ARRANGING

MUSIC

Tips for arranging music in a collaborative way

ABSTRACT
Delve into the process of arranging music, with questions designed to spark thought and creative input, a sample arrangement for reference and a closer look at Pier One's composition 'Epic Journey'.

Pier One
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Go to…

- **Approaches to arranging music**

Much like composing or improvising, there are many approaches to arranging music. It isn't necessarily about following a set of rules or a strict method of practice. The key is ensuring the process of bringing all the elements together works for you and your group. Any process of music-making should allow space for creative input, which is where the magic happens!

Whether using a pre-composed piece of music or creating a new composition, there are several things we need to think about when arranging music. It can be useful to think of these as building blocks, which you are putting together to create the final product.

If you are using an established piece of music, many of the elements may already be apparent, such as the main tune, harmony parts, chords/keys, lyrics, etc. Other elements may likely develop as part of the arranging process. The same can be said when creating a new piece of music, though it may be the case that more elements are developed as a direct result of arranging, rather than simply rearranging the elements you already have.

Some elements discussed in the arranging process will naturally develop hand in hand with the improvising/composing processes, whereas others will be pre-determined.

Starting point:

This might be a theme upon which your piece is based or the main tune, and will likely form the main body of the work.
Think of this as the gravitational centre, pulling together the other elements as you work through the process.
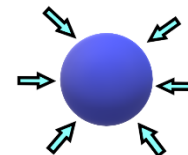
Order of sections/layering of parts:

How many sections or parts make up your piece? At this point, you may not necessarily have a beginning or end, but you will have the main bulk of ideas to form sections of the music. If using an existing tune, this might be in the form of the main theme and/or developments of the theme. New compositions might have a few different elements of music developed from an initial theme. Consider different factors that may influence the order of the sections:

- What is the overall character of the piece? (e.g., happy, sad, mysterious)
- Does it change at all as the piece progresses? (e.g., calm before the storm)
- Are there any practical issues? (e.g., change of instruments between sections)
- Are there any solo sections? Will they be consecutive, or interspersed with group sections?
- Is there a particular form/musical structure which would work best? (e.g., a song following verse/chorus/verse/chorus, or a piece following ABA form)

Transitions between sections:

Once you have a rough idea of the order, it is natural to think about how you move between the sections. This might already be part of the theme of the piece. Think about factors such as:

- What is the purpose of the transition? Will it signal the end of one section and beginning of another, or will you need to create extra music (a bridge)?
- Will only one motif be used to signal changes, or will each transition be different?
- How long will it last for? Who will determine this/signal the transition?
- Will everyone play in the transition, a small group or solo? If small group or solo, will it be a different one each time?

Beginning and Ending:

By now, you should have a clear idea of the finished product; overall structure, character/style, signals in place as required, practical and musical elements within the main body of work addressed. If it is not clear how the piece will start and end, now is the time to ask the following questions:

Intro:
- Will your arrangement start with the main theme you've established as your 'starting point'?
- Does it make sense to have an intro before you launch into the first section?
- Will this be soundscape, a motif used in the transitions, chords, a part of the main theme, etc.?
- Will the whole group play the intro? Small group? Solo?
- Will it fade in or start definitively?
- Loud or quiet opening? Part of the opening character or a new idea separate to the first section?

Outro:
- Will your arrangement finish with the final section?
- Does it make sense to have an outro/coda to end the piece?
- Will this be soundscape, a motif used in the transitions, chords, a part of the main theme, etc.?
- Will the whole group play the intro? Small group? Solo?
- Will it fade out or end definitively?
- Loud or quiet ending? Part of the final character, a new idea separate to the rest of the piece, or related to the intro?

Final details:

It is always good practice to play through your arrangement a few times and even record it so you can listen back at a later stage. It can take some time to fully process your work, so allow space and time to revisit your arrangement and tweak it as required, try out alternative ideas, and add in final details.

