Music Braille

Introduction to Music Braille

Kathleen Cantrell, Virtual Conference, Fall 2020

NATIONAL BRAILLE ASSOCIATION
95 Allens Creek Road, Building 1, Suite 202, Rochester, NY 14618

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Tuning Up

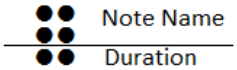
Print music notation is visual in nature, with specific symbols, shapes and graphic images instructing us which notes to play, how long to play them, and how loud or soft, gentle or forceful, calmly or aggressively to play them. While there is some text involved, much of the information is conveyed graphically, in multiple layers, both vertically and horizontally. This presents no small challenge to the transcription of music into braille.

There have been attempts to emboss the graphic music as it is. But think of embossed text – it's quite difficult to tell the difference between an embossed letter R and letter B. Imagine how much more difficult it would be to tell the difference between an 8th note G on the treble clef and a 16th note B in embossed graphic notation.

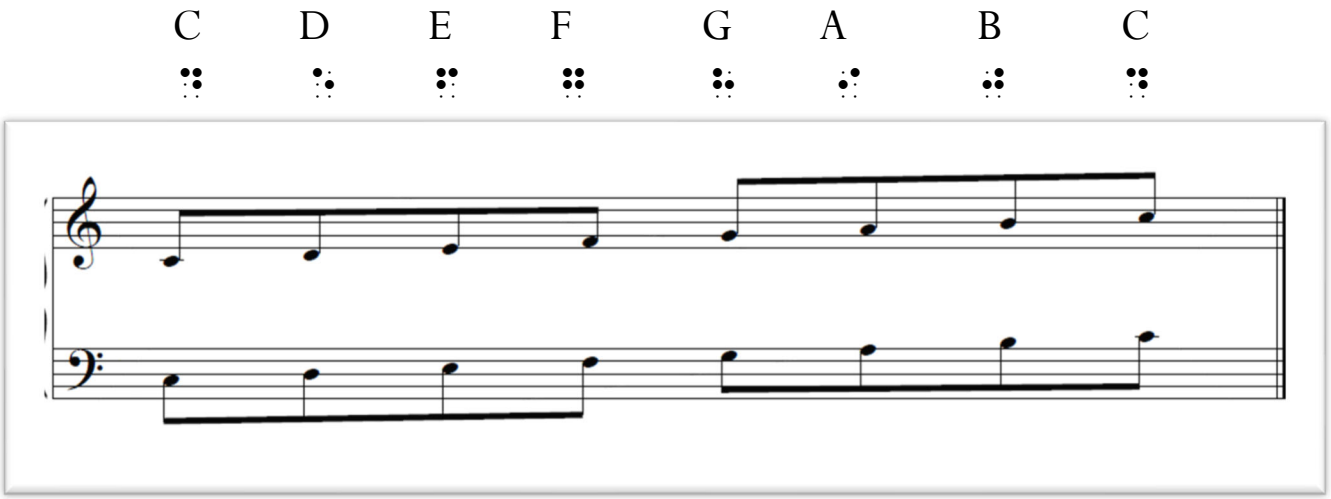
So to more clearly transcribe music into braille, we have to think more literally, descriptively, horizontally and less graphically than what we see on the page. Louis Braille knew this; as an organist himself, he developed the system of braille music notation right alongside the literary code.

Note Names and Shapes

There are two pieces of information in a single braille cell when representing the notes. The **upper two-thirds** of the cell determines the name of the note and the **lower third** determines the duration.



First let's look at the note names:

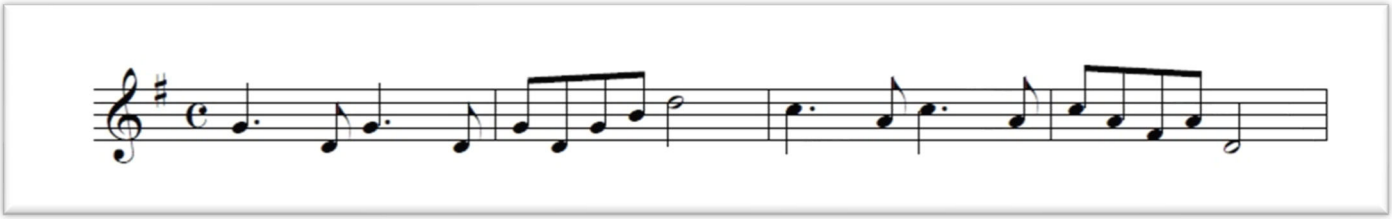


Don't be surprised that the notes names do not correspond to their literary counterparts. In France, the notes are not called by alphabetic names but by their solfége syllables: **Do (or Ut) Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti (or Si) Do.** If you think of **C** as **Do**, it's easier to grasp the starting pitch and then not relate the notes to actual letters.

After practicing the scale a few times, let's practice a melody:

The upper two thirds of the cell tell us the note name.

Eine kleine Nachtmusik, main melody, W.A. Mozart



Durations

The **lower third** of the cell tells us the duration of the note.

The notes we just transcribed, having no dots in the lower third of the cell, are **eighth notes**.

Note: Eighth notes can be printed singly with a flag or as multiple eighth notes joined with a beam. In braille the beams are generally ignored. The organization and grouping will usually be inferred by the context and meter.

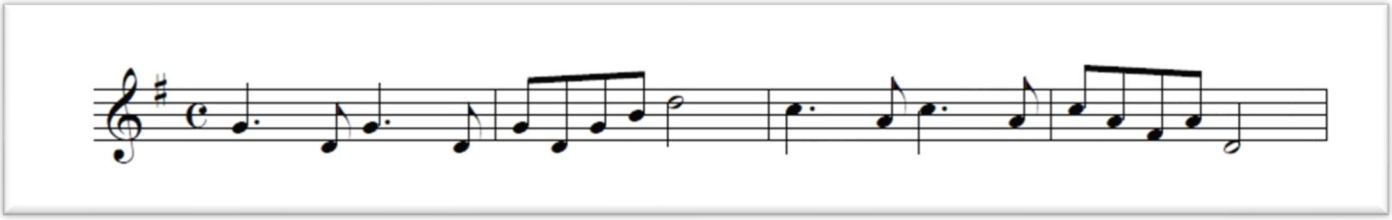
The lower third of the cell tells us the duration.

Eighth Note			128th Note	
Quarter Note			64th Note	
Half Note			32nd Note	
Whole Note			16th Note	

In print, bar lines separate and organize the music into measures. In braille, we simply use a blank space to show the measure division.

