

# Conceptual and Collaborative Arranging

Legend:

*Idea: a theoretical observation, stripped down in order to be expanded upon.*

Consider: an opinionated suggestion about something to try in your arrangement.

1. What is Conceptual Arranging?
2. Definition:
  - 2.1. Arranging before putting any notes on the page or touching an instrument.
  - 2.2. “Thinking Vertically”: Prioritizing structure and moments rather than focusing preemptively on individual lines.
  - 2.3. A lot of this is from the perspective of competition, but many of these ideas can be applied for other settings:
    - 2.3.1. An engaging arrangement is an engaging arrangement.
    - 2.3.2. These ideas are a great starting place to stay organized before notating your arrangement.
  - 2.4. This is not a skill that necessarily relies on musical talent or knowledge of music theory; these are core ideas that we can express in layman’s terms (this class is meant for all skill levels).
  - 2.5. What is the purpose of music theory? To think about what other people have done and take their core ideas to use in our own ways. “A good composer does not imitate; he steals” - Stravinsky (and innovate).
  - 2.6. When Nitsan Shai ([shai.nitsan@gmail.com](mailto:shai.nitsan@gmail.com)) and I wrote this arrangement, we wrote it up in a Google Doc together. We hoped that by structuring our arrangement before notating it, we could more easily collaborate.
  - 2.7. By analyzing how Nitsan Shai and I arranged Levels, I hope to showcase how a simple reference document can provide a solid skeleton for an arrangement, setting your group up for success.
    - 2.7.1. Examples will focus on practical application of these ideas.
    - 2.7.2. In between examples I will focus on how these ideas can benefit your arranging, your group, and how your audience perceives your arrangement.
  - 2.8. You’re always welcome to contact me we questions. [me@erikfredriksen.com](mailto:me@erikfredriksen.com)
3. Example 1: Levels Verse 1 through Chorus 1
  - 3.1. Intro
    - 3.1.1. We wanted to take advantage of some of our unique sounds, so we stuck them right in the audience’s face in the intro.
    - 3.1.2. We chose exactly where the percussion would enter, so that we could use that skeleton elsewhere!
    - 3.1.3. Consider: planning which areas repeat ideas breaths a lot of life into the arrangement
      - 3.1.3.1. It makes the arrangement easier to learn.
      - 3.1.3.2. Repeating a familiar part or structure in a new context can really help the audience remain engaged for the arrangement’s full duration.
  - 3.2. Verse 1
    - 3.2.1. *Idea: everyone doesn’t need to sing all the time.*
      - 3.2.1.1. Singing for 3 minutes straight is exhausting (especially a backup part).
      - 3.2.1.2. The bass and VP, when using a sound system, can carry a section by themselves (I’ll come back to this).
      - 3.2.1.3. Gives the soloist room to more clearly express themselves.
      - 3.2.1.4. Let’s call everyone that ISN’T the beatboxer, solo, or bass (with octave; depends otherwise) the “ensemble”. These singers are all going to be mixed most similarly to each other in terms of volume.



