Arranging for Jazz Ensembles 101

REWORKING the MELODY

Arranger’s Job

An arranger manipulates the style and rhythm setting, the melody, the harmony, the orchestration, the accompaniment patterns, and sometimes the form of a piece. Any of these elements can be a starting point for working on the arrangement. The elements ultimately coexist, so any treatment of the melody should fit the style, the harmony should fit the melodic treatment, the orchestration should reflect its place in the form. Rather than trying to juggle all of the elements at once, start with one. All elements can be adapted to fit the others as the arrangement unfolds.

Melody is the very essence of music — Mozart
What survives every change of system is melody — Igor Stravinsky

Respect the wisdom of Mozart and Stravinsky and start with and keep the focus on melodic development throughout the arrangement.

Melodic Development

Arrangers should take an oath like Primum non nocere, a Latin phrase that means “First, do no harm.” Before cutting and chopping and “fixing” your piece, get to know it well. The other part of that oath should be, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Too often, an arranger has “fixed” too many interesting things in a piece, overloading the clear, straightforward original line with every embellishment and rhythmic displacement, two measures of 5/4, a measure of 7/4, a salute to Coltrane harmonic substitutions aiming for the inevitable swing funk bridge. Remind yourself: “First, do no harm,” and “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

Most fake book and sheet music versions of jazz standards show the melody in its barest and simplest form, with little or no style. Get a good copy of the piece you are planning to arrange to know what the original composer intended at the very least. Jazz performers embellish, change, and sometimes ignore parts of the melody or change them, or, in some instances, play them wrong, so don’t trust your knowledge of a melody by one jazz recording you have heard. Listen to several artists perform the piece while comparing their versions to the lead sheet. What kinds of changes are made to the original? Listen to the whole, then listen to the individual components (melodic embellishments, changes in harmony, rhythmic elements that determine the style), then listen again to the whole and how the individual elements interact.

Here is a list of devices an arranger will use to adapt and individualize the melody.

Rhythmic Setting

Change the rhythm to fit a style. Often a basic melody can be made more interesting without the addition of any new pitches, but by just changing the rhythms to make give them style. How would the melody be played to make it swing, or make it sound Latin, or could it be turned into a waltz or an odd-meter?

She’ll be Coming ’Round the Mountain
Simple “lead sheet” version with no style

She’ll be com - in’ ‘round the mount - ain when she comes.
She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain
Medium swing style added using rhythmic vocabulary but no extra pitches.

She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain
As is might appear in a jazz waltz style.

She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain
As it might appear in five.

She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain
The rhythms, and cut time leave no doubt this is a Latin feel.

When the Saints Go Marchin' In
Simple “lead sheet” version with no style.

Oh, when the Saints Oh, when the Saints Oh, when the Saints go march-in’ in.
When the Saints Go Marchin’ In
Medium swing style added using rhythmic vocabulary but no extra pitches.
The 8\textsuperscript{va} displacement in m.3 is dramatic.

When the Saints Go Marchin’ In
As it may appear in a jazz waltz style. The long notes in the melody will do nothing to establish the jazz waltz, so much will depend on the accompaniment or secondary material to communicate the style.

After You’ve Gone
Simple “lead sheet” version with no style.

After You’ve Gone
As it may appear in five.

Ornamentation
When arranging vocal melodies for instruments, jazz arrangers are not limited to the syllables of the lyrics. Notes can be added to the melodies to make them sound idiomatic for the instruments and style. For example, any primary pitch (a.) may be approached with arpeggiated tones from above (b.) or below (c.), or scale tones from above (d.) or below (e.). Any primary melodic pitch may have neighbor tones. The lower neighbor or leading tone is usually chromatic; the upper neighbor tone is usually diatonic (f.). Chromatic passing tones may be used and are typically prepared using a diatonic note and then resolve to a primary pitch (g.). Any of these approaches may be combined (h. & i.).
Single pitch “G” embellished using arpeggiated tones, scale passages, and neighbor tone groups

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{a.} && \text{b.} && \text{c.} && \text{d.} && \text{e.} \\
\text{f.} && \text{g.} && \text{h.} && \text{i.} \\
\end{align*} \]

In the following examples, ornamental notes have been added to the original primary pitches to create idiomatic instrumental styles. Notes have been added before the primary notes and within the line. Neighbor tone groups and passing tones have been used.

