The Write Stuff

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Move from Ideas to Notes with Software

■ The opening sequence to the Sibelius 5 demo features a quote from the *San Francisco Chronicle* that boldly claims, "If Mozart had this, we'd have 10 times the symphonies we have."

A lofty claim, indeed, but one that is not without its merits, for today's generation of music notation software can do much to aid musicians and composers. Whether you are interested in producing a basic lead sheet for a song you've just written, or want to score a magnum opus for the New York Philharmonic, each of the programs can save you much blood, sweat, and tears, letting you focus on what matters most: the music.

Features

The basics of each program, Encore 5, Finale 2009, Notion 2.0, and Sibelius 5, are pretty much the same. What differs between each is the level of sophistication that each one brings to the task. Before notation is entered, for example, all programs except Encore provide score templates that really take the drudgery out of setting up staves and staves of music on lined paper with a pencil. Finale and Notion, for example, feature a number of ensemble types such as brass quintet or string orchestra, and are customizable depending on the composer's needs.

But it is here, as in so many other small yet significant ways, that Sibelius excels over its counterparts. All told, Sibelius offers more than 60 predefined manuscript blanks, fewer than Finale but featuring more esoteric instrument combinations like handbell and salsa groups, and even film orchestra manuscript paper designed by Alf Clausen, composer for *The Simpsons*.

Entering/Editing Notes

Once a template has been chosen, the basic issue of how to enter notes into a score has to be confronted. All four programs allow you to do that manually using a computer, either by pointing and clicking the mouse on the stave or by entering the note's letter on the keyboard. Here, the programs vary in degrees of user friendliness. Encore, for example, is quirky when it comes

to editing, sometimes stubbornly refusing to delete mistakenly entered items. Along with Notion, it also only allows users to go back to the version of the piece prior to entering the wrong note, while the other programs allow composers to retrace their steps back to a convenient restarting place.

MIDI Compatibility

All four programs permit input from a MIDI instrument. This can be done in real time, where the notes are scored as you play them, or in step time, where you enter notes one at a time. It is in this area that Finale scores several bonus points over its competition with its Hyperscribe (to add single lines over existing written music) or MicNotator (for brass or woodwind) features, which allow music to be recorded via a microphone. The performance is automatically transcribed and can then be edited manually in Simple Note Entry mode to erase and change any mistakes.

Importing

All except Notion also allow music to be scanned in or imported from other programs such as Rhapsody, ideal for choir directors or leaders of small combos or community bands who want to rearrange a piece of music for the instruments at their disposal. Once again, however, Sibelius goes the extra yard in this area with its ability to convert guitar tab into music notation, a feature that many guitarists will find tremendously helpful.

Playback

Once your masterpiece is complete, playback in all four programs is a relatively simple affair. All programs also allow MIDI playback, but when it comes to playback on your computer, Encore lags behind the competition. Sibelius, for example, boasts a library of 140 pitched and 900 percussion instrument sounds with its Kontakt Player 2 sampler, which can be expanded through the Sibelius website, while Finale features 300 samples in its Garritan Personal Orchestra sound library. For sheer class, however, Notion takes the honors in this department, boasting a fully integrated orchestral library played by the London Symphony Orchestra and recorded at London's famed Abbey Road studios.

Exporting

When it comes to exporting Sibelius can do something that none of the other programs can: burn a composition directly to CD, where it will sound exactly the way you want it to. Sibelius will also save your piece as an MP3, AIFF, or WAV file, so you can easily post a file to the web or attach it to an e-mail. All the other programs allow for saving as Music XML or MIDI files, with only Notion offering the option of saving as a WAV file.

Complexity/Pricing

Beyond the basic levels of inputting and saving, Sibelius continues to go the extra yard. To begin with, it is the only program that allows storage of musical snippets. Its Ideas feature essentially functions as a notebook that allows the user to store a musical fragment in the ideas hub, then tag it for future reference to come back to it later and integrate it to another piece being worked on. Then there is a feature, matched only by Notion, which identifies hard or impossible-to-hit notes, ideal for those composing for instruments that they don't play. Ranges for more than 400 instruments are built into the program, allowing composers to stretch well beyond the limits of their imaginations. Finally, there is Sibelius's ability to move around a large and complex score quickly and easily thanks to a zoom feature and the ability

to grab pages and move them with the mouse. Only Finale, with its multiple viewing options, comes close.

The fact that Sibelius outdistances the pack should come as no surprise, as its developer is Avid, the leader in video editing software and the creator of ProTools, the industry standard for audio engineering. But therein lies its only flaw: its professional appeal results in a reference manual the size of the *King James Bible*. Sibelius 5 does appear daunting out of the box to the inexperienced user, but with time and persistence, the rewards that it offers are great.

Ultimately, the decision to purchase one of these programs rests with your finances, needs, and abilities. In fact, several of the software producers offer limited and less expensive packages that would appeal to the budget conscious or those who just want to dabble in this area of music making. Finale, for example, makes several programs ranging in price from $199 for Allegro, to $99.95 for PrintMusic, and $49.95 for Songwriter, all of which differ in levels of functionality and convenience. Gvox also makes a basic version of Encore, MusicTime Deluxe, which retails at $119, while Sibelius First, a simpler version of Sibelius 5, is on the market at $129. But no matter what your situation or level of interest, investing in one of these programs is worthwhile simply because it gives you a different perspective on the way music can be composed, arranged, and performed.

	Encore	Sibelius 5	Finale	Notion
SLOGAN:	The Musician's Choice for Publishing and Composing	The Fastest, Smartest, Easiest Way to Write Music	Music Begins with Finale	Realize Music
IDEAL FOR:	Choir Directors, Band Leaders, and Arrangers	The Next Beethoven	Vocalists, Woodwind and Brass Instrumentalists	Proficient Players Looking for Easy Ways to Notate Their Music
PROS:	Basic, Easy-to-Use Interface	Plenty of Useful Bells and Whistles	Hyperscribe/ Micronotator Feature	Sound Library
CONS:	Quirky Editing	Steep Learning Curve	Limited Ways to Save Files	Does Not Import Scanned Files
MSRP:	$400	$599	$600	$699