Depending on the needs of the group, there are several ways to capture the overall arrangement structure; recording a run through, a detailed written outline, graphic score, and music score, to name a few!
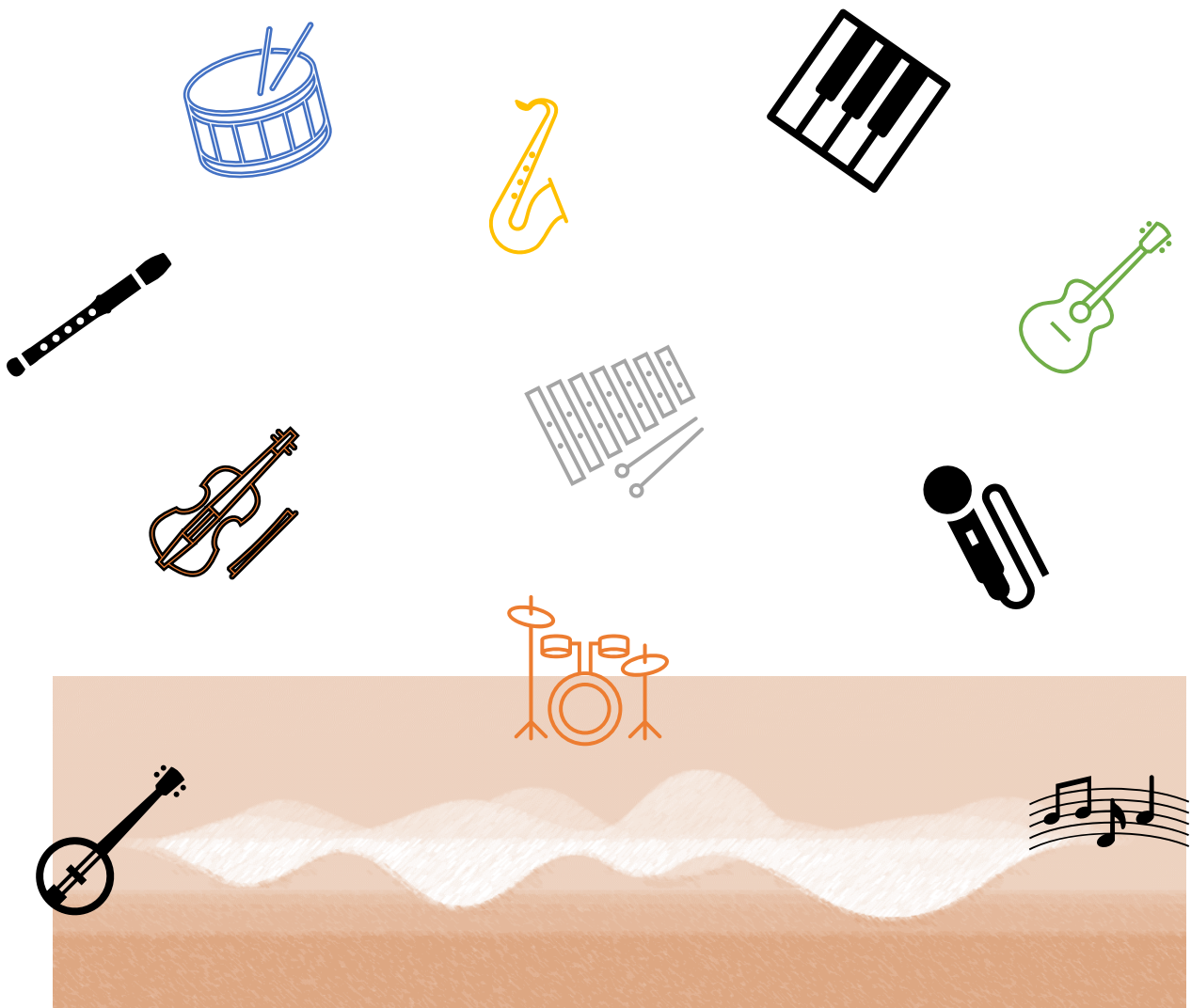
- **Sample arrangement: *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star***

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star, a nursery rhyme written by English author Jane Taylor and first published in 1806. Traditionally set to the French folk song *Ah! vous dirai-je, maman*, a popular tune which has been used throughout the ages in a variety of ways, such as by means of sampling, remixing, and arrangements in the form of theme and variations, and other verse settings.

Here is one example of structuring an arrangement for *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*:

➢ First, let's take a look at the different elements which will be used in the arrangement.

Theme (main tune): using a theme as a starting point gives a solid foundation for creating the main body of the piece. In this case, we already have the main tune, so this is our starting point. The lyrics and chords are shown here, which can be used either in conjunction with the tune or as separate elements. For the purpose of this arrangement, we are in the key of D major.

2-note part: as we are using an established tune, we can easily identify a 2-note part which is more accessible to those who may be less confident on their instruments or where the instruments themselves have a limited range of notes. For this piece, we'll stick with the tonic and dominant (I and V notes of the scale) as this will mostly fit the tune throughout. For this key, this will be D and A.

Rhythm part: introducing a rhythmic element will help to steer the direction of the piece. At this point, we can start to talk about the overall character of the piece – is it slow and gentle, perhaps with a laid-back feeling and beat to match, such as a slow blues beat? Or, is it more upbeat, with a lively tempo established by way of a fast dance beat? For the purpose of this arrangement, we are using a simple rhythm which can be played on any instrument, both tuned and untuned. This is another example of how we can create accessible parts for all music-makers in the group.

