# ARRANGING FOR ELEMENTARY OR MIDDLE-LEVEL BAND

*Have you ever wanted to arrange a piece for your ensemble of young instrumentalists? Roland Stycos offers some pointers for first-time arrangers.*

BY ROLAND STYCOS

Many rewards await the band director who successfully arranges music for his or her own band. No published arrangement, no matter how skillful, is tailor-made to suit the exact needs and abilities of your band. You, however, can create such arrangements.

Think for a moment of a piece that has not been arranged for band, and try to imagine your band playing it. If you believe it would be feasible for your ensemble, start by penciling in instrumental possibilities on the sheet music. In choosing the instrumentation, you will undoubtedly think of your students and their capabilities. Herein lies one of the advantages of doing your own scoring: If successful, you will enjoy extra rewards from the band students, either directly through compliments or indirectly from their apparent enjoyment of the piece. If the work is performed well, the instant feedback from parents and colleagues provides still another feeling of accomplishment. Once the arrangement proves its worth, it can then be used for many years to come, providing an enhancement of your present and future band repertoire.

An added bonus derives from your improved insight into instrumental tessitura, timbre, balance, range, harmony, and voicing. Now you are in the creative position of having to decide whether to double the saxophones with the clarinets or to place the flutes an octave higher or in unison with the clarinets, and so on. You can certainly learn to do this, and you will be a stronger director for having done it.

Photo courtesy of the author

Sixth graders in the band at Milwood Elementary School in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

## It's Elementary

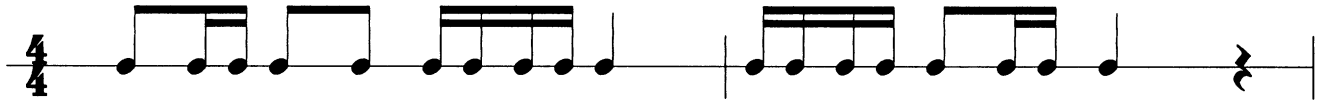
Starting with elementary band, there is a procedure that many band directors use requiring no written arranging at all. It involves repeating short pieces and changing the instrumentation. Pieces in the method books are frequently too short to perform more than once. They can be played several times, each time with different instruments. This gives certain sections a chance to solo—especially the flutes, who are constantly drowned out by the brass and saxophone—and adds some needed length

Roland Stycos teaches instrumental music at Milwood Elementary School and Lincoln International Studies School in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

**Figure 1. Simple modification of a portion of a snare-drum part**

**Example 1**

**Example 2**



to the brief pieces.

Frequently, method books print only the easier parts of pieces (such as the "A" section of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy"), which are too brief and incomplete for a performance. If the piece is good enough to perform, write it out in its entirety, giving students the opportunity of learning the complete piece the way it was written and giving the audience a chance to hear more than half of it.

Composing an introduction and an interlude can give short works added length. The interlude serves as a first ending prior to a repeat of the piece, which can then have different instrumentation. This will more than double the length of the work.

Marches in elementary method books seldom have introductions or modulations to second sections. If you add a simple percussion cadence as an introduction and a first ending prior to a repeat, you can obtain a much more attractive performance than the one used by the method-book arranger—a work that has greater variety.

Printed percussion parts are frequently too simple for even elementary performers. Usually there's a hotshot drummer in your band who can play much more advanced parts than those printed. In this case, the band director needs to dress up those limp snare-drum parts to make them exciting for both the young musician and the audience.

For example, should the snare-drum part look like example 1 in figure 1, you can rewrite it to look like example 2. Doubling the time will greatly increase the excitement and provide a greater challenge for the student. Should this prove too difficult, you can always revert to the simpler printed version.

## Take It from the Top

If you are writing a full arrangement from scratch, you might consider using the following procedure:

Acquire sheet music or an orchestral or piano score (making certain that you request permission to arrange the piece from the copyright holder), or compose an original piece that you intend to arrange. Choose the best possible key for your band if the printed one is not satisfactory.

Pencil in the desired instrumentation on the sheet music; then make a full rough score in pencil or erasable pen. (I prefer erasable pen because it shows up better.) Be especially careful with the keys of transposing instruments; this can be tricky at first. As a model, use a printed score that you find pleasing and readable.

Make all corrections. Playing parts on a keyboard is an excellent way to do this. It also helps phrasing and general musicianship to *hear* the line as well as see it. Be liberal as you write in accidentals, even if they are in the key signature. Students make more errors in this area than in any other.

Make a permanent score, being careful to check notation. Carefully write in rehearsal numbers or letters, being sure that they match those in the parts. Copy out the parts only after having completed them in the score. Making changes in the parts takes twice as much time and can be more difficult for the students to read. Double-check the parts at the keyboard, making sure they agree with the score.

