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THE DEDEKIND–MERTENS FORMULA
AND DETERMINANTAL RINGS

WINFRIED BRUNS AND ANNA GUERRIERI

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ABSTRACT. We give a combinatorial proof of the Dedekind–Mertens formula by computing the initial ideal of the content ideal of the product of two generic polynomials. As a side effect we obtain a complete classification of the rank 1 Cohen–Macaulay modules over the determinantal rings $K[X]/I_2(X)$.

Let $f, g$ be polynomials in one indeterminate over a commutative ring $A$. The Dedekind-Mertens formula relates the content ideals of $f$, $g$, and their product $fg$: one has

$$c(fg)c(f)^d = c(g)c(f)^{d-1}, \quad d = \text{deg } g.$$

It is the best universally valid variant of Gauß' classical formula $c(fg) = c(f)c(g)$ for polynomials over a principal ideal domain. (The content ideal of $f \in A[T]$ is the ideal generated by the coefficients of $f$ in $A$.) Content ideals and the Dedekind–Mertens formula have recently received much attention; see Glaz and Vasconcelos [8], Corso, Vasconcelos, and Villarreal [6] and Heinzer and Huneke [9], [10]. For detailed historical information about the Dedekind–Mertens formula, see [9].

The main objective of this paper is a combinatorial proof of the formula based on a Gröbner basis approach to the ideal $c(fg)$ for polynomials with indeterminate coefficients; in fact we will determine the initial ideal of $c(fg)$ with respect to a suitable term order. (For information on term orders and Gröbner bases we refer the reader to Eisenbud [7].) A side effect of our approach is very precise numerical information about the rank one Cohen–Macaulay modules over the determinantal ring $S = K[X]/I_2(X)$ where $X$ is an $m \times n$ matrix of indeterminates and $I_2(X)$ the ideal generated by its 2-minors. This connection extends the ideas of [6] and was in fact suggested by them. The actual motive for our work was the need for some explicit computation modulo $c(fg)$ in Boffi, Bruns, and Guerrieri [2], or, more precisely, modulo an ideal generalizing $c(fg)$ slightly.

Theorem 1. Let $K$ be a field, $R = K[Y_1, \ldots, Y_m, Z_1, \ldots, Z_n]$ and set

$$d_k = \sum_{i+j=k} u_{ij} Y_i Z_j, \quad k = 2, \ldots, m + n,$$

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with \( u_{ij} \in K, u_{ij} \neq 0 \) for all \( i \) and \( j \). Furthermore let \( S \) denote the set of the monomials

\[
Y_{i_1} \cdots Y_{i_u} Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_v}, \quad 0 \leq u < j_1, \ 0 \leq v < m + 1 - i_u.
\]

Then the set \( N \) of the monomials \( \mu \not\in S \) generates the initial ideal of the ideal \( I = (d_1, \ldots, d_{m+n})R \) with respect to the reverse-lexicographic term order on \( R \) induced by the order

\[
Y_1 > \cdots > Y_m > Z_1 > \cdots > Z_n
\]

of the indeterminates. In particular, \( S \) is mapped to a \( K \)-basis of \( R/I \) under the natural homomorphism.

**Proof.** We first show that \( N \) is contained in the initial ideal \( \text{in}(I) \). Each \( \mu \in N \) is divisible by one of the monomials (1) \( Y_i Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_v} \) with \( i \geq m + 1 - v \) or (2) \( Y_{i_1} \cdots Y_{i_u} Z_j \) with \( j \leq u \). Therefore it is enough to consider the monomials of type (1) and type (2).

(1) In order to conclude that \( \mu = Y_i Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_v} \in \text{in}(I) \) we show the following claim: modulo \( I \) the monomial \( \mu \) is a \( K \)-linear combination of monomials \( Y_{k \nu} \) where \( \nu \) is a monomial in \( Z_{i_1}, \ldots, Z_n \) with \( \nu < Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_v} \) and \( k < m + 1 - v \). (Of course, we allow the linear combination to be empty, in which case \( \mu \in I \).) In fact, \( \mu \) is the initial monomial of the element of \( I \) representing the relation between \( \mu \) and the \( Y_{k \nu} \) modulo \( I \).

The claim is proved by induction on \( v \). In the case \( v = 1 \) one simply uses that \( Y_m Z_{j_1} \) is the initial monomial of \( d_{m+j_1} \) and that the other monomials occurring in \( d_{m+j_1} \) satisfy the requirements of the claim.

