols on heavy staff to create a strong, well-balanced look that stands out well when the music is far away from the reader: for example, if it is on a music stand. A careful distribution of white space allows music to be set very tightly without crowding symbols together. The result minimizes the number of page turns, which is a great advantage.

This is a common characteristic of typography. Layout should be pretty, not only for its own sake, but especially because it helps the reader in his task. For sheet music this is of double importance because musicians have a limited amount of attention. The less attention they need for reading, the more they can focus on playing the music. In other words, better typography translates to better performances.

These examples demonstrate that music typography is an art that is subtle and complex, and that producing it requires considerable expertise, which musicians usually do not have. LilyPond is our effort to bring the graphical excellence of hand-engraved music to the computer age, and make it available to normal musicians. We have tuned our algorithms, font-designs, and program settings to produce prints that match the quality of the old editions we love to see and love to play from.

1.3 Automated engraving

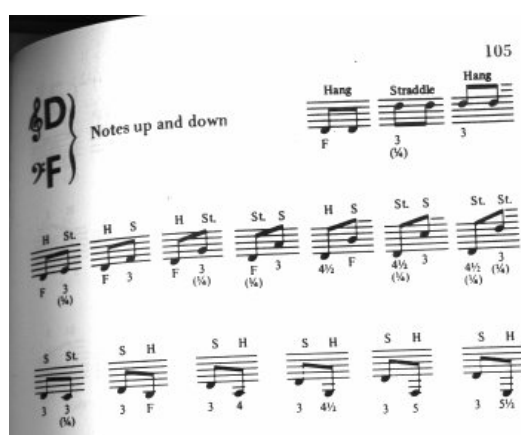
Here we describe what is required to create software that can mimic the layout of engraved scores: a method of describing good layouts to the computer and a lot of detailed comparisons with real engravings.

Beauty contests

How do we actually make formatting decisions? In other words, which of the three configurations should we choose for the following slur?



There are a few books on the art of music engraving available. Unfortunately, they contain simple rules of thumb and some examples. Such rules can be instructive, but they are a far cry from an algorithm that we could readily implement in a computer. Following the instructions from literature leads to algorithms with lots of hand-coded exceptions. Doing all this case analysis is a lot of work, and often not all cases are covered completely:



(Image source: Ted Ross, *The Art of Music Engraving*)

Rather than trying to write detailed layout rules for every possible scenario, we only have to describe the objectives well enough that LilyPond can judge the attractiveness of several alternatives. Then, for each possible configuration we compute an ugliness score and we choose the least ugly configuration.

For example, here are three possible slur configurations, and LilyPond has given each one a score in ‘ugly points’. The first example gets 15.39 points for grazing one of the noteheads:



The second one is nicer, but the slur doesn’t start or end on the note heads. It gets 1.71 points for the left side and 9.37 points for the right side, plus another 2 points because the slur ascends while the melody descends for a total of 13.08 ugly points:



The final slur gets 10.04 points for the gap on the right and 2 points for the upward slope, but it is the most attractive of the three configurations, so LilyPond selects this one:



This technique is quite general, and is used to make optimal decisions for beam configurations, ties and dots in chords, line breaks, and page breaks. The results of these decisions can be judged by comparison to real engravings.

Improvement by benchmarking

LilyPond's output has improved gradually over time, and it continues to improve by comparing its output to hand-engraved scores.

For example, here is one line of a benchmark piece from a hand-engraved edition (Bärenreiter BA320):



and the same quotation as engraved by a very old version of LilyPond (version 1.4, May 2001):



The LilyPond 1.4 output is certainly readable, but close comparison with the hand-engraved score showed a lot of errors in the formatting details:



- there is too much space before the time signature
- the stems of the beamed notes are too long
- the second and fourth measures are too narrow
- the slur is awkward-looking
- the trill marks are too big
- the stems are too thin

(There were also two missing note heads, several missing editorial annotations, and an incorrect pitch!)

By adjusting the layout rules and font design, the output has improved considerably. Compare the same reference score and the output from the current version of LilyPond (2.24.0):



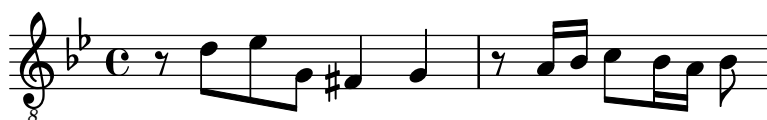


The current output is not a clone of the reference edition, but it is much closer to publication quality than the earlier output.

