

Bowing, divisi & string section marks

A string section is sixteen people trying to sound like one instrument, and these marks are how that is arranged. Composers get two things wrong more than anything: chords a section cannot split, and colour changes with no time to make them.

BOW DIRECTION

	Down-bow	Frog to tip. Naturally heavy at the start — used for strong beats and firm attacks.
	Up-bow	Tip to frog. Lighter at the start — used for upbeats and gentle entries.
	Slur	All the notes under it in one bow. This is the composer's main bowing instruction.
	Hooked bowing	Slur with dots: several notes in one bow, each stopped. Keeps the section together in dotted rhythms.
	Retake · lift	A comma above the stave: lift the bow and start again in the same direction.
	Louré · portato	Slur with lines: one bow, notes gently separated but not stopped.

WHY THE SECTION BOWS ALIKE

Sixteen bows moving the same way look like one and sound like one. The concertmaster or principal decides the bowings, the librarian copies them into every part, and every player pencils in what is missing before the first rehearsal.

The old rule still holds: **down-bow on the strong beat, up-bow on the upbeat**. Where a passage will not come out that way, players hook two notes or take an extra bow to get back in step.

A composer writes slurs for phrasing; players may change them for practicality. That is normal, not a rejection of your phrasing.

DIVISI — SPLITTING THE SECTION

div.	Split the section between the notes. Two notes, two halves.
unis.	Back together on one line. Always write it — divisi runs on until cancelled.
div. a 3	Three ways. Fine in a big section, thin in a school one.
div. by desk	Stand 1 top, stand 2 bottom, alternating. Even sound across the stage.
div. at the desk	Outside player top, inside player bottom — the usual default.
non div.	Play it as a double stop — every player takes both notes.
solī · tutti	Only the named players — the front desks unless you say otherwise — then everyone again.

Say which you mean. Two notes on a stave with nothing written is ambiguous — double stop or divisi? Write *div.* or *non div.* every time.

COLOUR INSTRUCTIONS

pizz. · arco	Plucked, then bowed again. Allow at least a bar to change back.
con sord. · senza	Mute on, mute off. Needs two or three bars of rest, not a quaver.
sul pont.	Bow near the bridge — glassy, thin, metallic.
sul tasto	Bow over the fingerboard — soft, hollow, no edge.
col legno	With the wood of the bow. Dry and percussive; use sparingly.
trem.	Fast repeated bows. Measured if you want a rhythm, unmeasured for shimmer.
harmonics	Circle for natural, diamond note for artificial. Quiet and pure; leave room.
spicc. · martelé	Bounced off the string, or bitten and stopped. Both are short — say which.

SECTION SIZES

A full orchestra runs roughly 16 first violins, 14 seconds, 12 violas, 10 cellos, 8 basses. Each divisi halves the weight of the line, so a three-way split of the seconds leaves under five players on each note.

GIVE CHANGE SOME TIME

Mutes, pizzicato and a move to another string all take physical seconds. Write the change during a rest, or in a long note, and mark it early rather than exactly where it starts.

BEFORE YOU SEND THE PARTS

Check every divisi is cancelled, every pizz. has an arco, every mute comes off, and no chord asks for more notes than a player has fingers or strings.