

MORE ADVANCED ARRANGING NOTES

I have written quite a lot of big band charts over the last few years and before I forget everything, I would like to share some ideas about writing music with you.. I have not seen some of these things mentioned in books on arranging so I hope they will be useful.

The Cost of Writing

If you want to write music, you will have to consider the true financial cost it will involve. If you prefer to write with a pencil, you'll need manuscript paper which is not cheap and make sure you have an eraser handy.

Turning to the computer, you need the software. Many people like Sibelius. I have never used it but use Personal Composer which is much cheaper and as good, to my mind. Once you have done the parts, the expenses mount up. You can get through a lot of ink (recycled cartridges are much cheaper than the brand names.) Copying paper is not too dear, but it all depends on how good the quality is that you need. 80 grams is the normal one but you may want to go for the 90 or 100 grams for more durability. If you think you may have to rewrite parts sometime, go for the 80 gram paper. You'll also need to buy some tape to put the pages together.

If you are writing for an established band, this is where your expenses will end, unless you want to buy everyone a drink for playing your music. This is the way most people start off. However you will have little say on getting your arrangements rehearsed the way you would like or even played on a gig. if you want to form your own big band you will have more control over this, but you will have to pay out for more things: hire of rehearsal venue. Depending upon where you live and how often you rehearse this can be quite expensive. Some of the musicians may also require travelling expenses if they have come from afar.

Putting on gigs yourself can be a huge expense. You will need to hire the venue and possibly pay additional costs such as having a bar. Publicity for the gig in the form of producing posters and getting them distributed is another expense.

If you want to feature a well-known guest musician, you will have to fork out a bit more. Making a CD or video of your band will add a lot more to the overall cost.

All in all then, you may find that writing music can be quite a drain on your finances. I don't want to put you off writing, but do be aware of the costs before getting started. However on the positive side, you may be given a commission or receive funding from an arts' body - well worth investigating.

Background information

There are lots of good books on arranging. You will need to know the range of instruments, the peculiarities of each of them, how to combine instruments together, how to achieve an overall balance, how to write for sections and ensembles, etc. Some of the books I recommend are:

Sounds and Scores by Henry Mancini

Arranging and Composing for the Small Ensemble, Jazz, R&B, Jazz Rock.. by David Baker

Arranged by Nelson Riddle

The Contemporary Arranger by Don Sebesky

Arranging for Large Jazz Ensemble by Dick Lowell and Ken Pulling

Inside the Score by Rayburn Wright

Jazz Arranging and Composing by Bill Dobbins

The Complete Arranger by Sammy Nestico

Method

Before you start writing you will need to have established certain things in your mind. By focussing in on what it is you intend to do helps you to organise your thoughts. remembering that decision-making is involved

during the whole process. What is the line-up of the band? Do you know any of the musicians' styles or the overall style of the band? What type of piece do you intend to write? is it for a special occasion (which may determine the style)? etc.

Then you need to have a tune that fits the bill. The tempo, the key signature and the type of rhythm and style can be determined once you have the tune written down. I always start with just the tune and chord symbols along with any little rhythmic figures in places where I might use them. The tune itself will dictate the choice of instrumentation and key. Certain things are more suited to particular instruments or sections than to others, but sometimes there can be various ways of dividing up who plays the tune and who does the backing. If you have a specific instrument in mind (say, an alto sax) the tune must lie within the range of the alto so choose the key with this in mind.

Think of the first chorus (usually the initial statement of the tune). Within this chorus there should be development so that it builds up to reach a minor climax at the end of this section. So, for instance, you could have solo alto for the first section, sax soli for the second, trombone soli for the next and ensemble or brass with sax counterpoint for the last section (if AABA structure).

Think also of how you going to develop the whole arrangement. Write down on a piece a paper a rough guide. Eg.

Intro - rhythm section (RS) figures

1st chorus (say, as stated in the previous paragraph)

2nd **A. trombone (Tbn) solo**
 B. add sax unis figures
 C. sax or brass soli
 D. as C

3rd **A. tenor solo**
 B. add tbns div
 C. ditto and add trumpets (Tpts) div
 D. 1st 4 bars - RS
 2nd 4 bars - Ens div

etc, etc.