Good software programs can produce extremely clear and consistent notation. If you are writing out the parts yourself, be sure that the handwritten notation is clear. Professional musicians are used to reading all kinds of manuscripts, but young students are not. They become confused by the most obvious notation mannerisms, such as a quarter note that is not completely filled in.

Though even the most fastidious arrangers make mistakes, every effort must be made to minimize them, since young people are seldom known for their patience. Some satisfaction must be achieved at the first rehearsal or the groans will drown out the music. Once the band is over this hump, however, satisfaction awaits the arranger.

## What Can Instruments Do?

The following sketch of instrumental groupings might prove helpful in deciding unison doubling. Of course, combinations can serve for octave doubling and harmonization:

- *soprano*—oboe, flute, piccolo, upper clarinet, upper cornet, upper alto saxophone
- *alto*—middle clarinet, cornet, alto saxophone, upper tenor saxophone, upper baritone horn, and upper French horn
- *tenor*—low clarinet, alto clarinet, tenor saxophone, baritone horn, lower French horn, trombone
- *bass*—bass clarinet, lower alto clarinet, lower baritone horn, lower trombone, tuba, bassoon, tympani.

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As the experienced band director knows well, every instrument has strengths and weaknesses that go beyond the limitations of student musicians. The following is only a reminder to aid in making choices.

*Flute:* Its best practical range extends from second line $G_4$ to E-flat$_6$ above the staff. Because the flute's low register is so soft and undeveloped in young students, it is better to avoid it and use the flute's tessitura of middle and upper registers where it is useful, in doubling the first clarinets in unison or an octave higher. In the absence of piccolos, the flutes provide the highest and most facile register in the band, giving the ensemble a brilliance otherwise missed. It is beneficial to give the flute section a solo part now and then so they can be heard on their own, above the brass and saxophones.

*Piccolo:* The piccolo's best written range extends from $D_4$ below the staff to E-flat$_6$ above the staff, sounding an octave higher. It can provide that extra octave of brilliance above the rest of the band, but it should not be overused. Because the piccolo is a "color" instrument and is so piercing, it is best to save it for climaxes and finales, except in short pieces like marches. The piccolo's tuning problems are opposite those of the flute: it tends to go flat in the high register and sharp in the low register. Playing the piccolo in octaves with the flute (which can be flat in the low register and sharp in the high) can cause tuning discrepancies, but these should not prevent the arranger from writing for these instruments together in nonoctave situations.

*Clarinet (B-flat):* The clarinet's best written range extends from low $E_3$ below the staff to $A_5$ above, sounding one tone lower. Because of the wide range of the clarinet, two- or three-part harmony is possible, but this division might not always be preferable. If the band's clarinets are elementary students or weak players, dividing them will make them weaker. In some cases, doubling them with the trumpets or saxophones might be advisable. One merit of unison scoring stems from a feeling of strength and togetherness for the section, resulting in a stronger line for the listener. An advantage of harmonic scoring, however, comes from placing the less experienced students on lower parts where they are stronger and need not play over the break. Keep in mind that the clarinet player can play with ease almost an octave lower than flutes, oboes, and even the alto saxophone, making it a good option for rich alto and tenor voicing. When students are capable, the upper register is good for the soprano or melodic line.

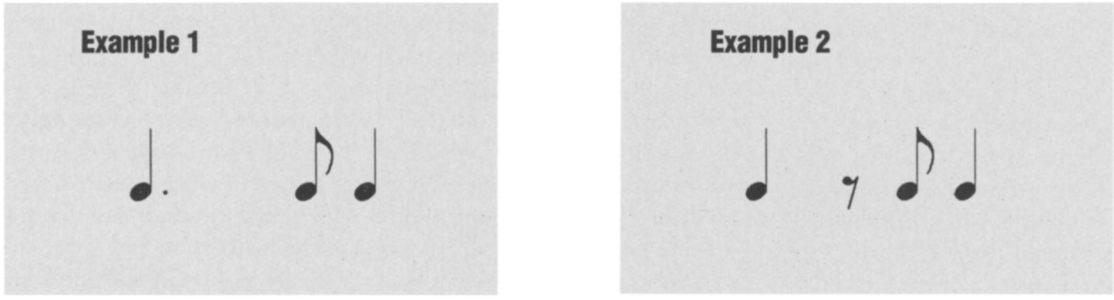
*Alto clarinet:* "Alto clarinet" is a misnomer. With a range extending nearly an octave below the alto saxophone, its best use is as a baritone or even bass instrument. Since its lowest-sounding note is G-flat$_2$, first line of the bass staff, it can reach down into the range of the bass clarinet, reaching all its low notes except for F, E, E-flat, D and D-flat—and it is more facile (well adapted to faster passages) and lighter than the bass clarinet. Although the saxophones are loud and resistant in their low register, the alto clarinet student can play with ease the same notes, plus seven notes lower. Always doubling it with the alto saxophone is not making the best use of its low register.

