

THE BACKGROUND TO ARRANGING

Arranging takes on different meanings, depending on the context or genre of the work. However, one thing remains central - the arrangement is the setting for the song or idea. Think of it as the way in which the music is presented to the listener. Arranging involves structure and instruments.

Arrangements and structures tend to follow a pattern that the target audience expects to hear. There is a formula we adhere to, without thinking about it, an order in the introduction of instruments and the way they are grouped.



CLASSICAL

The arrangement is thought of as the whole written score. A part of the score is produced for each instrument in the orchestra to follow. String sections can be scored for use in soundtracks, rock or dance music too.



JAZZ

Some Big Band or Jazz arranging is thought of in a similar way. There are many Jazz "standards" such as "Mack The Knife", which are covered time and time again. Each rendition is different due to differences in the arrangement, but it remains the same song regardless of how radical the style of delivery. This is also demonstrated in cover versions across the musical spectrum.



URBAN / R'N'B / DANCE

In more modern, computer driven song writing environments, arranging usually takes place as an idea is developed, it is part of the writing process. In fact it can be the foundation over which a song is written, or the framework upon which ideas are hung.



POP / ROCK

For a band, arranging is what happens in rehearsal, where decisions on instrumentation and dynamics are made. Further arranging will happen in the studio, extra layers will be played on top of what was rehearsed. Look at how George Martin's extra features worked on Beatles' albums, or how studio techniques and additional players gave so much depth to Pink Floyd material.



COMMERCIAL

Soundtrack writers have to consider other factors when arranging. They have to match the musical features to fit with what happens on screen, or to add drama to the dialogue.

