

Repository of music-notation mistakes

Jean-Pierre Coulon

August 19, 2009

intended for:

- users of music-typesetting software packages,
- developers of such packages,
- traditional music-engravers,
- sheet-music collectors,
- those keen on *semantics-*, *semiology-*, *philology-*, etc. problems.

This side: incorrect.

This side: correct.

NB: These examples are not claimed to have any musical interest: Do not read them with your instrument :-)
In order to limit myself to the essential, and lacking sufficient expertise, I will not deal with any of these neighboring, exciting topics:

- music theory, harmony, composition, etc.
- comparative test of various typesetting packages,
- how to interpret the quoted symbols according to epochs,
- copyright issues,
- percussion notation, and plucked-string instrument tablatures,
- very-early-music notation, and *avant-garde* music notation.

I apologize to readers of some countries for having adhered to the U.S terminology

1 General issues

1.1

Do your best to place *page-turns* at places acceptable for the musician, otherwise he will either require a "page-turner", or have to make laborious arrangements of chunks of photocopies. Since nowadays's musical scores are smaller than before, this demands more efforts from the music engraver.

The printed area, i.e. omitting margins, of most scores from former epochs, almost matched the usual format of most of nowadays's scores including the margins.

An easy solution consists in using a small engraving size. It is better to use a bigger size, at the price of more effort to manage the spacing rationally. These two excerpts require the same horizontal space, but that on the right is more easily readable:



Moreover, you also have to vary the distances between the staves of systems, to avoid wasting some vertical space (see my edition of Dussek's piano Sonata op.35-3).

1.2

Choose horizontal spacings that increase according to note durations, but not proportional to these durations. Personally I am happy with a spacing ratio of $\sqrt{2} \approx 1.414$ to represent a duration-ratio of 2, but this is not an absolute rule, especially if thirty-second or sixty-fourth notes are present, because this would result in their being too close to each other. Do not change the spacing of a specific duration within a line without a good reason.



If there are several staves in a system, the part with the **shortest** durations governs the overall spacing.

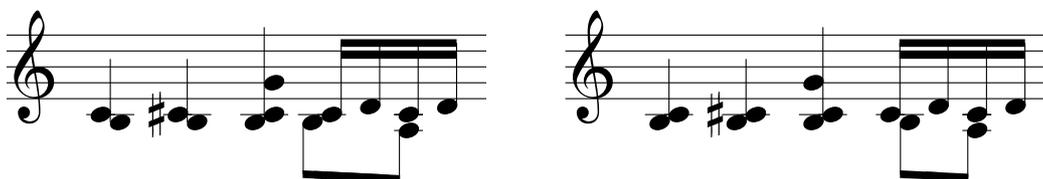
1.3

Never perturb the vertical alignment in order to accommodate accidentals:



1.4

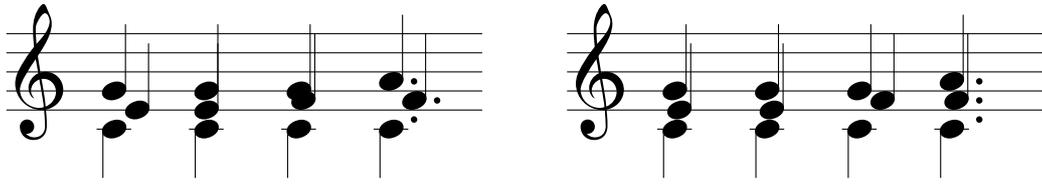
Write an interval of a *second* in a chord with the lower note **left**. On the other hand, in polyphonic writing, it should be put **right**.



Do not be perturbed by an accidental associated with the upper note. Do not perturb notes aside this second.

1.5

In polyphonic writing, notes should be shifted just what is needed to distinguish them, anyway less than the spacing that corresponds to a second:



Note the case of dotted notes.

1.6

Some linkings of notes or rests may be correct according to music theory, but result in awkward sight reading:



Some will argue that in early music, flag/beam notation expresses some degree of articulation. But the rule above almost always coincides with some *reasonable* articulation.

2 Beaming

2.1

Beams should have an appropriate slope. In the past, one would avoid too weak a slope, because the printing oil would maliciously attempt to fill the tiny angle between these beams and the staff lines. For a scale or an arpeggio, this slope cannot be steeper than that formed by the notes, nor horizontal. A compromise must be found. Here is an example, with its solution, by two distinguished publishers:



2.2

Avoid Z-like beams, as found in former editions:



2.3

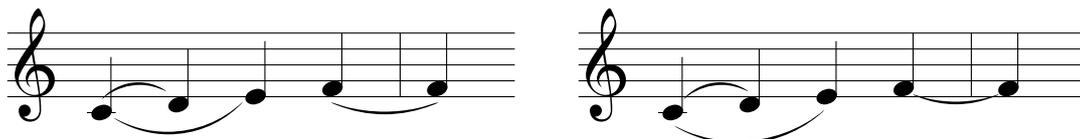
Beams should never collide with ledger lines:



3 Ties and slurs

3.1

When **slurred** notes are intended, the slur takes off and lands above the **center** of note heads. But for **tied** notes, the same sign takes off and lands vertically aligned with the boundary of the note head, and not higher than this head. One deviates from the first rule to avoid colliding the note stems.



