

How to mark up an orchestral part

The pencil marks experienced players use, what they mean, and when to write them. Always in soft pencil, never ink: the part is not yours.

The mark	What it means	Write it when
○—○	Look up: watch the conductor here	A tempo change, a pause, a tricky entry, anything the conductor will shape
, (above the staff)	Breathe here, or lift the phrase	The obvious breath is in the wrong place, or the section has agreed one
□ ∨	Down-bow, up-bow (strings)	The leader has decided; copy it into your part before the next rehearsal
12	Number of bars of rest	Any rest you have to count
ob.	The cue: what you hear before you play	Every entry that follows a rest
f	A dynamic you keep missing	After the second time you miss it
↑ ↓	Lean the pitch up or down	A note the section has agreed sits sharp or flat
1 2 3 4	The beats, written under a bar	A rhythm you keep misreading
V.S.	Volti subito: turn the page quickly	The turn falls inside a passage
a2 1. 2.	Both players / first only / second only	Copy any change the conductor makes
div. unis.	The section divides / comes back together	Where the part is unclear, and where the leader decides who takes which
con sord. MUTE	Mute on (senza sord.: mute off), and the bar where you have time to fit it	Every mute change: mark the change and the preparation bar
tacet	You do not play in this movement or passage	Where the part says it, and in your own hand if the conductor cuts you
24 23	Corrected rehearsal number	Score and parts disagree; the conductor's figure wins
vi- ~ ~ -de	A cut: jump from the first mark to the second	The conductor makes a cut; mark both ends the same night
*	Something changed here	And write what, in the margin, immediately

Keep the marks small and the part clean, and erase before the part goes back. A well-marked part is the difference between a player who turned up and a player who was ready.