You may not stick to this pattern as you go along as other ideas might come to you since the music will tend to write itself. But it will help get over the initial hurdle of getting down to writing an arrangement.

Note the useful abbreviations - *div* (harmonised), *unis* (unison), *solo* (1 instrument or can be used to mean a jazz solo), *soli* (a section, usually in harmony), *ens* - ensemble, *RS* - rhythm section. You can also abbreviate the names of the instruments - *tpts* (trumpets), *tbns* (trombones), *sxs* (saxes) encompassing *alts*, *tens*, *baris*, *sops*,

fls (flutes), *clars* (clarinets), *pno* (piano), *bs* (bass), *dms* (drums), *gtr* (guitar) *perc* (percussion), You can use these abbreviations on drum parts to indicate what's going on, as well as on other parts for the same reason. Obviously if you don't speak English you will have to use abbreviations in your own language.

The introduction can be a stumbling block. Sometimes it is straightforward. Extrapolate back from the first bit of the tune. Do you want a slow build up to when the tune comes in, eg. just rhythm section, or if there is a rhythmic backing to the tune, laying down the rhythm in the intro. Or do you want a total contrast, eg. full ensemble leading to a solo instrument playing the tune. Even the best arrangers often have difficulties writing introductions.

Don't end up getting a mental block if the introduction won't come. Write the introduction afterwards or do without one altogether.

OK, you should now have enough information written down to get going. Now at this stage I have a coffee and biscuit and go to the toilet (but this is not obligatory). I try and find somewhere to write where I won't be disturbed and spread everything out around me, cat included. I am an old fashioned writer and write on manuscript paper and then write the individual parts in on the computer. You may be more modern and be able to do the whole thing on computer. I admire people who can do this but I can't. Besides, I like to see a whole page and be able to flit back and forth by shuffling bits of paper around.

If you do as I do, you will need score paper. It used to be easy to get hold of at your local music shop, but now you usually have to order it online. I personally use the 18-stave Ms score paper from Faber Music which comes in book form with 75 pages in it. I find it easier to order this from Boosey & Hawkes than Faber Music. Write in manuscript paper in the search engine. In other countries you might find other ways of getting the paper.

The only problem with this paper is that when your pencil gets blunt the tip can cover more than one note so a good pencil sharpener is necessary or use a mechanical pencil instead with a very fine point. Years ago you used to be able to get some very large sheets of paper which had wider staves, but I've not come across it lately.

Using manuscript paper you will have to draw your own bar (measure) lines, which is an advantage as they can be of different sizes. You will also have to write in which instrument falls where on the line-up on the page - the 5 staves used for the saxes usually come at the top, followed by 4 lines for trumpets, 4 lines for trombones and then the rhythm section. Each section is bracketed on all pages. That saves having to count the number of staves up when going from one page to another. With manuscript paper that has fewer staves you can use 2 lines for trumpets and 2 for trombones with 1 and 3 with tails up on the first of each staff and 2 and 4 with tails down. This saves space but can be a bit awkward to write.

Obviously you will also have to write in the time signature and key on each part. I often use the blank key signature as I tend to use a lot of chords that are not in the key and often the key is hard to determine anyway. I used to write things in their proper keys so if a piece is in C the altos are in A, tenors are in D (a major 9th higher than the sound), and baritone is in A (an octave and a major 6th higher than the actual note),...,etc. If you can get someone else to copy out your parts you should do this too. But as I do my own copying, I now write all parts as they sound - this helps a lot when checking over harmonies which I always do before copying out. Some learned people might frown on this (to put it mildly), but it is the sound of the music that matters in the end.