Harmony part: adding another layer to compliment the tune is a good way of expanding the arrangement and allowing music-makers to explore counter-melodies. There are three chords from which we can draw inspiration – D, G and A majors (I, IV & V). We have opted for a simple harmony part which mostly follows the tune in thirds, but this would be a great opportunity to improvise and compose tunes that complement the main theme. These can then form many different sections/elements of the final piece.

➢ So, now we have the basic elements of our piece, we need to start putting it together. Remember, your theme is the starting point (or the foundation of the piece), so refer to that as you start to pull all the elements together. Let's list the sections we want to include:

- Theme (main tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle*), instrumental only
- Theme, chords and 2-note part (vocals included)
- Theme, chords, 2-notes and rhythm (vocals included)
- Theme, chords, 2-notes, rhythm and harmony (vocals included) X2

We want to establish the theme before we move onto any other sections and it can be quite effective having the theme played without any other parts so that the audience can clearly hear the tune. Ordering the sections as above gives a feel of theme and variations and, with each cycle, we build up the texture which, in turn, gives the sense of the direction moving forward as we build to a positive finale. The idea of playing the last section through twice adds to this effect.

➢ Now we need to think about how we transition between the different sections. As we have established that there will be several cycles of the same tune, adding layers each time, it feels like there should be some sort of separation between each cycle which will signal that something new is about to happen.

- Should the transition music be one short signal or part of the music?
- Should the transition music be a completely new idea or a motif taken from the music we already have at our disposal?

For this arrangement, we have opted for a 'simple motif' idea which is formed from a combination of the 2-note and rhythm parts. The motif will be 2 bars (2x 4 counts) to separate each section and will follow the character of the piece which has emerged from ordering the sections. Our new structure looks like this:

- Cycle 1: theme (main tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle*), instrumental only
- 2 bars transition: 2-note part only
- Cycle 2: theme, chords and 2-note part (vocals included)
- 2 bars transition: 2-note and rhythm parts only
- Cycle 3: theme, chords, 2-notes and rhythm (vocals included)
- 2 bars transition: 2-note and rhythm parts only
- Cycle 4: theme, chords, 2-notes, rhythm and harmony (vocals included)
- 2 bars transition: 2-note and rhythm parts only
- Cycle 5: theme, chords, 2-notes, rhythm and harmony (vocals included)

➢ Almost there… we just need to decide on the beginning and end!

This is a good opportunity to explore options such as fading in and out, using the transition music as the intro and outro, creating soundscape for the piece to emerge from and even disappear back into and using technology, such as an electronic drone sound.

It has already been mentioned that starting with the tune unaccompanied is an effective tool for establishing the theme for the audience and, for this arrangement, fits well with the idea of the piece building up layer by layer. It feels a bit too abrupt to finish with the end of the last cycle, so we have opted for an extended pattern of the transition bars.

Ending 4 bars (extended transition):

Our final arrangement looks like this:

- Cycle 1: theme (main tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle*), instrumental only
- 2 bars transition: 2-note part only
- Cycle 2: theme, chords, and 2-note part (vocals included)
- 2 bars transition: 2-note and rhythm parts only
- Cycle 3: theme, chords, 2-notes, and rhythm (vocals included)
- 2 bars transition: 2-note and rhythm parts only
- Cycle 4: theme, chords, 2-notes, rhythm, and harmony (vocals included)
- 2 bars transition: 2-note and rhythm parts only
- Cycle 5: theme, chords, 2-notes, rhythm, and harmony (vocals included)
- Coda: 4 bars transition; 2-notes to play 2 bars and then finish on held D, rhythm part to play 3½ bars, finishing with a sound on beat 3 of the last bar.

A notated score might look something like this (for reference only):

- **Pier One's *Epic Journey* breakdown**

Pier One's composition *Epic Journey* started life as a collection of exploratory motifs. The idea of moving from one place to another and having a forward momentum quickly became the overall theme, musically derived from a slow rhythm gradually speeding up to a climax. From here, we were able to draw together ideas of places we might visit on our journey, often influenced by the instruments being used.

