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# RANGES AND KEY SELECTION

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## RANGES

Any composer or arranger who consistently forces players into the absolute top or bottom of their ranges is a fool (with the exception of keyboards or plucked instruments). The possibility of failing to hit the note always creates great apprehension in a player no matter how proficient he or she is. On exposed instruments the possibility becomes even deadlier, especially during solo passages.

Each instrument has its own limitations. The lowest note on a violin is G, and it is probably the easiest note to play. A saxophone's lowest note, however, is a low B-flat, and it is not easy to play. Extremely high notes for strings are weak and, for less-than-top-notch players, will probably be out of tune. Talk to instrumentalists and learn the strengths and weaknesses of their instruments.

A very funny story made the rounds of the Hollywood studio scene some time ago. At a film-scoring session at one of the major studios the producer asked the composer-conductor to have the violins play a certain passage one octave higher. The composer relayed this request to the violins.

–“I'm afraid we can't do that,” said the concertmaster.

–“Why not?” asked the composer.

–“It's impossible; it'll take us out of range,” replied the concertmaster.

–“Well, play it up a half-octave,” answered the composer.

Sad, but true. As they say, it's not what you know but *who* you know in Tinsel Town.

Dynamics play an important part in the ranges that certain instruments can handle. A high C for a trumpet marked “pianissimo” is not only absurd but impossible to execute. Likewise, a low C on the flute marked “fortissimo” will elicit nothing but air. Common sense will lead you to the correct solutions in these areas. Again, if in doubt, just speak to the player.

I will refrain from including a range chart. Many are readily available and can be found in books on orchestration. Often in writing music for school publications, I provide optional notes for the first trumpets. If I cannot avoid a high note for the first clarinets, I divide them, with instructions for the top part to be played by one or two players.

Example # 4

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled "Brass" and contains a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents (^) and a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom staff is labeled "Synth. Brass" and contains a simpler pattern of eighth notes with accents (^) and a triplet of eighth notes, mirroring the structure of the brass part but with fewer notes.

Again, your synth part should support the busier part that the brass is playing.

To achieve the classic synth effect of the filter envelope opening, you can specify what you need in a couple of ways: you can use crescendo and diminuendo markings, or you can describe the sound of the filter opening—or both.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The top staff has a treble clef and the bottom staff has a bass clef. Both staves contain a single note with a long horizontal line above it, indicating a sustained sound. The top staff has dynamic markings: *pp* (pianissimo) followed by a wedge-shaped crescendo leading to *mf* (mezzo-forte), which is then followed by a wedge-shaped diminuendo leading to *pp*. The bottom staff has a similar dynamic marking: *pp* followed by a wedge-shaped crescendo leading to *mf*.

Open filter envelope on each attack.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The top staff has a treble clef and the bottom staff has a bass clef. Both staves contain a series of four chords. The first two chords have a wedge-shaped filter envelope marking above them, indicating an opening filter envelope on each attack. The chords are: C major (C4, E4, G4), C major (C4, E4, G4), F major (F4, A4, C5), and C major (C4, E4, G4).

When writing for a huge sound, like a big orchestral hit, be aware that the sound very often will be composed of several octaves and intervals. Such a sound will usually work best as a single note; if you write it as a chord, you will get some very thick harmonies, which you probably won't want.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The top staff has a treble clef and the bottom staff has a bass clef. The top staff contains a single note with an accent (^) and a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo). The note is in the treble clef. The bottom staff is empty.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The top staff has a treble clef and the bottom staff has a bass clef. The top staff contains a chord with an accent (^) and a dynamic marking of *ff*. The chord consists of notes in both the treble and bass clefs. The bottom staff contains a single note with an accent (^) and a dynamic marking of *ff*.