*Bass clarinet:* The practical written range of the bass clarinet is E-flat$_3$ below the treble staff to $F_5$ (fifth line), sounding down a major ninth like the tenor saxophone and baritone horn when the player is reading the treble staff. Its lowest octave is its main asset, and like the entire clarinet family, its rich low register can serve the band well. Higher than the break of the third-line B-flat$_4$, however, its tone becomes appreciably weak, given to squeaks and mechanical problems. When scoring for students, therefore, it is best to confine the range of parts to below this B-flat. If your band has no tuba or bassoon, the bass clarinet might be the lowest instrument in your ensemble. In this case it is vital for carrying the bass line; otherwise, it makes a good double for the tuba, bassoon, or trombone.

*Alto saxophone:* The practical written range of the alto saxophone extends from $D_4$ below the treble staff to $C_6$ above the staff, sounding a major sixth lower, like the alto clarinet. The full-bodied sound of the alto makes it a natural for either melody or alto voicing. This fullness, while usually an asset, can sometimes be overpowering, especially in the low register when played by other than advanced students. The alto saxophone can be divided into two parts if the players are strong; otherwise, it is best to stick to one part. It can also be used as a substitute or double for the French horn. Because of the difficulty of intonation on the French horn, it might do well to double the alto with it as guide for pitch.

*Tenor saxophone (B-flat):* The practical written range of the tenor saxophone extends from $D_4$ below the staff to the $C_6$ above, sounding down a ninth like the bass clarinet and baritone horn when reading in the treble clef. Its robust tone, even fuller and louder than the alto saxophone, must be kept in

**Figure 2. Simple modification of a portion of a bass-drum part**




mind when scoring for it. It is, however, a good substitute for a weak or missing trombone or baritone horn, or it can double these instruments.

*Oboe:* The practical written range of the oboe is $D_4$ below the staff to B-flat$_5$ above the staff. The oboe is frequently doubled with the flute because of its similar range, but this need not be constant. Sometimes it can play an alto line under the flute, or double the flute melody an octave lower when the flute is high. But the distinctive timbre of the oboe can provide a nice contrast in solo passages, if the student playing the instrument is apt. It can also double the first clarinet, when the range is compatible. Flute students can easily play the oboe part when no oboist is available, since oboe parts usually demand less facility than do those for flute.

*Trumpet and cornet:* The practical written range of the trumpet is $A_3$ below the treble staff to $G_5$ or $A_5$ above the staff. As with clarinets, trumpet parts can be written in two- or three-part harmony, but the arranger needs to do this with discretion. If your trumpet section is small or the players are weak, it is wiser to write in two parts or even unison. With elementary band, strong melody must sometimes take precedence over harmony if a choice needs to be made. If, on the other hand, the melody is too difficult for some players, then using these instruments to provide harmony might be a better solution. Here is an area where knowing the abilities of your student players can be a valuable asset.

*French horn (F):* The practical range for the F horn is from the $G_3$ below the treble staff to $C_5$ (third space), sounding a perfect fifth lower. Although two-part harmony typifies French horn scoring for young players, the arranger need not avoid solos if a student is capable of handling them. When one or two players are weak, unison is preferable. Because of the pitch problems with the French horn, it might be advisable to double it with the alto saxophone, baritone horn, or trombone. The French horn's penetrating tone can add much color to a brass section, and it is also excellent for countermelodies. But because of the instrument's difficulty, writing in cues for optional instruments will always be necessary.

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*Trombone:* The practical written range of the tenor trombone is from the A-flat$_2$ in the first space of the bass staff to the $C_4$ above the staff. The trombone's full tone should be used to advantage in the tenor line, but frequently its power fails to emerge when the instrument is in the hands of young students. If this is the case, it is better to double the tenor saxophone or baritone horn with it. Also, tonally weak trombonists will gain more if their part is doubled with these two instruments.