Getting things right

We can also measure LilyPond's ability to make music engraving decisions automatically by comparing LilyPond's output to the output of a commercial software product. In this case we have chosen Finale 2008, which is one of the most popular commercial score writers, particularly in North America. Sibelius is its major rival and appears to be especially strong in the European market.

For our comparison we selected Bach's Fugue in G minor from the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I, BWV 861, whose opening subject is



We made our comparison by engraving the last seven measures of the piece (28–34) in Finale and LilyPond. This is the point in the piece where the subject returns in a three-part stretto and leads into the closing section. In the Finale version, we have resisted the temptation to make any adjustments to the default output because we are trying to show the things that each software package gets right without assistance. The only major edits that we made were adjusting the page size to match this essay and forcing the music onto two systems to make the comparison easier. By default Finale would have engraved two systems of three measures each and a final, full-width system containing a single measure.

Many of the differences between the two engravings are visible in measures 28–29, as shown here with Finale first and LilyPond second:

Comparison of musical notation for measures 28–29 of Bach's Fugue in G minor. The top system shows the Finale output, and the bottom system shows the LilyPond output. Both systems show measures 28 and 29. The notation is in treble clef, C major. The first measure (28) has a half note G4 with a trill (tr) and a dotted half note G4. The second measure (29) has a half note G4 with a trill (tr) and a dotted half note G4. The notation is identical in both systems.

1.4 Building software

This section describes some of the programming decisions that we made when designing LilyPond.

Music representation

Ideally, the input format for any high-level formatting system is an abstract description of the content. In this case, that would be the music itself. This poses a formidable problem: how can we define what music really is? Instead of trying to find an answer, we have reversed the question. We write a program capable of producing sheet music, and adjust the format to be as lean as possible. When the format can no longer be trimmed down, by definition we are left with content itself. Our program serves as a formal definition of a music document.

The syntax is also the user-interface for LilyPond, hence it is easy to type:

```
{
  c'4 d'8
}
```

to create a quarter note on middle C (C1) and an eighth note on the D above middle C (D1).



On a microscopic scale, such syntax is easy to use. On a larger scale, syntax also needs structure. How else can you enter complex pieces like symphonies and operas? The structure is formed by the concept of music expressions: by combining small fragments of music into larger ones, more complex music can be expressed. For example

```
f'4
```



Simultaneous notes can be constructed by enclosing them with << and >>:

```
<<c4 d4 e4>>
```



This expression is put in sequence by enclosing it in curly braces { ... }:

```
{ f4 <<c4 d4 e4>> }
```



The above is also an expression, and so it may be combined again with another simultaneous expression (a half note) using <<, \\\, and >>:

```
<< g2 \\\ { f4 <<c4 d4 e4>> } >>
```


What symbols to engrave?

The formatting process decides where to place symbols. However, this can only be done once it is decided *what* symbols should be printed – in other words, what notation to use.

Common music notation is a system of recording music that has evolved over the past 1000 years. The form that is now in common use dates from the early Renaissance. Although the basic form (i.e., note heads on a 5-line staff) has not changed, the details still evolve to express the innovations of contemporary notation. Hence, common music notation encompasses some 500 years of music. Its applications range from monophonic melodies to monstrous counterpoints for a large orchestra.

How can we get a grip on such a seven-headed beast, and force it into the confines of a computer program? Our solution is to break up the problem of notation (as opposed to engraving, i.e., typography) into digestible and programmable chunks: every type of symbol is handled by a separate module, a so-called plug-in. Each plug-in is completely modular and independent, so each can be developed and improved separately. Such plug-ins are called engravers, by analogy with craftsmen who translate musical ideas to graphic symbols.

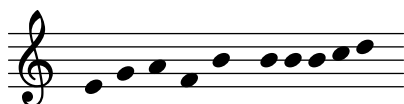
In the following example, we start out with a plug-in for note heads, the `Note_heads_engraver`.



Then a `Staff_symbol_engraver` adds the staff,



the `Clef_engraver` defines a reference point for the staff,



and the `Stem_engraver` adds stems.



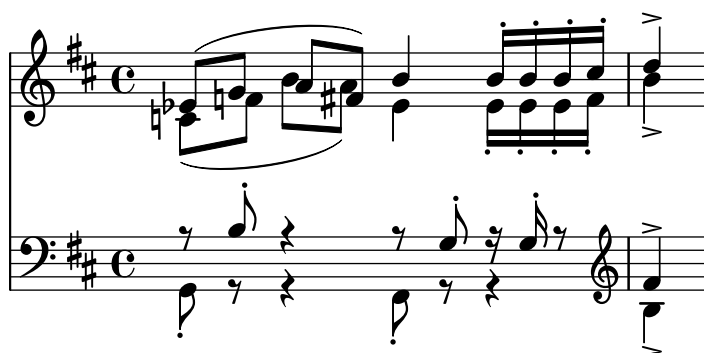
The `Stem_engraver` is notified of any note head coming along. Every time one (or more, for a chord) note head is seen, a stem object is created and connected to the note head. By adding engravers for beams, slurs, accents, accidentals, bar lines, time signature, and key signature, we get a complete piece of notation.