- 3.2.2. Consider: think about making each singer's "entrance" (when they first begin singing) feel meaningful and deliberate to the audience member (avoiding "is that person supposed to be singing?" or "I'm not sure what's going on").
- 3.2.3. Consider: when the ensemble doesn't sing, we are presented 3 opportunities.
  - 3.2.3.1. The ensemble has some time to breathe and compose themselves.
  - 3.2.3.2. The ensemble can focus on choreography/looking good on stage in general.
  - 3.2.3.3. The ensemble has time to get ready for their next entrance and think about their starting note/vowel.
- 3.3. Chorus 1
  - 3.3.1. Consider: one vowel works really well during a low key section.
    - 3.3.1.1. Easier to rehearse; can look at each other's mouths to and match placement so that everyone makes the same vowel shape
    - 3.3.1.2. The ensemble itself becomes more powerful because the sound is more uniform.
  - 3.3.2. *Idea: simplicity helps create tasteful and interesting contrast with your more challenging, complex and/or dense sections.*
  - 3.3.3. Consider:
    - 3.3.3.1. Occasional simple sections make it easier for your group feel what they are singing, which makes strong articulation and interesting dynamics more natural to sing.
    - 3.3.3.2. Simple ideas are easier to make engaging for the audience; articulation and dynamics can be brought to the forefront because blending is easier.
    - 3.3.3.3. If the group enjoys performing an arrangement and the audience enjoys listening to the arrangement, then it can enjoy a long, successful lifespan in your repertoire.
- 3.4. For the arranger:
  - 3.4.1. *Idea: focusing on conceptual "moments" makes it easier to find success with your individual lines.*
  - 3.4.2. It's very easy for arrangers to get lost in the notes instead of focusing on the bigger picture, regardless of experience.
  - 3.4.3. When you plan out everything beforehand, everything in your arrangement is there for a reason; there's never any extraneous, unnecessary musical information.
  - 3.4.4. *Idea: focusing on conceptual "moments" makes it easier to manage and present the unique qualities about your group to the audience.*
    - 3.4.4.1. You can arrange sections that are engineered to take advantage of your group's strengths.
    - 3.4.4.2. You can arrange sections that either work around or through your group's difficulties (this is the thesis for my "Pedagogical Arranging" class; these resources are also available on <https://www.erikfredriksen.com/a-cappella.html>).
  - 3.4.5. Lets you balance the 4 core parts of an A Cappella group
    - 3.4.5.1. These observations are focused on working with sound systems geared toward A Cappella.
      - 3.4.5.1.1. Think about these ideas and think about how you can apply them (or deliberately not apply them) to your group and the contexts in which the group typically performs.
      - 3.4.5.1.2. Hopefully you can take these ideas and reflect upon your experiences watching the collegiate competition; why were the arrangements you liked more successful in winning you over?
      - 3.4.5.1.3. This ideas will also help you prepare an arrangement for recording; we simply want our arrangement to be engaging to the audience because why not?
    - 3.4.5.2. Solo

- 3.4.5.2.1. The soloist is typically mixed louder than other singers in the group (reminder: we're trying to boil down our ideas as simply as possible).
- 3.4.5.2.2. *Idea: we want to consider our soloist's strengths while writing the arrangement.*
- 3.4.5.2.3. It's hard to do this over the summer, but auditioning soloists before writing the arrangement lets you choose the perfect key/lets you build moments around their strengths.
- 3.4.5.2.4. If your singer has something interesting about the way they sing (be it a part of their range, a high note, riffing), think about how they can use it successfully in their arrangement.
- 3.4.5.3. Consider: think about setting up moments involving the soloist such that the audience is ready and prepared for the moment, and the soloist can deliver.
  - 3.4.5.3.1. Moments like these are enticing, but they don't always "read" like you might intend unless you the audience is prepared for it.
  - 3.4.5.3.2. "Read" Definition: What does the audience think that you're doing?
  - 3.4.5.3.3. We want to show off the soloist, but careful about arranging in a key where the highest or lowest notes just aren't always there:
    - 3.4.5.3.3.1. Consistency is good for everyone's peace of mind and for group morale.
    - 3.4.5.3.3.2. When you're in school, your vocal health is ALL OVER the place because you're up late and you're crazy busy; it's very unlikely, even with careful preparation, that your voice is truly at 100%.
- 3.4.5.4. Vocal Percussion (VP)
  - 3.4.5.4.1. The VP is also very loud.
  - 3.4.5.4.2. Think about what unique sounds can they make. Can you:
    - 3.4.5.4.2.1. Showcase them in a cool way?
    - 3.4.5.4.2.2. Have aux VP cover the core sounds (kick, snare, hi hat)?
  - 3.4.5.4.3. Consider: writing moments that involve the VP are among the most bombastic/powerful, or at least the most noticeable (doesn't need to be a loud moment, doesn't need to be a crazy fill!)
- 3.4.5.5. Bass
  - 3.4.5.5.1. *Idea: using "A Cappella bass technique" is very particular:*
    - 3.4.5.5.1.1. Focusing on resonance and consistency of sound.
      - 3.4.5.5.1.1.1. Everything in this section is especially suggested when the bass has an octave on it.
      - 3.4.5.5.1.1.2. Trying to sing loud as a low baritone in your low range is somewhat unnatural; having one bass lets the bass focus on timbre while your low baritones can get louder by going up. Your overall volume becomes louder, meaning that your group now has a larger dramatic range.
    - 3.4.5.5.1.2. Having multiple basses simply brings in the same restrictions and possibilities that having multiple people on any part has;
      - 3.4.5.5.1.2.1. Really quick things come harder for multiple people to tune.
      - 3.4.5.5.1.2.2. Your part can't feel comfortable for only some of your singers; think about ways to make sure everyone can sing the part in a way that feels good to them and blends with everyone else.
      - 3.4.5.5.1.2.3. Your part is fuller because there's more people!
  - 3.4.5.5.2. Consider:

