

## INVOLVEMENT IN MUSIC

Music for large ensembles is a very hierarchical art-form, unlike for instance, painting. Each person in a band or orchestra has a role to play and the vast majority are subservient to those of other people. In classical music, the back desk of violins is below the front desk in status and they have to conform to what the principle first violinist decides about the nuances of bowing and other fiddly details.

Similarly, and this also applies to big bands, the first trombone player (the section leader) holds sway over the other trombonists. The same applies to other sections in a band and in an orchestra. In turn, the bandleader or the conductor dictates to the musicians how he/she wants the music to be interpreted. But even they are following the diktats of someone else, namely, the person who wrote the music in the first place. Even an arranger of someone else's music often has to tread very carefully about how freely they can mess with what the composer wrote or face possible legal action.

One of the things I wanted to do when I ran a big band was to get rid of the hierarchy - not all of it, as I was still the boss which I felt was justified as I had written all the music and paid the musicians mainly out of my own money.

The first thing I did was to get rid of the solo chairs. Every single person in my band was a soloist and I tried to share solos around with the exception of the lead trumpet who had a big responsibility in keeping the band together. Usually in big bands, the second trumpet, first alto, first tenor and first or second trombonist get to play the horn solos. This does not give the other players any chance or incentive to develop their own soloing. But it does mean that everyone has to be prepared to take solos and to treat soloing as importantly and skilfully as reading the music. I have found that in some bands this does not happen. Musicians should realise that they are fortunate in being given a solo and should leap at the chance of showing what they can do. The only snag in this is that solos usually require a microphone to cut over the rest of the band. Even when mics are available, the soloists need to get close to them, which some people are reluctant to do.

Partially to give more people a chance to improvise, I also included in some of my pieces some group ad-libbing, from 2 people to the whole band soloing at the same time. For the players, this can be a lot of fun and boost their listening skills - something which is neglected in most bands. This is particularly useful for special effects, which in classical music require masses of notes and expression marks. In *Pipp Brook*, the saxes and the brass represent two teams playing football against one another. In *I'm just Wilds about Busby* the ensemble gets to improvise together to make it really Wild(s), and in *The Royal Escape* the ensemble improvisation represents a battle. (All the titles mentioned are on youtube.)

The members of the rhythm section thrive on using their own musicianship to contribute to the overall sound. That is why it is so important to have really good players who knit together. I was horrified once when I was teaching to discover that in the scores of the school's big band every single note for rhythm section players was written down. It may have improved the pupil's reading, but it did nothing at all to teach them how to listen to what was going on and respond by contributing something positive and creative to it themselves.

The parts for members of the rhythm section should include as much freedom as possible. A composer/arranger may think they have just the right figure for them to play, but that means that every time the piece is played it will sound exactly the same and it deprives the band of the spontaneous ideas which bring the music to life. I must have done something right because the drummer once told me that playing in the big band was just like being in an enlarged combo.

There were times when I had to conduct the band from the piano. I remember a concert in a huge church where the band was well spread out. On account of the high roof, there was a distinct sound-lapse between one end of the band and the other, at times then I simply had to wave my arms around. The bass and drums did a good job of time-keeping so I didn't have to do that very often. But there was one piece in particular when all of the rhythm section were tacit and just the 3 flutes and 2 trombones were playing a backing for the soloist (*Seoul Lady*). I also felt it might be useful to conduct in some ensemble passages I had written which crossed the beat a lot in order to indicate where the beats fell. Whenever I had something tricky to play myself on piano, I asked the lead alto player, who was visible to the other horn players, to conduct where it meant bringing in the rest of the band. Devolution, I suppose it could be called.

In some of my pieces there are rits and accels. Ritting to a complete stop I found I could often leave to just the rhythm section, particularly the drummer and bass player to accomplish on their own, but rit-ing and accel-ing to another tempo did need a bit of arm-waving so as to get to the desired new tempo (see *Hove, Actually, The Omnibus Edition* and *Emma Lee*).

One piece of mine (*A knight at St Nicks*) required a spooky intro. For this I devised a 12-note tone row and gave it to 4 players but told them they could play it at their own tempo but beginning roughly at the same time. This worked sometimes and when it did, it was great. Pity it didn't always seem to work, but you never know beforehand. If we had played it regularly, I'm sure it would have settled down nicely.

For the backing for some modal or oriental pieces I gave the horn players, excluding the soloist, the notes of the scale. Each person could choose which note to play. A number of different simple rhythms were shown on their parts and I would indicate which one I wanted and then direct the band when to play and when to stop. The resulting chords were very interesting - you could not write them down beforehand as they did not obey the normal logic - the fourth trumpet might choose a very high note whereas the first might go for a very low note. I loved that idea and it became almost like a game (see *Namzadi*, for example). This is quite an old established device. It would be great to hear a symphony orchestra do this - perhaps some modern classical composers have incorporated it in their works.

The piece I developed most by way of letting the band take control was *Mad Jack Fuller*. In two sections I wrote out the relevant modes and told the fourth trumpet in the first and the third trombonist in the second to do the directing/conducting. It worked a treat and I was so pleased with it that I put the extract of the piece on youtube without the tune which we had difficulty in getting right.

I am sure there are many other ways in which band members can contribute to pieces beyond just playing their own parts. If I had continued to lead a band I would have wanted to go further. But the organisational part of running a band became too time-consuming and the unreliability of certain players in turning up to rehearsals got to me.

Anyway, here are some more ideas you might like to experiment with. I can't guarantee that they will work, but it might interest the musicians to give them a try.

1. Head arrangements - a tried and tested method but tricky with a big band without it sounding amateurish.
2. Give an entire section or even the whole band the chord sequence and get them to play any notes of the different chords in a given rhythm as a backing to a soloist. You could try it without a given rhythm, but it could turn out rather messy. There will always be some who would want to show off by being too busy.
3. Follow the Playing By Numbers tutorial of mine, but enlarge it to cover the whole band.
4. Divide the horns into 2 or 3 parts and get them to play against each other, for instance by alternating when to play. Some could play head riffs - unison, stated by one person to begin with and then taken up by the others, while another part could play harmony parts as in 2 above or within a single mode.
5. Divide the horns and get some to play in 3/4 and others in 4/4, either in the same pulse or 3 against 4.
6. Divide the horns and get each section to play at a different tempo. (In *Hen Party*, I had the horns play double tempo while the rhythm section stayed at the original tempo. In *Fisher Folk*, I got the solo tenor player to play at a totally different tempo from the rest of the band. It was not a disaster, as you might think.
7. Get a player from one section to think up a rhythm and show it to the others by clapping or waving a finger so the whole section can pick up on it. It could also be taken up by all the horns.

All of these ideas require a bit of thinking about beforehand so everyone knows what is going on. Rather than have the whole piece done in this way, it may be wise to insert some between written passages, especially if these are played very tightly. I like to end ensemble improvising in a drum solo or in a held chord which is a good contrast. Of course, too much freedom can be self-destructive and take away the cohesiveness of a piece so there have to be limits, but this can be accomplished while still presenting opportunities for self-expression.

Just as a final point I would like to emphasise that some degree of overall control is important. Otherwise, anarchy can take over and some individuals can tend to dominate, whereas others can feel intimidated. The main ingredient of jazz is surely improvisation and trying something new. Very tight playing is all very well and to be admired, but not at the expense of ridding the music of a sense of adventure.