This system works well for monophonic music, but what about polyphony? In polyphonic notation, many voices can share a staff.



In this situation, the accidentals and staff are shared, but the stems, slurs, beams, etc., are private to each voice. Hence, engravers should be grouped. The engravers for note heads, stems, slurs, etc., go into a group called ‘Voice context’, while the engravers for key, accidental, bar, etc., go into a group called ‘Staff context’. In the case of polyphony, a single Staff context contains more than one Voice context. Similarly, multiple Staff contexts can be put into a single Score context. The Score context is the top level notation context.



See also

Internals Reference: Section “Contexts” in *Internals Reference*.

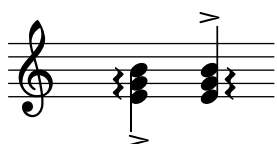
Flexible architecture

When we started, we wrote the LilyPond program entirely in the C++ programming language; the program’s functionality was set in stone by the developers. That proved to be unsatisfactory for a number of reasons:

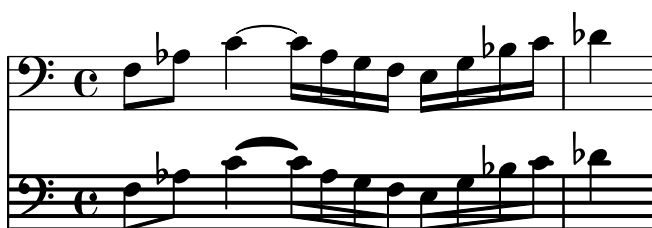
- When LilyPond makes mistakes, users need to override formatting decisions. Therefore, the user must have access to the formatting engine. Hence, rules and settings cannot be fixed by us at compile-time but must be accessible for users at run-time.
- Engraving is a matter of visual judgment, and therefore a matter of taste. As knowledgeable as we are, users can disagree with our personal decisions. Therefore, the definitions of typographical style must also be accessible to the user.
- Finally, we continually refine the formatting algorithms, so we need a flexible approach to rules. The C++ language forces a certain method of grouping rules that cannot readily be applied to formatting music notation.

These problems have been addressed by integrating an interpreter for the Scheme programming language and rewriting parts of LilyPond in Scheme. The current formatting architecture is built around the notion of graphical objects, described by Scheme variables and functions. This architecture encompasses formatting rules, typographical style and individual formatting decisions. The user has direct access to most of these controls.

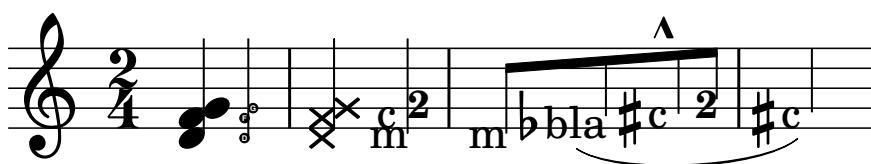
Scheme variables control layout decisions. For example, many graphical objects have a direction variable that encodes the choice between up and down (or left and right). Here you see two chords, with accents and arpeggios. In the first chord, the graphical objects have all directions down (or left). The second chord has all directions up (right).

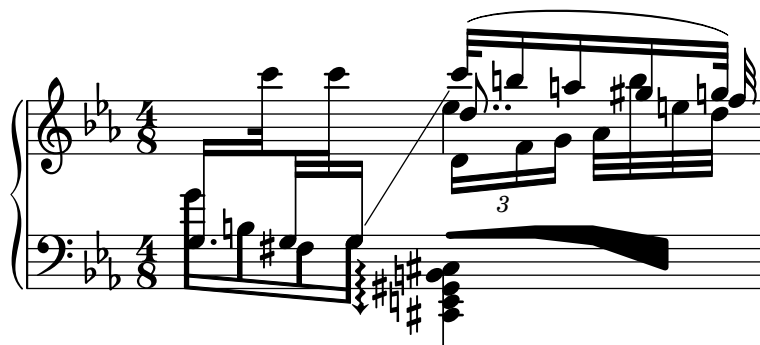


The process of formatting a score consists of reading and writing the variables of graphical objects. Some variables have a preset value. For example, the thickness of many lines – a characteristic of typographical style – is a variable with a preset value. You are free to alter this value, giving your score a different typographical impression.