Let's do that Mozart again, this time with true note values, organizing the music into measures.

A dot after a note is represented by a dot 3, directly after the note.



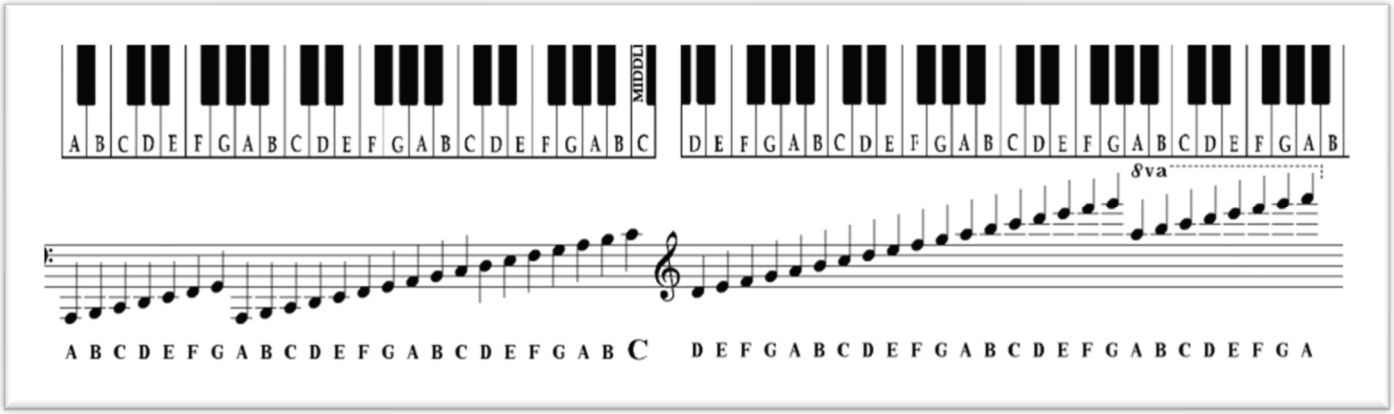
Rests

Eighth rest			128th rest	
Quarter rest			64th rest	
Half rest			32nd rest	
Whole rest			16th rest	

First Movement

Octave Indicators

We've learned how to form the specific notes and their note values, but how do we tell the reader exactly which C quarter note they should play? In print, staves and clefs are used to convey this information.



↑ Middle C

While we have braille symbols for clef signs, we generally do not use them in music transcriptions. (There are exceptions, of course, as with everything! But for now, we'll consider them omitted.)

Instead of clef signs, we use octave indicators to show exactly which pitches we are representing.

A few things to remember:

- **The octave spans from C-B**
- **There are 7 octaves, the lowest being octave 1. The octave beginning on Middle C is octave 4.**
- **Nothing will separate the octave indicator and the note to which it applies.**

1st 2nd 3rd 4th 5th 6th 7th

↑ **Middle C**

Lowest A and B:

Sub octave

Highest C:

Super octave

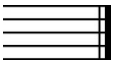
Octave Indicator Rules

- Every first note of a line **must** have an octave indicator.
- Read the interval to determine if an indicator is needed before the 2nd note.
- Three rules to follow:
  - An interval of a **2nd or 3rd** does not require an octave indicator.
  - An interval of a **6th or greater** requires an octave indicator.
  - An interval of a **4th or 5th** requires an octave indicator **IF** the 2nd note moves to a *different octave*.

Never mark a second or third;
Always mark a sixth or more;
Fourth or Fifth
Only if
It should leave the octave.

Side Note: "This is a nonfacsimile transcription" is the first sentence on most Transcriber's Notes pages. We are not attempting to recreate exactly what is shown in print – that would be more like creating a tactile graphic of the music. Rather, we are interpreting the symbols the best we can and describing them in the notation available to us. (Of course, there are exceptions! When we are transcribing music for a teacher who reads braille, it would be more important to attempt a closer "facsimile" transcription – we would then include clef signs and 8va indicators – items the student would see in the print copy.)

Endings

- Double Bar Line 
- Sectional Double Bar Line 

Beginnings

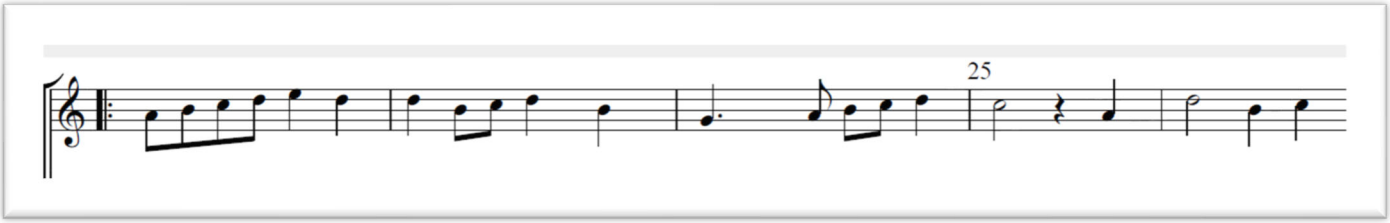
- Measure Numbers are given at the left margin, cell 1.
- A pick-up measure is numbered 0.

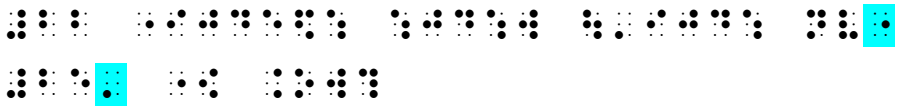
Single-Line Format

Music for a single instrument is transcribed in **"Single-Line Format."** Longer melodies are divided into segments, each around 8-12 measures long, depending on the complexity of the measures. Another gauge is about 2-3 braille lines for each segment. Each segment begins with the measure number in cell 1, a blank space, then the first note or element of the measure. All runovers are indented to cell 3.

Many pieces for Band or Orchestra have rehearsal letters or numbers printed in the music. These must always be the start of a new segment.

