Transcription and Analysis Guidance Notes

Introduction
Why bother at all? So that we can talk and write about it, and communicate what it is about music that moves us. It isn’t good enough to say “It’s a good/bad tune!” Being able to articulate the reasons why something ‘means’ ‘traditional’, ‘sacred’ or ‘good’ etc. is important, especially when communicating with other musicians. The approach taken depends on the function of the transcription. To give a friend the tune for a song, the ornamentation or breathing marks are not needed, however the basic melody, key/time signature is.

Transcription
- The purpose of a transcription dictates the detail necessary for that particular transcription. The purpose can range from helping to learn the words to a song, in which case you might not even need a tune, to detailed analysis of style, for examples see Bartok’s transcriptions of Hungarian folk song.
- Prescriptive or Descriptive.
- Prescriptive Transcription is a guide to a performer/analyst and only shows selective features usually in a simple form.
- Descriptive Transcription is an exact report or description of what has been heard that goes beyond ordinary staff notation and is as precise as possible. This is more useful for analysis than re-performance.
- It is possible to use a recording, some would argue that a recording is better than any ‘translation’ of a musical event, however transcription is very useful for analysis.
- Features may include: pitch/ rhythm/ ornamentation/ harmony/ special features, e.g. vocal techniques, string techniques such as double stopping, ornamentation/ timbre/? attack/ speed/ metre/ extra-musical features/ commentary on the general character of a performance.
- Transcription usually relies upon western notation for us, and all its limitations, this can affect the way you hear music also. The idea that you can achieve a ‘perfect’ transcription is false, as different people hear different things. However there other representations that can be made and these can be quite diverse in ethnomusicology, but must suit the purpose of the transcription.
- Many societies have different notations, for different musics. Many do not use notation at all, aural societies, this can throw up interesting transcription problems. For example how would you convey the timbre of Inuit throat singers, or Gaelic psalm singing?
- “No musical script can ever be a faithful mirror of music.” (Sachs 1962)
- A detailed approach to Transcription and Analysis can either be phonemic or phonetic (Mantle Hood used G-S line) which determines the look of the transcription and what it means. Ask yourself, ‘what detail is necessary for the analysis I’m doing?’
- Always try to work from a copy
Importantly: Musical sound treated in this way turns it into an object frozen in time. The transcription is a mediated representation of a particular time and place. Simply doing a transcription does not constitute an analysis. The cultural understanding of music involves understanding how that sound is heard; if transcription is useful for this then go ahead as it can provide useful evidence. Understanding the cultural significance of a transcribed sonic object usually requires detailed ethnographic work with other people!

Survey of methods and models

- There is a wide array of methods, each very specific developed for a particular music-culture. This is in part due to the diverse training of ethnomusicologists. Anthropology and Music.
- Analysis is the process of examining the attributes of a whole and the end-product is a separation of attributes. The process is deduction or reasoning, and conclusions follow logically and can form laws. The opposite is synthesis.
- The possible descriptors include:
  - Context
    - of performance
    - or recording
    - your own situation as researcher
  - Mode
    - Pitch set/ hierarchy
    - Structural tones
    - Stress patterns
    - Melodic motifs
    - Motion
    - Extra-musical associations
    - Ornamental pitches
  - Genre
  - Tradition performed within
  - The Performer(s)
  - Tuning system
    - fixed or variable
    - diatonic or non-diatonic
  - Scale: theoretical and actual
  - Ornamentation
  - Orchestration
  - Textual considerations
  - The listener(s) or hearer(s)...
**Instrumental music**

Ornamentation: You should include the pitch of the ornamentation, and show them as gracenotes, with the stems joined together for multiple gracenotes. Consider the audience for your transcription, what is the purpose of the transcription?

Key signature: Standard Western staff notation has a long history and wide currency. Understand basic notation and use it for transcription. Therefore, do not use a key signature unless you mean to imply both the given pitch set should be used throughout the piece but also the use of a tonic. Remember some tunes are *cyclical*. You may want to include a key signature, but be clear to show that this is an approximation, some instruments do not operate under diatonic rules, or equal temperament. However, if the piece is in a particular key, use the correct key signature. Also, remember, for comparative purposes it is sometimes helpful to have various tunes all transposed into one key, to aid analysis.

Pitch: An arrow ↑ or ↓ above the note head may be used to indicate that the actual pitch is higher or lower than indicated on the staff. Such arrows are most often used to indicate a quarter-tone in difference, but you should always include an explanatory note to clarify this. Cooke suggests the use of the symbols ♭♭ and ♯♯ in the key signature when the differences are consistently used in a performance.

Slides: There are various ways of approaching notes in traditional music and the following slides may be useful to you:

- A long slide beginning at an indeterminate pitch and ending on the pitch indicated by the note head.

- A short slide. The pitch of the beginning of the slide is not clear enough to determine, but it is in the area indicated on the staff by the beginning of the marking.