*Baritone horn or euphonium:* When using the treble clef, the practical written range of both the baritone horn and euphonium is similar to that of the trumpet: from B-flat$_3$ below the treble staff to fifth-line $F_5$, but sounding down a ninth like the tenor saxophone and bass clarinet. When written in the optional bass clef, the range is from first-space A-flat$_2$ to the E-flat$_4$ above the bass staff. (Using the treble clef has the advantage of keeping similar notation with that used for the bass clarinet and tenor saxophone, so that when transferring a trumpet player to the baritone, the ease in switching is obvious. The advantage of using the bass clef is that the director and student see exactly the pitches that are played.) For score placement, the bass clef is more normal and standard. On the euphonium, the optional fourth valve extends the range down a fourth, giving it an almost bass range. In the absence of a tuba or bassoon, this is extremely useful. Also, the euphonium's larger bore gives it an edge over the baritone since it gives it a sound closer to that of the tuba.

*Tuba or sousaphone:* The practical range for a BB-flat tuba extends from B-flat$_1$ below the bass staff to B-flat$_2$ on the second line. The tuba's large tone is well utilized when fulfilling its role as the band's lowest instrument. Its techni-

cal potential rivals most other band instruments, so the arranger need not hold back for this reason. Acoustically, however, simple bass-line parts result in greater clarity. The tuba's intonation is superior, so it is always preferred over the sousaphone except for marching.

*Bassoon:* The practical range for the bassoon students extends from $D_2$ below the bass staff to middle $C_4$ above the staff. The bassoon's light staccato makes it distinctive from other bass band instruments. Its colorful tone should be used to soloistic advantage. If the student's playing is weak, however, it is better to double this instrument with the bass clarinet, tuba, or at times, the baritone horn. Like most other winds except the clarinet, the bassoon's low register is difficult to deal with, and its high register needs special embouchure adjustment.

*Percussion:* Percussion scoring is done for many reasons: It can provide rhythmic reinforcement for certain sections of a band piece. It can help the ensemble by beating time in marches, jazz, or rock works. It can give percussionists solo opportunities. It can also serve as a source of interesti ter-rhythms.

- A challenging *snare-dru* can make an initially ba nd arrangement much mo est-ing and exciting. One can always resimplify if necessary, but students can often master surprisingly advanced parts, even if by ear.
- The fullness and depth of the *bass drum* gives an added dimension to the band, felt as well as heard. Simply keeping a steady beat, as in a march, needs only routine scoring, but more involved music requires some consideration. Because of its ample power and volume, the bass drum is best used discreetely with much attention to dynamic level. Like all bass instruments, its sustaining quality can easily "muddy" the band if not scored with frequent rests. For example, example 1 in figure 2 would be more clear and distinctive if written like example 2 in the same figure.
- When *tympani* are available, their inclusion is well worth scoring for. As in the orchestra, they give a solid bass and rhythmic reinforcement to the band with a texture distinctive in the percussion. Being the band's only pitch-changeable membrane instruments, the tympani enhance the possibilities of the snare and bass drums. Although pitched higher than the bass drum, these instruments share the option of melodic as well as rhythmic reinforcement, with great sustaining capability. As with the bass drum, scoring for tympani must be done carefully in order not to "muddy" the bass line.
- The *bells* (whose range extends from the B-flat$_3$ below the treble staff to the fifth-line $F_5$) add a bright texture to the melodic line and are good for occasional solos. In the hands of a good keyboard player, they provide a colorful option, either when doubling the flutes or alone.

## Just Do It!

Arranging, like many things, becomes easier with practice, and though time-consuming and burdensome at first, gradually becomes easier. The satisfaction is well worth this effort, and who is to say that publication might not be a possibility? In any case, the band director has much to gain and little to lose in an endeavor that will strengthen his or her ability as music instructor. ■

## *Notes to the Arranger*

The following are some considerations that you should keep in mind when scoring for your instrumental groups:

1. Always try to double weak players with strong. It will help their confidence and make playing more enjoyable.

2. Try to give talented players occasional solos, even if only a phrase or two. This will give them a chance to show off their ability and gives them an extra challenge.

3. Apply the solo suggestion to sections as well. Outstanding sections that do well and work well together need the opportunity to show what they can do.

4. Use imagination and variety when scoring, and avoid using the same instrumentation throughout.

5. Avoid using four-part harmony if the players are weak. It is better to score in three-part, two-part, or even unison if that makes the band sound its best.

6. Use only the most practical tessitura of each instrument. Scoring in the extreme low or high registers at this level of proficiency is ineffective and counterproductive.

7. Alter or simplify parts that don't work well for whatever reason. There is nothing sacred about printed parts, or your own works, for that matter. This flexibility is one of the great advantages of "personalized" scoring.

8. Check and double-check the score and all parts prior to the first rehearsal. Correcting parts during rehearsals should be held to a minimum since it causes students to lose interest quickly. As with any piece, try to achieve some degree of success at the first rehearsal.