

For SCL's SCORE

Bit by Bit – Remembering the Details

**By
Michael Isaacson**

“Putting it together, bit by bit... art isn't easy”
Stephen Sondheim's lyric from *Sunday in the Park with George*

Those of us who create electric music at the keyboard are certainly aware that inputting the notes is only the beginning of creating the sound approximation that we hear in our heads. Every aspect of the sound's envelope, sample color, stylistic performance, and dynamic arch needs minute scrutiny and “tweaking” in the editing process that attends every phrase that is played. We've been doing this for so long now that we assume every musician assumes the same meticulousness that we practice in our own realizations.

However, those of us who are also lucky enough to still stand in front of an acoustic orchestra sometimes forget that we are unbelievably fortunate to have highly skilled (and sometimes seer-like) musicians in Los Angeles who can not only instantly perform what they read on the page but sometimes add nuances that aren't even included there.

This is not so in the real world. If you have aspirations of having your music enjoy considered performances, less hurried read-throughs and unfrenzied takes outside the studios, you must remember that “heaven is in the details”. In concert situations, orchestral musicians are trained to read what is actually on the page... nothing more, nothing less.

So, if you've received an acoustic performance by “civilians” who've played your work in a fashion less than you had hoped for, here's an inventory check list for self-editing and proofing before you send off your scores for your next acoustic (or studio) performance. Thinking about these ‘bit by bits will make all your performances more artful and more representative of your best creativity.

1. Do you consistently include metronome markings and tempo expression marks through the whole piece at important changes as well as for the opening tempo?
2. Do you consistently include bowings, pedaling, legato, marcato, and staccato indications?
3. Do you consistently include crescendi, decrescendi, accelerandi, ritardandi, or rallentandi markings?
4. Do you consistently include dynamics, sforzandi, sfortepiani, subito, and repeat variation dynamics in all parts?
5. Aside from louder-softer, slower-faster markings, do you offer expression markings like “playfully”, “flamboyantly”, or “bitter sweetly” et al. Musicians really do glance at these indications for the fullest picture.

Not seeing enough of these markings in film scores, I understand the time pressures of the composer, the reticence of the orchestrator to assume compositional prerogatives in realizing a sketch, or simply the over reliance on session players to assume creative decisions beyond their performance responsibilities. However, these “bit by bits” are essential if you work with more musicians than yourself. Remember these details and put your scores together completely and artfully.

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