In the case \( v > 1 \) we must use an additional induction on \( Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_v} \) with respect to the term order. In the first step we replace \( Y_i Z_{j_1} \) by a linear combination of the other monomials \( Y_r Z_s \) in \( d_{i+j_1} \). If \( s > j_1 \), then \( Z_{s} Z_{j_2} \cdots Z_{j_v} < Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_v} \) in the term order; if in addition \( r < m + 1 - v \), then \( Y_r Z_s Z_{j_2} \cdots Z_{j_v} \) is compatible with our claim, and otherwise we may use induction on the term order.

Suppose now that \( s < j_1 \). Then \( r > m + 1 - (v-1) \), and we can apply induction on \( v \) to \( Y_r Z_{j_2} \cdots Z_{j_v} \). Thus we can replace \( Y_r Z_{j_2} \cdots Z_{j_v} \) by a linear combination of monomials \( Y_{q} Z_{k_2} \cdots Z_{k_v} \) with \( Z_{k_2} \cdots Z_{k_v} < Z_{j_2} \cdots Z_{j_v} \). (We need not take care of \( q \).) Now it only remains to check whether \( Z_{s} Z_{k_2} \cdots Z_{k_v} < Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_v} \); if so, we can again apply induction on the term order.

We rewrite \( Z_{s} Z_{k_2} \cdots Z_{k_v} = Z_{l_1} \cdots Z_{l_v} \) with \( l_1 \leq \cdots \leq l_v \). Whether \( s \leq k_2 \) or otherwise, one has

\[
Z_{l_1} \cdots Z_{l_v} \leq Z_{k_2} \cdots Z_{k_v} < Z_{j_2} \cdots Z_{j_v}.
\]

This implies \( Z_{l_1} \cdots Z_{l_v} < Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_v} \) since \( j_1 \leq j_2 \). (It is of course essential that we are using the reverse-lexicographic term order in which \( Z_1 > \cdots > Z_m \).)

(2) We claim: modulo \( I \) a monomial \( \mu = Y_{i_1} \cdots Y_{i_u} Z_j \) with \( j \leq u \) is a \( K \)-linear combination of monomials \( \nu Z_k \) with \( k > u \) and a monomial \( \nu \) in \( Y_1, \ldots, Y_m \). Observe that no condition on \( \nu \) is necessary: \( k > j \) implies that \( \nu Z_k < \mu \); thus \( \mu \) is the initial monomial of the element of \( I \) representing the relation established by the claim.

The substitution \( Y_i \mapsto Y_{m+1-i}, Z_j \mapsto Z_{n+1-j} \) induces an automorphism on \( R \) that maps the ideal \( I \) onto itself. Therefore we can replace our claim by the following: modulo \( I \) a monomial \( Y_{i_1} \cdots Y_{i_u} Z_j \) with \( j \geq n+1-u \) is a \( K \)-linear
combination of monomials $\nu Z_k$ with $k < n + 1 - u$ and a monomial $\nu$ in $Y_1, \ldots, Y_m$. However, this has been proved in (1) with the roles of $Y$ and $Z$ exchanged.

It remains to show that the monomials in $S$ are linearly independent modulo $I$. To this end we introduce the subalgebra

$$S = K[Y_i Z_j : i = 1, \ldots, m, \ j = 1, \ldots, n].$$

The elements $d_k$ belong to $S$, and we set $J = (d_2, \ldots, d_{m+n})S$. As an $S$-module, $R$ decomposes into the direct sum

$$R = \bigoplus_{\delta \in \mathbb{Z}} M_{\delta},$$

where $M_{\delta}$ is the $K$-vector space generated by all monomials $\mu$ such that $\deg_Y \mu - \deg_Z \mu = \delta$ (where $\deg_Y \mu$ is the number of factors $Y_i$ dividing $\mu$). Then $M_0 = S$. As an $S$-module, $M_{\delta}$, $\delta \geq 0$, is generated by the monomials $Y_{i_1} \cdots Y_{i_{\delta}}$, and a corresponding statement holds for $M_{\delta}$, $\delta \leq 0$, and the monomials $Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_{-\delta}}$.

This decomposition of $R$ induces the decomposition $R/I \cong \bigoplus_{\delta \in \mathbb{Z}} M_{\delta}/JM_{\delta}$ of $S/J$-modules. Since each monomial in $S$ belongs to one of the direct summands, it is enough to prove the linear independence of the monomials in $S \cap M_{\delta}$ modulo $JM_{\delta}$. We have already shown that their residue classes span $M_{\delta}/JM_{\delta}$ as a vector space.

