

Contemporary A Cappella Arranging in 10 Easy Steps

Do you have trouble finding arrangements of contemporary songs you'd like to perform with your group? Would you like to arrange but don't know where to start? This session will run through an easy step-by-step process for tackling arrangements of pop, rock and jazz songs, including how to choose songs, voicing considerations, style of backing parts, using technology to make life easier, transcription tricks, and ways to digitise and distribute the arrangement (creating scores, recordings and backing tracks). This session will suit teachers interested in arranging for their own school groups and VCE teachers who would like an easy sequential process to share with students studying Unit 4 Group Performance.

1. Choose a song

Tips for choosing a song:

- Choose a song that will suit the members of your group, and the soloist (if there is one)
- Some popular artists nearly always lend themselves well to a cappella arrangements: try Sting, Michael Jackson, The Jackson 5, Stevie Wonder, Queen, Beatles, Maroon 5, Justin Timberlake
- Don't overlook public domain songs (folk songs, traditional songs, hymns) because they can often be given a contemporary "makeover" – think gospel style, jazz, pop
- Try to choose something different to everyone else!
- Listen to music with your "arranging ears" on all the time
- You might consider doing an arrangement of an arrangement of an original song
- Keep track of potential songs to arrange by keeping an iTunes playlist of possibilities
- Choose a song you like – you're going to spend a lot of time working on it even before you get to the first rehearsal, so don't pick something you're not prepared to listen a lot!

2. Listen to the song.....a lot

- First of all, find a recording of your chosen song. Check the iTunes store or your local CD shop
- Become familiar with the different parts of the song: melody, bassline, backing parts
- Make some basic decisions about your arrangement while listening (see Step 3)
- At some point, it's good to "put it away"

3. Decide the basic parameters of the arrangement

This is where you can start to think creatively. Perhaps you'd like to change the original song completely, or maybe you'll choose to be fairly faithful to the original concept.

Some basic things to think about:

- How many parts will the arrangement have?
- Sometimes less is more: 3 or 4 parts sung well is better than 8 parts sung badly
- Will the song feature a solo?
- What is the song structure? Map out the verse/chorus/intro/outro and remember that you don't necessarily need to be faithful to the original version

And the fun part...deciding the musical style, key, speed and overall "feeling". These elements can really make an arrangement unique.

- Will you use a jazz-style accompaniment for a gospel song?
- Will an up-tempo pop song become a heartfelt introspective ballad?
- Will your version be in a different key? Minor instead of major?
- Use a different voice part for the solo? Be faster or slower than the original?

4. Gather materials:

You may have found a recording of the original version of the song, but there are other resources you can use to give you a head-start in creating your arrangement. There's no point spending hours transcribing a song from a recording if you can find the sheet music or a MIDI file or your chosen song at little or no cost.

At the very least, finding the lyrics, sheet music or MIDI file can save you time writing out the melody and bass line and will allow you to spend more time tackling the creative aspects of your arrangement.

Lyrics

You can find the lyrics to almost any song online. Do a search for the song title plus the word "lyrics".

Sheet music

The easiest way to purchase sheet music is via download from an authorised website

- Sheet Music Direct: <https://www.sheetmusicdirect.com/>
- Sheet Music Plus: <http://www.sheetmusicplus.com/>
- The Music Room: <http://www.musicroom.com.au/en-AU/>
- Don't forget that you can often transpose the sheet music before printing out your purchased copy

MIDI files

There are thousands of MIDI file sites - try typing your song title plus the word "MIDI" into Google. You can also try these:

- MIDI Zone <http://www.free-midi.org/>
- Electrofresh <http://www.electrofresh.com/>
- Hit Trax <http://www.hittrax.com.au/>

5. Consider how you'll "record" your arrangement and how your group will learn the song:

You'll need to share your arrangement with your group somehow and there are a number of different options. You may like to consider the following:

- Does the group read music? Do you have the skills to write down the notation?
- Will the group learn by rote?
- Do you need an audio recording of each part? Do you have the equipment needed to make a recording?
- Will you use a combination of these?

Notation

The easiest way to notate your arrangement is by using a specialist notation software program. The best options are:

- Sibelius
- Finale
- MuseScore (free)

The beauty of using a software program is that you can easily copy and paste sections, transpose at the click of a mouse, move parts around and even create instant rehearsal CDs (backing tracks) for your group.

Record: MIDI

If you are not planning to notate your arrangement, you might choose to record it into a sequencing program like GarageBand, Sonar Home Studio or Mixcraft using a MIDI keyboard (or an on-screen keyboard). The benefits of using sequencing programs are much the same as using a notation program, although they're better suited to making an arrangement sound good, rather than look as a printed arrangement.

Record: Audio

Another option might be to sing the melody and record it using a hand-held microphone, multitrack recorder or into a microphone attached to your computer. You can then distribute recordings of each part (as well as the arrangement as a whole) to the members of your group.