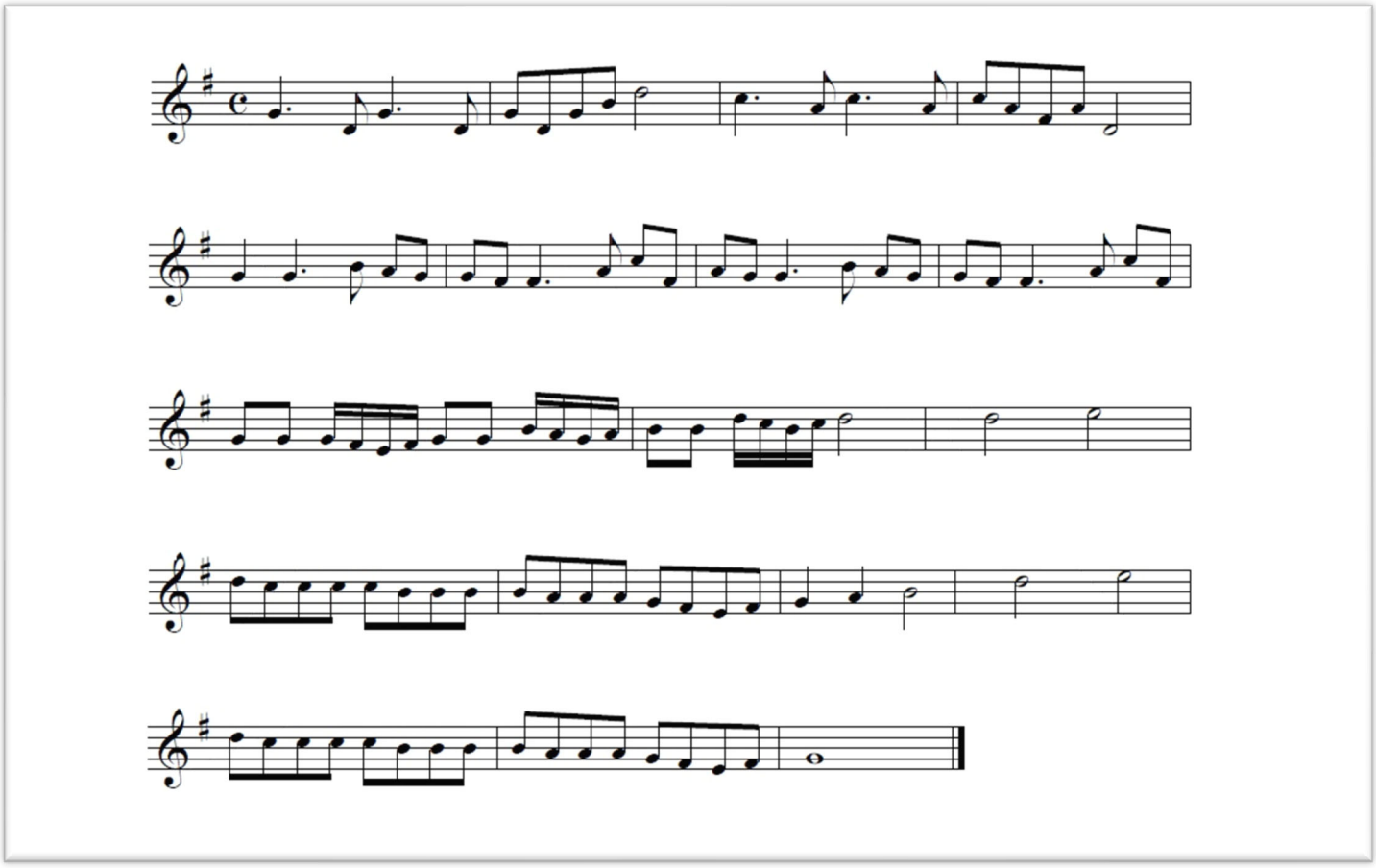
If there are no rehearsal numbers, it's important to sing or play through the melody to determine the best places to divide the segments. Phrase endings or major changes in the music are often good places to place a division. Sometimes the phrase ends and a new phrase begins in the middle of a measure. In this case, place a music hyphen, dot 5, after the final note in the first segment to show that the measure will continue. The following segment's measure number is followed by a dot 3 to indicate that this is a continuation of the measure.



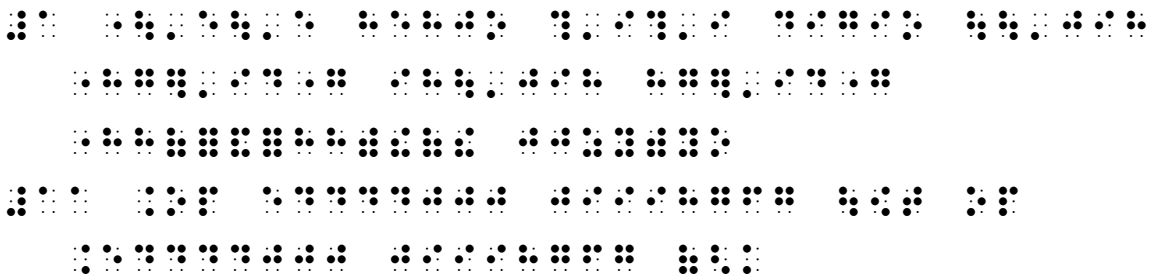


It’s always important to keep in mind how braille music is used. A braille music reader memorizes much of the music very quickly so organizing it in a logical manner is crucial to making the music accessible.

Let's look at our Mozart melody once again.



1) Number the measures.
2) Decide where it should be divided into segments. (Reminder: segments are usually 8-12 measures long in music such as this.)
3) Determine where octave indicators will be needed.



Proofreading Checklist:

Check Note Names

Check Note Values

Check Octave Indicators

Second Movement

Accidentals

Accidentals precede the notes to which they apply, as in print. When an octave indicator is needed, the order of symbols is **Accidental – Octave Indicator – Note**.