Formatting rules are also preset variables: each object has variables containing procedures. These procedures perform the actual formatting, and by substituting different ones, we can change the appearance of objects. In the following example, the rule governing which note head objects are used to produce the note head symbol is changed during the music fragment.





The fragments shown above have all been written by hand, but that is not a requirement. Since the formatting engine is mostly automatic, it can serve as an output means for other programs that manipulate music. For example, it can also be used to convert databases of musical fragments to images for use on websites and multimedia presentations.

This manual also shows an application: the input format is text, and can therefore be easily embedded in other text-based formats such as \LaTeX , HTML, or in the case of this manual, Texinfo. Using the `lilypond-book` program, included with LilyPond, the input fragments can be replaced by music images in the resulting PDF or HTML output files. Another example is the third-party `OOoLilyPond` extension for OpenOffice.org or LibreOffice, which makes it extremely easy to embed musical examples in documents.

For more examples of LilyPond in action, full documentation, and the software itself, see our main website: www.lilypond.org.

1.6 Engraved examples (BWV 861)

This section contains four reference engravings and two software-engraved versions of Bach's Fugue in G minor from the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I, BWV 861 (the last seven measures).

Bärenreiter BA5070 (Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke, Serie V, Band 6.1, 1989):



Bärenreiter BA5070 (Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke, Serie V, Band 6.1, 1989), an alternate musical source. Aside from the textual differences, this demonstrates slight variations in the engraving decisions, even from the same publisher and edition:



Breitkopf & Härtel, edited by Ferruccio Busoni (Wiesbaden, 1894), also available from the Petrucci Music Library (IMSLP #22081). The editorial markings (fingerings, articulations, etc.) have been removed for clearer comparison with the other editions here:



Bach-Gesellschaft edition (Leipzig, 1866), available from the Petrucci Music Library (IMSLP #02221):



Finale 2008:

Two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system contains measures 28 and 29. The second system contains measures 30 and 31. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

LilyPond, version 2.24.0:

Two systems of musical notation for piano, generated by LilyPond. The first system contains measures 28 and 29. The second system contains measures 30 and 31. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The notation is identical to the one above.

2 Literature list

Here are lists of references used in LilyPond.

2.1 Short literature list

If you need to know more about music notation, here are some interesting titles to read.

Ignatzek 1995

Klaus Ignatzek, Die Jazzmethode für Klavier. Schott's Söhne 1995. Mainz, Germany ISBN 3-7957-5140-3.

A tutorial introduction to playing Jazz on the piano. One of the first chapters contains an overview of chords in common use for Jazz music.

Gerou 1996

Tom Gerou and Linda Lusk, Essential Dictionary of Music Notation. Alfred Publishing, Van Nuys CA ISBN 0-88284-768-6.

A concise, alphabetically ordered list of typesetting and music (notation) issues, covering most of the normal cases.

Gould 2011

Elaine Gould, Behind Bars: the Definitive Guide to Music Notation. Faber Music Ltd. ISBN 0-571-51456-1.

Hals über Kopf: Das Handbuch des Notensatzes. Edition Peters. ISBN 1843670488.

A comprehensive guide to the rules and conventions of music notation. Covering everything from basic themes to complex techniques and providing a comprehensive grounding in notational principles.

Read 1968

Gardner Read, Music Notation: A Manual of Modern Practice. Taplinger Publishing, New York (2nd edition).

A standard work on music notation.

Ross 1987

Ted Ross, Teach yourself the art of music engraving and processing. Hansen House, Miami, Florida 1987.

This book is about music engraving, i.e., professional typesetting. It contains directions on stamping, use of pens and notational conventions. The sections on reproduction technicalities and history are also interesting.

Schirmer 2001

The G.Schirmer/AMP Manual of Style and Usage. G.Schirmer/AMP, NY, 2001. (This book can be ordered from the rental department.)

This manual specifically focuses on preparing print for publication by Schirmer. It discusses many details that are not in other, normal notation books. It also gives a good idea of what is necessary to bring printouts to publication quality.

Stone 1980

Kurt Stone, Music Notation in the Twentieth Century. Norton, New York 1980.

This book describes music notation for modern serious music, but starts out with a thorough overview of existing traditional notation practices.

