

Thoughts on Arranging

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WORKSHOP FOR VOCAL ASIA FESTIVAL

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PREPPING TO ARRANGE

- = Who is the arrangement for?
- = Consider the NEEDS for the arrangement (should it be a feature solo? Should it be a good 'closer,' or 'opener?' Should it showcase something special, like your great ability to sing difficult harmony? Should it be fun or serious or...?)
- = How difficult should the arrangement be?
- = Study the song. What are the lyrics about? What are the chords like, and melody?

CONCEPTUALIZING THE ARRANGEMENT

- = Consider the MOOD you want for your arrangement (Happy? Sad? Melancholy? Anxious? Gentle? Comedic? Fun? Exciting? Playful? Bluesy? Sad? Surprising? Refreshing? Dramatic?) What MOOD(s) should the audience FEEL when they hear it?
- = How are you going to achieve these moods in the writing?

LANGUAGES:

Try to establish a clear 'language' for each of the following categories, and be fairly consistent with them. Use consistency of languages to build a mood/concept/vibe in your arrangement.

1. Rhythmic Language (Tempo? Groove? Kicks? Meter? Types of rhythms used?)
2. Melodic Language (Are you using the melody as written or using a lot of variation?)
3. Harmonic Language (Using the harmony as written? Reharmonizing (a lot or a little bit)? Modal?)
4. Voicing Language (Solo, unison, octaves, 2-part, 3-part, 4-way close, 4-way open [choral or drop 2,] 5+ part, quartal, solo with backgrounds, fugue-like, etc.)

MOTIVES:

= Create 2-3 different motives to use in the arrangement. Recurring motives shape the character of the arrangement – they help to establish the mood that you want to create. Motives promote a sense of unity – they tie the arrangement together so it doesn't sound scattered.

= Motives should recur 2-3 times in the arrangement. They can be constructed from anything that is clearly identifiable and repeats at least once (so it becomes a familiar sound to the listener.) Consider adding them to your intro, your ending, and perhaps an interlude in the middle.

= Example motives might be:

Rhythmic hits. Certain melodic variation that recurs. A reharmonized passage that occurs several times in the arrangement. Dynamic shifts such as soft then sudden LOUD recurring at a certain place in the song. A short vamp that recurs.

FLAVORS:

- = texture
- = dynamics
- = phrasing
- = vocal range
- = stylistic elements

BRAINSTORMING PHASE

- = Start writing a sketch at the piano (or in your head) or on computer - just brainstorm ideas and get them down so you don't forget.
- = Or, use a recorder as you brainstorm to catch anything that you hear. (It's too easy to find something awesome, then later forget what it was!)
- = Sometimes, just write the rhythm
- = AVOID JUDGING everything. Try to get into just letting the ideas flow. Your first or 2nd ideas are probably the best. Don't worry if it seems too simple. Don't "overthink" it.
- = At the end, try to make some decisions about what you want for this arrangement.

ORGANIZING THE ARRANGEMENT

- = An arrangement needs organization— there has to be SOME order/structure to the form.. GOAL: a good balance of unity (predictability) and variety (surprise.)
- = The biggest single issue I see in student arrangements is inconsistency, in general – not enough unity. You can't write every section differently – the listener needs SOMETHING to latch onto, something that is familiar, that repeats. Balance that with some creative surprises.
- = Think intensity levels: they are important – they help to shape the arrangement into a cohesive whole. Always watch this! Typically (but not always) intensity level starts low, then builds, builds, sustains (during a solo maybe,) then peaks, then finally a cool down leading to the end.
- = Capture the ideas that INSPIRE you in the moment – these are the best!!
- = Sit on your back patio ☺ and hear it in your head. Make notes. When done, go get another cup of coffee or tea, then do it again.
- = Write a 'script' (a plan) for the ENTIRE arrangement. The whole arrangement should have an intensity shape. Here's an example script:

INTRO – (Key of C) Lyrical and beautiful sweeping melody in soprano over harmonized background chords. Use a melodic line that is similar to the bridge. END intro on a 'surprise chord.' Mood: peaceful.

A – Unison women 1st 2 bars; unison men 2nd 2 bars, 2-part for 4 bars

A – Unison men 1st 2 bars, unison women 2nd 2 bars, - 2-part for next 4. Some small melody variation.