You should always write the lead parts in first for at least a few bars. Try not to use a piano for this. You should be able to hear them in your head. But sometimes with a strange chord progression this can be difficult. Then write out the lead parts of the backing. Only then write out the harmony parts. If it is an ensemble harmonised passage, write out the brass first, from 1st trumpet downwards. If it moves about a bit, you don't need root notes at the bottom. Then write in the saxes to cover the lower trumpets but make sure the saxes are complete in themselves, harmonically speaking. This doesn't apply so much with regard to the individual trumpet and trombone sections when combined as brass. The rhythm section parts come next and then fill out expression marks you might have missed out and dynamics. You don't have to rigidly stick to this routine but it might help to do it this way if you have not got your own system worked out.

A method I don't use which some arranging books advocate is writing a 2 staff lead sheet in the beginning and then distributing the parts of this when writing out a full score. In my opinion this adds time and does not concentrate the mind on the individual instruments which happens when you start off with score paper.

Having to write out key signatures needs to be done only on the first page, unless there is a modulation at the end of a page. Other things, like barlines need to be done as you go. There are certain things which you might think at first are a drag to have to do. I have found that doing some of these mechanical things helps me to get in the mood, particularly when continuing a score after having a break.

There are shortcuts which do come in handy though. If all of the trumpets have a rest for a number of bars, you can indicate this on the first trumpet part and draw a vertical squiggly line down through the other trumpet parts to show it applies to them too. If certain instruments are playing in unison, you need only to write one of them and then write *col ten 1*, for instance, with a horizontal squiggly line for as long as it continues on another part. If another instrument plays the same line an octave away, then just write *col ten 1 8vb or 8va* with a squiggly line. If somewhere along the line it goes into direct unison, write *loco*.

Copying out the parts

As stated before, I transpose the individual parts when I copy them out on to the computer. Transposing is not difficult and soon becomes second-nature. Baritone parts are quite easy - you just swap the clef and write in the same pitch, keeping in mind that it must end up an octave and major 6th difference. Alto parts are much trickier

as there is no simple knack for doing this - you just have to think in major 6ths. Trumpets are easier as it's only a major second difference, and for tenor parts you have to add an octave to that.

Bearing in mind that in a lot of arrangements many of the parts are in block writing or unison, what I do is to start off with, say, the lead trumpet. This initial part takes longest to do because you have to include all the dynamics, accents, key changes, tempo changes, and other paraphernalia on it. Then when finished and proof-read (always remember to do that for each part), I save the part as 2nd trumpet. Now for unison passages, there is nothing more to write, for harmony parts you just need to shift the pitch of the note down as everything else applies the same. You can then go back to the 1st trumpet and save as 1st trombone, transpose everything down into the key signature a tone down, and what is sometimes useful to do is to transpose everything down a complete octave or you might be left with a mass of leger lines.

Then, where the brass are in block format, you do the same as you did for the 2nd trumpet part. Where the trombones are playing something entirely different, you may have to add or subtract bars (measures) and delete certain things but in the long term you still save a bit of time. Remember to save the file often on the computer as you go. You can do a similar thing in writing out the sax parts. For piano and guitar parts and sometimes bass parts, you can do the same process.

A few more things to think of doing. Musicians sometimes like to be sent or to take their parts away to look at, so write in the exact tempo at the start. The words *medium* or *fast* tempo covers a wide range. Even a slight difference can mean the difference between being able to play something easily or not.

Time is often spent in a rehearsal and on gigs on discussing the count-in. To save this time I try to remember to write in on each part what the count-in will be. Unfortunately in my case, I look at a metronome beating back and forth and count in waltzes 1234. But this is **my** disability and you **won't** suffer from it. Someone needs to invent a metronome that beats in 3, 5, 7 and so on, unless it's been done already.

In many arrangements, certain instruments are *tacit* for a number of bars. As you know, musicians' minds drift off at such times to matters of more importance - getting in a beer, trying to remember where you put the car keys, finding out what is wrong with the valves, slide, keys, reed, wife, etc which make them unable to play their parts correctly. Therefore when they have bars (measures) to count which add up to more than 4, tell them what is going on. This can be done in two ways. You can write something like *trombones in* at a particular point. You can also write in cue notes to guide them. Then they can safely daydream or get a day job and know when they are expected to play again. As every young male musician has found, relying on aural cues is handy when playing in dance-halls so you can concentrate visually on the young women. The problem is when someone forgets to play the cue notes.