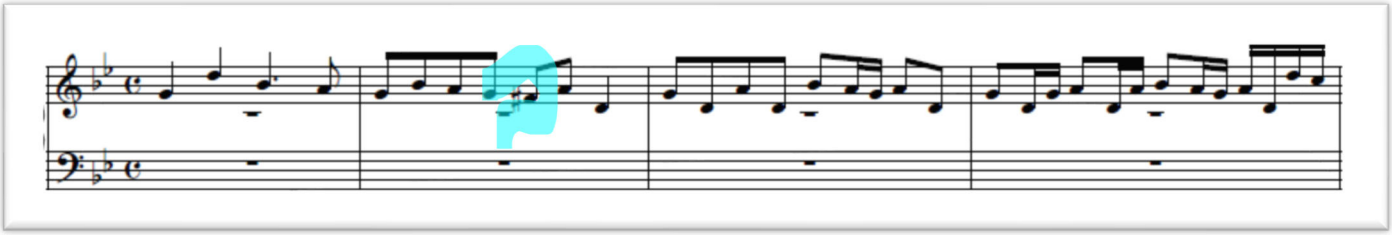
Sharp

Flat

Natural

Double Sharp/Double Flat

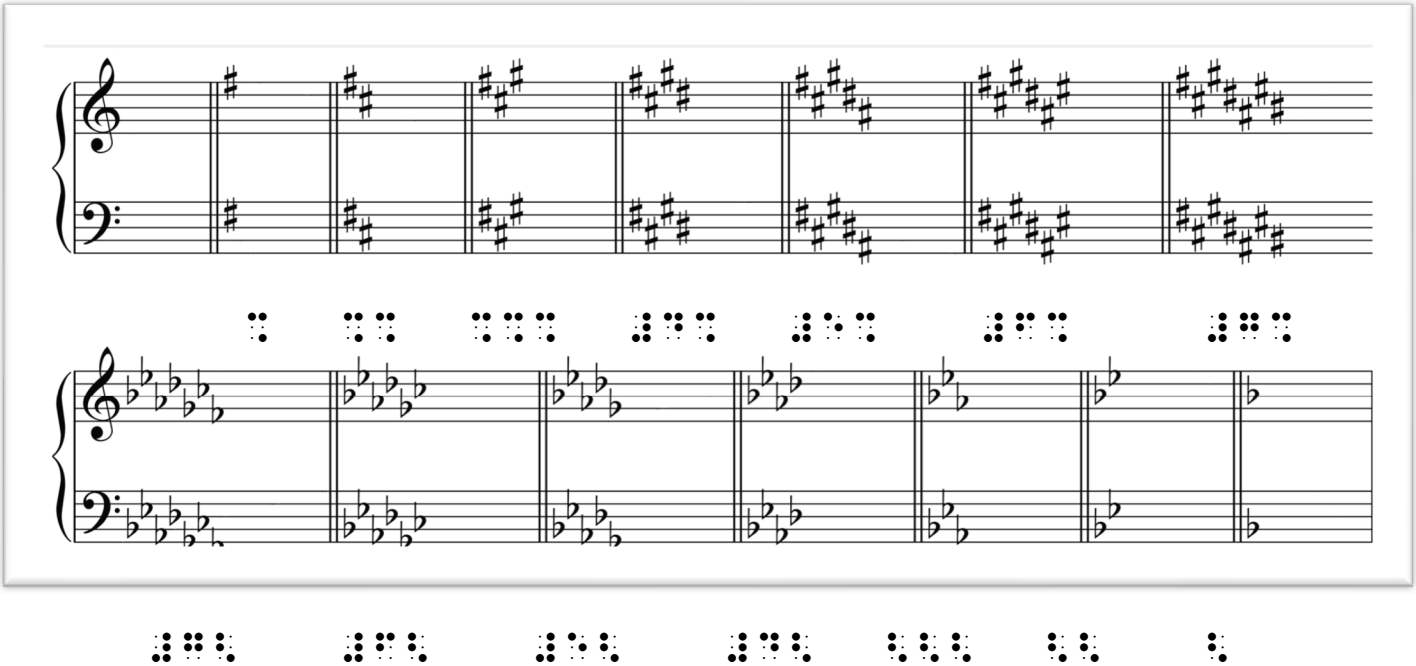
Order of Symbols:
Accidental
Octave Indicator
Note



Key and Time Signatures

The key and time signatures are formed together and centered above the first line of music. Unlike in print, where the time signature is stated once but the key signature is given on each line, both elements are only given at the start of the music in braille.

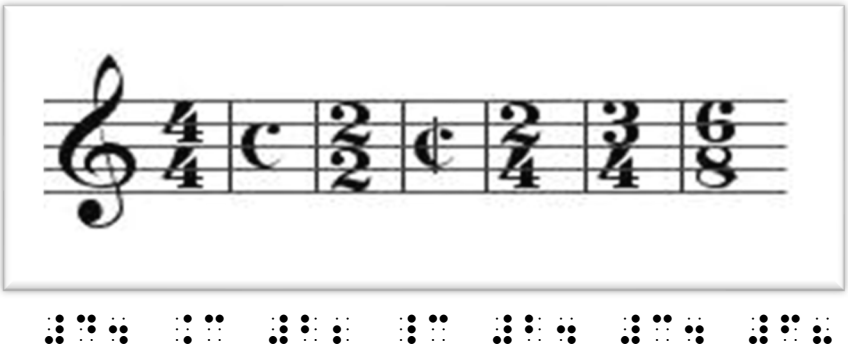
Key Signatures



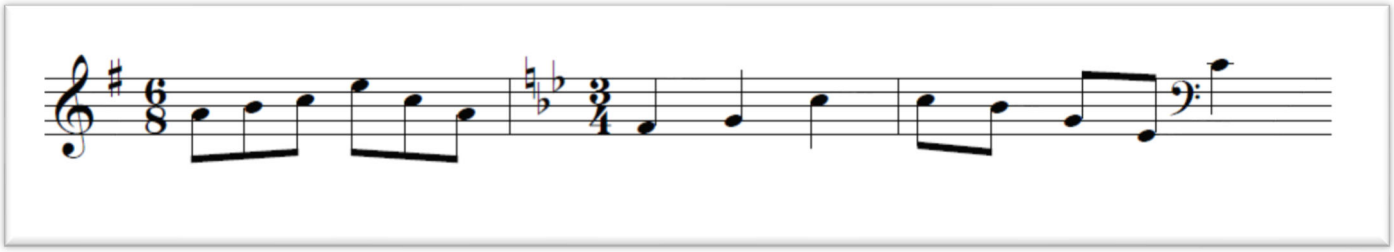
As you can see, in braille the specific sharps and flats are not indicated, as in print. The musician must memorize the order.

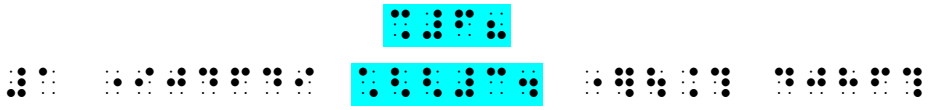
Time Signatures

Numeric signatures are brailled not as fractions but as numeric combinations with the numerator in the upper part of the cell and the denominator in the lower part of the cell.



When we transcribe the signatures, we braille them as a unit – key signature first, followed by the time signature, with no space in between.





