

Rearranging The Arrangement: Making Odd Instrumentation Work in Jazz Band

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If you're teaching at a rural or small school, or if you just had an odd turn-out for this year's jazz band, don't despair! With a few simple arranging skills, a bit of time, and some creativity, you'll be able to play your favorite tunes with any size ensemble and even with a non-traditional set of instruments.

1) Take Stock Of What You Have To Work With

- **What instruments could be used to cover parts that aren't currently in your band?**
 - No bass player? Use bari sax, trombone, or even tenor sax instead.
 - No trombones? Use low saxes or even low trumpets instead.
 - No lead trumpet? Be creative with using high saxes or transposing the chart to fit the ranges of the players you have.
 - Do you have keyboard players/drummers with keyboard skills? Be creative with electronic keyboard, piano, and mallets to fill voids in horn parts or to replace a bass part.

2) Be Familiar With The Written Ranges Of The Instruments You Are Working With

- If you're going to be re-writing parts for instruments, make sure you review comfortable written ranges before you start writing.
- If you have strong enough players, use "High-Intensity" ranges to fill voids you may have in other sections. "Extreme" high and low registers can fill out your band's sound if you have a small band and if you have strong students who can play in tune.

3) Choose Your Repertoire Wisely

- **Be realistic about which tunes your particular orchestration can pull off.**
 - If you don't have a drummer, you may need to skip rock tunes, but you could potentially do latin tunes if your horns can play auxiliary percussion.
 - -If you don't have a strong sax section, or players who can play eighth note passages, then don't choose an arrangement that has an important sax soli (Groovin' Hard, Groove Merchant, Cottontail, etc.)
 - Same thing goes for Basie tunes that require a pianist, Funk tunes that need a good bass player, etc.
- **Play to your ensemble's strengths**
 - If you have great soloists or a few strong players, choose repertoire that will let them shine. If you have a great soloist and a wacky instrumentation backing them up, the soloist will shine and the wacky ensemble will blend in.
 - If you have a lot of one kind of instrument (13 saxes and 3 percussionists!), choose a tune that will celebrate those instruments (Super Sax, Snarky Puppy...)
- **Look outside the box for modern or off-the-beaten-path tunes to do**
 - Your ensemble is already non-traditional, so don't be afraid to search for tunes outside of the "traditional big band" genre.

4) Identify The Most Important Parts To Include/Least Important Parts To Leave Out

- Listen and Take Notes
 - Density Graphs with notes on:
 - Form (Intro/Coda, A/B sections, solo sections, development sections, etc.)
 - Density: how many horns are playing, and what they are playing
 - Voicings (if possible)

- Intensity: where is the most epic part of the chart? Usually determined with dynamics, but could be a solo, shout, or highly-articulated passage.
 - Circle/highlight the parts you think MUST be included in your band's arrangement (melody, harmony, iconic solo sections)
 - Mark parts that you think could or should be omitted in your band's arrangement (shout chorus, soli, non-iconic solo sections)
- Score study, if you have a score that is helpful (for voicings/chord analysis/anything you can't hear your way through)
- Listen to MANY examples of the same tune. You might decide to throw something in your arrangement (transcribed solo, alternate bass line, cool backgrounds) from a small group recording or a different arrangement.

5) Familiarize Yourself With Interval Limits

- If you're not an arranging/orchestration pro, you may make simple mistakes that will make your harmonies sound weird.
- If you want a line to stick out above the rest of the group, make sure you don't have harmonies too close by in pitch. Dropping chord tones down an octave will sometimes solve this issue (Drop 2 Voicings, Drop 4 Voicings)
- In general, the lower your pitches go, the larger the distance you'll need between pitches playing in harmony. If you have low pitches playing in close harmony, it'll sound muddy and gravely.

6) Be Able To Put This All On Paper (or, be able to teach it all by ear)

- If you are not familiar or fluent with music notation software, become that way!
 - Editing and changing things up will be important as you work, and if you're working on a computer, you can cut/paste/delete quickly without hassle.
- If you must work on paper, be ready to spend considerable time on your arrangement (depending on its intricacies/difficulty)
- Don't forget to write out bass lines (AND chord symbols), drum grooves/fills, and piano voicings (AND chord symbols) for young bands.
- If you choose a simple enough song to arrange, work as a team with your band to create your own arrangement by ear.
 - Learn melody as a team
 - Learn bass lines and guide tones for harmony
 - Identify important background figures as a group and learn by ear
 - Assign transcriptions to more advanced students to write out (solis/shouts/iconic solos)
 - Use a good recording as your guide (not necessarily a recording of an arrangement for big band)

Bonus: Do Some Independent Study

If this is daunting or if your first attempt doesn't go as planned, don't give up. Pick up an arranging book, do some research, ask for help and try again. After you learn some simple voicing techniques and how to harmonize quickly, your arrangements won't take as much time to complete, they'll likely sound better, and your group will sound legit even if you have wacky instrumentation.

Recommended texts:

Arranging For Large Jazz Ensemble, Berkley Press, Dick Lowell and Ken Pullig
 Arranging Techniques, Gary Lindsey Staff Art Publishing
 The Complete Arranger, Sammy Nestico Fenwood Music Co.