

Notes on Playing in Ensemble

Bill Troxler

Guiding Principle

The point of playing in ensemble is to enrich the music so that the melody stands out in clear relief and can be easily perceived by the listener.

- Give the melody SPACE. Allow silence. Permit the music to breathe. Too many notes or chord changes can clutter the listening experience and significantly diminish the quality of the music. A good ensemble is about collaboration not about competition.
- Dissonance used sparingly and with good esthetic judgment is an essential tool in creating and relieving tension. The place and nature of dissonance is always determined by where the melody is going. If every sound of an arrangement is consonant, the music will be lifeless. Think of New Age music that seems to come from nowhere and arrive nowhere. It's largely dull because arrangers try to avoid building tension.

Each voice has a role to play in an ensemble. Take care not to confuse those roles when developing an ensemble piece. The melody conveys the meaning of the expression. The bass anchors and moves the music. The interior voice harmonizes, doubles and counters the melody so that the listener can hear the melody more clearly.

Keep in mind that the gold standard for ensemble playing is the classical era chamber music quartet. Its voices are two violins, one viola and one cello. Instruments rarely double lines and then only briefly. Most of the time, three voices will produce the most pleasant arrangements of traditional music.

THE most critical part of playing an arrangement is listening to what other musicians are playing. Dynamics, tempo, accents, all those vital qualities of performance must be done within the context of an ensemble, not as a solo performer.

Order of Arranging Steps

1. Understand the melody. That means LISTEN to it over and over. Figure out what it is saying. Feel the phrases. Know how the melody breathes. Short change this step and both the arrangement and the listeners will suffer. Even a simple melody can take months, if not years, to comprehend fully.
2. Write out the melody.

3. Select the chords – be creative. Make extensive use of chord substitution techniques and consider chords of tension in appropriate places: sus4 chords, diminished chords, augmented chords, add9 chords, etc. A rich chord structure provides the fodder for interesting bass lines and harmonies of the interior voices.

4. Write the bass line.

5. Write the interior voice or voices.

6. Test the arrangement and fix the flaws.

The Bass Voice

- Bass voices are used to accomplish two objectives: provide a harmonic anchor and move the music.
- Know the chord progress of the melody before writing the bass lines. Interesting chord changes provide the setting for good bass lines.
- Begin the bass line by writing the roots of the chords. Add movement by introducing scales at turning points in the melody. Let the bass line anticipate the opening and closing of phrases. Scales are most effective at this.
- Introduce rhythm and syncopation into bass lines. You are not arranging for a marching band! Let the bass create a rhythm by writing lines that are on weak beats and pick-up beats.
- Use tones of the chords as well as passing tones to keep the bass line interesting. Avoid oompah patterns that alternate between the root and the fifth of a chord. Break up that pattern with scales and chord arpeggios and selective dissonances.
- Bass lines that double the melody an octave below can be very powerful. That's why the bass violin in an orchestra is often called a "double" bass. That instrument often doubles the bass line found in the cello. A little goes a long way. Double lines should not extend more than a measure, maybe two.
- Bass lines should not be busy with lots of fast notes. However, a line of all half notes or quarter notes will not create a sense of movement, will bore the player and be a deadly drag on the quality of the music.
- When preparing an ensemble arrangement, determine the outer voices first. That is, write the melody line first and then the bass line. Write the interior voices last. When the bass line works well with the melody, the interior voices are much easier to write.

- Analyze the arrangement to eliminate, or at least reduce, a sequence of parallel fifths and fourths between the melody and bass line. Those sounds produce an undesirable sing-song quality.

The Interior Voice.

- Melodies are usually, but not always, placed in the highest pitched voice of the ensemble. At least the first time they are played. Melodies may appear in lower voices AFTER the listener has heard them in the high voice. It is possible and desirable at times, for the interior voice to be at a higher pitch than the melody. When this occurs the interior voice line generates a high harmony or a free counterpoint that does not distract from the melodic line. This high pitch technique on the interior voice is called a “descant” line.
- The interior voice must be analyzed to ensure that parallel fourths and fifths do not occur with the melody or the bass.
- For pleasant harmonies use thirds, sixths and ninths.
- For dissonant harmonies that create tension, use seconds, major sevenths and tritones.
- Make friends with the pentatonic scale. You’ll find these tones of enormous value when writing harmony and counter-point.
- The specialties of the interior voices are harmony and counter point. Occasional use of a different melody, for a short period of time, in the interior voice can bring out the melody. This technique is called “counter-point”. It is often desirable to begin a counter-point in the interior voice and allow the counter-point to be concluded in the bass voice. Letting the bottom and middle voices play catch with counter-point can be a very effective ensemble technique.

Testing the Ensemble

There is nothing like playing through an arrangement to test an ensemble. Mozart and Haydn would join two other friends to “read” through an ensemble arrangement. They thought the experience great fun. But of course, they were extraordinary composers and their music was usually right the first time it hit the paper. How can we test arrangements before passing out the score to friends?

Enter the computer. Many, low-cost, music writing software packages are on the market. Nearly all of these have a feature called musical instrument digital interface, or MIDI. That means the multi-part score you write will play back on your computer. MIDI is not

always a beautiful sound. But it will show flaws in your arrangement. Here are two software packages that I have used successfully.

- **NoteWorthy Composer:** www.ntworthy.com

From their website:

[NoteWorthy Composer] allows you to create, record, edit, print and play back your own musical scores in pure music notation. You can use the built-in transpose feature to quickly adapt a part written for an instrument in a different key to the native key for your instrument. The print feature makes it possible to publish sheet music right from your desktop. You can also save your notation as a MIDI performance for use in other MIDI applications, including software karaoke players. If you have a computer and an interest in music, consider trying our evaluation edition. It is a free download from this site. The licensed version of the program is just USD \$49 and is made available for immediate download from our site.

- **Finale Print Music** www.finalemusic.com

Finale software is what many professional composers and arrangers use to create scores. You do not need the full package. Scaled-down versions are available on the Finale website. Look under “products”. I use Finale Print Music. It is more sophisticated than NoteWorthy and creates a much better printout of the final score. The cost is about \$80. Finale’s program, NotePad, is only \$10 and does a lot of amazing things!

Many more music writing software packages are available. These are the ones with which I have the most current experience. Search for the one that seems easiest to use for you. All of them do roughly the same thing. How they do it and what kinds of commands are required and printouts are produced distinguish each vendor’s product.