

Chapter 10

Arranging Fundamentals for Worship Getting The Most From Your Instrumentation

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This month I would like to offer some creative ways to arrange music for your worship team. From basics to more advanced concepts, I believe there will be something to benefit nearly everyone involved with worship ministry. Let's explore some proven techniques as we endeavor to improve for the glory of God.

Band Set Up

Last article I spoke about the importance of a proper band set up. Since this is such an important topic, I would like to bring it up again. With regard to setup, each situation has its own unique set of variables. In general you should group similar instruments together, i.e. voices together, rhythm instruments together (drums, bass, guitars, keys, percussion, with the bass player directly next to the high hat on the drums), horns together, strings together, too. By placing instruments of similar function close to one another, they are better able to listen to one another. One thing I do when brought in to help a worship ministry is to address the band set up. Often correcting this can solve a number of common problems. Therefore, the first item on our list when arranging for the worship band is to have the proper band set up.

I've Got Rhythm, I've Got Music

Let's put some focus on arranging parts for the rhythm section. One common problem is that instrumentalists do not fully understand their musical function within the group. One example of this is the relationship between the bass and drums. In 95% of the music you play, the bass player should be playing a pattern that is nearly identical to the kick drum pattern of the drummer. A one or two measure repeated pattern is best. This pairing of the bass and kick drum provides the foundation for the rest of the arrangement. If this is not solid, you have nothing to build on. If you have a percussionist, he should likewise be committed to a 1-2 bar repeated pattern on whatever he is playing on (congas, tambourine, shaker, bongos, etc.) His part should compliment the bass and drum part, not distract from it.

I love the sound of a guitar, even multiple guitars, IF played correctly. All too often, however, all the guitarists in the worship band play the exact same thing, i.e., same chord voicings, same rhythm, etc. The net result is “musical mud” Not what we are after, is it? LISTENING and playing parts that are complimentary to one another easily fix this. Try playing less. Try playing higher on the fret board than the other guitar player (learn to use a capo). What about having one or more guitars lay out until the chorus or bridge. Here’s an idea-use different sounds (chorus, flange, delay, reverb, distortion) what about lessons? Listen to your favorite bands and you will notice how guitar parts are used to compliment not merely duplicate each other.

Keys of the Kingdom

Now on to the topic of arranging for keyboards. Okay, here goes, my number one complaint about so much of the keyboard playing that goes on in churches- the LEFT HAND PINKIE! Playing double roots is fine for a solo piece but NOT when you are playing with a band and a bass player. Either don’t play the bottom root or move your roots up an octave, or better yet, learn how to play root-less chord voicings. Instead of roots in the left hand you can play thirds, fifths and sevenths. You will be amazed how much you clean up the sound of your worship group by doing this one simple thing. It is also a good idea to work with the guitar player(s) to work out parts. In addition, do not feel like you must propel the band by playing on every beat of every measure. If the guitar part is busy, play less and vice-versa.

Do you have more than one keyboard in the group? Like guitars, avoid playing parts that are identical. Use the synthesizer for chord pads, organ lines, string lines, brass punches, high bell parts or even percussion. There is no need to duplicate on the synthesizer what the piano player is playing. Please stay off of the lower keys-that’s why God gave you a bass player! Listen to the other musicians and you will hear where you are to fit in and compliment.

And the Trumpet Shall Sound

For those who have horns in your worship group: I suggest having written lines out for each song rather than “head arrangements” (improvised parts). Sometimes it is appropriate, if a player is skilled to do so, to improvise between the lyrics. If you have more than one player doing this, you may end up with something resembling Dixieland. I’m guessing your probably don’t want that. The alternative is to have someone with the ability to write out parts for the horns that compliment the rest of the arrangement.

Complete arrangements for many popular Christian songs for all instruments and voices are available to purchase from most or all of the larger Christian record companies publishing departments. I suggest looking into it. Of course, this means reading music...

Strings and woodwinds should be treated like the horn section. Parts most often sound better. Make sure that similar instruments are grouped together on the platform. Please make sure they are adequately miked, too. It's frustrating to be playing only to be ignored by the sound engineer.

I Will Sing Praises

The same principles of good arranging which apply to the instrumentalists apply equally to the vocalists. Group them together in sections (either men/woman or SATB). If you have more than one vocalist (most churches do) you can employ a variety of creative arranging techniques to your vocals: alternate men/woman, unison parts, harmony parts, echo, and solo. Remember-and this is an important musical concept-not everyone has to sing and play at the same time during a song. Music should be dynamic. It should breath, it should build, and it should go somewhere. It should have tension and release. It should be soft and loud. It should be fast and slow. If you keep this in mind, you will look for ways to add or subtract instruments to accomplish mood and intensity.

Less Is More

Before we leave this topic-here is one suggestion; rather than everyone playing and singing from the beginning of each song to the end, why not start slower worship songs with a solo voice and piano or guitar. Add the bass playing long notes, light drums and a few more vocalists at the chorus. By the next verse, bring in more instruments. That way your arrangement builds and does not become monotonous. If you listen to your favorite worship recordings you will begin to get ideas on how to breath life and depth into your worship music by simply adding or subtracting instruments and/or voices at the appropriate times.

And the Band Played On

To summarize, here are ideas I urge you to develop:

- 1) Group similar instruments together.
- 2) Bass and drums should learn to play together consistently (bass pattern matches kick drum pattern) percussionist should play 1-2 bar repeating patterns, too.
- 3) If you have multiple guitar and/or keyboard players: play different parts, use different registers, and use different sounds. Compliment rather than duplicate.

- 4) Horns & strings benefit from written parts. They can be unison or harmony parts. At times it can be effective to improvise, but only one horn at a time.
- 5) The same arranging principles that apply to instrumentalists apply to vocalists, too.

Remember, sometimes the most musical thing you can do is lay out! Music, after all, is the aesthetic blending of silence and sound. Learn how to play the rests with style! Use your ears. Take some lessons. Listen to your favorite recordings and imitate what you hear. By doing so you will be proving yourself to be a good steward of the abilities God has given you.

I Can Help

By the way, I have opened my schedule to begin spending weekends with church worship bands that feel they could benefit from some personal attention to improve what they do for God. Please feel free to contact me for more information. May the Lord bless and keep you now and forever.