

TRICKS OF THE TRADE: COMPOSING FOR YOUNG BANDS

MIDWEST CLINIC, DECEMBER 2015

CLINICIAN - TIM FISHER

SPONSORED BY - BROLGA MUSIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, BOOTH 725

1. KNOW THE RULES

GENERAL BACKGROUND

In order to write successfully for any ensemble, there is some basic background information you need to know. This includes knowledge of:

- Harmony
- Melody writing
- Form
- How the various brass, woodwind and percussion instruments work, their range, transposition, and their individual technical difficulties.

The more you understand about each of these areas, the better your writing will be.

Some cheap and easy resources to find out more about what beginner players can and can't do, and the order in which they learn things are:

- method books - especially the conductors book
- scores of effective young band pieces
- your colleagues
- your own students

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Realize that you are writing for a band, not a piano. The piano is a helpful tool, but some things that are easy on to play piano are quite difficult for a band and vice versa. The piano also has a sustain pedal; a band does not. This in turn affects the way you score material.

Pick the grade level you are going to write for before you begin writing. Trying to "reverse engineer" a piece to a higher or lower grade is generally very difficult and not very successful. Then you must stick to the parameters of that grade level. There must be consistency, both within parts and across different parts. If you have a great idea that doesn't fit the parameters of the piece you are writing, put it in a different piece.

My short summary of guidelines for Gr 0.5 guidelines are:

- Range = concert A up to G (= 7 notes)
- Key signatures of concert Bb or F
- Time signatures of 2/4, 3/4, 4/4
- Rhythms = whole, 1/2, 1/4 notes, 1/8 notes in pairs
- "Real" instrumentation of Flute, Clarinet, Alto Sax, Trumpet, Trombone (or "bass line") and Percussion. You still write parts for all the other instruments such as Oboe, Bassoon etc, but it must be playable by just the instruments listed.

2. BREAK THE RULES

This is less about breaking rules and more like exploring what we can do within the rules, but that doesn't sound nearly as exciting! From here on, we will be exploring primarily in the context of the guidelines for Gr 0.5, but it also applies to higher levels.

EXPLORING TONALITY

Publisher guidelines generally specify key signatures of Bb, F, and then Eb. By default, we assume this means that we can only write in Bb major or F major or Eb major. But what if we take the 7 notes of Bb major and think of them as just an available pitch set, not the major scale? How many other scales or modes can we construct from just these 7 notes?

My list looks like this:

- A locrian, Bb major, C dorian, D phrygian, Eb lydian, F mixolydian, G aeolian
- Bb, Eb, F major pentatonic
- C, D minor pentatonic
- A, Bb, D, Eb, G (= ? pentatonic)
- A minor blues (almost)

I pick one of these scales/modes as a starting point for writing. Even if I drift into a different scales/mode, it helps me to start in a new and more interesting place creatively.

One example of this approach in my own writing is my piece, *Market In Marrakesh*. You can find a short score attached.

EXPLORING HARMONY

Now take the same seven notes as before, and construct as many 3-note chordal possibilities as you can. The obvious ones are:

- Bb, Eb, F major triad
- C, D, G minor triad
- A diminished triad
- F dominant 7th (Root, 3rd 7th = F, A, Eb)

Some of the less obvious ones are:

- sus4 (R, 4, 5), sus2 (R, 2, 5)
- maj 7 (R, 3, 7), min7 (R, 3, 7), 6th chord (R, 3, 6)
- “Power” chords (no 3rd)
- Quartal harmony (R, 4, 7= C, F, Bb)
- Clusters (3+ notes, e.g. C, D, E)

Are these sounds too hard for beginners to play? Maybe...but this is one way to challenge yourself as a writer - to try to incorporate these sounds in an effective and playable way. For me, this is ONE interesting place to start writing from. I should also say, don't try to put all of these into one piece, maybe just one or two.

There are, in fact, even more possibilities than this. What about simpler 2 note possibilities? Two notes are potentially a little more ambiguous harmonically and, as a result, more interesting. What about unisons and octaves? Everything doesn't have to be triads!

EXAMPLES

1. Unison



2. Power chords

A musical score for piano, featuring a right hand (treble clef) and a left hand (bass clef). The right hand starts with a half note G4, followed by a series of chords. The left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings: *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *ff* (fortissimo). The piece concludes with a fermata over the final chord in the right hand.

3. 3-note structures, created from parallel 4ths against a bass line

9 **Moderato**

D5 A min7 B^b_{sus2} C min7

4. 3-note structures, created from parallel 4ths against a bass line

E^b6 C min7 D5

5. Harmonic ambiguity

D5 F2/A C min7 ? D5 A min7

6. Complexity from simple HORIZONTAL motion against a pedal point (D, then G)

D5 E^b maj7 D5 C min7 B^b6 A min7 C min7

COUNTERPOINT IS YOUR FRIEND

Two part counterpoint can be a very effective technique for writing for young bands because:

- It gives students lots of unison friends to cling to. This in turn makes rehearsing easier, as you only have to sort out part "A", then part "B".
- The limited scoring resources aren't a problem.
- If you follow the counterpoint rules around dissonance (prepare the dissonance and then resolve by step), then students can play it.

SIGHT SINGING COUNTERPOINT EXAMPLE

WW's

Br.

9

This musical score is for a piece titled 'WW's'. It is written for two staves, with the upper staff labeled 'WW's' and the lower staff labeled 'Br.'. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The score consists of two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 8. The second system, starting with a measure number '9' at the beginning of the first staff, contains measures 9 through 14. The notation includes various note values (quarter, eighth, and half notes), rests, and a fermata over a half note in the final measure of the second system.

Notice what you just sang! Bar 2 is a major 2nd...for the whole bar!

This example is actually the opening of my piece *The Forge of Vulcan*. By preparing the dissonance and resolving it correctly (Unison \rightarrow Major 2nd \rightarrow minor 3rd), students are easily able to play a relatively difficult sound (a sustained Major 2nd).

3. FINAL THOUGHTS

- Percussion - please be creative and write for lots of different percussion instruments
- Two good questions to ask yourself to spark creativity:
 - What can they do?
 - How can I write "X" successfully?
- How would someone rehearse this?
- Is it interesting to play? (a.k.a. - give the low brass and woodwinds the melody sometimes!)
- Some encouragement...
 - Your first piece is unlikely to be a world beater
 - You haven't written your best piece yet!
- Find me:
 - www.composingforband.com
 - www.brolgamusic.com
 - email: tim@funkyfishmusic.com