Suppose first that $\delta \geq n - 1$ or $\delta \leq -(m - 1)$. Then the elements of $S \cap M_{\delta}$ are the monomials

$$Y_{i_1} \cdots Y_{i_{\delta}} \quad \text{and} \quad Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_{-\delta}},$$

respectively. It is obvious that they are linearly independent modulo $JM_{\delta}$.

In the cases $-(m - 1) \leq \delta \leq n - 1$ we count the elements of $S \cap M_{\delta}$. (The values $\delta = n - 1$ and $\delta = -(m - 1)$ in which both arguments overlap are of special interest.) Suppose first that $\delta \geq 0$. Then $S \cap M_{\delta}$ consists exactly of the monomials

$$Y_{i_1} \cdots Y_u Z_{j_1} \cdots Z_{j_{-\delta}}, \quad i_u \leq m - u + \delta, \ j_1 \geq u + 1,$$

where $u$ ranges over all positive integers $\geq \delta$. However, the inequalities can only be satisfied by at least one monomial if $u \leq m + \delta - 1$ and $u \leq n - 1$. With $N = \min(m + \delta - 1, n - 1)$, we have

$$\dim_K M_{\delta}/JM_{\delta} \leq \#(S \cap M_{\delta}) = \sum_{u=0}^{N} \binom{(m - u + \delta) + u - 1}{u} \binom{(n - u) + u - \delta - 1}{u - \delta} \leq \sum_{u=0}^{N-\delta} \binom{(m - 1) + \delta}{m - 1 - v} \binom{(n - 1) - \delta}{v} = \binom{(m - 1) + (n - 1)}{m - 1}.$$

For $-(m - 1) \leq \delta \leq 0$ one obtains the same result.

But we also have a lower bound on $\dim_K M_{\delta}/JM_{\delta}$. Note that $M_{\delta}$ is a rank 1 module over $S$: multiplication by $Z_1^{\delta}$ in the case $\delta \geq 0$ and $Y_1^{-(\delta)}$ in the case $\delta \leq 0$ maps $M_{\delta}$ bijectively onto a non-zero ideal of $S$. It is well known that

$$S \cong K[X]/I_2(X),$$

where $X$ is an $m \times n$ matrix of indeterminates, $I_2(X)$ the ideal generated by its 2-minors, and the isomorphism is induced by the substitution $X_{ij} \mapsto Y_i Z_j$. The
1-forms $d_k$ form a system of parameters in $S$. This follows as in the special case in which $u_{ij} = 1$ for all $i$ and $j$ (for example, see Bruns and Vetter [4], (5.9)). Therefore

$$\dim_K M_\delta/JM_\delta \geq e(S),$$

where $e(S)$ is the multiplicity of $S$; see Bruns and Herzog [3], 4.6.11. The multiplicity of $S$ is

$$e(S) = \left( \frac{(m - 1) + (n - 1)}{m - 1} \right);$$

it is not hard to compute since $S$ is the Segre product of the polynomial rings $K[Y_1, \ldots, Y_m]$ and $K[Z_1, \ldots, Z_n]$ (see Herzog and Trung [11] for the multiplicities of determinantal rings in general).

Since $\#(S \cap M_\delta) \leq \dim_K M_\delta/JM_\delta$ and $S \cap M_\delta$ represents a system of generators of $M_\delta/JM_\delta$, we conclude that $S \cap M_\delta$ represents a basis of $M_\delta/JM_\delta$ and that

$$\dim_K M_\delta/JM_\delta = \left( \frac{(m - 1) + (n - 1)}{m - 1} \right) = e(S).$$

In conjunction with the linear independence of $S$ modulo $I$, the inclusion $\mathcal{N} \subset \text{in}(I)$ implies that $\text{in}(I)$ is generated by $\mathcal{N}$. \hfill \Box

Our first corollary is the Dedekind–Mertens formula.

**Corollary 2.** Let $A$ be a commutative ring, $f, g \in A[T]$, and set $d = \deg g$. Then

$$c(fg)c(f)^d = c(g)c(f)^{d+1}.$$  

In general, the exponent $d$ cannot be replaced by a smaller number.

**Proof.** It is enough to treat the “generic” case in which the coefficients of $f$ and $g$ are indeterminates over $Z$, and $A$ is the polynomial ring over $Z$ in these indeterminates. Furthermore, the formula holds over $Z$ if and only if it holds over $Q$ and modulo all prime numbers $p$. Therefore we may then replace $Z$ by a field.