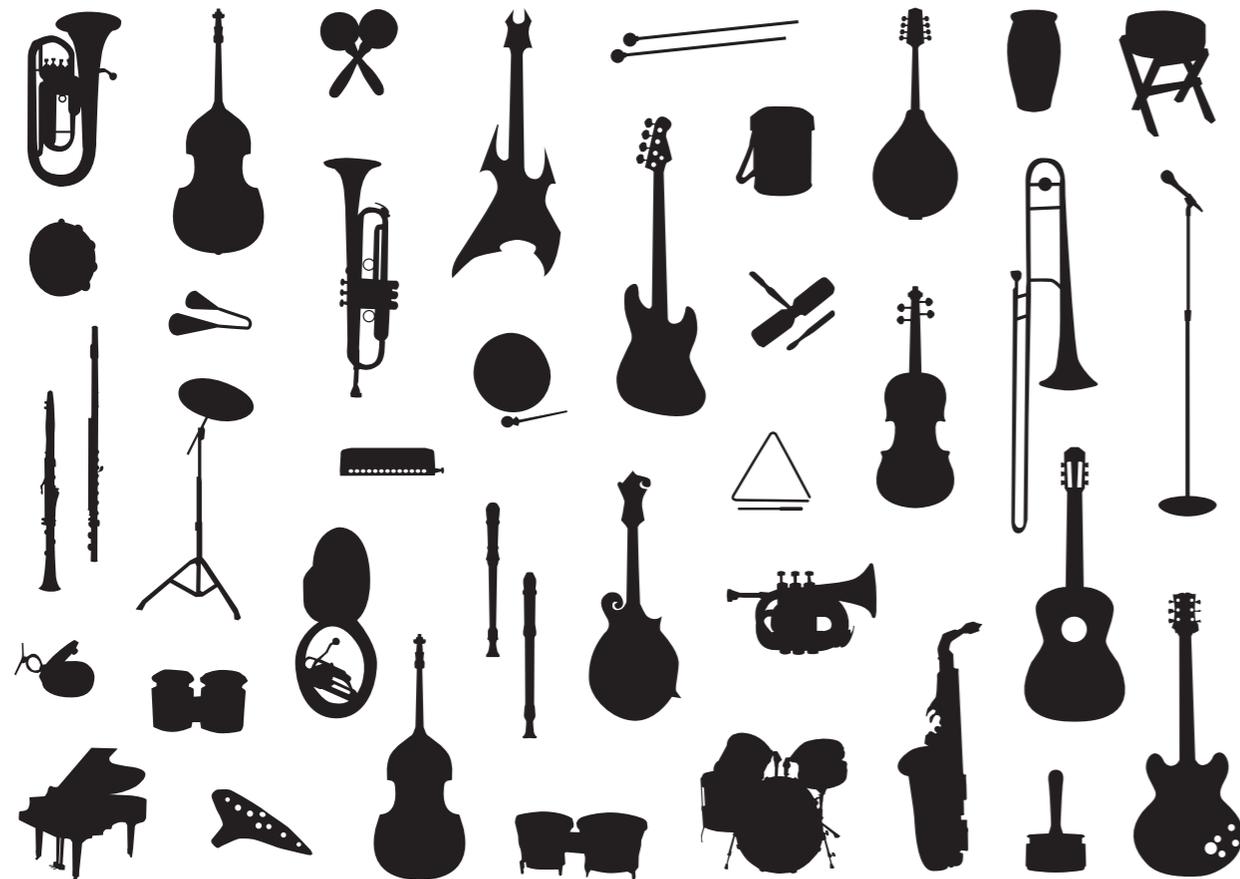
photography Ray Chan

IDENTIFYING INSTRUMENTS AND WHAT THEY DO IN AN ARRANGEMENT

On first listening to a piece of music it's easy to miss some of the instruments used when they make only a small or subtle contribution. But if there's a sound in there, however minimal, then it's making a contribution to the arrangement and we should know about it.

As you list the instruments, make some judgements about the sound, playing style, interaction with other instruments and what they add to the arrangement.

So don't just make a list, but describe characteristics.



For the sound of an instrument here are some words that you might use:

electric, acoustic, heavy, distorted, light, bright, mellow, distant, chorused, fat, thin, abrasive, soft-edged, warm, metallic, hazy, clear.

For the playing style you might use words like:

tight, loose, energetic, delicate, aggressive, gentle, simple, advanced, bending, sliding, understated, sequenced, sampled, quantized.

For interaction with other instruments you might use descriptions like:

in unison, tight with, bouncing off, responding to, harmonising with, going against, doubling up.

For judging what each instrument contributes to the arrangement, try:

melody, rhythm, chords, harmony, counter-melody, riffs, sustain, fragments, off-beat, figures, broken chords, drone, staccato, high, middle, low.

Shooting Star' by Tinman

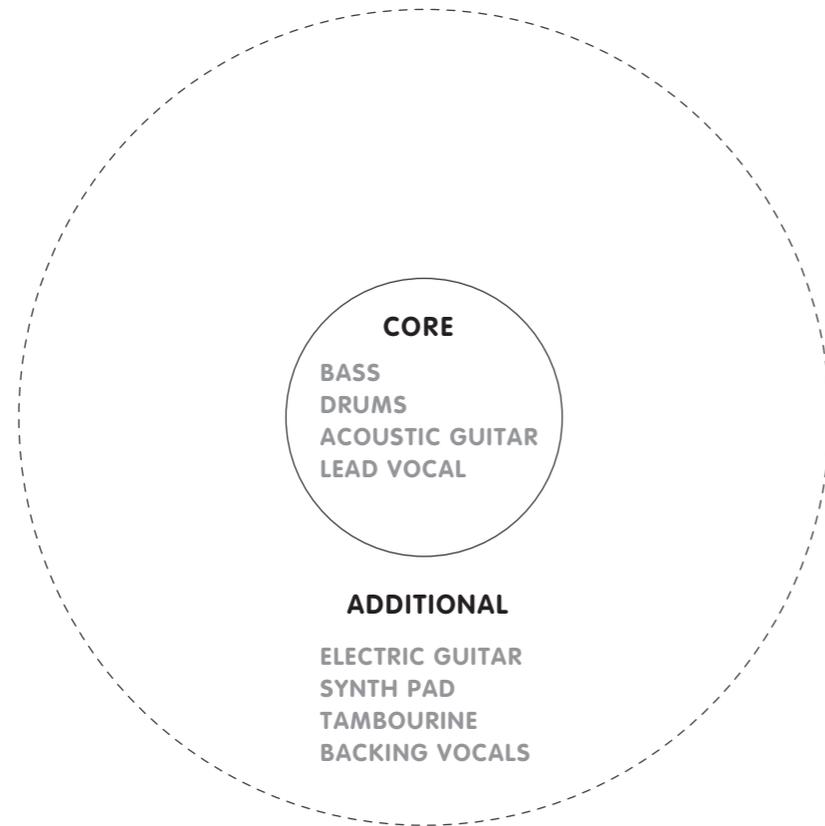
In the song Shooting Star by Tinman (the example used in chapter 1) there's clearly an electric piano. But when we listen more closely we can hear other keyboard parts – a more distant, floaty electric piano in the verses and a high, subtle string line that's in the intro, chorus 1, verse 2 and outro. There are many other arrangement techniques in this song that make it a well-crafted production. Listen to the pizzicato strings in the choruses that provide a counter melody to the lead vocal; listen to verse 2, where bass and drums drop out for 4 bars, helping to shape the journey of the song. The scat bvs are quite different in each chorus, so although we enjoy the repetition of the hooky chorus there's always something that's evolved. There aren't many drum fills, in fact drums often drop out at the end of phrases where you'd expect a fill – this arrangement uses reverse cymbal where a drum fill might have been.

