



“You have to have a very good ear and a vast knowledge of music theory.”

You probably come across lots of sheet music in your music class—but did you ever stop to think about who does all of that notation? It’s not an easy job, and for over 33 years, Mark Phillips has been arranging many of your favorite songs for publication. But that almost didn’t happen, because he started out as a math major! He eventually made the switch to music theory, hoping to become a professor. However, upon finishing his doctorate coursework, there were no openings. And as fate would have it, he was hired by Warner Brothers to arrange and edit piano and vocal songbooks. Now at Cherry Lane Music, Mark took some time to explain how he gets those printed notes to sound like music to your ears.

who: Mark Phillips
Job: Director of Publications,
Cherry Lane Music

You’ve created song arrangements for a long time. Does the work ever get boring?

No, not at all. Every song has different problems to solve, like “How do I make this section playable? How do I make it sound like the artist?” Every note is a decision, and it’s very rewarding to resolve these issues.

Tell us some specifics about your job.

The bulk of my work is editing printed music. We publish piano and guitar books with arrangements that sound like the original music—from Barbra Streisand to Metallica. We condense all instrumental parts into an arrangement for either just piano or just guitar. It’s very tricky to do because everything is done by ear. I hire piano arrangers and guitar transcribers to notate the music. When they submit their manuscripts, I have to make decisions about what to leave in or take out so that it sounds as close as possible to the original recording. And it’s not only about the notes; I have to capture the feel and mood the artist conveys.

Why can’t artists just give you the notated music?

In general, they don’t give us anything. If they do, it’s usually not very helpful because they often have never studied how to do notation. All notation has to conform to the standards of the publishing industry.

Are any musical genres more difficult to notate than others?

Sometimes jazz is challenging because it’s so avant-garde and improvisational. It’s really hard to get that on paper. And when we finally do, sometimes the composer will say that it’s not meant to be played that way. Also, when we’re making a guitar book, we have to recreate what the guitar player is playing, even when the recording contains lots of riffs blended together. We have to figure out who’s playing what. To show exactly how a part is played, we note finger styling and we figure out which effects, if any, the guitarist uses.

What skills are crucial for your job?

You have to have a very good ear and a vast knowledge of music theory. You should know how to play the piano, guitar, and bass. You should know the ins and outs of music notation. And you should have the sensitivity to reproduce the right feel and style of the music.

What’s most challenging about your job?

It can get tedious when I’m working on a really bad manuscript, which actually shouldn’t happen, because I’m the one who hires the arrangers. Also, I make the final decisions, so I really have to trust myself that any and all changes are done for the better.

—Veronica Dominguez-Garcia

Want to know more? go to www.mymusicalive.com/coolcareers