Transcribing Tips

If you're transcribing the melody from a CD recording, here are a few tips:

- Find a quiet place to work
- Use headphones!
- If you're playing back your song in iTunes, learn a few playback shortcuts (ie. space bar to start/pause)
- If you're using a CD player, find one with responsive rewind and fast forward buttons
- Use technology to help you: Audacity is a free audio-editing program which will allow you to slow down the tempo of a song (without changing the pitch). You can also transpose a very low passage up an octave to make it easier to hear

6. Get the melody down

If you're notating your arrangement with a software program, or recording it into a sequencing program via a MIDI keyboard, a good place to start is by writing out the melody & lyrics. This will allow you to map out the form of the song and provide a basis for the rest of the arrangement.

And if you're using a notation or sequencing program it won't matter which part you write the melody into for now – you can always copy and paste it into a different part later on if necessary.

I usually write the entire melody for a song into one part – such as the soprano or tenor line – and then add in repeat bars, double barlines at the ends of sections, 1st and 2nd time bars etc so that the song structure is in place. Don't forget to write in the lyrics too – they help you keep track of where you are in the song.

7. Strong bassline

Melody + strong bassline = good arrangement

If you can get the basics right – that is a strong bassline to accompany your melody – you're 80% of the way there. So what makes a strong bassline?

- It's harmonically sound
- It will often move in a different direction to the melody
- When you play the melody and the bassline together, the song can "stand" on it's own (ie. you don't need any other parts to make it work)

8. Add in some interesting inner/backing parts

The "backing" parts are where you can add a lot of interest into your arrangement. Some tips:

- Make them rhythmically interesting
- Use a different texture to melody and bass
- You may like to consider imitating instrument sound (ie. jazz horns, guitar arpeggios)
- You can repeat words from the melody (or pre-empt them)
- You can use scat/nonsense syllables
- Be imaginative with syllables: there's more than just doo, dm and ba! Try jing, gling, thm, zwee, dot, shu....

9. Make a good arrangement *outstanding*

One of the best ways to enhance your arrangement is to use CONTRAST:

- One section unison, then break into parts
- Begin sparsely (melody and bass only) then increase fullness by adding other parts

- Change the style of backing parts in different sections: ie. arpeggio patterns followed by a chordal section or short, staccato chords followed by a lyrical section
- Choose to use different tempos for different sections
- Vocal percussion

10. Sharing your arrangement: teaching and learning

Notation

If you notated your arrangement, you can simply print out scores to distribute to your singers. And to save time and trees you can email PDF versions to members of your group, or even upload an “interactive” version that plays back to your group website. You can also create an audio file of your score which you can burn to CD as a backing track

Sequencing program

Some sequencing programs allow you to print notation, but the results are not nearly as sophisticated as a dedicated notation program like Sibelius or Finale. You can also create a backing track of each part, or of the whole score to distribute to your singers

Audio Recording

Your only option here is to distribute CDs of your recording of the arrangement.

Other tips

Listen to recordings of lots of vocal groups and take note of what makes an arrangement work and what doesn't. There are lots of places to find good a cappella music:

Podcasts

- The Acapodcast – full-length songs <http://www.acapodcast.com/>
- The Mouth Off Show – in-depth album reviews, interviews, opinions (look past the giggling...!) <http://www.mouthoffshow.com/>
- Contemporary A Cappella Society originals <http://www.casa.org/node/5908>

Information, links, reviews

- CASA <http://www.casa.org/>
- Recorded A Cappella Review Board <http://www.rarb.org/>

Recordings

- Primarily A Cappella <http://www.singers.com/>
- iTunes Store - it can be difficult to find contemporary a cappella music in the iTunes store because there's no a cappella category. A cappella albums and songs can be categorised as “vocal”, “pop”, “rock” or “jazz” or a variety of other options. Once you've found one or two albums, it can be useful to check the “Listeners also bought” section for other suggestions
- the website of your favourite vocal group

Songs played in today's session

Snippets of songs including - but not limited to - the following:

Group	Song
The Real Group	I'm With You
The Idea Of North	Sweet, Sweet Spirit
Beatles	Got to Get You Into My Life
Earth, Wind & Fire	Got to Get You Into My Life
Firedrill!	Got to Get You Into My Life
Suade	The Way You Look Tonight
Vox P	The Shape of My Heart
Cluster	One Note Samba
Tears for Fears	Mad World
Gary Jules	Mad World
Sonos	I Want You Back
Manchoir (rough recording by Ugg)	Africa
Bobby McFerrin	Don't Worry Be Happy
The Real Group	It Don't Mean A Thing
Firedrill!	My Yard
SoCal Vocals	Falling Slowly

A full list of songs used will be available after the workshop from:

www.midnightmusic.com.au (click on Resources)

Katie Wardrobe – Midnight Music

Katie Wardrobe is a qualified teacher who enjoys helping people who are short on time and dislike reading software manuals. She runs her own business - Midnight Music - which specialises in music technology training for educators and students. She is also a freelance copyist, music arranger and transcriber and a member of the Music Arrangers Guild of Australia. During the past 20 years, Katie has sung in a range of a cappella groups, including jazz group Vocalese, women's a cappella group Les Ms and the Victoria Chamber Singers and is in the process of setting up a new (as yet unnamed!) vocal a cappella quintet.

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