

PLANNING AN ARRANGEMENT

Before you start writing, spend a little time planning the shape of your arrangement. It doesn't have to be very detailed, but it will give you something tangible to work from. Think variety and unity.

With a big band, you have lots of choices of colour:

Trumpets - solo trumpet, 2 or 3 trumpets, unison trumpets, trumpets in harmony (divisi or div), trumpets with mutes (cup, plunger, harmon, bucket, straight.) Be aware that mutes not only alter the sound, they have an effect upon the volume too. Additionally, you can instruct trumpet and trombone players to "play into stand" or "hand over bell" to deaden the sound. Most trumpet players also play flugel horns which have a mellower tone and can play lower notes with more body. They can be used in place of bucket mutes in trumpets. Mutes are not used for flugels. Flugels can often be used to produce a French horn sound.

Trombones - solo trombone, 2 or 3 trombones, unison trombones, trombones div, trombones with mutes (cup, plunger, harmon, bucket are the most common ones). Bear in mind that it can take a few moments to put in or remove a mute so "hand over bell" (HOB) can be useful if necessary.

Saxes - alto solo/ 2 altos, tenor solo/2 tenors, baritone solo or baritone with a combination of other saxes, soprano solo/ 2 sopranos, soprano/s with other saxes, clarinet solo/2 clarinets, clarinet with saxes or flute/s, bass clarinet solo or with saxes or flute/s, flute solo/2 flutes, flute with others
Saxes/woodwind unis, or divisi

Mixed instrumentation - eg. trumpet and alto or trombone and tenor (and baritone?) - useful for high or low register parts.

Rhythm section - all playing, omit piano or guitar or both, bass and piano unis (plus guitar?) Piano or guitar in unis with horns (usually the lead part). Drums with sticks, brushes or played by hand or tacit.

Think first about the tune (if you can't think of an intro at first, it can be added later.) Especially with a long tune, you will need to vary the sound to keep things interesting for everyone. Bear in mind that horn players can get very tired playing non-stop and they do need time to breath. Don't neglect certain instruments.

Simple format For the tune, maybe the first 8 bars could be a sax (depending upon the range and sound you want), playing the tune with say, chordal backing from the trombones. For the second 8 bars, you need to build on this so you could have a sax unison for the tune or you could add trumpets but be careful to keep their volume and range down to avoid drowning the saxes. For the middle 8, a change of colour might be nice, so trumpets or trombones could play the tune. Saxes could play harmony or if the brass are in block harmony the saxes could be unis. For the last 8 bars you might go for block ensemble to cap what has been going on so far. In block writing, write downwards once you have written the lead part, so trumpets and then trombones and then add the saxes. The lead alto can play the same as the lead trumpet if it is not too high (up to F an octave and a fourth above middle C).

If the trumpet part is high you will need to voice the lead alto lower, maybe doubling the second trumpet or skipping between the second and third trumpet to make the line as melodic as possible. Try and double the lower trumpet parts with the other saxes as low trumpets can be pretty weak. If you have the luxury of a soprano, it can safely double the lead trumpet.

What we have then is the tune building to a climax at the end of the tune. You can then have a quieter section - solo instrument soloing or a section playing soli so you are varying the level of intensity.

I have personally found that you need only plan this far in advance. Once you have got underway and got this far, you can play it by ear - the music will take over. There may be instances though where you have in mind various things you want to happen later in the arrangement so make a note

of them too.

What you do have to consider is that the whole piece should consist of a series of climaxes with the main climax occurring about 80% of the way through or even at the end of the piece. It is very sad that people who look at youtube videos tend not to listen to the whole piece so they miss out on shout choruses which you may have spent a lot of time concocting.

Anyway, to get back to where we were, if you have a solo after the tune, you will need to build up in intensity once more, so for instance, if there is a solo instrument with just rhythm section for 8 bars, in the following 8 bars you could add some backing from the horns, say, trombones or saxes unis or div to create a pad or riff or whatever. In the middle 8 add something else and so on. By the end of the solo, hopefully the soloist will be getting pretty excited. But don't overdo it or you will drown out the soloist and he will get pretty annoyed. Longer notes are better.

If the piece is going to be short and you just want an ensemble shout chorus to follow this you will need to keep something in reserve for the backing or it will be anticlimactical unless you want to start this section with a quiet ensemble and build up. You can go for unison horns, or block or one section (brass or saxes) against the other. Keep the really high notes and fast lines to the end of this chorus.

It is going to be very boring if you then use the whole tune again, so either go back to the middle 8 or reharmonise it or find other ways of changing thing. If you used a solo sax in the first chorus, you could choose sax unis for the last chorus/half chorus.

All that is left now is the coda - how on earth am I going to end this, you may think. Something might come naturally, if not you could have a tag ending, extend the length of notes, or use other techniques. Be aware that the musicians want to get to the bar/toilet quick so no need to prolong the agony.

This is just a simple format. The form can be extended to include more choruses once you become experienced. Good luck.