

# Front Ensemble Arranging: Tips from the Experts

By Gene Fambrough

**F**ew things in the percussion world are more daunting than writing your first front ensemble arrangement—especially when you have no experience to draw on. Many years ago, when I was given my first assignment, the only direction I was given was “don’t double the woodwinds.” Although that was great advice, it certainly didn’t spark any creativity. Practical advice is commonplace: study your transpositions, work on literature, listen to the source material, etc., but many times the actual experience is what is needed the most.

With most novice arrangers, a frequent question is “How do I even start?” With that in mind, I asked several prominent arrangers to provide their “quick tips” for the arranging process: Omar Carmenates (The Cadets), Rob Ferguson (Matrix), Chad Heiny (Blue Knights), Matt Jordan (Music City Mystique), and Tom Rarick (The Bluecoats). Read on to hear their best advice on the arranging process, gleaned from many years of experience.

## OMAR CARMENATES

*Orchestrating to be heard.* The most fundamental difference between marching music and chamber/concert music is the need to project across large distances (mostly) outdoors. When scoring for front ensemble, this should be one of the primary considerations that

arrangers put into their musical ideas. For instance, when compared to a larger ensemble, a smaller sized front ensemble may need to put all of its “eggs” in the “basket” of mostly unison writing so as to have multiple people reinforcing each other on one part, rather than few individuals spread across multiple parts. In addition to being clearly heard, well-orchestrated parts also have the added benefit of avoiding undue stress on the instruments or on the players’ bodies.

*Writing to the player and instrument.* A fundamental drawback of writing on a computer is that simply putting a “p” or “f” under a phrase of music immediately makes it softer or louder without consideration for how it feels in the player’s hands or how it will actually speak on the instrument. It is important that parts written for each voice of the front ensemble are idiomatic to the instrument(s), the player, and the chosen volume level.

*Stylistic Competence.* It is vital for a front ensemble arranger (or any arranger) to have a general understanding of what makes various genres of music sound the way they do, especially from a harmonic and rhythmic standpoint. This internal musical “compass” will help an arranger’s writing “feel” better to both the ensemble and the audience, and it may even deter many timing difficulties that marching ensembles consistently face. Score study, transcription,

and a varied listening diet are all important to making that happen.

*Professional Delivery and Communi-*



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**—Omar Carmenates**

cation. Whether writing for an ensemble as a designer-from-afar or as a staff member involved in the group's day-to-day operation, it is important that an arranger's scores are detailed, well laid out, and mistake free, and that the scores are consistently delivered on time. With that said, creative work can be difficult to put an exact timeline on, so clear, honest communication *in advance* is vitally important if the writing process is taking longer than planned.

*Writing with a Hint of Pessimism.* With a marching ensemble's season lasting for months, it is tempting for an arranger to overwrite—either in quantity or difficulty—thinking that there are copious amounts of rehearsal time available to learn and “clean” the music. In reality, any ensemble staff member will tell you that nothing could be further from the truth! So as an arranger, it is important for the majority of your writing to sound really good “right out of the box” and to have that balanced with challenging writing sparingly placed at appropriate moments. An analogy I often use is that nobody likes trying to put together a puzzle where the pieces fit together poorly, no matter how many pieces or how challenging it is. Ensembles will feel similarly about a needlessly overwritten score.

## ROB FERGUSON

*Resist the urge to double wind parts.* Doubling wind parts easily creates balance and pitch issues and begins to nullify the specific wind colors that those parts are orchestrated to highlight. Look for ways to create counter lines, arpeggiation, and/or colors versus doubling melodic parts.

*Look for opportunities to contribute beyond just keyboard.* I often feel young writers feel the need to have all of the keyboards play all of the time. Remember that wind arrangers typically don't have all of the wind voices playing all of the time. Allowing yourself to isolate when those keyboard colors contribute allows them to have identity. In addition,

consider the use of cymbals, etc. as opportunities to color a phrase and create a variety of texture that will inevitably make the larger musical picture more interesting, and give the front ensemble more identity phrase to phrase.