Choices of instruments/sections

Most trumpet players do not have lips of steel - their range is often limited to about the Bb concert above the staff.

You can write higher if you know who you are writing for, but it might be hit or miss with some players. You are not going to sacrifice excitement by keeping the lead trumpet lower than Maynard Ferguson likes to play. There are other ways to build excitement - when the singer stops, for instance. So for a full-blooded trumpet sound which can also be played quietly, don't go into the stratosphere. The same applies to lead trombone.

(You can ignore this if you know that the lead brass players in your band have super chops.)

This means that in harmonised passages, some of the trumpets are going to be quite low. No problem. Tell them to practice long notes - if you dare. You can also double up the 3rd and 4th trumpets if really low. Another solution would be to get them to play flugel horns while 1 and 2 play trumpets. Make sure to double up low trumpets with some of the saxes for support.

For higher lead trumpet parts (say, above the staff) you will usually need to double the part an octave lower with another trumpet or with a trombone. This brings out the note. If the sax section is led by an alto, the alto can double the lead trumpet part up to about the F, top line of the staff or for very short incursions maybe an F# or G.

This is something which was once a no-no in arranging books but as many great arrangers do it (Thad Jones, Bob Brookmeyer, etc) I see no reason to argue with that. If you can call upon a lead soprano, it can double the lead trumpet and has a higher range. Make sure the intonation for the instruments is spot on though or it could sound awfully out of key.

Muted trumpets including the use of flugel horns are a useful tool for the arranger. Flugels give a lovely mellow sound which blends well with saxes, flutes, clarinets and trombones. To get an overall mellow brass sound I like to have flugels with trombones in bucket mutes. Trumpet players used to have to play buckets or hat mutes to sound mellow. Now that many of them own a flugel horn, this has taken the place of these mutes in many circumstances.

I never used to like cup mutes as a result of hearing swing commercial bands in which vibrato is shovelled on with a ladle. Cup mutes without vibrato however can sound great. They can be useful for instances when a lower instrument is playing (a trombone for instance) which would otherwise be covered up. Buckets can be used for the same thing but producing a different sound. Trumpets with harmon mutes give a nice tingly sound but they can disappear, especially when in harmony, Mark the dynamics higher for them if necessary. A single harmon muted trumpet is a good, but a microphone is needed to hear it. Plunger mutes can create some interesting sounds. You should indicate when you want it open or closed. There is no reason why you cannot have half of the trumpet section in one mute and half in another or even each one in a different mute, but inform each player or they might just copy what the person next to them is doing. Section players tend to do everything together.

Trombone parts can be unwieldy when they are low. Not a problem for long notes (organ-like, as it is sometimes called), but for faster passages, they need to be kept higher, which means above F on the second staff line.

Continuous lines very high up can be tiring, so give them breaks occasionally so they can empty their water-key into the next player's beer.

I do like bass trombones. For any high part played by the other trombones, they can play down the octave or be rested. Whether an ensemble passage has a bass trombone at the bottom or a baritone sax depends on the context and on the inclinations of the arranger. The bass trombone can go down much lower with a good round sound but it sometimes takes time for the instrument to speak so it should not be too fast. Baritones can hold their own with trombones in terms of volume in the lower range and can be played quite rapidly down there. Unless you want to really emphasize a low bit, there is no need to double the baritone with the bass trombone. It can sound very heavy.

With regard to the **sax** section, I have to admit that I hate the sound of saxes with a big vibrato that you get with some dance bands. I prefer no vibrato at all for the sax section. The traditional line-up of alto or clarinet, alto, tenor, tenor, baritone or alto has become more diversified over the years. This is still a punchy sound and is needed for those type of arrangements which require body and volume. But nowadays sax players double on a variety of instruments. Most sax players can play clarinet even if not all of them like to do so. Unfortunately, all clarinet players cannot automatically play the saxes. In some school bands and function bands the sax chairs are filled with clarinet players who see the saxes as an easy option. But it is a different technique and a different tone is required.