2.2 Long literature list

University of Colorado Engraving music bibliography

- Willi Apel. **The notation of polyphonic music, 900-1600.** Cambridge, Mass, 1953. Musical notation.
- Ernest Austin. **The Story of Music Printing.** Lowe and Brydone Printers, Ltd., London. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- Anna Maria Busse Berger. **Mensuration and proportion signs : origins and evolution.** Clarendon Press, Oxford, England, 1993. subject: early notation.
- Roger Bowers. **Music & Letters**, volume 73. August 1992. Some reflection upon notation and proportion in Monteverdi's mass and vespers.
- Paul Brainard. **Current Musicology.** Number 50. July-Dec 1992. Proportional notation in the music of Schutz and his contemporaries in the 17th Century.
- Carl Brandt and Clinton Roemer. **Standardized Chord Symbol Notation.** Roerick Music Co., Sherman Oaks, CA. subject: musical notation.
- Earle Brown. **Musical Quarterly**, volume 72. Spring 1986. The notation and performance of new music.
- John Cage. **Notations.** Something Else Press, New York, 1969. Music, Manuscripts, Facsimiles. Facsimiles of holographs from the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, with text by 269 composers, but rearranged using chance operations.,V).
- J Carter. **New Paths in Book Collecting.** London, 1934. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- F. Chrsander. **A Sketch of the HHistory of Music printing, from the 15th to the 16th century.** 18??. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- Henry Cowell. **Our Inadequate Notation.** *Modern Music*, 4(3), 1927. subject: 20th century notation.
- Henry Cowell. **New Musical Resources.** Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1930. subject: 20th century notation.
- O.F. Deutsch. **Music Publishers' Numbers.** London, 1946. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- Suzanne Eggleston. **Notes.** *New periodicals*, 51(2):657(7), Dec 1994. A list of new music periodicals covering the period Jun.-Dec. 1994. Includes aims, formats and a description of the contents of each listed periodical. Includes Music Notation News.
- Hubert Foss. **Music Printing.** Practical Printing and Binding. Oldhams Press Ltd., Long Acre, London. subject: musical notation.
- Jean Charles Francois. **Writing without representation, and unreadable notation..** *Perspectives of New Music*, 30(1):6(15), Winter 1992. subject: Modern music has outgrown notation. While the computer is used to write down music with accuracy never before achieved, the range of modern sounds has surpassed the relevance of the computer...
- David Fuller. **The Journal of Musicology**, volume 7. Winter 1989. Notes and inegales unjoined: defending a definition. (written-out inequalities in music notation).
- Virginia Gaburo. **Notation.** Lingua Press, La Jolla, California, 1977. A Lecture about notation, new ideas about.
- Keith A Hamel. **A design for music editing and printing software based on notational syntax.** *Perspectives of New Music*, 27(1):70(14), Winter 1989.
- Archibald Jacob. **Musical handwriting : or, How to put music on paper : A handbook for all musicians, professional and amateur.** Oxford University Press, London, 1947. subject: Musical notation.

- Harold M Johnson. **How to write music manuscript an exercise-method handbook for the music student, copyist, arranger, composer, teacher.** Carl Fischer, Inc., New York, 1946. subject: Musical notation –Handbooks, manuals.
- David Evan Jones. **Perspectives of New Music.** 1990. Speech extrapolated. (includes notation).
- H King. **Four Hundred Years of Music Printing.** London, 1964. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- A.H King. **The 50th Anniversary of Music Printing.** 1973.
- O Kinkeldey. **Music And Music Printing in Incunabula.** *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, xxvi:89-118, 1932. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- D.W. Krummel. **Graphic Analysis in Application to Early American Engraved Music.** *Notes*, xvi:213, 9 1958. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- D.W Krummel. **Oblong Format in Early Music Books.** *The Library*, 5th ser., xxvi:312, 1971. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- Jeffrey Lependorf. **?. Perspectives of New Music**, 27(2):232(20), Summer 1989. Contemporary notation for the shakuhachi: a primer for composers. (Tradition and Renewal in the Music of Japan).
- G.A Marco. **The Earliest Music Printers of Continental Europe: a Checklist of Facsimiles Illustrating Their Work.** Charlottesville, Virginia, 1962. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- K. Meyer and J O'Meara. **The Printing of Music, 1473-1934.** *The Dolphin*, ii:171–207, 1935. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- Raymond Monelle. **Comparative Literature**, volume 41. Summer 1989. Music notation and the poetic foot.
- A Novello. **Some Account of the Methods of Musick Printing, with Specimens of the Various Sizes of Moveable Types and of Other Matters.** London, 1847. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- C.B Oldman. **Collecting Musical First Editions.** London, 1934. subject: history of music printing and engraving.
- Carl Parrish. **The Notation of Medieval Music.** Carl Fischer, Inc., New York, 1946. subject: early notation.
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