Note that the tie becomes "quieter".

3.2

Meanwhile avoid "acrobatics" to strictly abide these rules:



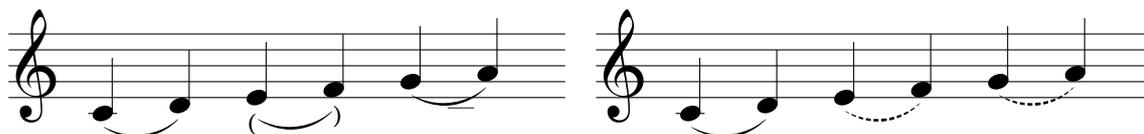
3.3

At some epochs a single tie was supposed to refer to **all** notes of a particular chord. Particular cases have become so frequent, that it is better to note all ties explicitly.



3.4

The dotted slur is the best way to emphasize an *editorial slur*:



4 Accidentals

4.1

When a note with an accidental expands over several measure, do not repeat the accidental on the next measures, except if there is a line-break or a page-break:



4.2

When an accidental affects *small notes*, and is desired to also affect subsequent notes, it must be repeated.



4.3

When a note with a single sharp comes after the same note with a double sharp, you no longer put a natural sign before the single sharp, unless you want to mimic 19th engraving style. Same for flats:



4.4

In polyphonic writing, accidentals of either part are not supposed to affect other parts. If such accidentals are to affect other parts, they should be written explicitly:



4.5

In the old days, an accidental would also affect corresponding notes at other octaves:



Nowadays, such accidentals should be explicitly written:



Note that some software packages, able to convert a MIDI file into a score, have kept this former convention.

4.6

When changing the key signature in order to decrease the number of accidentals, the natural signs should be written **before** the remaining accidentals:



4.7

When there is a need to shift some accidentals to avoid collisions, the upper is left at its normal position, and the lower is shifted to the left, either in chord- or in polyphonic-writing:



4.8

Accidentals other than well defined ones, get classified in three sets:

- editorial accidentals (e),
- cautionary accidentals (y),
- "courtesy" accidentals (c).

Put an editorial accidental when you think the source is wrong. Note it with a small-size accidental above or under the note. If this note is within a chord, place it left to the note.

Thorough bass also uses such small accidentals above notes. But the misunderstanding is unlikely most of the time.

Put a cautionary accidental when music-theory rules demand its effect, but you fear the musician misses it, e.g. at the end of a "crowded" measure. It must be parenthesized.

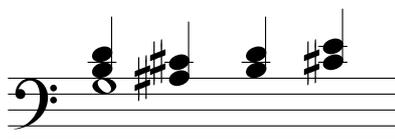
A courtesy accidental is a theoretically redundant accidental, which confirms the cancelling effect of a barline on previous accidentals. The usage is to write it normally.



4.9

Some accidentals in ancient editions may seem redundant according to our modern rules. Therefore the following theory must be banned: *if this accidental is present in my source, there must be a good reason for this, but a wrong accidental has been written here.*

Here is how the source looks like:



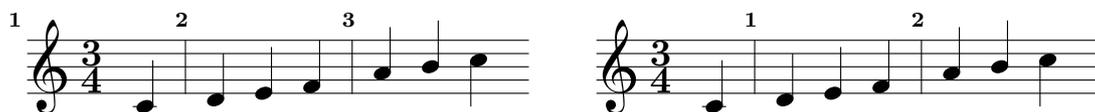


If these thirds of fourth-notes had been written as polyphonic notes, the explanation would be obvious. I could also quote similar misunderstandings about accidentals an octave away, as seen before.