- A short slide beginning at a clearly defined pitch, indicated by the location of the x on the staff.
Strings: Often string players will hit open strings for drone accompaniment to the main melody, although these notes are not part of the main tune.

The small dot with no stem is an open string that is hit along with the main note of the tune. They are usually not equal in volume or emphasis to the main note, and not part of the tune.

If the drone note is as prominent as the melody note, then write both of them down on the same stem.

Dynamics: Use the standard crescendo and diminuendo to show changes in dynamics. A particularly emphasised note is usually marked with an accent but a stronger accent can be shown with \( ^{\wedge} \) (above a note head) or \( _{\vee} \) (below).

Ask other questions like: is there a pattern in the performance between dynamics and melodic range? Does the performer tend towards always treating particular passages of music/words the same? Is there a link between the text and the emphasis in the music?

Rests: Silence can be used effectively in every music, so remember to include it in transcription:

- Crotchet
- Quaver
- Semiquaver

The minim rest in a bar sits on top of the third line: and the semibreve rest hangs below a line, (usually the fourth from the bottom)

Remember rests can be dotted also.

Pitch set and range: The pitch set of a tune is very simply what notes are used. However, it is important to remember that a pentatonic tune, may occasionally use a sixth, passing note usually shown in brackets, but this does not mean it is not a pentatonic melody. For example:
Tetratonic = 4 notes
Pentatonic = 5 notes
Hexatonic = 6 notes
Heptatonic = 7 notes
Diatonic = only using the notes of a particular key (usually heptatonic scale), eg. D major

Tempo: \( \dot{\text{M}} = 60 \) The metronome markings are sometimes written with ‘c.’ ('circa') however many beats per minute. Speeds do vary within a performance, but unless it is a major departure from the indication on the transcription do not worry (unless this is important). Also directions, as in art music can be used, but remember who the audience for the transcription is; if it is traditional musicians then they will be expected to understand the average tempos and performance practice of a piece. However, if it is for analysis, say of one performer’s rendering of the same tune over a period of years, then it might be interesting to take account of the various speeds. M.M = metronome mark.

In addition, pauses \( \text{\large \( \bullet \)} \) (also known as fermata) can be used.

Rhythm: Sometimes a performance does not follow a strict pulse, or does not group them regularly. If the pulse is regular but the groupings are irregular then you can change the time signature, for each bar if necessary, there are tunes written like this. Remember also that the time signature also indicates a hierarchy of beats and avoid time signatures if it is inappropriate.

If the pulse is not regular, but the groupings are, then you can show this with a half bar-line on the top of the stave like this:

\[
\text{\large \( \bullet \)}
\]

or

If both metre and pulse are irregular, you have to improvise, but it is probably best to avoid bar lines.

Dotted rhythms are very specific; remember that \( \dot{\text{M}} \) \( \dot{\text{M}} \) equals a 3:1 relationship. Traditional music often uses varying degrees of rhythmical division that are not always in this relationship. Remember double dots and
double cuts can be used, e.g. \( \text{\textvisiblespace} - \text{\textvisiblespace} \) and these represent the rhythmical relationship of 7:1.

Also, sometimes, tunes are generally notated with running patterns such as \( \text{\textvisiblespace} - \text{\textvisiblespace} - \text{\textvisiblespace} - \text{\textvisiblespace} \)

however no traditional musician plays these exactly even, and sometimes an extra diagonal slash in the tail shows that it is just shorter than indicated and that the time has been given to the pitch before or after it within the beat. For example:

You should make a note of this in transcription.

Rhythm is also used as a variation technique by many performers. Does the performer swap the emphasis in repeating the tune/song? What is the rhythmical scheme and how do they alter it as variation technique?

**Explanatory notes:** *Write up notes on the transcription, always include a note on the specifics of the transcription.* Including notes on pitch, key and metre and also other less quantifiable concepts such as timbre. The explanation should include all unusual musical symbols, including those you need to invent but this is separate from the contextual description or essay that accompanies a transcription.

**Vocal Music**

Remember: The gracenotes and problems of transcribing instrumental music are often the same as in instrumental music, however, the words are an extra factor in transcription. In general these are placed under the notes using the rules of proportionality to put the right syllables under the right notes. If you need to split a word the use a hyphen to show it, and be careful to represent the correct length by altering the length of the hyphen in proportion with the stave above.

**Pitch**

Remember the singer’s pitch range may not fit on the stave comfortably and you may need an unwieldy number of ledger lines. In this case transcribe the whole performance. Make sure you make a note of the actual pitch at the start of the transcription.
Pulse
Remember to use metronome markings when the pulse is regular. Make sure this holds for the entire performance, if a regular pulse at a new speed is achieved later in the performance, put in another metronome marking.

If there is no regular pulse, or it’s very irregular, you can use a time line or even graph format. Do not in this case use crotchets and quavers; use solid note-heads instead, without tails.

Another method where bars etc. is unclear is to use one line of stave per phrase, or breath.