The Art and Science of Jazz Arranging

An Honors Creative Project (ID 499)

By

Kevin J. Klee

Project Director

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Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
May, 1981

Spring 1981
For my ID 499 project, I wanted to tackle something that could be considered significant. I wanted to make my mark on the musical world, as it were. Being involved with music, I find myself in a rather unique position because I believe that my academic skills in music far outweigh my performance skills. Even though I lack the necessary talent to become a great performing artist, I still feel that I can make an important contribution to the field of music through education and by arranging and composing music for school ensembles.

It has been said of jazz that it is the art of the arranger rather than of the composer. Because of its unique emphasis on improvisation and the individual expression of the soloist, jazz depends on tunes for their harmonic patterns as much or more than for their melodic content. These harmonic chord changes form the basic framework and structure from which the jazz soloist weaves his art. The art of the arranger lies in structuring the music around the given chord pattern and melody (if one exists.) The arranger in a very real way is responsible for organizing the music and balancing it in such a way that the innovativeness and creativity of the soloist and the precision and ensemble feeling of the band are showcased more or less simultaneously. The science of musical arrangement involves the observance of the accepted principles of harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration. These serve not to limit the arranger's creativity, but instead act as resources to guide him.
The craft of the arranger has fascinated me and occupied much of my time since my first exposure to it over four years ago. Since that time, I have completed over twenty-two arrangements for groups ranging from marching bands to symphony orchestras. However, my first love has always been the jazz ensemble. There is something about the collective tone color of a big band that makes it one of the most exciting sounds on earth! It is for this reason that I decided to arrange four pieces for full jazz ensemble to fulfill my Honors Creative Project. In the process, I also turned composer and actually wrote one of the compositions that I arranged.

My first arrangement was based on the Lewis and Klenner tune, "Just Friends." It is an interesting thirty-two bar song that was made popular by saxophonist Charlie Parker on an early recording with strings. I approached the introduction from a slow ballad standpoint with the lead tenor player setting the theme over the band's sustained harmony with two horns thrown in for color. This is followed by a transition to an up tempo swing feel, and a trio of tenor sax, trumpet, and trombone state the melody. Each of the aforementioned instrumentalists are featured on improvised solos, and the saxophone section adds its own excitement with a sixty-four bar "super sax" soli. The trombone section is also featured with the bass in a unison soli passage somewhat reminiscent of Thad Jones' "Tiptoe." The ensemble re-enters for a "stop-time" chorus without the piano, bass, and drums. I then added the rhythm section for the final shout chorus which modulates into the bridge of "Lollipops and Roses." At the close of the shout chorus, the trio makes another appearance to recap the melody and to settle things down a bit.
Each year Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia and Sigma Alpha Iota music fraternities sponsor Spring Sing, a campus-wide swing choir contest designed to raise scholarship money for the University Foundation. This year, two of the arrangements I did for my honors project were performed during the program. The first arrangement was a "Chicago Medley" and featured music popularized by this rock group. The second, "The Day After (Our First Night Together,)") was based on a composition by jazz flugelhorn-player Chuck Mangione.

The "Chicago Medley" featured "Make Me Smile," "Colour My World," "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?," "Beginnings," and "Questions 67 and 68." These five hits provided some of the most outstanding popular music of the late 60's and early 70's. This particular arrangement was dedicated to Mike Scanlon, a good friend and Chicago's most ardent supporter. Mike was undoubtedly the inspiration behind this orchestration. My arrangement utilized the traditional instrumentation plus a horn section, a harp, five vocalists, and an assortment of Latin percussion instruments.

Because of their many jazz influences, the music of Chicago seems particularly suitable for jazz band. In fact, Robert Curnow arranged a Chicago suite for the Stan Kenton Orchestra in 1974. Chicago is a significant musical influence in the popular field if only because of the tremendous amount of their musical output. Yet even when the volume is considered, their music never seems to lose its originality or its amazing versatility. Many of their unison and tutti lines are vaguely reminiscent of the be-bop style of the 1940's and 50's. I feel that this arrangement was particularly effective because of the many mood changes within the five selections.
The Mangione composition provided greater difficulty in its adaptation to the big band idiom. "The Day After" is characterized by the sound of a small performing group. The many unison melodies and predominant bass lines seem to be a trademark of Mangione's music. I tried to capture this feeling of lightness by making use of full tutti sections only sparingly. Most of the piece is comprised of solo lines or the color of one particular section of instruments. The instrumentation is very similar to that used in the "Chicago Medley." The mood of the piece is an uptempo bossa nova/disco feel that seems to be constantly changing between cut time and 4/4. This "happy-go-lucky" mood prevails until measure 107 when it takes on more sentimental overtones as the tempo momentarily ritards. The piece builds to an exciting climax, and then we are let down easily with... what else? a flugelhorn cadenza!

My final chart was a composition that I wrote for my brother Kent, who will one day grow up to be the world's greatest jazz drummer. Kent is thirteen years old and plays drums in the Lakeside Middle School "Lancer Jazz Company." He has studied drums privately for the past four years and shows quite a bit of potential. He is also the leader of his own combo, "Flaming Youth," and believe it or not, he also does some of their arrangements!

"Kent's Blues" follows a twelve bar blues pattern and is well within the playing capabilities of most high school or middle school jazz ensembles. It starts out with a two bar drum solo (naturally,) and features the rhythm section alone for the first chorus. The piano and bass parts are partially written out to help younger and more inexperienced players. The saxes open with the opening theme
which is later accompanied by trombone accents and a trumpet coun-
termelody. The improvised trumpet solo features chord symbols with
the appropriate scales written out. The sax section is featured for
two choruses prior to an alto sax solo. The ensemble then takes
turns trading two bar phrases with the drummer for a total of
twenty-four measures. The drummer leads the band through a rousing
shout chorus, and the ensemble ends the tune by returning to the
original "head."

As I complete this project, I feel not only relief, but also
a sense of deep satisfaction. Arranging is an art, and I feel the
same joy any artist experiences towards a work that he finds aes-
thetically pleasing. As with all of my best assignments, I always
felt that I was doing this project for myself rather than for the
reward of a grade. The fact that two of the arrangements were per-
formed before a capacity crowd of over 3000 people in Emens Audi-
torium should indicate that they are indeed of professional quality.
This is not to say that there aren't rough spots in a few of the
scores. This project has been a significant learning experience for
me, and one of the best learning methods that I know of is trial
and error. To evaluate this project effectively, I think one has
to take in the larger picture and to consider the several hundred
hours of arranging, composing, rehearsing, and copying parts that
this paper signifies.

It used to be that young men who were indentured out to learn
a trade from a master craftsman were required to submit some piece
of work indicating their skill before they themselves could join
the ranks of the trained professionals. It is with this same spirit
that I am submitting this project. It is a project that I feel to be fully deserving of the designation "Honors." With the completion of this Honors Creative Project, I feel a sense of accomplishment that I have proven my musical ability to many people, but most importantly, to myself. Standing on the threshold of Commencement, I eagerly await my acceptance into the company of professional musicians confident that I have been carefully trained in the art and science of jazz arranging.

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May 22, 1981