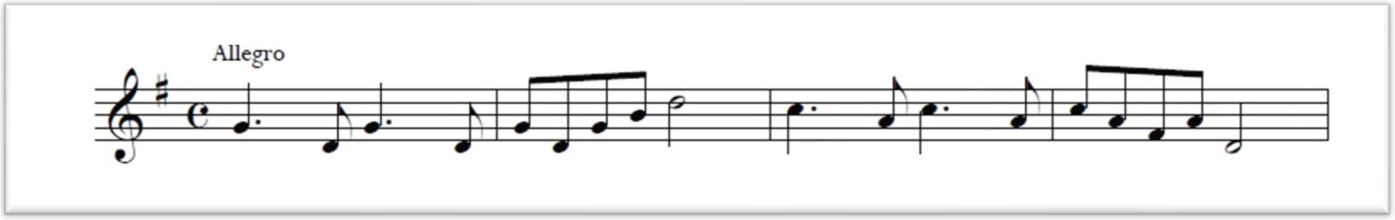
Third Movement

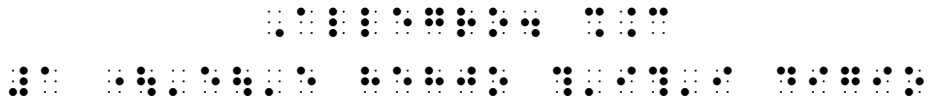
Music Heading

The music heading consists of the Tempo Marking, Metronome Marking, if present, Key Signature, and the Time Signature.

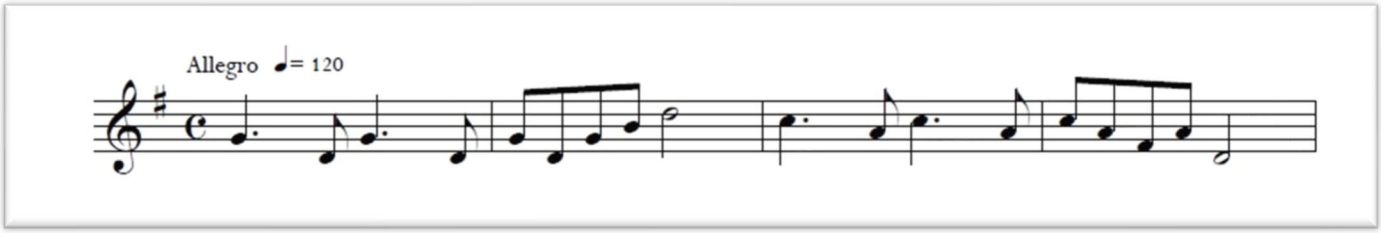
The heading is centered above the first line of music, with no intervening blank line.

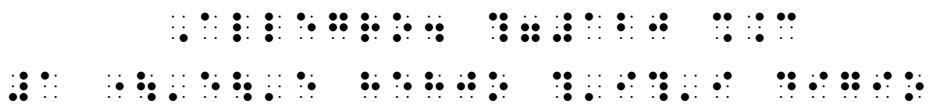
The tempo marking is transcribed in uncontracted braille and followed by a literary period, even if one does not appear in print. Capitalization follows print.



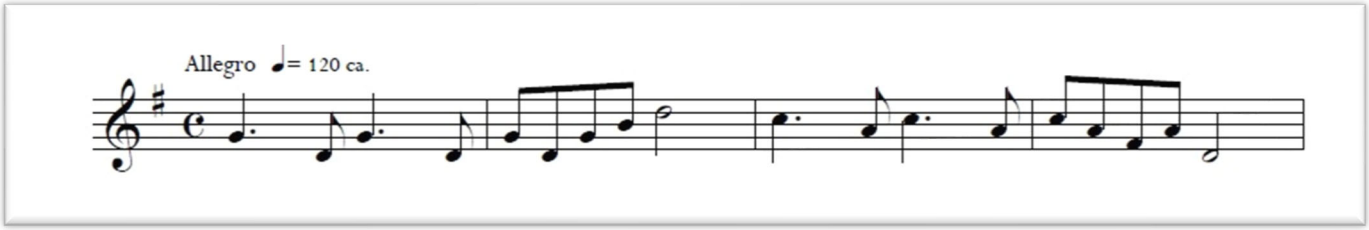


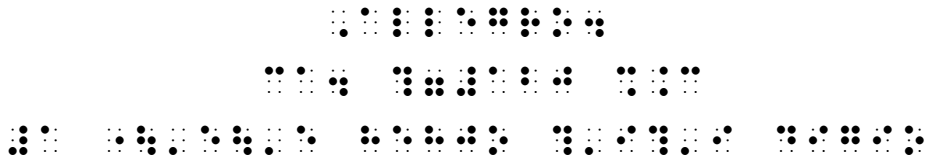
Metronome markings vary in print. We transcribe the note value as the note C, followed by the dropped G equal sign and the number.





When the print shows “circa” or the abbreviation “ca.”, whether it appears before or after the metronome marking, we braille the indication before the MM.





The **Music Heading** consists of the

Tempo Marking
(in uncontracted braille) followed by a period;
the **Metronome Marking**
(if shown in print);
the **Key and Time Signatures**.

Articulations

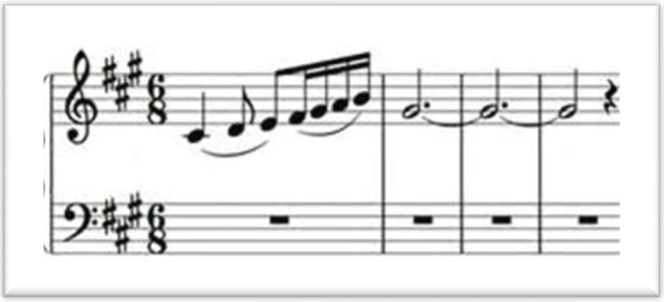
Slurs and Ties

In print, the slur and the tie look identical. Context informs us which one is being employed. In braille we have separate symbols for the two.

Slur ⠐⠐

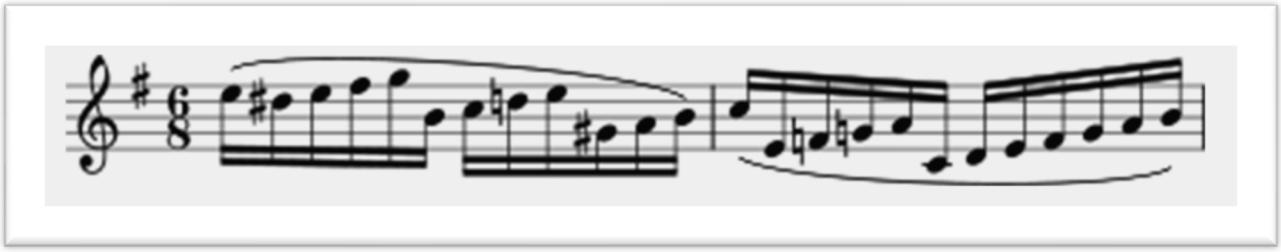
Tie ⠐⠐⠐⠐

The slur and the tie are brailled in between the notes which they connect.