- 3.4.5.5.2.1. Use little fills to keep repetitive bass-lines interesting; you would be surprised how the smallest addition can add a lot of character.
  - 3.4.5.5.2.1.1. Slides are powerful; don't overuse them.
- 3.4.5.5.2.2. Consider writing as if you were writing for a bass guitar/upright;
  - 3.4.5.5.2.2.1. Take a section and write a bassline that's more melodic but still holds the harmony down. It will keep the texture fresh.
  - 3.4.5.5.2.2.2. Listen and sing along to the basslines in your favorite pop songs (in your own octave, of course). Which ones are fun to sing? Which ones aren't?
- 3.4.5.5.3. Consider: Having multiple basses can add a great low character to an arrangement. It also doesn't have to be for the ENTIRE arrangement.
- 3.4.5.5.4. *Idea: we want to write "interesting" and varied bass lines. (basslines? Bass lines?)*
  - 3.4.5.5.4.1. Consider: interpreting "Interesting" both as fun for the audience to listen to and fun to sing over and over again in rehearsal.
  - 3.4.5.5.4.2. *Idea: Bass parts really don't need to be super low all the time:*
    - 3.4.5.5.4.2.1. Make their low notes count.
    - 3.4.5.5.4.2.2. Remember their low notes are softer.
  - 3.4.5.5.4.3. Remember that they have to breathe.
- 3.4.5.5.5. Ensemble (everyone else)
  - 3.4.5.5.5.1. In competitions, the ensemble tends to be relatively quiet; little one person parts are unlikely to be heard.
  - 3.4.5.5.5.2. Regardless of the sound system, one member of your ensemble is a very small portion of the overall sound.
  - 3.4.5.5.5.3. HOWEVER, do not interpret this as "the ensemble is less important"; rather, interpret this as "the ensemble is one significant and core portion of the arrangement". This viewpoint is more to push the idea that entire ensemble is working together to provide their uniform sound to the end product.
  - 3.4.5.5.5.4. Our ensemble is an "instrument". What does that mean?
    - 3.4.5.5.5.4.1. We want whatever the ensemble is doing to be clear to the audience, even if they're doing nothing at all.
    - 3.4.5.5.5.4.2. It's "easier" to blend as an ensemble member if there is either:
      - 3.4.5.5.5.4.2.1. 1 person on a part.
      - 3.4.5.5.5.4.2.2. 3+ people on a part.
    - 3.4.5.5.5.4.3. 2 people on a part makes errors more clear, but can certainly be successful.
    - 3.4.5.5.5.4.4. If the audience doesn't hear what your ensemble is doing, are they even really singing at all?
    - 3.4.5.5.5.4.5. By really thinking about the ensemble as a single instrument, or unit, we can make sure that everything the ensemble does is clear to the audience so that we can focus on making it sound good.
  - 3.4.5.5.5.5. *Idea: Homophony (where everyone is "mostly" doing the same thing, vowel and movement-wise) is very safe.*
    - 3.4.5.5.5.5.1. Coupled with silence, can be very impactful (reference Levels verse).
    - 3.4.5.5.5.5.2. Chords really pop when everyone is using the same vowel:

- 3.4.5.5.5.2.1. Look at each other's mouths and try to match "placement", or where it sits in their voice.
- 3.4.5.5.5.2.2. As voices get higher, all vowels slowly become closer to "oh", so be careful with writing really "wide" chords.