Let $U_0, \ldots, U_d$ and $V_0, \ldots, V_d$ be the coefficients of $f$ and $g$, respectively. Then $c(fg)$ is generated by the elements $\sum_{i+j=k} Y_i Z_j$, and we are in the situation of the theorem upon setting $m = c + 1, n = d + 1, Y_i = U_{i+1},$ and $Z_j = V_{j+1}$.

The inclusion “$\subset$” holds for trivial reasons, and to verify the converse we must show that every monomial $\mu$ with $\deg Y \mu = d + 1$ and $\deg Z \mu = 1$ is contained in $I$ (with the notation of the theorem). However, the standard basis $S$ contains no monomial of bidegree $(n, 1)$ and $J$ is generated by bihomogeneous elements. Therefore all monomials of bidegree $(n, 1)$ belong to $I$.

Since $S$ contains monomials of bidegree $(n - 1, 1)$, the exponent $d$ cannot be reduced. (In [6] this was proved in the case in which $\deg g \leq \deg f$; the argument uses information on the Hilbert series of $S$ that, for example, is contained in Corollary 4 below.) \hfill \Box

The proof of the theorem has given us very precise information on the modules $M_\delta$. This information can be interpreted homologically.

**Corollary 3.** With the notation introduced in the proof of the theorem, the modules $M_\delta, -(m - 1) \leq \delta \leq n - 1$, represent the isomorphism classes of rank 1 Cohen–Macaulay $S$-modules.
Proof. If \( \delta \geq 0 \), then multiplication by \( Z_i^\delta \) maps \( M_\delta \) isomorphically on the \( \delta \)-th power of the ideal \( Q \) generated by the elements \( x_{ii} = Y_iZ_i \) in \( S \). An analogous statement holds for \( \delta \leq 0 \) and the ideal \( P \) generated by the \( x_{ij} \). By a result of Bruns (see [4], (8.4) and (9.18)) the powers of \( P \) and \( Q \) represent the divisor classes of \( S \). Therefore it only remains to find out which of the modules \( M_\delta \) are Cohen–Macaulay.

Since rank \( M_\delta = 1 \), its Cohen–Macaulay property is equivalent to the equation \( \dim_K M_\delta/JM_\delta = e(S) \); see [3], 4.6.11. We have verified this equation for \( -(m-1) \leq \delta \leq n-1 \). For all other values of \( \delta \), the minimal number of generators of \( M_\delta \) exceeds \( e(S) \). \( \square \)

The Cohen–Macaulay property of \( M_{n-1} \) is actually equivalent to the Dedekind–Mertens formula. In fact, let \( m \) be the irrelevant maximal ideal of \( S \). Then \( \dim_K M_{n-1}/mM_{n-1} = e(S) \) so that the equality \( \dim_K M_{n-1}/JM_{n-1} = e(S) \) forces \( JM_{n-1} \) to be equal to \( mM_{n-1} \). This is another way to read the Dedekind–Mertens formula.

It seems that the exact value of depth \( M_\delta \) is not known for \( \delta \) outside the range specified in the lemma. However, its asymptotic values have been computed: depth \( M_\delta = n-1 \) for \( \delta \gg 0 \) and depth \( M_\delta = m-1 \) for \( \delta \ll 0 \) (see [4], (9.27)(c)).

It would be interesting to generalize Corollary 3 to all the determinantal rings \( S_r = K[X]/I_{r+1}(X) \). The divisor classes of \( S_r \) are again represented by the powers of the ideal \( P \) generated by the \( r \)-minors of the first \( r \) rows and the powers of the corresponding ideals for the columns. An easy localization argument (ubiquitous in [4]) by which the Cohen–Macaulay property descends to the case \( r = 1 \) shows that \( P^k \) and \( Q^l \) can only be Cohen–Macaulay for \( k \leq m-r \) and \( l \leq n-r \), and we conjecture that they are indeed Cohen–Macaulay for these values.

For the previous corollary only the multiplicity of \( M_\delta \) was used, but we have actually computed its Hilbert series. The Hilbert series can be written as a rational function

\[
H(t) = \frac{h_0 + h_1 t + \cdots + h_n t^n}{(1-t)^{m+n-1}},
\]

since \( \dim_K M_\delta = \dim_K S = m + n - 1 \). In the next corollary we confine ourselves to the case \( \delta \geq 0 \). The other case follows by exchanging \( m \) and \( n \), \( \delta \) and \( -\delta \).