I like bass clarinet but rarely use it in my because of the problem of depts. When someone requires depts or leaves a band, the person filling the chair next may not have the other instrument. A lot of re-writing may be required as a result. Provided the part doesn't go too low (ie. below Bb or to be safe C below middle C) a tenor can be substituted for a bass clarinet, but it will lack the distinctive sound of the intended instrument. A bass clarinet can often be used in place of a baritone with good effect.

Sopranos are a great asset in a band. A soprano lead over the sax section can give a very modern sound, as the soprano has a sinuous sound which is akin to a human voice. Sopranos can also cut through a full band more easily than an alto or tenor. I sometimes use 2 sopranos, which I cherish. Sopranos can blend well with the other saxes, brass and flutes.

The flute is one of my favourite instruments and I like to use it a lot. But it has to be mic-ed, particularly when used in its lowest octave. My sax section is often made up of flute, alto or soprano, alto, tenor, tenor, thus

dispensing with the baritone at times. I use 4-part harmonies with the flute doubling the lead alto or soprano an octave up. It can also be used in unison with the saxes very effectively. When in unison with or an octave above the lead trumpet it can give a great edge to the sound - much cleaner than a lead trumpeter straining to play very high notes. Flutes in unison or in harmony is wonderful and gives a nice touch to a ballad.

With regard to altos and tenors (and baritones), they are superb for jazz solos and for unison and harmonic writing.

They are also very versatile in getting round tricky phrases and their ability to bend notes like a human vocal intonations can add so much to an arrangement. They can be written in wide open voicing or in close voicing or in clusters, just like trombones. Check the tuning, just in case.

At one time, pianos had the task of doubling bass lines and doing the odd fill-in. With the emergence of electric pianos, organs and synths and all the different sounds they can produce they have a much more important role. In older arrangements, the saxes often had to supply the harmony. The piano can now fulfill this function while also giving a much needed break to the horns at times. Like all rhythm section instrumentalists, pianists like their freedom. There is a temptation to over-write for the rhythm section. Where the opportunity arises, they should be given scope to do their own thing. I once saw a few arrangements in which all of these parts were written out in full. The arranger should have been shot. The best bits of an arrangement are often the parts where the rhythm section do what they do best at. Arrangers should cease trying to control everything but facilitate things instead.

Obviously there are times when the rhythm section players have to stick to more rigid parts to fit in with the band.

But there are also times when the piano and guitar can be tacit. Personally I love rests, particularly when I have them on my parts. They give me quality time in which to do crossword puzzles.

I never used to use a guitar player in my band - one more person to pay on a gig - but I for a few years ago I added one to the band and now wouldn't be without it. But it has to be a very good guitarist! A guitar player (like a piano player) who plays loud chords can destroy carefully constructed charts, Because the chords played by horn players can be changing with each note, a guitarist should only play sporadically or be given a lead line to play in unison with another player. Where they score is with things that need a lot of rhythm, particularly in rock numbers where the pianist/organist can sustain chords leaving the guitarist to play fast rhythms chords. Apart from that they are very useful in providing the special effects which only guitarists can conjure up. Because piano and guitar are often given the same part (chordal backing), there is a danger that the two might clash at times. For example, one might play a natural fifth or ninth in a dominant seventh whereas the other may use altered notes. To prevent this from happening, make one of them tacet while the other plays. A chordal guitar backing has a totally different feel to it than a piano bashing out the chords.

Bass lines can now be heard thanks to amplifiers. It is essential that the bass player is loud enough as the chords played by the horns may require the root-notes to be meaningful. But obviously it should not be too loud. If the bass line is very busy, you may require a bass guitarist. For accidental reasons, I once had a bass player and a string bass player in my band. But they don't play together - at least not very often. I was once challenged to write for the two playing together and it took a lot of ingenuity. Arco bass on a string bass is very powerful and can be put to good use for pedal notes or to bolster up bass trombone or baritone where needed.