**3.4.5.5.6. Most of the discussion to follow will be focused on how the ensemble is used in the rest of Levels.**

- 3.5. Example 2: Levels Chorus 2 through Bridge (including First 2 Measures of Chorus 3)
  - 3.5.1. *Idea: having 2 backup soloists generally finds success.*
    - 3.5.1.1. Consider: making it as easy for the sound people as possible:
      - 3.5.1.1.1. If the sound person can't quickly get your arrangements' respective intents from your sound check, it's harder for them to do their job.
      - 3.5.1.1.2. Keeping the same backup soloists through the whole song makes things easier; it's easier to remember to turn up 2-3 parts for the choruses of a song compared to balancing a dozen voices all the time.
    - 3.5.1.2. It can be a really rewarding experience for backup soloists.
      - 3.5.1.2.1. Consider: spreading opportunities like this to as many members as possible (careful wording; hard to write a part to someone that doesn't show up).
      - 3.5.1.2.2. Consider: don't give yourself a lot of backup parts, but learn all of them so you can reliably cover them. Can relieve a lot of stress for those random gigs throughout the year.
    - 3.5.1.3. Consider: mixing up whether harmonies are above, below or around the solo.
  - 3.5.2. Easy difference: the homophony goes from an "oo" in Chorus 1 to an "ah" in Chorus 2
    - 3.5.2.1. *Idea: A vowel change can be more than enough to completely change the vibe.*
      - 3.5.2.1.1. The notes don't need to be different all the time (like in Levels)
      - 3.5.2.1.2. Then it's also easier to learn! Cuts all "unnecessary" difficulty; it's a safe option.
    - 3.5.2.2. Consider: If you want to have very different choruses (or verses, bridges, etc.) how you would justify such a change to the audience?
  - 3.5.3. Reuse the "rooftop" moment at the end of Chorus 1 to ease the audience into the breakdown.
  - 3.5.4. Notice that this breakdown is VERY similar to the intro, now it has similar choreo and more voices.
  - 3.5.5. Even within this breakdown there are multiple moments:
    - 3.5.5.1. Every moment has accompanying choreo.
    - 3.5.5.2. Easy for an audience member to remember the sequence, hard to remember notes.
  - 3.5.6. *Idea: ending the sparse bridge with homophony into a wall of sound is very powerful and safe option (though common! Think about distinct ways to subvert this)*
- 3.6. For the audience:
  - 3.6.1. *Idea: The audience remembers powerful moments.*
  - 3.6.2. *Idea: keeping the audience engaged by having "smooth" transitions between moments and sections.*
    - 3.6.2.1. *Jarring transitions can be smooth if the audience is already invested.*
    - 3.6.2.2. If the audience is actively waiting for the next moment, it's less likely they'll look at their phones.
  - 3.6.3. Consider: writing a beginning that actively offers the audience a chance to become invested; never assume that the audience is as invested as the group members.
- 3.7. For the group:
  - 3.7.1. *Idea: Choreographers can take advantage of great moments*
    - 3.7.1.1. Discrete moments are very reliable pillars to structure moments around.



