

Notation software

You do not need software to compose — pencil and manuscript paper are faster for a first idea, and always will be. What software gives you is parts your players can read, a playback you can check, and a score that still exists in ten years. Learn one program properly rather than three badly.

WHAT TO USE

PROGRAM	COST	BEST AT	WORTH KNOWING
MuseScore	Free, open source	Everything a student needs, on any computer.	Start here. The engraving is good, the community library is enormous, and nothing is locked behind a licence.
Dorico SE	Free tier	Beautiful default engraving; strong on rhythm entry.	The free tier is limited to two players, so it suits songs and duos rather than ensembles.
Sibelius First	Free tier	The industry habit; what many teachers know.	Capped staves too. Useful if your school already teaches it.
Flat / Noteflight	Free tier, browser	Working on a tablet, or writing with someone else.	No install and easy sharing; less control over how the page looks.
A DAW	Varies	Recording, loops, electronic and production work.	A different job. It makes tracks, not readable parts. Use both if you write both.

A FIRST SCORE, IN ORDER

- 1 Choose your instruments first — adding a stave later re-lays the whole score.
- 2 Set key, time signature and how many bars you expect. All are changeable.
- 3 Enter pitches and rhythms only. No dynamics, no slurs, nothing else yet.
- 4 Play it back and fix wrong notes. This is the fastest proofreading you have.
- 5 Now add dynamics, articulation, tempo and expression marks.
- 6 Title, composer, date, instrument names. Then bar numbers and rehearsal marks.
- 7 Print the parts, not just the score — and check every page turn.

Playback is a proofreader, not a performance

The sounds are approximations. They will not tell you whether a phrase breathes, whether a string player can bow it, or whether the balance works in a hall. Use playback to catch wrong notes and wrong rhythms — then read the score yourself and ask a player to try it.

THE KEYSTROKES THAT MATTER

1 – 9	Note value: shorter to longer.
A – G	Type the pitch by letter name.
↑ ↓	Move a note by a semitone.
Ctrl /  + ↑	Move it by an octave.
.	Add a dot to the value.
R	Repeat what you just entered.
Esc	Leave note entry. Press it often.

Learn these seven and you will enter music several times faster than by clicking notes onto the stave with a mouse.

Saving your work properly

Keep the editable file, and export a PDF of the score and every part. Name files so the newest is obvious — quartet-v3-2026-09.pdf, not final final.pdf. Store one copy somewhere that is not your laptop. MusicXML exports let another program open your score in twenty years.

DON'T LET IT COMPOSE

Software makes it easy to keep tidying and never decide. Sketch by hand, bring a finished idea to the screen, and use the program to write it out.

TRANSPOSITION IS AUTOMATIC

Set an instrument correctly and the program handles the written pitch for you. Know what it is doing anyway — see the Transposition chart.

PARTS NEED LAYING OUT

A part is not the score with staves hidden. Check cues, page turns, multi-bar rests and rehearsal marks — see Score layout & part preparation.