

## INTERMEDIATE ARRANGING

**You are ready for this class if you have mastered these basic arranging concepts:**

- Choosing appropriate music to arrange, with strong inherent barbershop harmony
- Setting it in the appropriate key
- Following the composer's intended harmony using strong barbershop voicing for all primary chords, with basses generally on the root or fifth and tenors frequently a third above the lead.

**So what's next in this journey of learning to arrange?**

*Understanding harmonic progression and chord substitution*

As you work with sheet music to determine the composer's intended harmony, you may discover that only the primary harmony is given, and that the melody sometimes falls on a note that is not included in the intended harmony. How do you determine what harmony to use in these places?

First, determine where you are going harmonically. Arrange the next target chord; then look for chords that will move from the first target chord to the second target chord. Start by looking for chords that share at least two notes with the intended harmony of the first chord. If that doesn't work, try all the chords you can think of that have the melody note in them. Keep trying chords out until you find one that sounds "right." Then voice the chords so that the voice parts move as smoothly as possible through the chords.

There will almost always be more than one solution to this problem. Choosing one of them for your arrangement depends on harmonic progression that makes sense and on smooth voice leading, but it also reflects your personality as an arranger. Don't be afraid to follow your instinct. If it's wrong, you'll find out when you or someone else sings the arrangement. The more you arrange, the easier this process will become. You'll begin to hear where the chords need to go without going through the whole process every time.

*Understanding voice leading*

Voice leading is really a simple concept: Keep the notes in each part line flowing as smoothly and as singably as possible. But its' importance can't be overemphasized. Poor voice leading causes many problems for singers, and results in a song that sounds jumpy and disjointed. Your job is to make the singers' jobs as easy as possible while still providing the opportunity for an artistically pleasing performance. The more the harmony voices jump around, the less pleasing the song will be to the listeners' ears.

Certain moves within a part line are more easily accomplished than others. For instance, it is easier for basses to make an octave jump than to jump an interval of a sixth or seventh. Tenors are most comfortable and most effective when their notes change no more than a third or a fourth. Baritones are generally more accomplished at accurately making bigger jumps from chord to chord, because their part requires it.

Related to voice leading is “cross voicing,” which happens when a harmonic progression leads naturally to a note that is taken by another voice part. Most of these situations can be avoided by careful arranging, but sometimes it isn’t possible. These spots will be difficult to sing and tune well, so avoid them if you can.

### *Using embellishments*

For some arrangers, this is the most interesting part of arranging. This is the “fun” part of the job. But there’s a danger in thinking this way – it may lead you into putting in more, and more intricate, embellishments than are needed. The result is an arrangement that begins to overwhelm the song itself, drawing attention to the embellishments instead of the message of the song. Remember this basic rule: *Embellishments are used for a reason. If you don’t have a reason, don’t put one in!*

You may imagine that an embellishment is needed to add interest to the song. Sometimes this will be true, but if a song truly needs added interest, how good is it? These are more valid reasons for using embellishments:

- To move the voice parts from one chord to another (swipes and repeats)
- To emphasize key lyrics in the song (swipes and repeats)
- To help build the arrangement toward a climactic high point
- To add a touch of harmonic variety when the intended harmony stays the same
- To fill in spots where an orchestra would play for a soloist singing the song
- To set up the story (intros)
- To wrap up the story (tags)

When you decide that an embellishment is needed, keep it simple. Try to plan the use of embellishments in advance, progressing from very simple ones to more complex ones as the song progresses.

When you create an intro, remember that its purpose is to “set up” the song. It should get the listener in the mood for the message of the song. Don’t make it too complicated – and don’t say anything that you aren’t going to say, perhaps in slightly different words, in the lyrics of the song. Remember the rules for writing essays in high school – “Tell them what you’re going to say, then say it, then tell them what you’ve said.” (Well, at least that’s what my high school English teacher told me.) The intro tells them what you’re going to say; the body of the song says it; the tag tells them what you just said.

Because they lead logically to the end of the song, tags can be a little longer and more complex than intros. However, be sure you repeat what the song says and don’t introduce a new thought in the tag. This causes confusion for the listener and can detract from the message of the song itself. Beware, also, of overarranging the tag. Yes, some arrangers do it, but that doesn’t mean it’s the best way to go. Those long, complicated tags often overwhelm the song, and it’s the SONG that is important, not the arrangement – or even the singers, and certainly not the arranger.

### *Finding a quartet to sing your arrangement*

Hearing and evaluating your arrangements is one of the best ways to learn and improve. Find a quartet (your own, if you have one) who is willing to sightread your arrangement.

Record them as they do. Ask them to comment when they find a passage difficult to sing. Notice how much difficulty they have in sightreading, and try to determine if it was caused by something you did in the arrangement, such as difficult voice leading. Notice if they have tuning problems that may result from difficult voice leading or weak chord voicing. Ask them to tell you honestly how they feel about the arrangement. Would they want to learn and perform it? Can they give you suggestions about how to make it stronger or more interesting? Were they comfortable with the harmonization? Were they comfortable with the embellishments? Did the embellishments feel “natural” to them?

*Asking for feedback from an experienced arranger.*

Having an arranging mentor can be very helpful at this stage. Your mentor can alert you if you are consistently making the same mistakes without realizing it. She can spot your strengths and your weaknesses. She can show you techniques that you might not have figured out on your own.

When you believe you are ready, *apply for the arrangers’ scholarship program*. This program provides a mentor and funding to help you get together with her for one-on-one training.

Arrangers aren’t born – they learn to arrange. It takes practice, practice, practice, and a willingness to recognize and learn from mistakes. It takes the courage to ask people to sing what you’ve done and give you honest feedback, and then to listen to that feedback. It takes a willingness to consider other ways of doing things, and to give up something you’ve done if you learn a better way to do it. Don’t become possessive of your arrangements – be flexible and ready to change when you need to. You’ll never be perfect, but you’ll always keep getting better.