

Episode 12: Adventures with Dorico, Part 1

Intro

Hello and welcome to Tonal Diversions. I'm your host, Lori Archer Sutherland, and this is my journey as a multifaceted musician. I'm a composer, clarinetist and more who is navigating the world of is classical music, and I'd love to share my adventures with you.

Episode proper

In these episodes, I wanted to talk about my thoughts and experiences with learning Dorico notation software. I've used Finale since college, and it was released on floppy disks. I have a lot of years invested in Finale.

I'm breaking this episode into two parts. Part one will be about the purchase, installation, and setup process, plus some general views on the program. Part two will cover some of the details of entering music and other features.

Why the switch?

Dorico has been on my radar since it first came out in 2016, though the project was announced a few years before that. It has reimaged how to work with putting music into written form. For me to switch, I needed a compelling reason in order to overcome the sunk cost fallacy. I'm still learning things with Finale, and I learn something new with pretty much every project I do. And I've used it for decades, so the thought of learning an entirely new program is rather daunting.

While I had heard good things about Sibelius over the years, it didn't seem like a big enough change to invest time and money in switching. If I hadn't already been firmly in Camp Finale at that point, I probably would have gone to Sibelius.

A friend gave me a really quick walkthrough of some features of Dorico, and it does feel like a different approach to creating notated pieces. While there are video tutorials out there, it helped me to have someone I know talked me through it in real time.

I took advantage of their Black Friday sale, which had 20% off the crossgrade purchase for Dorico 3.5, plus the promise of a free upgrade to Dorico 4. My total cost was around \$200. That was only about \$50 more than Finale's latest upgrade, which I'd already decided I didn't need. I'm not affiliated with either program, so anything I buy is with my own money.

For those who aren't aware of the crossgrade option, it's special pricing for those who already own the professional version of Finale or Sibelius. Otherwise, it's close to \$600 if you're buying new, and \$350 or so if you're affiliated with an educational institution. By the way, that's how I initially bought Finale. I was getting ready to graduate college and realize that that was a good deal on that program and I needed to go ahead and spend the money on it.

There's a cheaper Dorico Elements program, but I don't know what that includes. Since I had the crossgrade option and I produce music for publication, I knew I needed the full pro version

of Dorico. If you're doing music as a hobby or you are only writing like solos or quartets, or something, I'm going to guess that Dorico Elements might be just fine for you.

Purchase and Installation

I'll admit this was not a great experience. My initial documentation for the crossgrade from Finale was rejected. It took weeks of back and forth with customer service via email to figure out that only part of my screenshot was showing up for them, even though it showed up entirely for me. And of course, it wasn't the part that showed proof of ownership of Finale. It was just like a little blue square or something ridiculous.

Then their help desk wouldn't accept the new PDF, so I basically had to figure out that I needed to go back through my original purchase and buy it again in order to submit the new PDF. Since my first JPEG didn't work, I switched to PDF in order to resubmit. Fortunately, the Black Friday discount remained, even though by that time it was well into December and thankfully I wasn't charged twice.

The rest of the installation went okay, but it still seemed a bit convoluted. I didn't do anything with the program at that point because I knew I didn't have the time to dedicate to learning it between Midwest and Christmas. Dorico 4 got released early this year, and while I did get the free upgrade and get it installed, I had to do an Internet search to figure out how to do it. I ended up on a Reddit thread that linked to a post somewhere else that gave tips on how to get the new software. While this setback wasn't nearly as drawn out as the crossgrade debacle, it was still frustrating.

They've since changed things with their installation procedure, but frankly, it's still not as simple as Finale. Do I need the downloader or the activation assistant? Stuff like that. I feel there are too many separate little programs I have to navigate instead of just hitting update from within the program. But finally, I had it up and running—or so I thought.

