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WRITING AT THE PIANO

A great deal of discussion has been centered around the pros and cons of composing or arranging at the piano. Actually, it is a matter of being able to work without a piano. In my opinion, it makes no difference as long as the result is satisfactory. By writing at the piano, one has a tendency to be limited by the keyboard's range and sound, while the score page is a much broader palette of colors.

In arranging I very seldom use a piano now, but during the beginning of my writing career I used it extensively. If I get stymied while writing, I occasionally go to the keyboard, let my fingers "go where they may," and quite often find a way out of my dilemma. One can obviously write a lot faster if dependence upon the piano is eliminated. One way to do this is to work away from it and, later, check what you have done. Eventually, you'll find yourself checking less and less. Some of the world's greatest composers wrote at the piano and an equal number did not use the instrument at all. If you cannot "hear the notes" by looking at the score page, do not despair, it will come in time. And just remember that Igor Stravinsky wrote at the piano and was not ashamed of it.

The only way to really learn how to arrange is to hear one's scores actually played. A book or record will show how an example may sound but until you do it yourself it is just not the same thing. When I was in junior high and high school, I had my own dance band. I always managed to have a four-bar fragment written up and copied for each engagement we played. In this way I could try things out and, by trial and error, find out what would work or what wouldn't. While at Northwestern University I would hang around the Chicago radio stations where they all had staff orchestras at that time, and eventually the conductor would play something of mine just to get rid of me. I am hoping that the reader has some access to a performing organization. If not, he should find one, as there is no way to learn without hearing.

An incident that happened to me in Chicago will demonstrate what I mean. I was about to be drafted. The Korean War had erupted. I was out of college and I was 1-A! I had spent a lot of time writing songs and was just a little apprehensive about my future. A month before my induction, a big name band was looking for arrangements and a dear friend of mine and a marvellous musician, Paul Severson, said I ought to give it a shot. The pay was ridiculously low, also I would only be paid if the band leader liked my arrangements but I didn't care. I wrote two arrangements, copied the parts, and sent them in. I heard nothing for a couple of weeks, so finally I made a phone call. To cut a long story short, the band leader said, "Nice try, kid, but it's not really what I had in mind." He promised to return them.

Very discouraged, I soon found myself in the army and into basic training. There was precious little time or energy to worry about music; after all, I was being trained to be a killer! One night, lying in my bunk, encrusted with the accumulated sweat of the day's training, I became aware of a radio playing. Blaring forth was "John Doe" and his orchestra, from the Meadowbrook in Cedar Grove, New Jersey. I listened to a few numbers. The band was really great, and all of a sudden there it was: my music! my arranging! They were playing my songs! I yelled to the guy in the next bunk, "They're

HARMONIZING PASSING AND NON-CHORDAL TONES

My approach to this chapter will be a practical one for the commercial arranger. The formal rules, “dos and don’ts,” and nomenclatures for the various kinds of passing and non-chordal tones certainly apply, but I much prefer to keep my discussion on a less “cerebral” basis.

When I first started to arrange, one of my big fears was harmonizing the melody notes that were not contained in the chord and had no chord symbols above them. I often wondered if the composer also didn’t know how and left them blank on purpose! Whether there are rules or not I really don’t know. I remember one book that suggested the use of diminished chords. Well, a diminished chord can cover a multitude of sins, but it doesn’t always provide the desired result. The real secret I found out is wholly dependent upon the harmony of the passage. If it is primarily based on the tonic harmony, a passing tone is harmonized as close to the chord as possible. If a dominant harmony is apparent, then we switch to that chord. Ex. 27a, using C Major, shows the tonic feeling and the corresponding harmonization.

Ex. 27a.

The musical notation for Ex. 27a is in C major, 4/4 time. The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note pattern: C4, E4, G4, C5. The treble clef contains chords and non-chordal tones. Above the staff, chord symbols are written: C (sus. 4), C, Cma9, C, C-5, C, C, Cma7, C, C+, C, C°, C. Asterisks (*) are placed above the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth measures to denote non-chordal tones. The first measure has a non-chordal tone on F4, the third on G4, the fifth on A4, the seventh on B4, and the ninth on C5.

**Denotes non-chordal tone.*

The C tonic remains constant, as the bass notes show. If you retain as many of the original notes in the chord as possible, you won’t go wrong. Although I used a diminished chord in the first beat of bar 4, I might have substituted a “G” for the “A,” making the harmony C min. instead.

If one were harmonizing a similar passage with a G7 or dominant harmony (Ex. 27b), it might look like this:

Ex. 27b.

The musical notation for Ex. 27b is in C major, 4/4 time. The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note pattern: G3, B3, D4, G4. The treble clef contains chords and non-chordal tones. Above the staff, chord symbols are written: G7, G6, G7 (sus. 4), G7, G9, G7, G7 (sus. 4), G7-9, G7, G7+, G6. Asterisks (*) are placed above the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth measures to denote non-chordal tones. The first measure has a non-chordal tone on F4, the third on G4, the fifth on A4, the seventh on B4, and the ninth on C5.

All the harmony notes are in a G7 chord. The bass line should remain within its chordal confines and not reflect any ramification or alteration of the melodic activity. The bass is the foundation, the support of whatever may be happening up above. Ex.