

The Seven Common Misleading Uses of Vocal Notation

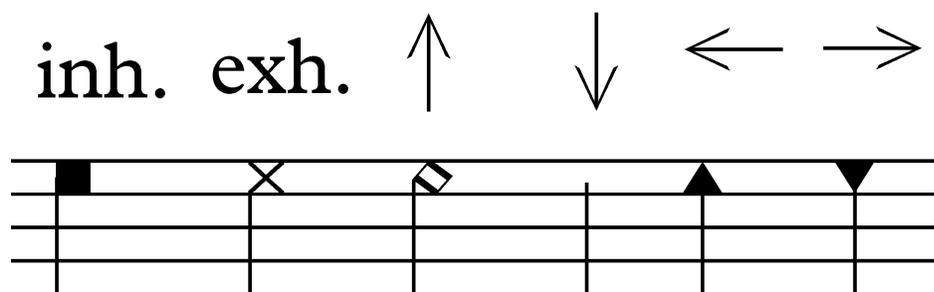
We composers sometimes have difficulty getting our intentions across, which is understandable given that Western musical notation was developed for the vocal music of half a millennium ago. What is less understandable is that at least one of the seven most common notational problems seems to come up with almost every new score of choral or vocal music – even in these informed and interconnected times. This often boils down to negligence on the part of the composer. With experience of premiering choral music for almost two decades, I am willing to step up and share some food for thought with my composer and singer colleagues, and any combinations thereof. I will put a slight emphasis on choral music, since that is where the stakes are highest.

1. Breathing sounds

I have seen all four of the most common ways of notating inhalation and exhalation; two of them using vertical lines, two using horizontal lines.

As for any musician, horizontal lines intuitively indicate some kind of change in sound quality during the following five seconds or so. However, breathing is not a timbral transformation per se and should not be notated in a horizontal way when the duration of the breath is already indicated on a rhythmical (horizontal) level. One solution is to introduce an aleatoric element and allow the singer to inhale or exhale in a duration that comes most naturally to the individual singer's anatomy. This solution would call for a textual explanation.

As to vertical arrow notation, some composers think more about the airflow down into and up from the lungs. Unfortunately, this is the opposite to how most singers think. Others have promoted the up-bow and down-bow symbols familiar from string notation, though even when systematically applying bowing symbols to airflow, occasional confusion cannot be avoided. When in doubt, I suggest using the text indications *inh.* and *exh.* exclusively.



Whichever notehead you use for breathing sounds (I would suggest a notehead that can be distinguished from the notehead used for pitched singing), forget about the arrows, since some composers have confused singers by designating the arrows contrary to how the singer intuitively perceives them, and this past misunderstanding is now perhaps impossible to rectify.

2. Glissandi

With vocalists, notating a wealth of articulated glissandi is not as much of a problem as it is with string and wind instruments (which have bowings and tonguings to complicate their notation), as

long as the text includes syllables which indicate where a new onset – pitch, noise, or otherwise – occurs in the sound. Each new syllable will mean a new onset, yet the opposite need not be true.

A composer could nevertheless use different types of slurs to differentiate the continuity of a glissando from a conventional legato. Alternately and non-standardly, a composer could write detached (i.e. re-articulated) glissandi with a thin glissando line, and continuous glissando-legato lines with a thick glissando line. If the glissandi are to progress in a non-linear fashion, such as with a dip or a sudden, faster surge, the shape of the line or the addition of intermediary pitch goals should indicate this. A choir can provide non-unison results when the composer has not indicated an ending or starting pitch or has not marked any intermediary pitches for a long or non-linear glissando. There is a tendency for singers to start changing the pitch in a glissando too late. This is best counteracted by composing glissandos that do not always start on the beat, and also by using different durations for the steady pitch part of a line, if any, and writing out those durations.

During a glissando, noteheads may be hidden and stems should be shown so that all beats remain visible, in keeping with current practice. New syllables during the glissando can be left out only in extremely self-explanatory cases and when accompanied by a written explanation.

= an ambiguous notation = notation for legato vs. = notation for tenuto (5 onsets) equals

My solution for notating the combination of glissando and legato, as opposed to a glissando with deliberate onsets in between.

3. Whistling

Composers often require singers to whistle, but such a requirement is often expected without regard to how many singers can whistle with a satisfactory sound quality. This is not a mode of the voice that can be learned easily if the anatomy simply is not there.

Moreover, whistling pitches are often written in an octave that it is impossible to reproduce – even with singers who can whistle. Individual whistling ranges do vary, however, so composers should not be discouraged from using a wide range of whistled pitches when composing for multiple voices. It should be understood, however, that allowing flexibility with regard to the redistribution of parts between the singers is key.

We can assume that all singers are able to read the treble clef and octave transpositions thereof. Yet the way in which a whistling sound is produced feels to the vocal apparatus one octave lower than the resulting sound. Experiment with this yourself! This leads the most effective composers to write either “resulting sound” at the start of a whistling passage or to use a treble clef with an *8va* marking above.