B – 4-part chords together with the inner moving parts. More drama here

A – Unison women and men first 4 bars, then break into 4 part for the next 4.

INTERLUDE (based on intro material.) Mostly a repetition from the intro. End of interlude leads to a key change – down a major 3rd.

A – (Key of Ab) Female solo with backgrounds.

A – Female solo again with MOSTLY the same backgrounds, slight variation.

B – All in 4-part with melodic variation, and more movement – building drama and higher intensity.

INTERLUDE (based on melody from intro) Mostly a repetition from the intro. End of interlude tapers down to all for a gentle last A section.

A – Unison women 1st 2 bars; unison men 2nd 2 bars, 2-part for 4 bars. Very similar to the beginning, but add a repetition of the last phrase 3 times. (Tage ending.)

END – Use a short version of the INTERLUDE as an ending.

STARTING TO WRITE

- = Consider writing your intro or ending AFTER you've written the arrangement. (Just an option.)
- = Consider writing words/rhythms first if it's a groove-based tune.
- = Follow your script (though, you might later totally depart from this script as you write. This is ok!)
- = Keep your eye on expressing a FEELING on a line by line basis. No one cares about hearing 'chords' or 'rhythms,' try to communicate FEELINGS.
- = If you get stuck for ideas (it happens often!) – walk away, come back later. Take a break and come back. Or, listen to some other music then come back.
- = Don't write primarily from an intellectual point of view. Write it from an emotional point of view; the song should express emotion.

FINALIZING THE ARRANGEMENT

- = Leave the arrangement for at least a few hours or days. Come back to it with a fresh perspective and discover what you want to change, if anything. (Listen to it ALL the way through in your head.)
- = Put it on computer notation.
- = Print out and proof read the music. I have NEVER written an arrangement where I didn't make some note or rhythm mistakes in the notation. Proof read it as well as you can.
- = If something (ANYTHING) doesn't sound right (at the piano, or on computer playback,) then it ISN'T right. Fix it. Great writers fix every detail until it truly sounds 'right.' Arranging is not about writing a lot of notes, it's about writing the 'right' notes.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

- = Arrangements (the most creative ones) can take me 20-40 hours. The problem is not finding ideas, the problem is how to choose from so MANY ideas that come to mind.
- = Another challenge is tying together sections so they sound natural: connecting the sections. Making it flow. Keeping momentum, interest, but not so much that it gets scattered.
- = Getting stuck: sometimes a 4-bar passage will hang me up for days. But when I find the right solution – it sounds so 'right.' AND, it might be the most simple thing. IF IT WORKS, SOUNDS RIGHT – THEN USE IT! DON'T OVERTHINK IT.
- = Playing piano has helped me more than any other single thing in my whole musical career! The 2nd most helpful has been listening a lot. The 3rd (in arranging) has been playing someone else's arrangement at the piano.
- = The arrangement that was the most easy for me to write was the one that SOUNDED probably like it would be the most difficult. (Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy)
- = The arrangements that are most difficult for me to write are the ones where:
 - I don't have a clear concept/mood/emotion ahead of time.
 - I don't have a good 2-3 motives to use to unify the arrangement.
 - I spend too too too too too much time trying to find something AWESOMELY creative. Sometimes if try too hard and too long to find some magical idea, then, I find no good ideas at all. The most important thing is to tap into your creative FLOW – without too much judgement.

BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN GIVEN MUCH – ARRANGEMENT BREAKDOWN

An analysis of one of Michele's arrangements.

Arranged for Bradley Hampton, recorded on CD, One Savior, One Voice

(available at www.OneSavoirOneVoice.com, CD Baby <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/soundstage2> or iTunes [<https://itunes.apple.com/ke/album/one-savior-one-voice/id948938462>])

ORIGINAL SONG:

- = Languages: traditional choral church music; triadic voicings. ballad, a capella. Simple harmony with some surprises – not TOO simple. Melody – lyrical, a lot of stepwise motion, verses repeat, typical church hymn.
- = Mood: sweet, caring, relaxed, a message of LOVE and GIVING, also, ASKING for love and giving, in gentle way.
- = Script (happens 3 times):
 - A = 4 bars
 - B = 4 bars
 - C = 4 bars
 - D = 4 bars(feels like an AABA form; feels like the C is the "bridge")
- = Other characteristics: nothing much – no intro, ending.

