

Arranging for the Young Band

by Gordon Brisker

There are several factors involved in doing charts for primary school and high school players, not the least of which is range. When writing for brass a good upper limit is a written D over the staff for lead trumpet and a G over the staff for lead trombone. Young embouchures get tired more quickly and long phrases with trumpets continually over the staff can be killers, as can large intervallic leaps. In writing octaves for trumpets, it is often useful to score the lead part up and the other three down. This will reduce intonation problems.

Saxophone range presents similar problems. This is not so much a problem with endurance as with intonation and sound quality in the higher notes and volume control in relation to the lowest notes. As a saxophonist and teacher of the instrument, I have found it helps sax intonation to focus the students on supporting the sound with the air stream rather than jaw pressure. Of course, mouthpiece and instrument key height play their roles, but this is a topic for another day.

How you voice chords is very important in getting the young band to sound well. Clusters involving whole and half steps next to each other sound great on keyboard. Young ears however, have quite a bit of difficulty with tuning and blending them. Phrasing is not to be taken for granted with younger players. Neither are nuances like bending notes, vibrato and dynamic changes. I tend to err on the side of being extra explicit in these areas rather than leaving any question as to how the music is to be played.

Rhythmic writing skills can also make the difference in how a young band accommodates a chart. Many times on the beat figures can be as effective as complex syncopation, which can baffle the young sight reader. Although it is time consuming, notated piano and bass parts along with written improvised solos will give your arrangement more appeal. This is particularly important to band leaders who's students do not improvise, know how to voice chords or construct logical brass lines.

Probably the biggest challenge lies in composing a piece and arranging it simply while maintaining the rhythmic, harmonic and climactic interest found in the best professional arrangements.

Arranging for the young band can be a daunting task. I believe taking these factors into account, along with the usual hard work and perseverance, will soon have your band sounding it's very best.

Gordon Brisker was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. He received his Master of Arts from California State University, Los Angeles. He also studied and taught at Berklee College and Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati. Gordon is best known for his saxophone playing but has also been recorded playing piano and flute. He enjoyed a long and successful career as a jazz musician in the United States. Gordon eventually left his then home of Los Angeles, to accept a position as a lecturer in Jazz Studies at the University of Sydney in the Conservatorium of Music. From Sydney he has continued his career as an internationally respected performer, composer and clinician. Gordon was the sole judge of jazz performance contestants in the City of Sydney Performing Arts Challenge. He was selected to be Musical Director for the New Zealand Youth Jazz Orchestra, touring and recording with that ensemble and conducting clinics at both the Wellington Polytechnic and Christchurch Polytechnic Universities. Gordon's goals in life are to learn and progress as a musician and as a spiritual person. He tends to consider his next recording, song or arrangement to be his greatest achievement musically. He feels that his greatest personal achievement is being an inspiration to others. Gordon's hobbies include fishing, traveling, food, tropical fish and working on the computer.

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