ELEMENTS THAT MAKE ARRANGMENTS & COMPOSITIONS

- Chart has clear focus, character, story with beginning, middle & end.
- Focus is clear regarding central elements. (What is the primary focus [melody, rhythm, harmony] at any one point—there can be only one primary focus)
- Consistent harmony & voicing
- Idiomatic tunefulness
- Rhythmic invention
- Recurring elements
- Harmony serves the needs of the chart & is logical
- BALANCE: complexity v. simplicity, one element against another, etc., surprises & expectations
- Idiomatic/stylistic cohesion
- Idiomatic horn writing
- Idiomatic rhythm section writing
- Tension & release elements? (rhythmic, harmonic, & melodic densities balanced & related to overall form.
- Contrasts

TIPS ON COMPOSING

(Many will apply to arranging)

One of the hardest parts of teaching jazz is teaching composing. How can a teacher tell a student how to write music that the student hears? It cannot be done. What can be done is helping the student to recognize and develop what is strong in their writing. The ultimate choices will be the students. The teacher’s job is to help them find and make choices. If the student has only a first draft, there is nothing to choose from. The teacher can assist in the rewriting process, instruct the student on questions to ask, and help with procedures and organizational ideas from a long history of great composers, arrangers, and writers.

MUSIC THEORY RULES

Two great rules of all music theory:

- No. 1 Does it sound good?
- No. 2 Does it sound good?

All else is a discussion of music theory principles, not music theory rules. When a composer creates a musical idea, at some point he must refer to rule no. 1. If the answer is “yes,” he might want to ask “why?” At that point he may discover a principle working that will be helpful in developing this piece or other compositions. If the answer is “no, it doesn’t sound good,” the composer will have to ask “why?” and may discover other helpful principles. The composer should always refer to the two rules and try to determine the principles behind the answers. If something sounds good, you would want the tools and understand the principles in order to create music later that sounds good. It follows that the composer would also want to understand the things that made the music not sound good so as to avoid the same mistakes.

GETTING STARTED

Let the inspiration carry you as far as it will. Try not to be critical of what comes naturally. It is hard enough to get the flow going. If you constantly criticize your output, you will inhibit the flow. Let the juices flow. After the inspired moment has past, then the work can begin.

A piece may begin with any number of musical elements. You may only have a rhythmic idea, only a melodic germ, or possibly a harmonic progression. I have started some compositions from a formal idea (ABACABA), or from an orchestration concept, thinking of a combination of sounds, then having to imagine music that would make it work. There is no set way to begin. Move with what moves you at the moment.
REWRITING

Hemingway once said that writers were not paid to write, writers were paid to rewrite. This is good advice to all composers and arrangers. In the process of writing and rewriting, the composer must constantly refer to rule no.2 (or rule no.1). A first draft gives the composer no choices. Examination of all the elements of a piece and a deliberate reworking of these elements gives the composer choices. If the composer has written several versions of one section of a composition, the choice can be made for the most effective and musical. Sometimes after writing and rewriting a section of music, I will have five to choose from. Sometimes I end up with the sixth version, a combination of the best elements of the first five. Other times, it is the first draft that best conveyed the musical idea. Having done the other five versions helped in determine the first idea was the best, how else could I know without the other choices?

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Once you have basic ideas for your piece the composer should ask questions of every element. This is the way to begin a process of re-writing.

- **Melodic Material**
  - Range: too much? Not enough? Too extreme?
  - Contour (emotional curve, climax timing, story telling)
  - Busy/not busy enough
  - Vague?

- **Phrasing**
  - Phrase content: Is the phrase form = abcd efghaij or more clear: ahac, abba, abac, etc.
  - Phrase beginnings: (before the downbeat/on the downbeat/after the downbeat: B/O/A)
  - Phrase lengths: short and long phrasing as contrasts

- **Harmony**
  - Too busy/ not busy enough
  - Does it support or conflict with the melody
  - Are there possible substitutions, deceptive resolutions, reharmonizations, which could help propel the piece. Material may recur in the piece in different harmonic settings or different modes.

