

Fostering Contemporary Musicians: Creativity Through Student-Led Arranging

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Most classically-trained musicians think of *arranging* from a singular perspective: one person, sitting in front of a computer (or pad of staff paper), painstakingly making detailed decisions about what/how various instruments will play. That is, indeed, one way to do it. But, for the rest of us – and for our students – that way of arranging is often too complicated and too time-consuming.

Arranging: the process of making decisions (alone or in a group) about how to play musical material that was primarily composed by another individual or group.

THE BASICS

The primary ingredients for creating music through arranging are:

- 1) melody
- 2) chords
- 3) rhythm

MELODY

When learning melodies, *always* learn/teach by ear. (If you do hand out sheet music, wait until after the students have learned the melody.) Learning by ear gives four important advantages in the arranging process:

- memorization from the start
- an aural understanding of what's happening right away
- a reliance on listening over reading
- a reorientation of one's relationship with the instrument

Notably, many pop melodies have rhythms that are relatively easy to execute but complicated to notate/read! Learning by ear skirts this challenge.

Considerations when choosing a melody:

- difficulty
- range
- key signature
- melodic shape/contour (note: some songs are driven by lyrics, not melodies, and therefore have melodies that are themselves quite boring)

CHORDS

How do we find the chords for any melody?

- The internet is a great resource, especially for pop tunes! Search for “guitar tab” or “chords” – use the “image search” feature.

How do we know what notes to play?

- Default to playing the root and the fifth of the chord. (Avoiding thirds, initially, allows you to play G major and G minor in the same way.)
- Think “as low as possible” to leave room for melodies on the higher end of the instrument. On violin, play on G & D; on viola/cello, play on G & D or C & G; on bass, play the root. More advanced bass players can also explore double stops.
- Easiest instructional path: everybody plays on G & D so chords voicings are the same. When feasible, play double stops.

If you can't find the chords anywhere, try to figure out the chords on your own:

- Many melodies use the I, IV, and V chords – starting there is probably smart.
- For any chunk of notes, figure out what notes are the most harmonically important (e.g., notes that are repeated frequently, the final note of the phrase).
- Which chord in that key shares the majority of those notes? That's probably the best chord for that spot!

Find other ways to incorporate relevant theory into your teaching:

- Teach a melody by ear and ask them to identify the key. (*What note feels like home?*)
- Point out scale patterns.
- Point out skips vs. stepwise motion.
- Ask them to find the chords by figuring out what “sounds good.”

RHYTHM

When in doubt, keep it simple.

Common options:

- any rhythms unique to the tune/song
- drones
- shuffle patterns (e.g., 3-3-2, off beats)
- other rhythmic patterns

The 3 Rules of Chopping:

- 1) Bottom two inches of the bow. (Under your index finger.)
- 2) Stick toward your face.
- 3) Out and in. (Not up and down.)

THE PROCESS

This is up to you and/or your students! Here are some ways to think about making decisions:

- group by instruments (e.g., all violins play chords) or grade (e.g., all seniors play melody)
- arrange democratically (i.e., students make suggestions, every suggestion is tried, the group votes) – this can be time-consuming, but invites many students’ ideas
- incorporate a “you do you” or “jam” section where students choose what to play
- consider if certain sections/groups should be featured in certain ways
- think about what would be interesting from an audience’s standpoint

OTHER TIPS

Always encourage students to make *their own choices* about what to do. There are no *right* or *wrong* answers in this creative process. Discourage them from feeling like something *must* be done a certain way. (*This goes for you, too!*)

Have the students write down what they need to do on their own “tune forms” – this can serve as their sheet music for the arrangement. If you’re making an arrangement for a class, write out who is doing what on the board!

If you put students in small groups, try to mix up instruments, friend groups, ability levels, etc. Arranging with other students can be a remarkably rich experience.

Don’t make assumptions about who may or may not excel at this work. Often times, the least advanced players in the room have the best ideas! Create space for their voices.

Don’t assume your students will be able to effectively work in groups on their own. Group work is hard! It’s always helpful to have conversations with students during the process about constructive group behaviors.

Resist the urge to think arranging is a concrete process that must be done a certain way!

Remain flexible.

Gilbert Town

FIDDLERS

Founded in 2013, the Gilbert Town Fiddlers (GTF) is an extracurricular youth development and music education organization based in Gilbert, Arizona. Drawing upon folk traditions and cutting-edge playing, GTF students develop the creative, collaborative skills necessary to make all of their own arrangements for performances. To their knowledge, this is the only fiddling program of its kind in the country, whose students *themselves* exclusively create their own material. This season marks the 12th year of GTF's flagship high school ensemble and the 2nd year of its middle school program, with 40 students in total.

In addition to GTF's unique musical curriculum centered around aural learning, improvising, and arranging primarily in folk music traditions, students in the program actively develop prosocial skills through various student-led and student-centered activities. This semester, for example, every GTF student will teach a fiddle tune by ear to another GTF student. A large part of the organization's continued growth and success is also based on the idea that GTF belongs to *all* of its students – past, present, and future. Many activities, instructional concepts, and traditions can be traced back to specific students who have come through the program. Accordingly, GTF alumni play an active role in educational programming. In addition to the three alumni who now are on GTF staff, alumni also perform at the yearly holiday fundraiser, sit on alumni panels at retreats to share about their experiences, volunteer to assist at events, and often serve as resources and connections in the college search and application processes.

As folk music is a living tradition actively passed down between generations, GTF places a strong importance on bringing in guest artists to teach and work with its students in workshops and masterclasses. Over the past years, GTF students have been visited by over 40 renowned fiddlers and folk musicians, including Grammy-Winning and Grammy-Nominated artists, many of whom are considered to be among the most influential and important folk musicians living and performing today. Earlier this season, GTF was visited by multi-style cellist Mike Block and concert violinist Rachel Barton Pine.

In March 2024, GTF will travel to the American String Teachers Association National Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, as one of three student groups from across the country who were specially invited by the ASTA National Board to give featured concert performances!



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