The “single” slur is used in passages with 4 or fewer notes slurred together. If there are 5 or more, we have two options.

- Double Slur – place two single slurs after the first note of the passage and a single slur before the last note of the passage.
- Bracket Slur – place the opening Bracket before the first note and the closing Bracket after the last note.



OR

Word Expressions, Abbreviations, and Letters

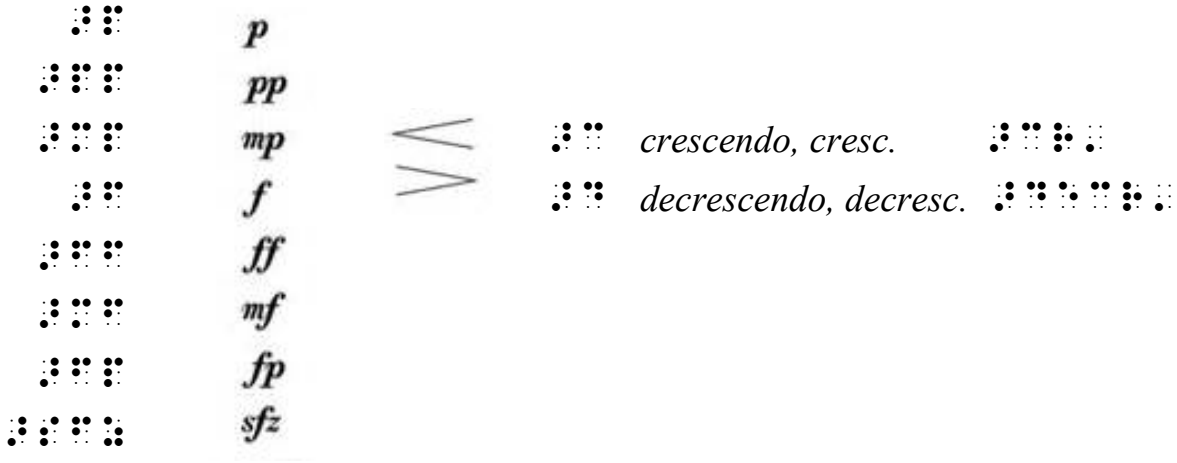
The Word Sign

Print music is not only comprised of graphic symbols representing notes. We have literary markings and text to deal with as well.

The word sign is the Braille symbol that indicates what follows is literary and not music: ⠸

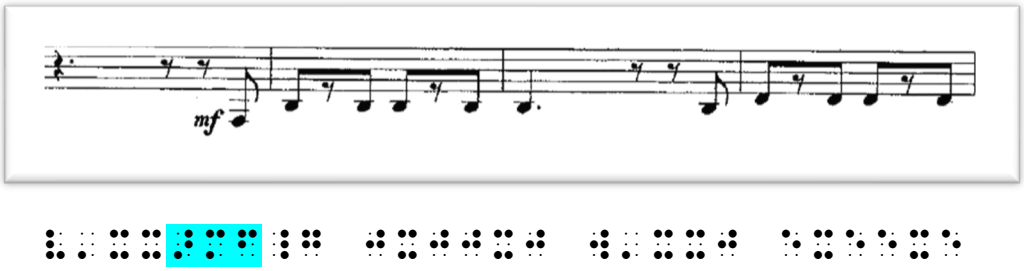
We use this in front of any text element within the music line.

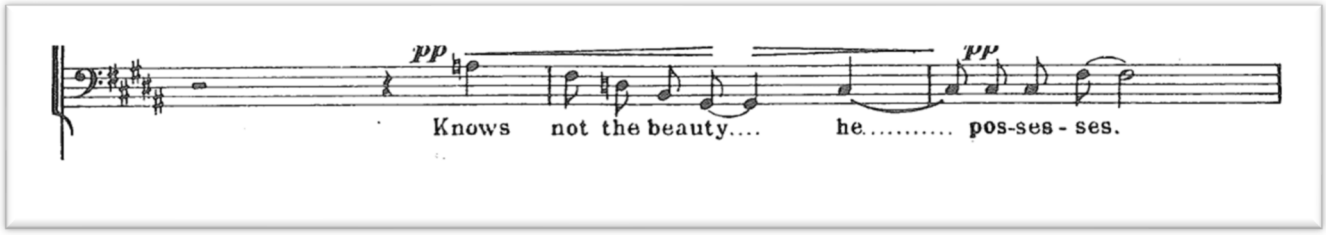
Note: The word sign is not used with lyrics in vocal music.

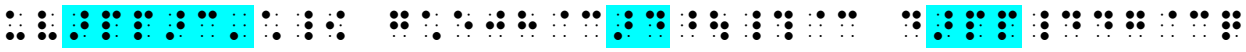


The switch back to Music Braille is indicated by:

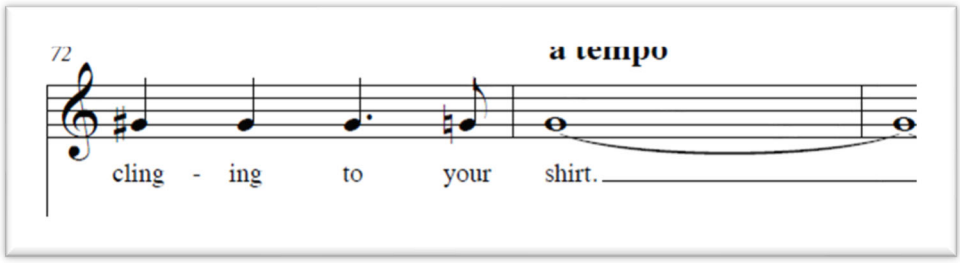
- The octave indicator which **MUST** precede the next note;
- A dot 3 placed after the word or abbreviation – used when the following cell contains left hand dots (except when the following sign is another word sign)

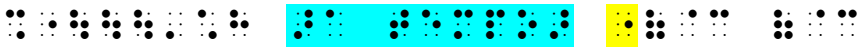


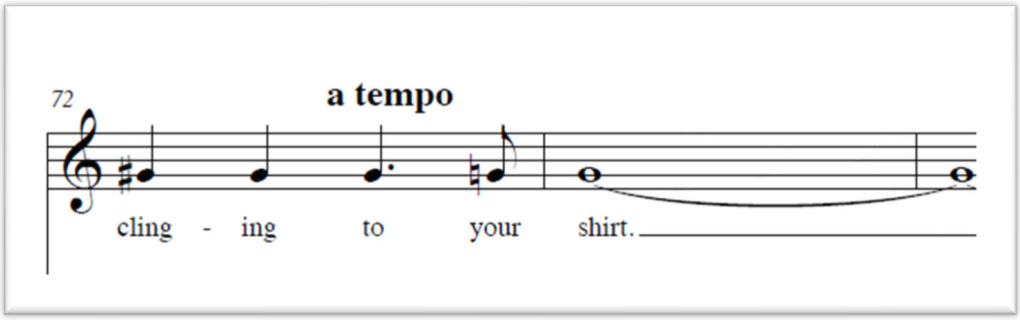




A longer word expression – comprised of two or more words or abbreviations – is completely enclosed in word signs, preceded and followed by blank spaces.







