

The Note Reader

TRANSCRIPTION: the Preservation of Music

by Mark Gaare, originally from The Note Reader, published by MG MUSIC Company, Mesa, AZ, July 1991.

Transcription is the process by which music is extracted and preserved for future performance. If a work of music is ever to be performed by a musician other than the original composer, then some kind of transcription is necessary. Transcription in its crudest form is an individual musician listening to a recording, and then attempting to reproduce it note-for-note. The disadvantage of this type of transcription is that the only other person who can play the music will be the musician who has gone through this somewhat tedious exercise. Also, the knowledge of how to play that particular song is temporary. It may only remain in someone's memory for a short time, and then be forgotten.

Writing music in notation form is a better way to preserve music. Before the invention of sound recording in 1877 it was, of course, the only way to record music. If the music is only available in recorded form, the services of a musical transcriber can be used. He transcribes the music once only, and fixes it into a written form that is suitable for those that will be viewing or performing the music. The musical ideas can then be freely exchanged without any undue puzzle-solving.

Thanks to innovations in computer technology, automatic transcription is now available. The music can be played on any instrument equipped with MIDI capabilities, and transferred automatically into musical notation. Most electronic instruments today are equipped with MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface).

The written form of music is also an archival-quality record. Written music does not rely on any mechanical device in order to be heard or reproduced. The presentation of music in any other form (e.g. tape) is dependant on the operation of mechanical or electrical devices. All that a musician needs to reproduce written music is an instrument. Or, if one is capable of sight-singing, his or her own voice can serve as the instrument.

Music can be written in many different forms depending on who will be viewing the written music, and for what purpose. The more complex the



notation, the more accurately the music can be reproduced. But full musical notation is not always needed.

In the popular music industry, the minimum requirement is what is known as a "lead sheet." Popular music publishers usually require a lead sheet (along with a demo tape) for any song that they are considering to produce/publish. The basic contents of a lead sheet are: lyrics, chord progressions, and song structure. Fake books are merely a collection of these lead sheets. Actual musical notation is not necessary for the publisher, but may be helpful to other musicians.

For vocalists, the individual syllables of the lyrics must be placed exactly beneath their corresponding notes. This is necessary for singers to be able to accurately reproduce the vocal lines. And finally, drum tablature and guitar tablature are forms of musical notation that are specifically designed for that particular instrument.

Musical notation is the primary vehicle for transcription. Written music facilitates distribution, performance, embellishment, and even imitation. However, some people believe that sound recordings will suffice. (Sound recordings were originally called "electrical transcriptions.") These alone will not stand the test of time. Enormous amounts of music have already been lost because of outdated recording formats such as 78s, 8-tracks, and now albums. But if music is written in some form, it will continue to thrive and survive for years to come.