*She’ll be Coming ’Round the Mountain*

Medium swing

*When the Saints Go Marchin’ In*

Medium swing

Be careful changing melodies that we all know and love. There are notes that should not be changed, and you have to decide as an arranger to what limit you stretch your idea from the original. The boundaries will change depending for whom you are doing the arrangement. Have you been hired by a Beauty pageant contestant or the local hip Monday night rehearsal jazz band?

One of the challenges for the arranger is to find the right balance between the simple and the ornate. Ornamentation or rhythmic complexity can create a great deal of interest or be a distraction from the essential musical idea. The arranger must consider the overall structure when making any musical decision. Timing is everything. The place in the chart may dictate the harmonic, rhythmic and melodic approach. There is no secret formula—just the formula decided by the arranger for each given circumstance by making choices and questioning those choices.

As you work individually with the melodic separate from the harmony, you might recognize harmonic implications in the original melody and some implications in your version of the melody. Make notes as you develop your lines.
Development Devices as reference

• Rhythmic displacement, particularly anticipation, and sometimes delayed resolution
• Passing tones & Chromatic Passing tones (usually prepared
• Neighbor tones
  — Upper neighbor tone = diatonic
  — Leading tone or lower neighbor tone = chromatic
  — Neighbor tone combinations
• 8va displacement
• Arpeggiation, pivot or pedal tones
• Iteration or repeated notes
• Modal mixture, blues notes
• Sequencing ideas—rhythmic and pitch groupings

Write & Rewrite

Once you have your melody the way it feels right. Sing it a view (dozen) times. Often a first time arranger will develop a version of the melody that sounds natural, but has failed to notate it correctly on the page. Make sure that what you are singing is accurately represented on the page. If any part of the line feels awkward or forced now, it will probably still sound awkward and forced at the reading. Try making it less interesting in some spots so that other interesting spots have a chance to shine. Arrangers are the directors and the scriptwriters who craft the great lines for the cast. A funny line can die from lack of a good set-up. Space is important to frame what the listener should hear and react to: surprise, laughter, lament. Sing it on the way to the grocery store, to and from work. Listen to your natural inclinations to make it just a bit better, fine tuning one rhythm, finding a relationship between a fragment from the first half that should match and be developed like an earlier part. Arrangers will often have several versions of the melody written before picking the best suited for the situation. Do not throw the other versions away, yet; parts of them may be useful later on (in spite of the contradiction to this advice in the next paragraph). I have written some sections of an arrangement five times in a row and used a sixth version which was the best material pulled from the earlier five with better pacing.

Writing is writing. Writing music is a similar process to putting words on the page. Hemingway said that writers are not paid to write, but paid to rewrite. “I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of [waste],” Writing is rewriting. Hemingway confided to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1934. “I try to put the [waste] in the wastebasket.” He also suggests starting with the simplest things and distrust adjectives, which may serve as warnings about overuse of ornamentation to the arranger. Arrangers write and rewrite. Mark Twain once said, “The difference between the almost-right word and the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.” It’s worth the effort to get the right balance of simple direct melodic material and effective ornamentation.

Assignment No. 1

Write and rewrite at least two versions of tune chosen for your first arrangement. Be prepared to show your work to the class and explain specifics regarding elements used to rework melody including discussion of why certain devices were used in relation to the pacing of the piece.

Due: 1st class of week 2.
Some Melodic Principles

• Try to avoid leaps over the barlines and from weak beats to strong beats.

• After more than one leap in the same direction, and after any skip of more than a third attempt to bring the line back by a half or whole step.

• Make the melody lead to some climactic goal, do not let it wander aimlessly.

• Avoid repeating a note on strong beats or nearby measures.

• Avoid using the same note too frequently.

• Avoid two or more equal high points.

• Avoid using the same rhythmic pattern in consecutive or nearby measures.

• Avoid symmetrical phrases and periods.
Other melodic development examples

1. Basic line with no style.

2. Rhythmic Activity + Bass line

3. Iteration

4. NTs around Primary Pitches

5. Notes before/Pivot on Chord tones, Ch. PT

6. Notes added to middle & end