- 3.7.1.2. Example: consistent/repetitious moments lend themselves to walking. We've certainly seen it be successful, but because the walking drags on for a long period of time, it can seem more difficult to frame walking in an interesting way.
- 3.7.2. 3 Ideas: on setting up a choreographer for success
  - 3.7.2.1. Hit the audience with a moment, then let them catch their breath (but not for too long). Choreo can tie to the moment, and not worry about having constant motion thereafter.
  - 3.7.2.2. Long "breakdowns" can feel exhausting for the audience to listen to. You can certainly make longer arrangements, but try to find a healthy balance of thinking about if you're using the time well while also fully committing to the length.
  - 3.7.2.3. The ensemble doesn't have to sing the whole time; when they're not singing, they can take some time to focus 100% on performing physically (choreo moves, jamming, stillness).
- 3.7.3. Consider: focusing on making an arrangement a positive experience for your group.
  - 3.7.3.1. *Idea: good voice leading can help make an arrangement fun to sing.*
    - 3.7.3.1.1. "Good" voice-leading: when the lines themselves feel engaging and "natural" to sing within the context of the arrangement's harmony.
    - 3.7.3.1.2. Great place to start; get an AP Music Theory book (or take a Music Theory I or equivalent class, if available) and pay attention to Bach's 4 part voice leading.
      - 3.7.3.1.2.1. Old western art music is certainly more conservative than what we're doing, which is exactly the point; all these ideas came because they created more stable music to sing.
      - 3.7.3.1.2.2. Example: parallel fifths (demonstrate for people unfamiliar) are "relatively" difficult to sing, partially because they have a very strong, clear sound. However, if you want that strong, clear sound, go for it; just keep in mind that it may be slightly more difficult to put together in the rehearsal room. This is a judgement call based completely on your group.
    - 3.7.3.1.3. Your singers are probably of all levels; good voice leading means that your arrangement is accessible to more singers in a meaningful way.
    - 3.7.3.1.4. Think about how your favorite melodies move around; what parts are the most satisfying to sing?
    - 3.7.3.1.5. Some of the following ideas are found in my "An Introduction to Color" class, which focuses on good voice leading in more complex harmony; it can also be found on <https://www.erikfredriksen.com/a-cappella.html>.
  - 3.7.3.2. Consider: singing all the parts as you arrange to ensure that they feel good to sing.
    - 3.7.3.2.1. When singing parts in an octave comfortable for you, think about writing parts that you would want to sing to yourself over and over again.
    - 3.7.3.2.2. Easier said than done, but a little effort goes a long way when rehearsing one arrangement for several, several hours.
    - 3.7.3.2.3. It's easier to learn the arrangement if you can sing all the parts with good musicality and intention; it can be encouraging to hear exactly how your music director wants something sung and be able to replicate it with success.
  - 3.7.3.3. *Idea: the whole arrangement doesn't need to be loaded with content.*
    - 3.7.3.3.1. Example: homophony on dummy vowels ("ah", "oo", etc.) can be really fun when using expressive dynamics.
    - 3.7.3.3.2. Example: a couple harmonies with the soloist can be enough to feel valuable, especially since they're so rewarding to sing.
  - 3.7.3.4. *Idea: If the arrangement is engaging to sing, tangible rewards feel more gratifying.*
    - 3.7.3.4.1. Members want to sing because singing is fun!

3.7.3.4.2. Locking in on simpler sections of an arrangement is a great morale boost, even during a show!

4. What is Collaborative Arranging? *Idea: when working together on an arrangement, writing things out in layman's terms lends itself to successful and healthy communication among multiple arrangers.*

4.1. Process:

- 4.1.1. Have a meeting/conference call with all interested arrangers/contributors to pitch ideas and come up with a finalized, written structure that everyone mostly agrees with.
  - 4.1.1.1. Focus on writing arrangements around the 4 parts of the A Cappella group.
  - 4.1.1.2. Sometimes, 2-3 meetings can be good so that people have time to sketch out any ideas that are difficult to communicate through speech.
- 4.1.2. Once a general structure is agreed upon, the arrangement gets divy'd up so that each arranger has as much of the arrangement as they can and want to commit to writing.
- 4.1.3. As each arranger completes their part, they can send it to each of the other members for feedback.
  - 4.1.3.1. Feedback is most easily expressed using measure number.
  - 4.1.3.2. Usually 1 round of feedback is enough for the big ideas, and any additional rounds of feedback focus on details.
- 4.1.4. Lastly, each of the contributions are collected together into a simple manuscript.
  - 4.1.4.1. Easiest when everyone is using the same software, but is still very possible cross-platform; notes are still easy to send, everything else is hard.
  - 4.1.4.2. I would be in charge of taking everything because I had the most knowledge of how to use Finale; I volunteered because it was best that everything would be notated cleanly.