*Help create impact!* Similar to the previous tip, I often see young front ensemble arrangers write all keyboard in large tutti ensemble phrases and miss an opportunity to help create punctuation and impact. Smart use of suspended cymbals to highlight key points in the melody or phrasing is a great device to help the bigger musical package. Secondly, don't ever forget how effective the use of concert bass drum and gong (often in combination) is to help the battery (and winds) punctuate the end of a phrase.

*Minimize how many different voices you have in keyboards at a time.* When I was young, a much more experienced front ensemble arranger told me this,



**“Resist the urge to write everything with 4-mallet technique; good 2-mallet playing is very effective.”  
—Rob Ferguson**

and it still rings true with me today. It is easy as we listen to MIDI playback files, and even our front ensemble in a sectional situation, for us to love the intricacy of multiple lines in marimbas and multiple lines in vibes. When you get into a full ensemble environment, these additional lines are generally lost and often are making the ensemble “muddy.” I try to hold myself to two lines at a time in the keyboard the majority of the time.

*Remember that 2-mallet phrases are still highly effective!* Resist the urge (especially writing for high school students) to write everything with 4-mallet technique; remember that good 2-mallet playing is very effective. When velocity (often sixteenth-note scale passages) is the tool you are looking to use, ask yourself if there is a place to shift to 2 mallets prior to that. While we all see a lot of inside mallet runs in the world-class side of the activity, remember that playing those with 2 mallets creates the same and often more dynamic effect to the audience and judges in the box.

## CHAD HEINY

*Study the source material.* If available, obtain the original score to the work being arranged and study it with multiple recordings to ensure a final product that includes as much of the original composer's intent as possible.

*Keep track of musical ideas.* In a notebook, sketch out some thoughts about how to bridge the composer's intentions with the needs of the arrangement.

*Use your resources wisely.* Write within the means of the available instrumentation by not getting too independent if the instrumentation is minimal, and not getting too unison if the instrumentation is robust. Striking a balance between projection, transparency, and color is key.

*Write within the means of the performers.* Yes, challenge the ensemble and its members, but only under the umbrella of what their rehearsal time will be to produce and execute the arrangements successfully.

*Ego is the enemy.* Have an original voice, but don't put it before the composer's intentions, the ensemble's needs, or the performers' abilities.

## MATT JORDAN

*Adapt an existing tune.* If you're totally new to arranging, find a relatively simple "pop" tune, and transcribe the melody, harmony, bass line, and general drum set groove, then copy/paste the parts from your transcription into your score. Start simple—melody on vibes, harmony/groove on marimba, and bass line in bass guitar or synth. The melody usually does not need much embellishment, but often I'll add some extra chordal notes in the left hand of the vibes to fill in the harmony. The marimba part is where the majority of the adaptation will hap-

pen in this exercise. Allow the marimba part to have a variety of techniques—alternating double verticals in different rhythms, permutations, block chords, rolls, etc. After you're done with the melodic instruments, *please* don't stop there! Learning to write great drum set and rack parts is the difference between a good arranger and a great arranger.

*What missing element does the music need?* Generally, the answer to this question helps clarify the intent of what I'm writing. I generally think about most parts fitting into one of the following categories: 1. Melody (primary or support), 2. Harmonic/Rhythmic motion, 3. Transitional, 4. Punctuation, 5. Impact. If I can determine which element a phrase is missing, it will help guide my decisions.

*Don't write music that's too hard for the students.* Many beginning arrangers come from marching a BOA/WGI/DCI group, where they've played lots

of difficult notes. However, most of the time, the first groups you will write for are small rural schools that don't have a dedicated percussion staff. Your job as an arranger first and foremost is to write what the music needs and to make the students sound good.

*Do your research on beginning composition, orchestration, harmony, and chord voicing.* This can be through transcribing other arrangements, reading books, watching YouTube videos, going to theory class, etc. Also, know how the instruments you are writing for typically function. If you're writing for a front ensemble, that generally means all the keyboard instruments, synths, bass guitar, drum set, and percussion. A great arranger generally knows the instrument ranges, general styles and grooves, and what's technically possible on the instrument. Nothing is more frustrating for a young student (or a teacher) than getting parts that don't actually work on their instrument!