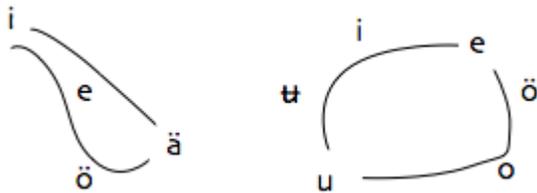
4. Vowel bridges and diphthongs

Regardless of whether you use the *International Phonetic Alphabet* or some other system of indicating phonemes, many composers suddenly seem indecisive when calling for transitions between vowels. Here we are dealing with a timbral transition in time, and a simple horizontal arrow on the same level as the text is sufficient. In many cases, even between two “basic” vowels there exist one or more “basic” vowels along the way (*basic* in the sense that several languages recognise each of these vowels as common and distinct from the remaining common vowels, even if the formant placement may differ slightly between languages and dialects).

Some examples are shown in the chart below.

A composer may be indifferent to the changing speed and route of such vowel bridges, yet in most rehearsal situations the sounding result will be ambiguous if the composer has not credibly thought of a sound preference.

When asking for vowel bridges such as the one from [i] to [æ], there is often one short route and one longer route. Sometimes there are two equally valid options, which is the reason such vowel bridges sound muddier the more singers are allotted to the same part. On a smaller scale, this applies to diphthongs with a duration longer than about one second also prevalent in the classical repertoire. The singers will have to decide where to put the second vowel, whether to arrive at the new vowel directly or by lengthy bridging, as well as which bridging route to take.



Examples of vowel bridge route choices with Finnish-Swedish vowels. Regardless of the route taken, going from [u] to [e] might include two phonemes recognised by native speakers, yet the choice of which two is left to the composer or the singer.

5. Consonant placement

This challenge must have plagued some of the most astute listeners even during the common practice period. Few if any composers spent time indicating where the consonants – mostly at the end of a sentence before a rest – should be placed or to how long they should ring, if applicable. With the emancipation of noise of the 1900s, the lack of such notation becomes all the more obvious.

As an informed composer, you can save a considerable amount of rehearsal time (in conventional music with lyrics, around 10% of the rehearsal time not spent singing is spent negotiating consonant placement) by indicating where you want a consonant to be voiced. This practice is still not widely used, so prepare for opposition from people who only have a look at your score and have not faced the impracticalities of singing music themselves.

If you don't separate the final consonant(s) from the rest of the syllable, singers will conventionally place them on the beginning of the following rest. Situations within a legato line or where a breath is needed are the most ambiguous ones.

A wider question opens with text placement in general when a composer indicates that a selection of text is to be distributed across several bars by the singer. When the orientational advantage of bar lines is not taken into account in the notation, this easily leads singers to miss or skip a bar, as they cannot as actively process the conductor's downbeat. Alternatively singers often inadvertently condense the spoken text towards the end of the section.

6. Range

This point has more to do with compositional choices than notational ones. I include it here because some composer colleagues may still treat neighbouring vocal ranges interchangeably, as if the notated material could readily be shifted to another voice type while still retaining its function. Not all composers seem to be very familiar with *Fachs* and vocal ranges and, when the choice presents itself, which vowels are the most economic to use in which contexts.

Certain vowels on certain pitches for a certain *Fach* can be exhausting after a while. The passaggio range of the soprano (at approximately 700 Hz) will have a distinguishable timbre due

to the technical effort involved. Exhausting a performer is a rare aesthetic, and while at times it can be a valid choice, composers don't always manage to convey to the musicians that the effect is intentional in a given composition.

This point again translates to "know your instrument" and is analogous to learning all wind instruments' fingering charts for each transposing instrument, perhaps alongside its bisbigliandi and a choice of your favourite multiphonics. The human voice will seem simple by comparison.

When using the falsetto range for long stretches of time, an indication of *falsetto* is often enough and no other symbols, such as a circle (familiar from string instrument harmonics), are necessary. Traditionally, the individual singer will make the choice of using or avoiding falsetto, according to their skill profile. The sound quality of falsetto might vary considerably from singer to singer.

As a side note: the composer has to know a particular singer's capabilities or at least acquaint themselves with the registral regions typical for a particular voice type. Even a trained singer without an obvious *passaggio* can make use of their different registers so that they sound distinct from each other. Alongside the vaning knowledge of vocal registers, the compositional choice of concentrating on one voice register (or on the fine line between registers for expressive effect) has largely been forgotten, as has the sometimes equally expressive use of the whole vocal range in a single breath.

7. Vibrato types

There are two elements that combine to create the highly individual singing of vibrati. It is necessary to stress this aspect since composers often ignore both elements and go for a generic vibrato, the choral interpretation of which will take up a large chunk of the rehearsal time valuable to everybody, especially composers. The two key elements not inferior to the core pitch are fluctuation speed and width or pitch range. A further variable – regularity vs. irregularity – exists, yet in many cases irregularity is best notated through the indication of predetermined clues, e.g. using several intermediary noteheads and glissando lines. Combinations of vibrati and glissandi can indeed open sonic realms uncharted by most composers.

The basic instructions in vibrato notation which elicit the fewest questions from singers are the following combinations:

- narrow & slow
- wide & slow
- narrow & fast
- wide & fast.

Controlling the last of these arguably requires the most concentration from the singer. As to the fluctuation speed, a tempo marking or a rhythmic approximation with small notes could be written at the start of the vibrato – one should however indicate whether the marking applies to one whole cycle or, for instance, just for the parts of the vibrato going up. An approximation of a vibrato range can be written out with the pitch extremes indicated, e.g. in a box or within brackets at the start of the passage.

narrow	narrow	wide	wide	wide
slow	fast	fast	slow	extremely slow

Examples of meticulously marked vibrato speeds, complete with pitch ranges to be interpreted from the notational context each time.

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