4.2. Results:

- 4.2.1. *Idea: can be a great experience when experienced arrangers are working with less experienced arrangers.*
  - 4.2.1.1. Experienced arrangers can mentor newer arrangers such that they can provide tangible feedback, structured for the purposes of education.
  - 4.2.1.2. Newer arrangers don't have to implement ideas by themselves if they're worried or stuck.
  - 4.2.1.3. People without the time to write the arrangement can still come to meetings that discuss the structure.
  - 4.2.1.4. Creating an entire arrangement by yourself is very difficult; dividing up the workload easier to hit deadlines during the rush of the school year.
  - 4.2.1.5. Sometimes people just want to watch or don't feel comfortable arranging anything on their own; now they get an easy way to contribute artistically.
- 4.2.2. Ideally, everyone gets something that they're excited to arrange.
- 4.2.3. Consider: creating a positive environment to encourage collaboration, open-mindedness, and sensitive language.
  - 4.2.3.1. Don't be afraid to bounce ideas off of each other.
  - 4.2.3.2. Don't dismiss ideas without really giving them thought or a chance to be fleshed out; not all ideas lead to success, but all ideas lead to education and knowledge.
  - 4.2.3.3. Keep an open mind! Give them time to convince you and entertain any and all ideas before coming to your own conclusions.
  - 4.2.3.4. Preemptively expecting to compromise can lead to positive-minded and healthy collaboration; talk through things and ask respectful questions.
  - 4.2.3.5. Since everyone already agreed on a skeleton, we can keep our feedback pointed but constructive, acknowledging when our reactions are based on personal taste, practical issues or otherwise.
    - 4.2.3.5.1. When I offer feedback, I try to clearly separate my opinions from more grounded issues concerning voice leading or technical things.



- 4.2.3.5.2. Focus on helping other arrangers find success implementing their ideas by using positive and supportive language.
- 4.2.3.5.3. Offer all types of feedback. Some ideas:
  - 4.2.3.5.3.1. “Technical” musical things (voice leading, harmony, rhythms, etc.)
  - 4.2.3.5.3.2. “I love this idea here. Consider.... This might help make it as powerful (or other adj.) as we want it to be”.
  - 4.2.3.5.3.3. “Can we pull this off? If you think so, go for it!”
  - 4.2.3.5.3.4. If the music director is cc’d especially, “this might be hard to rehearse because of... but it’s definitely something we could drill”
- 4.2.3.6. Example: I’m in a metal band called Samsara with 2 guys I’ve known since high school. Before I really wasn’t someone who enjoyed jamming, but I realized that my perfectionist attitude was getting in the way of making some sick music with my friends. Now we write skeletons outside of rehearsal and we encourage each other to always be coming up with new ideas and just trying them out until we find cool ways of implementing them. Great exercise: come up with 4-5 sections of a song (don’t worry about “verse”, “chorus” etc.) and switching them around and coming up with the arc ourselves.
- 4.2.4. However, it’s still important to focus on finishing the arrangement in a reasonable amount of time.
  - 4.2.4.1. It’s ok to have doubts about portions of an arrangement when you just have the skeleton; trust your fellow arrangers to implement their ideas successfully.
  - 4.2.4.2. Encourage members who misjudged the amount of time they can commit to ask for help sooner rather than later.
- 5. Wrap Up/Questions/Conclusions (What to take away)
  - 5.1. Everything I’ve presented here is just ideas; you may choose to use them, ignore them or actively oppose them.
  - 5.2. My goal is to give you the information you need to feel confident making these decisions on your own.
  - 5.3. Arranging as a student can be extremely difficult, given your other commitments; having some methodology can help keep your work productive and practical (both in terms of getting the notes on the page and for your group to rehearse).