- **Focus**
  - Which area should get the most attention at any point?
  - Harmony
  - Melody
  - Counterpoint (does the secondary material support or conflict with the primary material?)
  - Orchestration
  - Do the secondary elements distract from or support the primary element

- **Accompaniment choices:**
  - No accompaniment?
  - Independent?
  - Dialog?
  - Homorhythmic?: Emphatic matching of the accompaniment and melody. 1 to 1 relationship?

- **Form and the larger structure of the piece:**
  - Introduction/exposition of main themes/Development of main themes/transitions/restatement of themes (maybe in a different way than in the beginning)/ending
  - What is the relationships of the themes, transitions, introduction and ending?
  - contour (emotional curve of the entire piece, does it tell a story, how to control the curve.)
CONTRASTS
An A section is usually followed by a B section at some point. For a B section to sound like a B section it has to be different from the A section. That sounds like an obvious statement. Many beginning composers get locked into their first ideas, and write what they consider B sections when it is actually more of a development of the A ideas. Some possible contrasts are:

- Harmonic character
- Bright/dark character, Modulations
- Type of vocabulary: Traditional & substitutions, Mystery chords, Pedals
- Simplification of original
- Complication of original
- Harmonic rhythm (if A is active then B could be less harmonically active)
- Melodic range (if A remains low, then B could go a little higher, A returns low, B1 return a little higher than B.)
- Orchestration (change of colors and accompaniment)
- Texture (small and thin/big and thickly textured)
- Rhythmic activity (applies to the melody and accompaniment) smooth/jagged, Active/passive, what is the basic unit? 8ths? then quarters, dotted quarters, dotted eighths, and sixteenths would contrast.
- Phrases beginnings (before the downbeat/on the downbeat/after the downbeat: B/O/A)
- Phrase lengths: short and long phrasing as contrasts

CONSISTENCIES
Contrasts are very important, but consistency is a factor. This is often very difficult for some beginning composers. Harmonic vocabulary: might not mix dodecaphonic writing with I-IV-V within phrases. Extended tertian chords and polychords may not have bebop sounding ii-V-I passages in between.

MOTIVIC/COMPOSITIONAL DEVICES
A list of compositional devices not limited to any musical style or musical element. A composer could manipulate melodic, harmonic and rhythmic material using any of these devices.

- Repetition: the idea has to recur for us to hear it as a motive. A one time occurrence of an idea may not be significant in the overall structure of the piece.
- Adding material: adding material to the motive. Added material could be a prefix (before) or a suffix (after). Distinguished from ornamentation in that the original occurs intact before or after the added material.
- Ornament or Embellishment: Addition of notes to the original motive. The general motive is still discernible. Could include an inflex (within).
- Displacement: Pitch or pitches placed in different octaves than the original idea. Displacement can also refer to the rhythm of the motive.
- Mode Change: A change from one mode to another.
- Sequence: Repetition of motive at different pitch levels
- Transposition: Transposing the idea to other pitches or to another rhythmic place.
- Augmentation: The idea with larger rhythmic values or larger intervals
- Diminution: The idea with smaller rhythmic values or larger intervals
- Fragmentation: separating the motive or idea into even smaller pieces.
- Inversion: The idea turned upside down, a mirror image of itself. What rose before now falls and vice-versa. The intervals can be exact inversions or diatonic inversions.
- Retrograde: The idea played backward
- Retrograde Inversion: The mirror of the idea played backwards

LISTENING
Someone once said, “stealing a little is plagiarism, stealing a great deal is prolific writing.” Stravinsky once said, that he stole a great deal from Mozart, but was sure Mozart would be pleased with what he did with it. Listen to many styles, not just your area of expertise. Ask yourself about the rules of music. If it sounded good, why? Remember what made it sound good and use the principles. If it sounded bad, certainly try to remember why and avoid whatever was the cause.