MICHELE'S ARRANGEMENT:

- = To start thinking about this arr: I knew the group could probably sing anything. I knew they were probably very good vocal group singers, so: no restrictions.
- = I also knew this would be for a recording, and other arrangers were Mark Kibble (Take Six,) David Maddux (First Call,) Phil Mattson, Darmon Meader (NY Voices), Anders Edenroth (Real Group,) etc. So: wow, the pressure was on to make it as good as possible.
- = In analyzing the piece and brainstorming, I discovered something special that I loved: the lyrics.

= I wanted to keep this arrangement sweet, but make it more intense – more deep and profound. The lyrics basically communicate: 'be a person that helps those in need, and also know that this is not just a gift for them, but it's a gift for yourself.' I wanted the listener to be really emotionally moved about the beauty and importance of the message.
= So the first idea I had was to make a [chant](#), a recurring chant taking certain lines I picked from the song. This was the first motive. The chant has a haunting effect, and appears often in the arrangement, but with a positive message. It also creates rhythmic vitality which helps to energize the piece. (PAGES 1-4; 0 -:53):

*I shall give love to those in need,
I'll show my love by word and deed,
With every brother that I see,
Who has the need of help from me
(then after several repetitions:)
Thus shall my thanks be thanks indeed.*

PLAY-BY-PLAY OF THE ARRANGEMENT:

1. The arrangement needed to be longer than just 3 verses. It had to be lengthened, which would also give it more weight of importance. It turned out to have a feeling of being a bit epic: long, it takes the listener on a journey.

2. Wanted to create *importance* and drama. So I used often a [pedal tone](#) – the second recurring motive in the arrangement. [Pedal tones](#) (with various tension chords above) create excitement and anticipation. (PAGES 1-4 :0)

3. There also had to be relief from the excitement, because we always need a balance of unity and variety. So I created as part of the intro and ending, a little sweet, simple, [playful idea](#). (PAGE 5 :52-1:04) This is the third recurring motive – it happens at least several times. It serves to remind the listener: this piece is about sweetness and love, and here is sweetness and love in this little motive.

4. When the song actually starts, there has been 1:06 seconds of intro. The real melody begins with a solo with backgrounds (PAGE 6 1:04) then also just after, voicings are simple 4-way close and drop 2, or, just choral voicings – simple. (PAGE 7 1:15) The [pedal tone](#) continues. (*Then a revisitation of the [playful idea](#) motive – exactly the same.)

5. Then the 2nd verse of the song – no [pedal tone](#) this time, so it is a relaxation from the previous intensity building. (PAGE 9, 1:37) Just a little different as it's all harmonized (4 way close and drop 2)

6. After 2 verses, something different had to happen. And, I needed to begin to build excitement/drama somehow. So I made a long EXTENDED INTERLUDE (based on the intro PAGES 10-14 1:57) that built in intensity. This helped to give dramatic importance to the arrangement, and created interest in general. Here's how intensity was built:

= The interlude starts with simple chords (exactly like the intro – helping to create unity in the arrangement) in a low range, then over time, the pitches move up to eventually be in a high range – full, strong chords.

= Notice the background melody is simple and just moves up by step over time. The background is [chant](#), [pedal tone](#), and interesting, sometimes dissonant harmony behind.

= The chords (harmony) increase in dissonance and the volume continue gets louder and louder, over time.

= The reharmonized chord progression contains SURPRISES – chords the ear didn't expect. Creates drama.

7. Last Verse

= The 1st 8 bars of the last verse have BIG chords in a high range coming out of the interlude build up! (PAGES 14-15 2:41)

= Then it needed to cool down – high drama eventually needs relief at some point. So it reverted back to less dramatic chords, a medium range, and no [pedal tone](#). Things begin to relax. (BOTTOM PAGE 15 2:53)

= Using a tag (a repetition of the last line 3 times) lets the listener know we are near the end.

8. Final Ending

= Then appears the [playful idea](#) motive (PAGE 16, 3:11) to give the music a chance to go truly back to a peaceful place.

= Then finally, a final section was added, very light, with the [chant](#), and [pedal tone](#), presented in a very easy, relaxed way. A long cool down, then, a gentle fade out. (PAGE 17-19 3:20)