

TIPS TO BETTER ORCHESTRAL ARRANGING

There are four basic factors essential in making a good arrangement: **Balance**, **Economy**, **Focus**, and **Variety**.

BALANCE has two categories:

- Tonal balance: the proper distribution of tones in order to get the best possible sound with any combination of instruments
 - Formal balance: can be achieved by utilising three basic elements in a meaningful way - *melody*, *instrumentation*, and *time*.
- A. **MELODY** should be handled with care. As a general rule, the arranger needs to restrict themselves to as few melodic ideas as possible, whether they're derived from the song itself or composed by the arranger to add contrast. Before implementing a new motif, look at how you can create variations on the one already present. This will give your arrangement a sense of unity and eliminate confusion.
- B. **INSTRUMENTATION** - the distribution of instrumental sounds directly influences the balance of your arrangement. Different instruments within the orchestra have different timbres, and a good arranger must know how to combine said timbres in a coherent and structured way. Every instrument should have a reason to play a part. Inexperienced arrangers tend to throw all the instruments present in an orchestra into the first page, when maximum effectiveness can be achieved only by judiciously distributing the orchestral colours throughout their score. This correlates to the *Economy* factor. *Side-tip: Knowing the overtone series is a great tool for composers and arrangers to have in their arsenal, as taking it into consideration can elevate the quality of sound.*
- C. **TIME** - the duration of your piece will play a role in how you balance its arrangement. Obviously when composing it's not always easy to estimate how long a piece will turn out to be, but if you are planning on orchestrating it afterwards, you need to take its length into account, so that you can write purposefully and realistically.

ECONOMY is the art of omitting from your score anything not absolutely necessary. Every note in your arrangement should serve a purpose, positively impacting the score as a whole. If it doesn't, it should be erased. As composers we sometimes treat every note as sacred, and that's a notion that can harm our work. By going through the arranging process, we get a second chance at evaluating whether or not something works in our score. Keep into account that sometimes something that may work on paper (or rather your notation software) might not actually translate very well in the studio. No matter how sensitive an arranger is, some errors are bound to be made, and that's a good thing. Making mistakes means that you keep experimenting and trying out new combinations, which will only lead to more growth. Economy is something that can't be overemphasised. Less is more.

FOCUS: at any given point in your score, there is an element which is more important than any other - it becomes the centre of *focus*. It can be a solo instrument (maybe a French Horn carrying the melody) or a whole section (a sombre string section highlighting a dramatic passage in the music), or even the whole ensemble itself. Our ears are capable of unconsciously categorising different aural elements into varying degrees of importance. However, this ability is not without its limits - improper focus can confuse the listener, therefore making them lose interest. When arranging, it is your job to see that the listener's ear is directed to what you want them to pay attention to and not divert it or confuse it by an overly busy background or counter-line.

VARIETY (also called *tone colour* or *timbre variety*) is the process by which an ever-evolving and changing combination of instruments helps maintain the listener's interest throughout a score. This can be achieved by switching different elements of your score around between your ensemble, thereby creating different timbral colours and textures, and by using *harmonic variety*, re-harmonising your melody in its every appearance and utilising harmonic substitutions.

These are four basic principles are the building blocks of any good arrangement. Obviously there is a lot more to be said about each one of them, but by applying them even at their most basic form you should see an improvement in your orchestral arrangements.

Just for reference, here are some instrumental combinations that sound great out of the box:

- Doubling French Horns with Clarinets gives the sound a really noble quality, almost ethereal-like.
- Using Celli in their upper register can result in a really sombre and powerful sound, full of emotion (listen to Barber's *Adagio for Strings*).
- The Viola section, often overlooked, can actually be a really powerful tool in making your string section sound huge. Used right, it can ground a melody or enhance chords in a way that no other section in the orchestra can.
- Woodwinds are under-utilised nowadays because modern film scores many times require a heavy, Hans Zimmer-esque sound. However, they are incredible for adding texture and detail to your compositions. Try them out in their extremes, play around with them and see what kinds of combinations you can achieve. Several sample libraries now include incredibly detailed and creative woodwind sections with all sorts of effects.
- Double your low brass with bassoons to add more spite to your sound.
- Pizzicato Double Bass with a spiccato Celli section playing an octave above is a very common way of grounding your bass line, and can be commonly found in classical scores and film scores alike.

If you want to learn more about arranging and orchestrating, here are some books I would recommend:

The Contemporary Arranger by Don Sebesky
20th Century Harmony by Vincent Persichetti
Sounds and Scores by Henry Mancini
Scoring the Screen by Andy Hill

Study scores written by the great composers such as Mahler, Berlioz, Wagner, Williams, Stravinski, and so on. Each and every one of them is a masterclass in orchestration and composition.

I hope you've found this useful. Thanks for reading!

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