Symbols of Expression

Aside from notes and word and letter expressions, we have a plethora of symbols instructing us how to play particular notes. In print, many of these are shown above or below the notes. In braille, we must precede the note or follow it.

Symbols which come before the note:

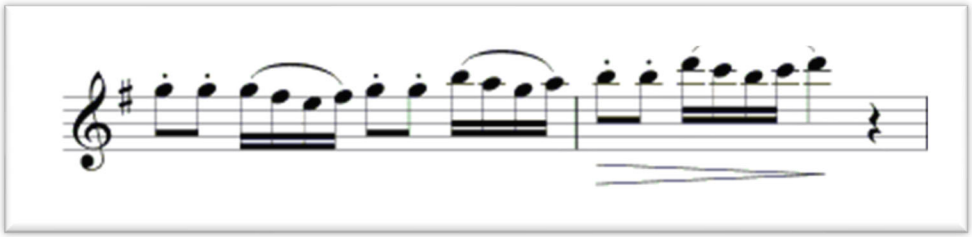
Dot above or below a note (staccato)

Pear-shaped dot above or below a note (staccatissimo)

Dot and short line above or below note (mezzo-staccato)

Short line above or below a note (agogic accent or tenuto)

Thin converging horizontal wedge (accent)



Symbols which follow the note:

Fermata (hold or pause):

over or under a note

Breath or break mark (a)

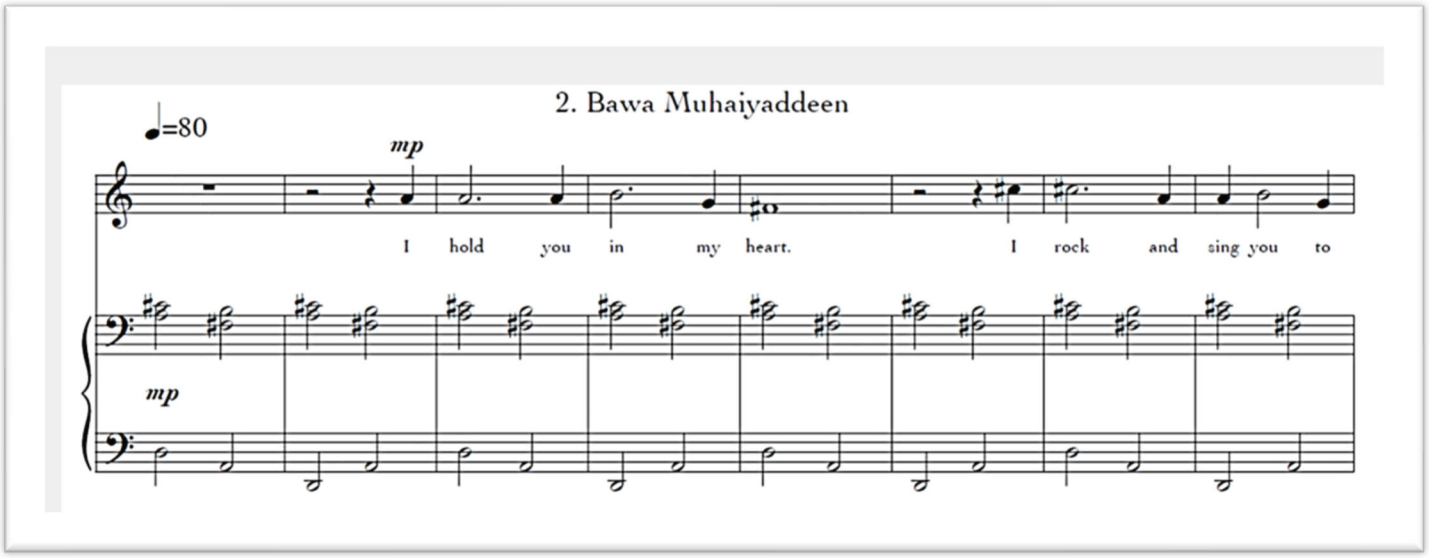
(b)

Fourth Movement

Vocal Music

In print we see three main elements in a vocal piece:

- Vocal Music
- Words
- Piano Accompaniment

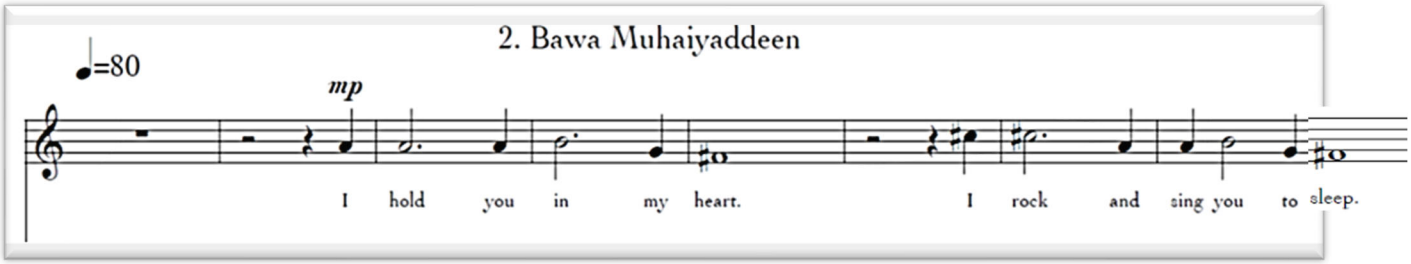


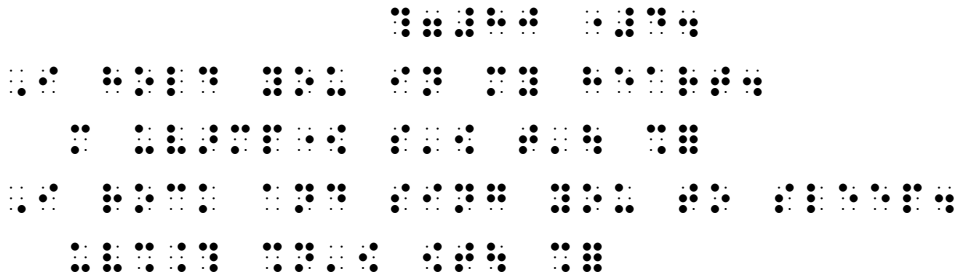
From "Sufi Songs" by Jay C. Batzner, © 2014

When transcribing music for a singer, we only need to be concerned with the words and the vocalist's music.