Drum parts need to inform the drummer what basic rhythm to play and to indicate the notes of phrasing played by other members of the band. The drummer can then do what only he/she can do and elaborate on these things.

Over the years my drum parts have become much simpler as I have handed over most of the responsibility to the drummer for what he plays. This means that on the first play through he will be working out what exactly to play but on future occasions he will inject his own personality and skill on to the proceedings.

This brings me to a major point - improvisation. I believe that big bands are a part of jazz and therefore should be based upon improvisation. Some arrangements I have played give only short token solos to a few selected players. This goes against the whole spirit of jazz and I have done my utmost to bring back improvisation into my charts. I like to give people long solos, to have more than one person solo at a time and to have places where several people, sometimes everyone, gets to solo at once, in which case *soloing* is not the right word.

As an arranger, you should know the techniques of soloing. Don't ask someone to play a solo over a backing

which is virtually impossible to play over. Space the chords out, keep the backing simple, particularly in the early stages yet still find ways to stimulate him or her to spur them on. Know the scales you are expecting the soloist to play and use chords based on these scales as backing.

A few more general things. I usually try and get rehearsals recorded. Then I either send the recordings on a CD to the players or use Dropbox or Youtube. I also send pdf files of the parts to anyone who wants. Sometimes I go over someone's parts with them on an individual basis and sometimes we have had section rehearsals. After hearing the recordings I can tell where any mistakes occur and can check on the parts if they are faulty and if so, I rewrite them. Someone once tried to make me feel guilty about rewriting parts. I don't regret it. Everyone can make mistakes, or change their mind about something, even the great arrangers and composers.

Bits and bobs

Harmony - tunes based upon 2 5 1's can sound dated so try thinking up new sequences. This will sound fresh and prevent soloists from churning out things they've played many times before.

Harmonising moving lines - in the Swing era this involved 4-part writing using 6th chords, diminished chords and other simple harmony. This technique is sometimes called the *thickened line* or if opened up by dropping the 2nd part from the top down an octave, the *widened line*. This is the way that saxes are often voiced with the baritone sometimes playing an octave below the lead alto. Ensemble passages meant that everyone was assigned one of these notes thereby doubling up on them. The sound was strong because several notes were played by several instruments. But you do not have to resort to this method. You can use constantly changing triads or much denser harmonies, including clusters. Don't be afraid of minor second intervals. You can grow to love them, as I do.

Unisons are wonderful. Don't just think in terms of sections. You can split instruments up and get loads of different unison combinations. With a big band it is tempting to neglect simple 2-part or 3-part writing. This can be block voiced or a counterpoint line.

There are things in classical music which have not been used much by jazz arrangers. I have tried to incorporate some of these things into my charts - rits, accels, modulations, bi-tonality, 12-tone rows, parts of a band playing in a different time or key to other parts. I also like the tension that is produced by 3 against 4, and 2 against 3. You can also have 5 or 7 against 4 and various other combinations. Places where the rhythm section play a broken-up feel can also be effective as it gives a spontaneous combo feel.

Dynamics are important - a pity so many arrangements do not use them much. Apart from the whole band playing a cresc or dim you can get sections to fade out and fade in against other sections.

In passages where you want a very long continuous note (or a very long phrase), you can achieve this by dividing up the members of a section. When one person takes a breather (a rest), another person dovetails in so there is no gap in the sound. Sometimes you have to split up the whole section to achieve this with each person taking rests where others are still playing.

Musicians who play in big bands tend to adopt a big band mentality which is very different from how they respond in a combo. I have tried, not always successfully, to get musicians to think as individuals rather than members of a section. Fear of coming in at the wrong place may inhibit players, so writing cue notes to indicate what others are playing helps.

Sometimes you may want to have the effect you can create on the piano by holding down the sustain pedal. You can do this by getting certain instruments to hold on to a note where the next note changes and is played by someone else. This works best I have found if you double up the instruments and sometimes give another instrument the complete thing to play.

Experiment and challenge all assumptions and very likely the musicians will respond well. Do it!

