

Orchestrating for Big Band:

The First Steps

By Pete McGuinness

To composers who first set out to write a big band arrangement, the sheer number of instruments, voicing choices, and even just seeing all the staff lines on a blank score can seem a bit intimidating. Even if one has listened to a lot of big band recordings, trying to organize one's own ideas in preparation to put music onto a score page can seem overwhelming. But by first dealing with form by blocking out areas of orchestration activity with basic language and ideas, the novice big band arranger can more easily get a handle on things and limit the number of elements that must be dealt with at any one time.

Featured vs. Background

Much of what composers focus on when writing for small groups, or even simply composing a song with chords, deals with "featured material" versus "background material." In one manner or another, these two contrasting ideas are always at work. This seems like a very simple concept, and generally it is. For example, a solo instrument may present a melody, while the background material may be as simple as a choral rhythmic figure and bass line in the rhythm section. The difference with writing for big band is the sheer number of choices available to fill these two general areas of featured versus background material at any given time, and all the possible ways these choices can shift as the music moves forward.

Let's Get Verbal

One assignment I often give my beginning arranging students before any note of music is ever written is to create a verbal schematic of musical events that are to happen over the form of the chart, using basic but descriptive language. I am not the first to advocate this idea — many other well-regarded arranging teachers also use this method of helping students create an initial sense of order. Some knowledge of specific arranging terms is helpful, but not mandatory (for example, "sax pads" could be described as "long-note sax chords," but that can get a bit wordy).

This thought process will force the beginning arranger to decide on many things per section — what general feelings should be presented in the various formal sections and how can one translate them into musical orchestration and texture? For example, ideas like "thick and warm" might use fully voiced tutti brass, with tightly voiced flugelhorns in clusters in the mid-low range. "Thin/busy" might use unison saxes in rapid eighth note-based lines. "Powerful" might feature strong tutti structures, with a generally high lead trumpet range and wider voicings overall.

I suggest the arranger lay out several ideas for what kinds of feelings are to be suggested in the course of the chart, then choose orchestrations that seem to work best with each. There could be a

few per feeling and grey areas may come up, such as: "warmth: harmonized saxes or trombones? Use of bucket mutes?" et cetera. This is where having listened to lots of important big band recordings and having seen some well-written scores will help with being able to recall various orchestration sounds and effects to help with these kinds of decisions. But in the initial stages of the schematic, it is OK to keep things rather general. "Warm" may be enough to work with for the moment, if say, something very different such as "thin" or "busy/contrapuntal" is coming up.

Mapping Out a Template

Once an array of feelings/orchestrations ideas have been written down, begin looking at the overall form of the chart you are to write. How long will it be? Is it a more simple chorus-by-chorus type? Will it have a development section? Map this out first as the basic template of the schematic. Then, go into the smaller phrases, maybe thinking in four or eight-measure sections as works with the song's form. Always imagine the melody in this flow of events — what group of instruments should have the melody at the beginning of the chorus? Solo instrument? A section soli in unison? Harmonized section? Tutti? This first choice is very important, as it will determine many things — it may be a central idea of the overall character of the chart, and may also suggest contrasting ideas (both as background material as well as to what orchestration the featured material may move to).

In the example schematic, the melody is first presented by a soli of one trumpet and one alto sax in unison. This is accompanied later in the section by unison trombones in a simple counter melody. I chose this idea because of the lower range of the bones (so as not to conflict with the range of the melody), as well as trombones being a darker-sounding contrast to the brighter sounding soli/melody instruments.

In bar A5, the bones continue to act as a background, but are now in harmony, creating a subtle shift of tension and forward-motion to the phrase. By only shifting the texture slightly, I am trying to gracefully draw the listener into the unfolding of events. There isn't really any exact science to these kinds of decisions, but common sense can often dictate what may be a good choice at any moment (as explained with the choice of trombones as backgrounds in A 1-8). Real thought and feeling should be put into these early decisions. In terms of form, the changes of orchestration and texture in an arrangement are almost a piece of music in itself: a story being told by shifting colors and effects.

On the following page is an example of a verbal schematic of the first 32 bars of big band arrangement. One could plug many different 32-bar songs into this template. Each eight-bar section is labeled with a rehearsal letter.

Note how the number of bars in each area is clearly labeled. Also notice how events can appear in odd-bar lengths. For example – letter C bars 5-7 = three bars of piano melody, switching to tutti for one bar in C8. This example shows the choice for “Featured Material” as primarily main melody (C 5-7), but sometimes can appear as counter or composed material that may answer/contrast main melodies (C8).

If need-be, the arranger may start with even simpler ideas per section, for example “eight bars =mainly saxes,” then work in more deeply to see if any background material would help create more interest, or even if the melody should shift to a different group of instruments for part of that same eight-bar

usually, you will be able to rely on your own inclinations, which may or may not be directly inspired by others, but ideally by your own instincts and experimentations. But one can see that once some basic decisions are spelled out, as in a verbal schematic, the next round of choices will have more direction and clarity.

Basic Decisions Lead to Logical Choices

It can be very helpful to follow this step-by-step process when writing for a big band or any situation with many orchestration choices. It may help you feel more in control of the various elements at your disposal and be creative with them. And often, these basic choices may inspire other more specific



section. Any decision may be changed at this point. This whole process is to give the arranger an idea for the overall flow of events in terms of color, texture, and general feelings of intensity and drama in the form.

Note some of the other indications I added on the schematic: “sudden” in C8, “simple” in A3+4, “MF” as a general dynamic reminder in D 1+2, even a general idea about harmony with “a few re-harmonizations” for later work once one gets down to filling in notes/voicings. But in general, the language is still very “big-picture”-oriented at this point.

As I do these schematics myself, I’ve often heard other things suggested to me from my inner ear and overall experience. I have stored years of aural memories of all kinds of big bands and arrangers, even if only of their overall sounds. One writer’s “big tutti” might sound different than another’s. How might Thad Jones, Gil Evans, or Frank Foster have voiced this or that? Is the chart in a very different style than that of earlier arrangers and, if so, what kinds of sounds are you hearing as they relate to the chart? Perhaps a re-harmonization of a chord might be needed for dramatic impact or surprise.

You may also start to hear other sounds you want to include along the way. Mutes? Woodwind doubles? Wordless voice? Even-

ideas – what exact kind of “big voicing” is best at a certain moment, creating just how much “power,” and so on? How busy or simple a line should this or that “counterline” be? How consonant or dissonant should the harmony feel at any moment? Once more basic decisions have been made, the answers to these next sets of decisions may come faster, easier, and might even seem like the most logical choices that can be made.



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