*Don't think about being "creative."* I think much of the writer's block that younger designers often experience is because they're trying to be creative, rather than treating arranging as an exercise in problem solving. That means I generally don't start writing on bar 1; often times I'll start at the phrase I feel the strongest about, and I will then jump around the score to the parts I feel pretty good about. Generally, I find that it's easier once you see notes on the page, and you can start to think about just "connecting the dots" between the phrases that are already done.

## TOM RARICK

*Make a plan.* The creation of a phrase chart or some other kind of organizing system can be a great pre-production tool. For me, it's a living document that includes an outline of the basic structure (phrases), identifies the main voice or primary focus in those phrases, and provides some general percussion thoughts. The details can and will change over the course of the process, but having a



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—Matt Jordan**

sense of the horizontal structure (phrase to phrase) of what you're designing can provide enhanced context and meaning for how the percussion voice fits into the fabric of the show.

*Create a front ensemble setup diagram.* Give careful thought to the physical locations of players and instruments in the ensemble. These decisions can help you in determining orchestration/involvement due to transition time, advantageous listening and communication environments (proximity and sight lines), and aid in visualizing what the impression of a given moment will be to the viewer. These situations always morph when put on the field, but early consideration in the design process can help make more efficient use of your rehearsal time, and set your students up for more immediate success.

*Explore all you can, away from the computer.* Try to maintain a physical connection with the music you're writing. De-

spite all the great technology available to us with software notation and fantastic sound libraries to make our arrangements come to "life," remember that actual people are (hopefully) going to be performing them. Spending the time to scrutinize how something flows/feels on a drum pad or marimba, experimenting with tenor or vibe voicings while factoring in ergonomics, and thinking about how people will look while performing, are important considerations. Ultimately, the music will sound better and communicate more successfully when it feels great for the performers.

*Embrace accessory and textural elements.* Often times the battery percussion, in combination with marimba and vibes, provides the backbone of a marching percussion arrangement through density, volume, and the number of players on each part. Accessory instruments can sometimes be a forgotten element when relegated to the "rack," and often left to less experienced performers. Thoughtful uses of instruments like tambourine, triangle, unique cymbals, or any of the myriad of possibilities and combinations can add personality and help create a sense of depth and connection between the voices. Also, if you're designing electronic elements or working with another designer, it's important to consider how the acoustic and synthetic textures work in tandem to create a cohesive sense of color and identity.

*Many thanks to the contributors for taking the time to offer these wonderful insights into the arranging process. As faculty members of the "Composing for Percussion Seminar" (hosted by Omar Carmentates this past July), they each presented sessions and offered lessons on their individual arranging process. As the seminar progressed, I felt strongly about sharing their expertise with the PAS readership, and I hope this article provided some thoughts on getting started and inspiration to those interested in arranging for front ensemble.*

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**Rob Ferguson** is a multi-school designer and arranger in Ohio and the surrounding Midwest area as well as the designer and arranger for Matrix Percussion and Phantom Regiment. His other arranging experience includes The Glassmen, Hawthorne Cabaleros, and the Skyliners.

**Chad Heiny** is the program coordinator for The Blue Knights Drum and Bugle Corps. Prior to this, he arranged, consulted, or coordinated for The Cadets, Boston Crusaders, Spirit of Atlanta, and The Glassmen.

**Matt Jordan** serves as Assistant Professor of Percussion at Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama. He is also the front ensemble arranger for Music City Mystique, the Music Coordinator and Sound Designer for the Bluecoats Drum and Bugle Corps, and a Music Advisor for the Colts Drum and Bugle Corps.

**Tom Rarick** is the percussion section leader of the United States Air Force Band Ceremonial Brass, stationed at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, D.C. In 2009, he assumed the role of percussion arranger/composer for the Bluecoats Drum & Bugle Corps, after serving as the front ensemble arranger since 2002. [PN](#)



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—Tom Rarick