

Arranging Fundamentals: Reinventing Melodies

BY DAVID W. SNYDER

Some of the greatest experiences an arranger can have are the opportunities to lovingly “mess with” someone else’s melody. I’ve found that it is also the one aspect of arranging which less experienced musicians are the most intimidated by. However, altering aspects of a song’s melody shouldn’t be looked upon as something that is taboo. Rather, the process can be thought of as actually paying tribute to what makes a work great in the first place.

Selection and Approach

When picking a melody I want to reformat, I always try to select a tune I feel a strong personal connection with. But even when working with lesser material, it is important to find something to love about the given tune and to deeply understand the song’s structure and history. This will keep you inspired and informed, helping creative ideas come more easily.

If the selected tune is one the average listener is generally familiar with, then the way an arranger treats it can act as a window into his or her creative thinking

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and personal style. Whenever possible, it helps to start by listening to a recording of the original version of the song, or at least a version done in the traditional manner. This will help make clear the tune’s original intention as a composition. Assuming there exists plenty of freedom to alter various aspects of the song (melody, harmony, style, meter, et cetera), the most crucial choice the arranger first makes is with respect to the new overall “feel” of the composition. This decision should be allowed to evolve very generally, by choosing basic things like tempo, overall level of



tension, and so on. Then, the arranger should pick a rhythmic style that best addresses those overall ideas. For example, if I want to turn a standard-sounding ballad into something “fast” and more “tense” in mood, I might select a samba for the groove, with a heavily syncopated treatment of the melody, perhaps adding some unusual re-harmonizations as well. Maybe I would also incorporate some kind of underlying rhythmic vamp figure, which could possibly enhance the feeling of tension. Not every change of groove or tempo is going to work for the arranger, personally. He or she must sit with the tune for a while and play around until something feels right. It’s really a matter of taste.

The idea here is to convince the listener that your new arrangement of the tune could, in fact, be the originally intended version – very tricky to pull off! But, if the arranger is familiar enough with the rhythmic and stylistic language of many styles of music (underlying drum patterns, bass lines/comping patterns, traditional rhythmic treatment of melodies), he or she will have more options, and the music will sound authentic. Personally, I find this to be one of the most fun parts of the arranging process. I suggest trying lots of approaches out. You may find that you can hear the tune in more than one new context, so you should give yourself time to find the “right” one. Most importantly, pick one in which you can hear the melody work within the rhythmic style. Remember, it is generally the melody that is the most important aspect of any song, so deal with it first. You can worry about re-harmonization, orchestration, and everything else later. They are the icing on the cake in comparison (the exception being a more conservative alteration of the melody in favor of other changes, such as more heavy re-harmonization, much counterpoint/rhythmic vamps, et cetera). Regardless of the style chosen, let it be one that is familiar to you. I often start by listening to classic recordings, typical of the genre I’ve chosen for my chart, in order to get my head into the specifics of the style. Then, I’ll think about the structure of the melody I’m arranging in relation to this chosen groove.

In some situations, this may seem like putting a square peg into a round hole, but if you think about the original rhythmic design of the tune’s pitches, and compare that to traditional melodies in the chosen style, you may see rhythmic possibilities leap out at you. Trust your ear and your knowledge of the style. Remember, there is some reason you first chose this approach for the tune (or more likely, it chose you). Start by experimenting with the layout of the pitches. If the song has lyrics, even if the arrangement is to be an instrumental, try to hear the lyrics of the song as you re-structure the pitches. Do the words still seem to have a grammatical flow and logic? Melodic structures working with lyrics are often composed with this in mind. How about rhythmic sequences in the original’s phrases? Where’s the tune’s climax (usually the highest note somewhere towards the end)? The ar-

ranger must thoroughly understand the important features of the tune’s original melodic structure, and use technique to “comment” on them.

Interpreting a Smile

If you look at the notation examples I’ve prepared, you’ll see various re-working of a song near and dear to my heart, “Smile,” by Charlie Chaplin for the soundtrack to his film “Modern Times” (1936). My first exposure to this song was the classic ballad recording done by Nat King Cole in the 1950s. Both Cole’s version and the original from the Chaplin film are very ballad-oriented and romantic. It is a very simple song, almost like a lullaby, so there’s lots of room for alterations. A word of caution at this point – there is a fine line between being clever and interesting as arranger, and just “doing stuff” to show off musical knowledge for its own sake. Try to

Arranging : Rhythmic Context Change

based on the tune **"Smile"** composed by Charlie Chaplin

Ex. 1) Original, unaltered version (Ballad) (First four bars)

Ex. 2) With common swing-type phrasing (various tempi)

Ex. 3) As a bossa-nova

Ex. 4) As a samba

Ex. 5) As a jazz waltz

Ex. 6) Light swing playing around drum brushwork (i.e. "Soft Shoe")

Ex. 7) With embellishments around melody's original pitches

* = original melody pitch

remember the original spirit of the tune and the overall intent of the new context, while tastefully trying to keep the listener's interest.

In the examples on the previous page, I've tried to come up with several possible contexts in which "Smile" might appear, while trying to retain as much of the tunes original character as possible. Example 1 is simply the straightforward, unaltered presentation of the song's first four bars (for reference). Notice that the first note is a longer time value (half note) than the notes that follow.