We use a "Line-by-Line" format, employing a two-line parallel with the text on the first line and the music that corresponds to that text directly below that, indented to cell 3. Runovers are indented to cell 5. (You may have a runover of the text OR the music. It's advised not to do both in the same parallel.)

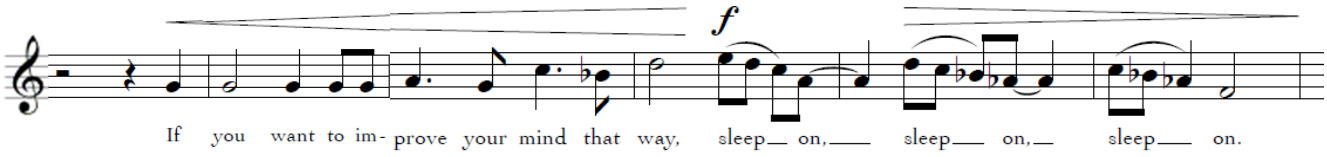
In print, the text is most frequently printed below the vocal music, in between the staves. In braille, we place the text, uncontracted, on the first line of the parallel.

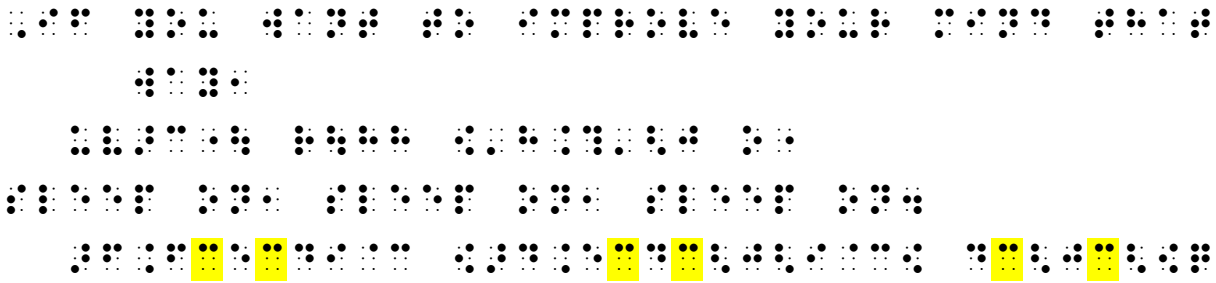




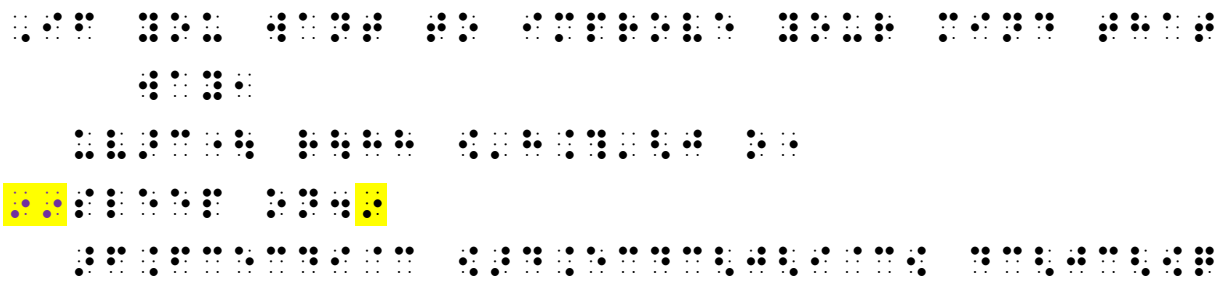
Note that the music is not aligned with the text above it. At first, this seems difficult and contrary to what we expect the music to "look" like. However, the singer understands that in this format each syllable receives one note.

When syllables are carried over more than one note, we use slurs in the music to show the placement of each syllable.

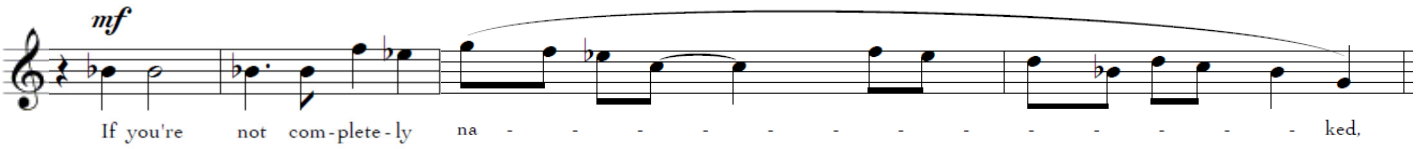


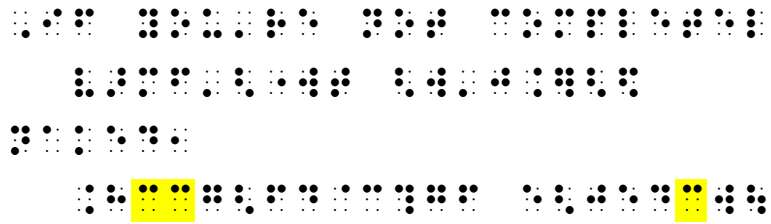


The repetition of text can be shown by enclosing the repeated text in dots 35. If the text repeats twice (it's sung a total of three times), begin the grouping with dots 35, 35.



If a syllable is carried over 5 or more notes, we must use the double slur.





Coda

Resources used for this presentation

- DeGarmo, Mary. *Introduction to Braille Music Transcription*, 2nd ed. NLS, 2005. Currently being revised for UEB and the 2015 Music Code.
- *Music Braille Code, 2015*, BANA edition

  Lehmann, Heidi. *Music Braille 101*, National Braille Association Publication; Previous NBA Music Session Presentation