

# Toby Wardman

Writing sample

## Manuscript paper on steroids

Imagine that you sit down at your desk one morning with a musical project in mind. Open your manuscript paper, pick up your pen and start to scribble. (I mean it. Go ahead.)

But this is no normal manuscript paper. As you write in the opening time signature, much to your amazement, the barlines appear as if by magic. As you jot down the opening anacrusis, hey presto, crotchet rests fill out the gaps. Soon the notes are flowing from your pen, unencumbered by the need to number bars, rewrite key signatures and copy out identical passages – because your magic manuscript paper can do all the legwork for you.

So you've written your first page. Want to hear how it sounds? No problem. Just tell your magic manuscript paper to play. The orchestra strikes up in glorious stereo at your command. Sounding a bit sluggish? Scribble out 'Andante' (it will fade away before your very eyes) and replace it with 'Allegro'. Add a few accents here and there, and a rall on the last couple of bars for good measure, then play again to hear the difference. Not convinced by the harmonies in bar 14? Just grab one of the notes and move it elsewhere on the staff, or erase it altogether. Instantly the chord is transformed.

So far, so good, but here comes the *real* magic. Suppose your masterpiece includes a solo clarinet. Now you need a separate part for the clarinet player, in a different key of course. You *could* write it all out again, but why bother? With a few waves of your pen, the manuscript paper flips over and the transposed clarinet part lays itself out on the next page (complete with tempo markings, cues and tacet passages). Even more magically, if you subsequently change your mind and decide to alter a bar in the original score, the clarinet part will rewrite itself on the fly to reflect your changes.

Or suppose you decide that the top A in bar 88 might be a bit much for your soprano section. You could re-write that passage – easy when your manuscript paper can erase and rewrite to your heart's content – but maybe you like the melody at that point, and you'd rather transpose the whole thing. Normally you'd have to re-write it from scratch, but not any more – this is *magic* manuscript paper, remember? Just tell it to transpose your music down a tone, and in an instant, there it goes, key signature and all. What's more, the manuscript paper instantly scans the other parts too, and highlights in red ink any notes which now seem a bit too low (tut – did you overlook that bass E-flat in bar 17?).

Now, don't try and tell me there wouldn't be queues down the street if your local music stockist sold manuscript paper like this. Sadly, it doesn't. But it does sell the next-best thing: scorewriter software. And if anyone out there is still unconvinced of the benefits of computer-aided score writing, then boy, do I envy you – because, believe me, you have a treat in store.

Wikipedia, the fount of all online wisdom, calmly reports that "a scorewriter is to music notation what a word processor is to written text". That's true enough, in its rather austere way, but I prefer a different analogy. A good music notation program is to manuscript paper what pen-and-ink is to chisel-and-mortar. Within the confines of a computer window lives your very own, all-singing, all-dancing *manuscript paper on steroids*.

The market leader in scorewriter software is a program called Sibelius. (Don't ask me why; I don't have a clue. Rumour has it that the name is a pun on the inventors' surname – they're called Ben and Jonathan Finn – though it strikes me as equally likely that they picked it just because it sounds pretty futuristic.) Before Sibelius, there were others, like Finale and Encore, both of which were OK in their own time but have been nigh-on eclipsed by the newcomer.

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Anyone who sets out to design a computer program for musicians is automatically facing an uphill struggle. The thing is, musicians aren't exactly renowned for their technological know-how. But the point of Sibelius is that *you don't need any*. This becomes obvious as soon as you load up the program: what appears on your screen is not a frightening array of toolbars and icons, but simply a beautifully-rendered blank sheet of paper set against a blue marble backdrop.

And from there on in, you need never look back. It's intuitive. Want a crotchet? Click. A minim? Click. A rehearsal mark? Click. Copy a passage – click – and transpose it up a third – click – and type some lyrics. Play back your score, or just a couple of instruments, to see how it sounds. Add guitar chord symbols, tab, or avant-garde notation, all with just a few more clicks of the mouse.

Another bonus is the manual – once again, written by musicians, for musicians. Most computer programs these days come with a flimsy flyer printed in 28 languages and a dismissive instruction to “consult the online documentation”. Not this one. Sibelius comes with a big, weighty book, packed full of musical examples, written in a gorgeously chatty style, and all, reassuringly, in English.

Perhaps you're not quite convinced. Let me make one more point. The point about computer scorewriting is not to glorify the mundane aspects of music-writing. The point is to get those mundane aspects out of the way, to make room for your own creativity. Nobody *really* wants to write out the same lyrics six times for a six-part motet, or rewrite an entire score because the sopranos are wobbling on the top note.

And here we come to a point of disagreement among computer-using musicians. At what point in the composing – or arranging – process does one make the transition from instrument to screen? Of course, it's entirely up to you, but for what it's worth, here's my answer: the sooner, the better. Just as there are some romantics who prefer to write their entire essay by hand (or chisel) before they type it up, so there are some who prefer to sit at the keyboard (the thing with black and white keys, I mean, not Qwerty) and hash out every detail of their musical masterpiece before they reach for the mouse (the thing with a wire and buttons, I mean, not Mickey).

I am not one of those people. I want Sibelius in from the start. Far from stifling my creativity, I find it enhances it.

Don't get me wrong; computers are not a cure-all solution to anything. Despite appearances, even John Rutter needs the occasional injection of human creativity in his work. And when they invent that magic manuscript paper, believe me, I'll be first in the queue. Until then, thank God for Sibelius.

Now if you'll excuse me, my copy deadline is approaching and my chisel is getting a bit blunt. Time to look into a replacement...