Here is a written outline of the full score of *Epic Journey* (individual names have been blacked out):

EPIC JOURNEY

█████ cues █████ to start...
INTRO: -
    █████ on Electronic Drone fades in
    Everyone improvises softly over drone
    █████ cues the end with cymbal roll getting louder/crash cymbal

█████ cues █████ to start...
SPEED UP 1
    █████ plays slow tom pulse.
    All start by whispering words inspired by Caribbean in time with drums.
    Drums speed up gradually, everyone follows the drum speed & gets louder.
    █████ cues the end with a Crash cymbal

Straight into...
CARIBBEAN GROOVE
    █████ plays reggae beat, soft to start and louder when everyone joins in
    █████ cues start of the offbeat stabs
    All players join in with offbeat stabs (notes from major chord)

    █████ cues start of call and response, plays 4 long loud notes
    █████ continues playing reggae beat
    Everyone else stops

        █████ call – all respond
        █████ call – all respond
        █████ call – all respond
        █████ call - all respond

        █████ – iPad solo

    █████ cues offbeat stabs to return, all play groove
    █████ plays a loud fill & crash to signal the end

Straight into...
SPEED UP 2
    As above, using words inspired by Mongolia

Straight into...
MONGOLIAN DRONE
    █████ leads drone on Morin Xuur
    Everyone joins in, droning on D minor (white notes), humming, or shakes/rattles
    █████ cues everyone to get quieter – ███████████ sing into mics

█████ cues █████ to start...
SPEED UP 3
    As above, using words inspired by India/Japan

█████ cues the start of...
INDIAN/JAPAN FUSION
    █████ starts Indian keyboard texture 1 █████ plays iPad texture 1.
    Group 1 join in.
    █████ cues to stop with 'ending' motif – 3 long notes
    Group 1 stop.

    █████ & █████ play texture 2
    Group 2 join in.
    █████ with 'ending motif'

    Everyone plays their texture

█████ cues █████ to start...
SPEED UP 4
    As above, using words inspired by Travel

█████ cues █████ to start drone, leading into...
ENDING
    █████ on Electronic Drone, fade out to finish

The arranging process:

<u>Starting point:</u>

Already mentioned above, the theme of traveling was quickly established with the musical motif of a rhythm starting slowly and gradually speeding up. This made us think of a train setting out on a journey and gradually picking up pace as it progresses on to its destination.

<u>Order of sections:</u>

During small group activities, three clear sections for the piece were created; Caribbean and Mongolian influenced sections and a fusion of Indian and Japanese. We considered a number of factors when choosing an order, including:

- Tempo of each section
- Character/style/mood
- Key/Tonality
- Instrumentation
- Any practical implications of shared instruments/seating arrangements

We tried out a few different structures to evaluate which worked the best, based on these factors, and would fit in with our overall theme. We decided to start with the Caribbean section, which had the most positive start of all the sections with the reggae beat in the drum kit to kick things off. In contrast, the Mongolian section was much calmer, with more of a soundscape feel to it produced by the drone/humming and improvised vocalised sounds. The Indian/Japanese section, much like the countries it represents, fuses two musical elements together, thus giving us a positive and formal structure with a mystical feeling created through the tonality and solo instruments. This gave us our final arrangement – Caribbean "reggae", Mongolia "drone", India/Japan "fusion".

Transitions:

The transitions in this piece are an example of how some elements of the process are created hand in hand with others in the early stages of composition. With our theme of travelling giving us this musical motif of forward momentum, it was clear this would be the perfect transition between the sections, with the mental image of riding the train to the next country on our journey. Each speed up section (transition) functioned in the same way musically but, to give the opportunity for everyone to participate in these sections, we used different words to represent each destination.

Beginning and ending:

So far, we had a structure which was bookended with the 'speed up' motif, but we felt as a group that this resulted in a rather abrupt start and finish. We explored different textures and ideas which would compliment the overall piece and settled on using an electronic drone which was reminiscent of the "drone" section featured in the middle. In addition, for the intro we included the musical ideas of improvisation over the drone and gradual build of dynamic with the cymbal roll, both of which feature in the piece, as well as emulating the atmosphere of a train station with lots of sounds and background noise present.

Final details:

With our overall structure complete, we were left to consider the finer details that enhance a performance, as well as any practical issues that were needed to be addressed. With the nature of our group working in a collaborative way, we often share the responsibility of leading sections rather than having one conductor/leader. Our final considerations included:

- Dynamics (loud/quiet/changes between them)
- Musical cues and who would give them
- Tech requirements
- Seating arrangements for sub-groups
- Sight lines for cues
- Title for the piece!
- Scores for performance (and recordings where appropriate)

We often record our rehearsals so that participants can listen back as required and practise, as necessary. For a piece of this complexity, it is also advisable to circulate scores which can be referred to both in practice and performance. We used a combination of the written outline above and a more graphic style score below (individual names have been blacked out), which met the needs of the participants and suited the style of piece created. However, if required, a musical score (notation) would also be an effective tool for capturing the final arrangement.

Final thought:

These are just a few approaches we have used at Pier One when arranging music, but is certainly not exhaustive. To echo the sentiment conveyed earlier, any process of music-making should allow space for creative input, which means working in a way that best suits the needs of the group and providing a safe space for exploration.