5 Measure numbers

5.1

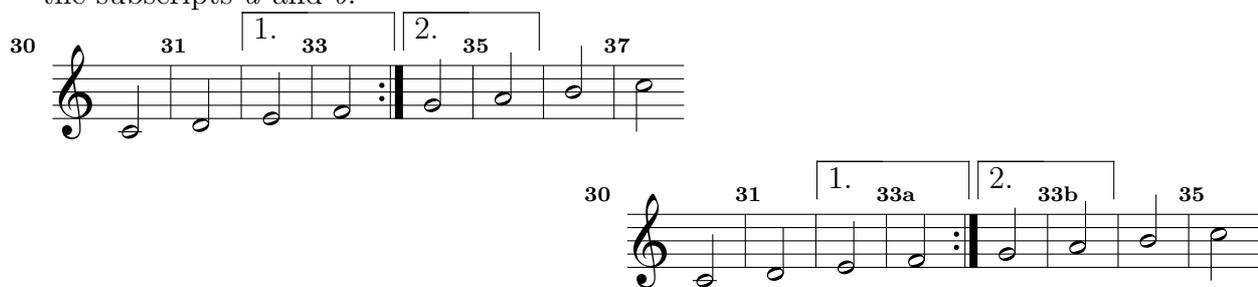
The number of the very first measure of a piece is never written. If this measure is an upbeat, this number is **zero**.



Measure numbers at system left-tops are enough in practice.

5.2

When *first ending-second ending* measures are present, measure numbers of only the *first ending* measure act on the numbering. If necessary, corresponding measure numbers have the subscripts *a* and *b*.



6 Miscellaneous

6.1

No barline should be written at the beginning of an instrument part involving a single staff, unlike a conductor score.



6.2

In ancient times, some staccato notes had a small wedge instead of the modern dot. If **both** symbols show up in a piece, they also represent two degrees of staccato. This notation must then be faithfully reproduced. On the other hand, if only wedges exist, they must be replaced with dots.:



7 Problems specific to keyboard instruments

7.1

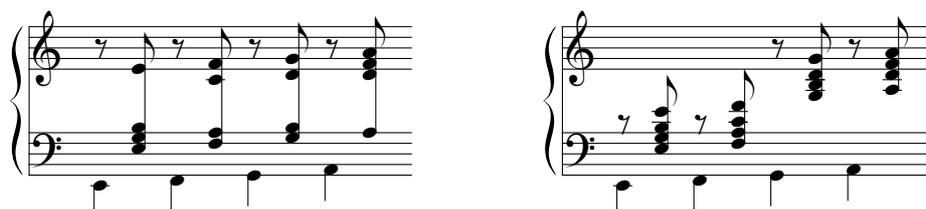
Crossed-hand passages should not be noted with sea-sickening key changes, but at their real heights:



I think hand assignments are redundant.

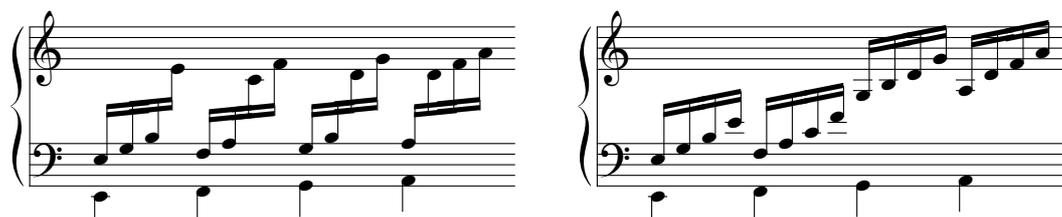
7.2

In the old days, one would let chords straddle both staves. Now one is less reluctant to use ledger lines:



7.3

This holds true for eighth- and shorter notes too:



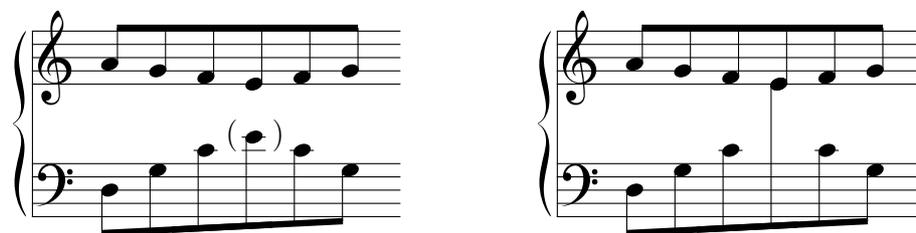
7.4

On the other hand, large runs of short notes spreading on both staves are quite appropriate, especially for a fast, non-measured run:



7.5

Meanwhile, this can be an elegant way to emphasize a unison between both hands.



7.6

In the old days one would write **loco** to emphasize the end of an octave sign. Now such signs have become common, and this **loco** is well redundant.

8 Some moral advice, to conclude

8.1

If you elect to using a specific notation practice, keep up with it along the entire piece, instead of toggling between two practices according to your whim, even if we have seen that this first practice is questionable.

8.2

Pitch errors of a third are much more frequent than those of a second, for obvious visual-perception reasons. Be tolerant with the authors of your source.

8.3

Remember: Noting music correctly is as difficult as playing an instrument correctly.