**Corollary 4.** The coefficients of the numerator of the Hilbert series of \( M_\delta \), \( \delta \geq 0 \), are given by

\[
h_u = \begin{cases} 
(m-1+\delta) (n-1-\delta) & \delta \leq u \leq \min(m-1+\delta, n-1), \\
0 & \text{else.}
\end{cases}
\]

Proof. Since \( M_\delta \) is Cohen–Macaulay, the homogeneous system of parameters \( d_1, \ldots, d_{m+n} \) is a regular sequence on \( M_\delta \). Therefore \( h_u = \dim_K (M_\delta/JM_\delta)_u \), where the index \( u \) indicates the graded component of degree \( \delta \). (The elements \( x_{ij} = Y_iZ_j \) have degree 1 in \( S \).) This number has been computed in the proof of the theorem. \( \square \)

It is not hard to check that among all the modules \( M_\delta \) exactly one has the highest coefficient \( h_u = 1 \), namely \( M_{n-m} \). It follows immediately that \( M_{n-m} \) is the canonical module of \( S \), a result that has been shown by another approach in [4]. For \( \delta = 0 \), \( M_\delta = S \), one can also compute the Hilbert series using the fact that \( S \) is
the Segre product of the polynomial rings \( K[Y_1, \ldots, Y_m] \) and \( K[Z_1, \ldots, Z_n] \). (See Conca and Herzog [5] for the Hilbert series of determinantal rings in general.)

Some further aspects of our results have been collected in the following remarks.

**Remarks 5.** (a) From the view point of determinantal rings, a basis of \( M_\delta/JM_\delta \), \( \delta \geq 0 \), in terms of the generators \( Y_{i_1} \cdots Y_{i_\delta} \) of \( M_\delta \) and the generators \( x_{j_1k_1} \cdots x_{j_u k_u} \), 

\[
i_1 \leq \cdots \leq i_\delta < j_1 \cdots < j_u < m, \quad \delta + 1 < k_1 < \cdots < k_u,
\]

represent a \( K \)-basis of \( M_\delta/JM_\delta \). (For \( \delta \leq 0 \) one has a dual statement.) In particular, the defining ideal of \( S/J \) as a residue class ring of \( K[X] \) has a Gröbner basis of degree 1 and 2 elements with respect to a suitable term order.

(b) Our results can be formulated for more general rings of coefficients than fields. For example, let \( A \) be a commutative ring and set \( R = A[Y_1, \ldots, Y_m, Z_1, \ldots, Z_n] \). If the coefficients \( u_{ij} \) of \( d_2, \ldots, d_{m+n} \) are units in \( A \), then \( R/I \) is a free \( A \)-module, and the set \( S \) represents a basis of \( R/I \).

This is easily reduced to the case of a field of coefficients. In fact, it is enough to show the statement for the case in which \( A = \mathbb{Z}[U_{ij}^{\pm 1}] \) is a Laurent polynomial ring over \( \mathbb{Z} \). For \( R/I \) to be free with basis \( S \) over an integral domain \( A \), it suffices that the dimension of \( R/I \otimes Q(A) \) coincides with the cardinality of \( S \) where \( Q(A) \) is the field of fractions of \( A \). But this follows from Theorem 1 and its proof; in showing that \( S \) generates \( R/I \) we have only used that the \( u_{ij} \) are units.

(c) For an application in [2] we note that \( \mu = Y_1^{n-1}Z_1^{m-1} \) belongs to \( S \), and is therefore non-zero modulo \( I \). However, one has \( Y_i \mu \in I \) and \( Z_j \mu \in I \) for all \( i \) and \( j \) since \( S \) contains no element \( \nu \) with \( \deg_Y \nu \geq n \) or \( \deg_Z \nu \geq m \).

We can say even more: \( \mu \) is the only element of bidegree \((n-1, m-1)\) in \( S \); therefore it generates the bidegree \((n-1, m-1)\) component of \( R/I \). The same is true for \( \mu' = Y_1^{m-1}Z_1^{n-1} \) since the automorphism given in the proof of Theorem 1 maps \( \mu \) to \( \mu' \). Therefore there exists \( a \in K, a \neq 0 \), with \( \mu' \equiv a \mu \) modulo \( I \). As the whole argument also works over \( \mathbb{Z} \) (see (b)), one actually has \( a = \pm 1 \).

(d) The theorem was suggested by MACAULAY [1].

**References**


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