

Kearns, M. (2016). Arranging popular music for the jazz band: "Can't Feel My Face" by The Weeknd. *The Recorder*, 58(4), 26-28.

Arranging Popular Music for the Jazz Band: "Can't Feel My Face" by The Weeknd

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With Resonate 2016 fresh in our memory, I thought it was suitable to revisit the arranging material I covered in Arranging Popular Music for the Jazz Band during iNSPIRE#15. As a teacher and performer of jazz and contemporary popular music, I know how these genres are complementary and inspiring to young musicians. The problem for elementary and high school teachers is finding an arrangement for the jazz band that 1) is well written, 2) matches their unique instrumentation and 3) showcases current, popular music. Even if you are dead-set against using popular music with your jazz band, a swing arrangement of your students' favorite song will boost morale, attendance and interest in other repertoire. If you are not an arranger by trade, then a few tips may be welcome. Here are ten:

1. Once you have decided on the song that you would like to arrange or you have finally succumbed to your students' wishes to arrange and perform a certain song, find its lead sheet in a fake book, online or elsewhere, but make sure it is a trusted source. I tend to use musicnotes.com (I have no vested interest in this site).
2. Decide if the key is appropriate for your ensemble. If a singer is going to be featured, is the highest and lowest note within his/her range? If the song will be an instrumental number, who will play the melody (saxophone, trumpet or trombone) and is it within the instrument's effective range? More importantly, is it within your students' range or what they can play

comfortably? I try to keep the song in the original key so that the students can play their parts along with both the Sibelius audio file (my arrangement) and the original recording.

3. Once you have the lead sheet for your song, spend some time ensuring that the rhythms and articulations are correct. You can have all the right notes and the melody will still sound horrendous. Authenticity comes from repeated listening to the original recording and this aural knowledge being reflected in the correct notation with all the appropriate articulations. To make this job easier, transfer the lead sheet notation into Sibelius (or Finale) as it is. By listening to the differences between the computer playback and the original recording, you can quickly correct rhythms and articulations. Now, this fastidious method of replicating the melody is irrelevant if you are changing the style of the song and coming up with a completely new arrangement. Whether maintaining the character of the original melody or reimagining the line, I like to ensure that the computer file sounds as good as possible upon playback, so that it is an acceptable model for the band; reinforcing the basic rhythms, articulations, harmony and form. Here is an example of the first melody of 'Can't Feel My Face,' articulated and played in unison with the alto and tenor saxophones, and an octave below with the baritone saxophone.

The image shows a musical score for saxophones, starting at measure 56. The score is written for five parts: ALTO 1, ALTO 2, TENOR 1, TENOR 2, and BAR. SAX. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is articulated with accents and slurs. A box labeled 'D' is placed above the first measure of the Alto 1 part. The notation shows the first four measures of the piece, with the melody being played in unison across all parts.

4. With the melody, it is wise to move it from section to section. This is not typical in many arrangements but give everyone a chance to shine and you will have a more motivated ensemble.

5. Consider the characteristics of the melody. Are there turns or scoops in the melodic phrase? Maybe give that to the trombones. For example, in 'Can't Feel My Face' by The Weeknd, I assigned the chorus to the trombones.



The image shows a musical score for four trombone parts: TBN. 1, TBN. 2, TBN. 3, and B. TBN. The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The music consists of four measures. In the first measure, all four parts play a melodic line with a slur over the first three notes. In the second measure, the melodic line continues. In the third and fourth measures, the melodic line is primarily carried by the three upper trombone parts (TBN. 1, 2, and 3), while the bass trombone (B. TBN.) plays a lower, more rhythmic accompaniment. The notation includes various note values, rests, and slurs.

Quicker passages are often reserved for the saxophones and trumpets. By mixing sections (trombones and trumpets) but maintaining a unison line or creating parallel octaves, you are keeping the arrangement simple while efficiently using your time. At the same time, you are enriching the timbre and staying true to the popular music texture. In my arrangement, I added the trumpets an octave above the trombones, as the arrangement progressed.

6. Adding additional instruments to the jazz ensemble will be easy if you are emphasizing unison and octave lines: 1) flutes can be added an octave above the trumpets or alto saxophones, 2) clarinets and oboes can play in unison with the trumpets or alto saxophones, or can be written an octave above, 4) bass clarinets, euphoniums and baritones can double the trombone or tenor saxophone line, 4) French horns can double a trombone line or a mid to low trumpet line and 5) tubas can double a mid to low bass trombone or baritone saxophone line, or the bass line if it is simplified to allow for the occasional breath. One last benefit of emphasizing unison and octave lines is that if a section member is absent from practice, the sound is not dramatically affected.

