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## Arranging Popular Music for the Jazz Band

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Example: The Weeknd's "Can't Feel My Face" (2015)

### **1. What to arrange – if you are going to invest time in an arrangement, work on something current and popular (but also quality music) that will have recruitment value and “staying” power**

Find the sheet music you want (either in a fakebook, online or elsewhere) but make sure that it is a trusted resource. I tend to use musicnotes.com and find it reliable and affordable.

### **2. Key (range) of your arrangement?**

Is the original key suitable for your ensemble?

- If not, can it be changed at the online site? I prefer to keep the original key as I like to my players to listen and play along with the original recording, and the Sibelius file.

### **3. Authenticity means accuracy of the melody and harmony, but more specifically correct rhythms and articulations. It also means capturing little “isms” that define the original recording.**

Double check melodies and harmonies with the source recording

- Bass line was incorrect with “Can't Feel . . .”
- Harmonies are often incorrect or at the very least, poorly written for young pianists

You can have all the right notes and the melody will still sound horrendous. Repeated listening of the source recording is essential to ensure correct notation and articulation.

- Transfer the lead sheet's notation into Sibelius (or Finale) and then “tweak” it afterwards. If there is a discrepancy between the lead sheet and the source recording, you can pinpoint it by playing back the computer notation.

What is not on the lead sheet? What do you hear that is distinctive and now can this be realized in a part(s)?

- Synthesizer swells in source recording did not translate well, so the pianist's rhythm reinforces the bass line
- Guitar rhythm is muffled in the source recording so I notated what I heard and kept it simple and funky.

### **4. To harmonize (or reharmonize) the melodic line**



Be critical and trash harmonized attempts if “unhip.” Sometimes simpler is better.

- Tried to harmonize chorus of “Can't Feel My Face;” didn't work. Chose to harmonize “Oh\_” instead. Simple but gave arrangement a bit of flavour and the instrumentalists a little variety.



## 5. Assigning the melody and the use of unison and octaves

If line does not work for one instrument group, try assigning it to a different instrument.

- In tried assigning background line in chorus to saxophones but it did not sound right. Reassigned to the trumpets in straight mutes and it was the closest match to the original electronic, processed sound.



If you have effective phrasing and a “groove” in the rhythm section, unison or octaves are effective.

- Much of the arrangement is unison/octaves with some shots being harmonized.
- Add personal touch and push boundaries of style by throwing in a dominant #9 chord twice.

I try to move the melody around the ensemble. This is not typical but your ensemble will be more motivated if everyone gets a chance to “shine.”

- Scoops in one melodic phrase? Maybe give that to the trombones. Quicker passages are for the saxophones or trumpets, typically.

Mixing sections but still having unison or octave lines are simple but provide a rich timbre and are very appropriate for popular music arrangements.

- Consider splashes of mutes here and there to change the timbre. It does not take long to write “cup mute” and it can give the song a totally different character.

## 6. Writing the drum part.

Keep the drum parts simple but authentic and accurate. Tailor the parts to the skill level of your drummer(s).

Pair the ride/high hat and snare with voice 1. Place the bass drum in voice 2 (bass pedal rhythm will often reinforce the bass player’s line). Any drum fills can be written in voice 3 if needed.

Slash marks, repeat symbols and one single rhythm to be interpreted is not cheating, it is expected and efficient communication.

## 7. Put some extra time into making the computer file a decent sound recording so that it is a good model for the band.

## 8. Before you print the parts, be sure that there are easy page turns for the horn players and that the rhythm section can easily see four or eight bars at a time.