This may have to do with the lyrics – "Smile, (pause) though your heart is breaking..." The melody makes sense rhythmically with the flow and grammar of the words here. So one way I tried to maintain a sense of the tune was to remember this point, at least in the first two bars of each example (Ex. 4 being the only exception for variety), in order to more directly let the

listener know what song they are hearing. If you clearly establish what the tune is early on, you will have more liberty to stray further from the tune later on. It is also important to strive for a balance of the expected, such as sticking close to aspects of the original tune, and the unexpected, such as perhaps altering/obscuring the melody more, even inserting original composed material (carefully!

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– remember, this is an arrangement you are working on). Great arrangers have the ability to stray from the tune to the point where it almost sounds like a different melody. Case-in-point: Bill Holman's treatment of "Stompin' At The Savoy," arranged for Stan Kenton in 1955 (found on *The Best Of Stan Kenton* – Capitol Records). But even in this chart, you somehow always hear "Savoy" in the presentation of the melody. Arrangers like Bill Holman are true masters of this technique. However,

I strongly advise less experienced arrangers to master the art of arranging/altering melodies et cetera with subtlety first before experimenting with more abstract concepts.

If you return to the notation examples, notice the various grooves and styles that have been chosen, and how the melody has been made to fit rhythmically. In examples 2 through 6, only the original pitches were used, nothing extra.

This is a particular challenge, as the arranger must deal with only the number of notes as in the original. This is where knowledge of many tunes done in each particular style comes in handy. For instance, in example 2, the rhythmic figures are very typical of swing phrasing – lots of eighth-note anticipations, a mix of short/long notes. Whereas in example 4, I employ common samba-like rhythmic patterns, such as consecutive syncopated up-beats, and the "surprise" anticipation on beat 4 in the second and fourth bar of the phrase (the beats here are represented by eighth-notes in double time feel). Example 6 is a jazz waltz, with one less



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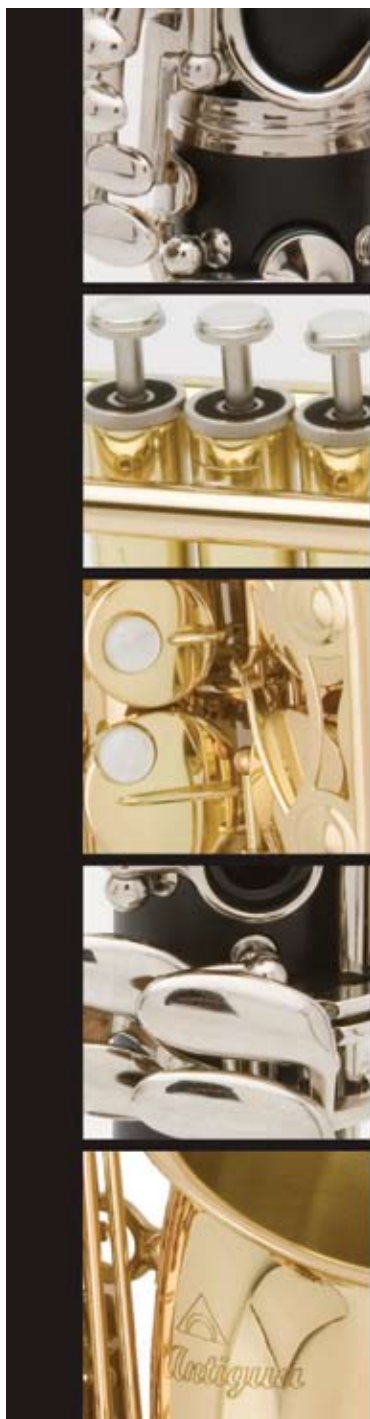
beat per bar – an additional challenge. Example 7 is the only one where I use extra pitches besides the originals. Notice that in this case the locations of the original pitches within the line (each indicated with a “*”) are fairly close to their locations in the original version (ex. 1). This helps keep the feeling for the tune, in spite of the fact that there are many embellishing pitches in the line.


Of course, there are many, many more others styles and ways of phrasing that could have been chosen for this example. In fact, arranging melodies can get much more complicated – longer note and/or phrase lengths (augmentation), turning intervals upside down (inversion), mixed meters, not to mention all the things that can be done with reharmonization. All of these techniques are available, if the arranger has the technique, a background in listening to lots of styles of music, and most importantly, good taste! It should always be remembered that a good arrangement is mostly a clever commentary of a song, using technique to serve that end not for it’s own sake. So don’t try to do everything in one arrangement – that’s just plain overkill.

In Closing

One last thing – remember to reuse a few ideas in the course of your arrangement. You want the listener to walk away remembering something specific about your arrangement. It could be a certain phrase from the rearranged melody, an underlying repeated vamp figure, a specific harmonic progression, a voicing type. Find a few things you can bring back from time to time in the arrangement to give it some specific sense of character. If you are clever about it, you may only need one or two elements to reuse. The key is to have enough of both reused and varied material to keep things interesting. This is part of the game of arranging – the fun of pulling the listener along, giving them something to guide their ears through the chart, such as reuse of material, as well as offering surprises along the way. Good luck. I hope you will feel more confident that it is okay to “mess with” other people’s music, even famous tunes. If your arrangement is done well, you may find that the composer will be very flattered! 

Pete McGuinness is an active New York City based jazz composer-arranger, trombonist, vocalist, and leader of his own big band, The Pete McGuinness Jazz Orchestra, whose debut CD First Flight was released nation-wide on Summit Records in 2007. He has written arrangements for many other groups including the Dave Liebman Big Band and the Westchester Jazz Orchestra. Pete is a member of the jazz studies faculty at New Jersey City University (Jersey City, N.J.). Visit Pete at www.petemcguinness.com.

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