7. If you decide to harmonize a melody or reharmonize a section, be critical and abandon any attempt that is odd or 'unhip.' Often simpler is better in arranging popular music. For instance, I

tried to harmonize the chorus of 'Can't Feel My Face.' This is when The Weeknd sings 'I can't feel my face when I'm with you, but I love it, but I love it, ohhh' (Tesfaye & Martin, 2015). The harmony really sounded out of place. Instead, I chose merely to harmonize 'ohhh' with the trumpets at the end at the end of the phrase, after the trombones had played the chorus. It proved to be just the right amount of colour.



The image shows a musical score for five instruments: four trumpets (TPT. 1, 2, 3, 4) and one trombone (TBN. 1). The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The trumpets are in treble clef, and the trombone is in bass clef. The score consists of six measures. In the first five measures, all instruments are silent, indicated by a horizontal line. In the sixth measure, the four trumpets play a short melodic phrase consisting of a quarter note followed by a quarter rest. The trombone plays a melodic line in the first five measures, consisting of a quarter note, a quarter rest, and a quarter note, with a slur over the first two notes. In the sixth measure, the trombone plays a short melodic phrase consisting of a quarter note followed by a quarter rest.

8. If you assign a melody or countermelody to one instrument group and it is not sounding natural upon playback, do not panic. Try assigning the same line to another instrument. Sometimes, that is all it takes. For instance, in the chorus, I tried to give the background vocal line to the saxophones but something was just 'off.' I solved the problem by writing the line for the trumpets in straight mutes; their sound was closer to the original timbre of the electronically processed voice. Here are the trumpets playing the background vocal push into the chorus, in thirds.

The image shows a musical score for four trumpets (TPT. 1, 2, 3, 4) and one trombone (TBN. 1). The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. The first five measures show all instruments with rests. In the sixth measure, all four trumpets and the trombone enter with a melodic line. Above the trumpet staves, the instruction "STRAIGHT MUTE" is written. The trombone part in the bottom staff features a melodic line with slurs and accents, including a triplet of eighth notes in the sixth measure.

9. KISS. Keep it simple; unison and octave lines work beautifully – have I said this enough? For variety, harmonize background ‘shots’ and maybe the melody of a single chorus in two to three-part harmony. When new to writing, and when time is at a premium, place your emphasis in timbral variety. Pass the melody between sections, experiment with different combinations of instruments and liberally use brass mutes and the player’s ability to play into and out of the stand. In ‘Can’t Feel My Face’ the greatest intensity was created by each section playing in unison but jointly, creating polyphony and harmony.

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ALTO 1

ALTO 2

TENOR 1

TENOR 2

SARL. SAX.

TRP. 1

TRP. 2

TRP. 3

TRP. 4

TBN. 1

TBN. 2

TBN. 3

B. TBN.

J. Gtr.

PNO.

BASS

DR.

I saved my thickest chord and the biggest reharmonization until the very last note of the arrangement. In my opinion, the dominant 7 #9 chord was a great replacement for The Weeknd's last shout.

10. While you may not have weeks to spend on an arrangement, you do want to slow down and take some time to ensure that the player's parts are easy to read before printing them. Players generally find it easiest to see four bars at a time, especially the rhythm section, and you always want to have music that is large enough to read easily. Watch for quick page turns and adjust the formatting to eliminate these.

Whether you take a current popular song and make a quick swing arrangement or perform it like the original recording, your band members will appreciate that you have incorporated the music they listen to. More than that, by including today's popular music as part of your jazz band repertoire you are making a statement that jazz, and big band music, is not dead. That it continues to evolve, as it always has, borrowing from and fusing with other styles of music. Yes, you should educate your students on the history of jazz and yes, you should be playing jazz standards arranged and performed by the legendary big bands of the 20th and 21st century. However, only you know what mix of repertoire is best for your students. For my band, the mix will always include a little rock, funk, hip hop . . . you name it, stirred in with my jazz.

References

Tesfaye, A. & Martin, M. (2015). Can't feel my face. On *Beauty behind the madness*. Songs Music Publishing, LLC. Purchased from www.musicnotes.com