I initially opened it and it seemed to work. However, in a couple of months between then and when I got to use it again, it said no license found. Spent another 20 to 30 minutes trying to figure stuff out, had to reboot my computer and more, only to have it say my verification was expired. Apparently, there was another step I was supposed to have taken with no alert that I was aware of to let me know that that was a thing. I got to their chat, explained everything, and he was actually really helpful and got me back up and running. I do have to wonder if others were dealing with this issue as well, since I didn't have to jump through any more hoops to show that I'd purchase the program or anything like that. All told, that was at least an hour of my time. And I realize I'm spending a lot of time talking about this here, but I'm going to be honest about their convoluted installation and authorization process. It was extremely frustrating and I consider myself fairly competent when it comes to computer stuff.

I will add that since all of that, I have been able to regularly get into the software without any problems. I also upgraded to 4.1 and 4.2 with relatively little fuss. I think it still might be just a touch easier in Finale, but I didn't have any of the headaches that I just talked about.

Setup and Use

I was finally in and able to start a project! There are a number of templates to use, and I'll admit it took me longer than I really want to acknowledge to find the empty one so I could create my own. The selection of templates is limited, but since you can save your own, I'm really not too worried about that. At that point, you can choose your key and time signatures, and there's an option to be able to reuse those within the piece. That's a great idea, and it should speed up input in certain pieces. You can also do without either of those things, which is a bonus point for Dorico. I love that it allows for no time signature because that's great for creating exercises or just sketching things out, or I'm sure some other uses that I am not even thinking of. In Finale, you're pretty much locked into choosing a time signature, which may or may not really be what you want. Instruments were chosen after choosing the key and time signatures. There were different options for transposition and display, and I need to dig deeper into that to see what exactly the options were.

There's also a concept of "player." I don't know how much I'll need to use that because of the type of music I write, but it seems like it would be really helpful for stuff like Broadway books where one player plays multiple instruments. You can also add template instrumentation via the buttons below the "players" box. I personally like that there's a clarinet choir option. Of course!

Flows

Dorico introduces "flows" which are discrete sections of music like movements or songs within a show, stuff like that. This looks like something that's going to be very helpful with Finale. You either have everything stuck in one file and have to do some interesting formatting to create movements, or you have each movement in a separate file, which presents its own set of issues. There might be another option that I don't know about in Finale, but movements have always been rather frustrating to me there.

I recommend watching the tutorials, and there's a "Learn" tab on the home screen which was really helpful. I'm sure I'll have to watch some of these multiple times for things to sink in. I wish more of the icons had hover text as I'm still learning what icon stands for what function.

One thing I have to be aware of is that this doesn't function how I expect Finale to work. It seems like an obvious thing to say, but it's something I do have to remind myself. Some things are pretty similar, because if it works, why change it? But there's so much that's different. I know I'll get shortcut keys mixed up for a while until I'm just more familiar with how Dorico works. With that in mind, Dorico has a printable Quick Reference card, which is going to be really handy, and I've already printed it out for myself.

Separate Functions

Another interesting thing about Dorico is that it separates the functions of setup, writing, engraving and playback, though they're still interconnected. I think that's ultimately a good thing, even though I'm used to it all being together in Finale. I've already learned to remember Libraries → Options in the menu, as that's where some things hide. And there's also a "Properties" pane at the bottom of the screen that has other options. I'm sure it'll take time to get used to which section has what information and all of that. Plus there are a few more places where things like to hide.

Audio

It took a bit to make sure that Dorico and my computer talked to each other with regard to playback. I'm on Windows 10. Be aware of the setting for "let application take control of audio," (or however it's worded) and the sample rates. It seems like all of those need to match in order for things to work, at least on my machine. The one problem I have with letting the application take control of audio is that if I'm in the middle of a project and want to watch a tutorial on YouTube, the YouTube audio won't play because Dorico has full control over the audio. Finale is the same way, but I seem to remember it wasn't quite as picky if you deselected the "take control" option. And maybe one of my listeners has an idea for how to get both things to actually play audio, even if they're both open.

Dorico did recognize my Midi keyboard with no issues at all. It's that little Akai LPK 25 keyboard that I mentioned in a previous episode.

This concludes part one of my experiences with Dorico. Next time, I'll dive more into the process of inputting music.

Outro

Thank you for listening to Tonal Diversions subscribe wherever podcasts are found and share with a friend until next time. Bye!