

In a musical piano score, there are small squares above notes (actually two-note chords), without any explanation (that I can find). What might they mean?

In piano sheet music, a small square or diamond-shaped symbol appearing above specific notes or chords usually indicates one of three distinct musical markings, depending on the piece's style and era:

- **Silently Depressed Keys (Acoustic/Resonance Markings)** If the square is a hollow or solid square/diamond replacing or sitting directly over a notehead, it instructs you to press down those keys silently without letting the hammer strike the string. You hold them down while playing other notes, allowing those open strings to vibrate sympathetically with the rest of the music. This is common in 20th-century and modern piano literature (such as works by Béla Bartók or Henry Cowell).
- **A Double Sharp (×)** If the shape looks like a small square with tiny extended corners or diagonal cross-lines (forming an ×shape), it is a **double sharp**. This accidental sign tells you to raise the note by two half-steps (one whole step).
- **Harmonics (Piano Extended Technique)** In contemporary or avant-garde piano music, small diamond or square markings above a note can indicate a natural harmonic. The pianist touches the string inside the piano keyboard at a specific node point while striking the key to produce an overtone rather than the full fundamental pitch.

The marks are real squares (not X signs or the like). The notes/chords in question are eighth note chords in a fast piece, so both silently depressed keys and harmonics are certainly not meant.

Since these appear above fast eighth-note chords, extended techniques like depressed keys or harmonics are ruled out. Depending on the context, edition, or instrument target, small square marks above rapid note groups generally represent one of these possibilities:

- **Open-String or Key Handing Markings (Organ / Harpsichord / Early Keyboard Music)** If the piece is an arrangement of early keyboard, lute, or baroque music (or played on a dual-manual organ/harpsichord), a small square above a chord often indicates **manual changes** (e.g., lower vs. upper keyboard) or a specific **registration/stop toggle**.
- **Micro-Pedal or Sostenuito Markings** Some modern engravers use small square brackets or open square symbols (□) directly over specific chords to indicate a **short, immediate pedal catch** (or Sostenuito pedal press) to be released immediately on the next beat, distinguishing it from standard, swooping pedal lines at the bottom of the staff.
- **Edition-Specific Footnote Markers or Missing Glyph Errors** If the music is a digital score (like a PDF exported from software like Sibelius or Finale) or a custom edition, a small open square above a note is frequently a **font rendering artifact**. When engraving software fails to render a custom accent, staccatissimo, or finger-number symbol, it defaults to a small missing-character square box.
- **Percussive or Muted Attack (Pianoforte / Modern Style)** In some contemporary pop/jazz piano arrangements, a square symbol placed over short chords indicates a **dead-key or slap-attack effect**—striking the keys to create a sharp, dry sound without letting the full tone sustain.

It's apparently a somewhat modern (but tonal) piece; and it's not a PDF.

Given that this is a modern, printed (non-digital PDF) score of a fast tonal piece, ruling out harmonics and depressed keys, a small square above rapid chords typically means one of four specific things in 20th and 21st-century piano notation:

- **Sostenuito Pedal Activation (□)** Instead of writing standard pedal brackets underneath the bass staff, some modern engravers use small square icons directly above the active staff to indicate precise, per-chord pedal catches. An **open square (□)** marks the exact chord where the middle (Sostenuito) or damper pedal is to be engaged and instantly released, maintaining clarity in rapid passages.
- **Martellato / Square Accent (■)** A solid black square (or filled rectangle) above a notehead is a modern articulation mark for a martellato attack—meaning **extremely heavy, sharp, and hammered force**. In fast chord passages, it demands maximum attack speed and arm weight without sustaining the sound longer than the eighth-note value.
- **Dead-Stroke / Key Slap Effect** In modern tonal music featuring percussive extended techniques (common in contemporary, minimalist, or rhythmically driven piano works), a small square directly over a chord indicates a **slap attack or dead stroke**. The pianist strikes the chord keys rapidly and freezes their hands on the keyboard to immediately choke the vibration of the strings, producing a punchy, dry sound.
- **Editor's Custom Bracket / Structural Marker** In certain 20th-century critical editions, small square frames are used to highlight **metric accents**, cross-rhythms (such as hemiolas), or to indicate that an accent mark was added by the editor rather than the composer.