Download the song online at www.citycol.com/rfrecords/cds/olm/tinman_shootingstar.MP3

CORE OR ADDITIONAL?

Which instruments are the stars, which are the extras? This will vary from song to song, but it would be fairly typical for bass, drums, guitar and vocals to be at the core of a rock song, with additional bits coming from backing vocals, keyboards, percussion, brass.

In an RnB tune the core might be vocals, backing vocals, drums, bass and piano, with extras coming from percussion, strings, brass.



BASS

The instrument that everything else sits on is the bass. A bass line can come from a bass guitar, double bass or synth bass. It generally plays single notes - the root note of the chord, but may also provide quite melodic lines and riffs. This is important, as often bass is one of the main elements we are aware of when listening to a tune, even if we don't notice it as consciously as the lead vocal or lead guitar. If you've ever stood outside a club and heard music in the distance you'll know that bass is one of the instruments you can still hear!



DRUMS

The main elements of the drum kit are kick, snare and hats. Kick and snare 'bounce' off each other (on-beat/off-beat), while hats provide continuity and fluency. Toms are often used for fills, crash cymbals to accent and ride cymbal for a more ringing alternative to hats. Much of what we hear as drums in music has come from loops, samples or synths.

How Bass And Drums Work Together

Bass and drums form the main part of a 'rhythm section' in most styles of music. They will often lock together with their rhythms (particularly the bass with the bass drum) and phrase to emphasize the on-beat, off-beat and any syncopation.



GUITAR

There are numerous types of guitar but essentially just 2 categories - acoustic and electric. Guitars are versatile, able to provide melody (lead lines), accompaniment (chords) and rhythm (strumming and picking). Guitar is at the heart of many pop/rock songs.



PIANO

Like the guitar, the piano comes in 2 main categories – acoustic and electric – and is as versatile as the guitar, providing melody and harmony to arrangements. Because it can't sustain like a lead guitar, it is often used either for more gentle music or for chords and riffs. The digital piano has become so well refined that it has virtually replaced the traditional acoustic piano.



KEYBOARDS AND SYNTHESIZERS

The variety of sounds and textures that can be generated by keyboards and synths is awesome. They are often used in arrangements to provide alternative sounds to the core elements (like guitar and bass), giving a song an extra dimension or extra 'colour'



PERCUSSION

Percussion is often added to an arrangement as an after-thought. But percussion can do much to vary the textures and intensities of an arrangement. Doing something as simple as adding tambourine to a chorus can create a significant lift.

SKILLS YOU NEED TO ARRANGE

Specialist players can bring the techniques, styles and possibilities of their own instruments – this might typically be a brass player or percussionist.

THE FIXER

Rather than enlisting just one musician, you may feel a song is crying out for a string section or a full gospel choir. For this you may need someone to manage the whole process. A string "fixer" can find an arranger for you, book the musicians and even the studio.



Be creative with use of pedals, effects and styles, for example U2 and Rage Against the Machine use guitars that sound like other things. Develop your own style!

If you are arranging for a group of musicians you must understand the role of each instrument used and how best to incorporate its sound. You will also need to be able to communicate your thoughts to this group of people. This requires a whole range of talents in itself!

If you are creating a score to do this, then you must be able to write musical notation.

If an arrangement is being generated using computer software then you'll want to be proficient with it to get the best out of it. Knowing the sounds available to you from a synth, or from patches available on your computer, and what kind of part they are suited to, is the same as understanding conventional instruments.

TECHNIQUES USED IN ARRANGING

COMPUTER, HEAD OR PAPER?

Just like composing music, there are different ways of working on an arrangement, and each approach has its own advantages.

arranging...

😊 **pros**

😞 **cons**

**with
a computer**

... offers a fantastic environment in which to develop music. Record your ideas with midi and audio like a notepad for musicians: edit, delete, copy, paste, sit back and listen.

... can be a bit clinical, difficult to capture the energy of live performance. Your music can become over-arranged because it's so easy to keep recording ideas. Also sequencing encourages repetition, whereas music needs evolution.

**in
a live room**

... is a real, natural organic, team thing. If music is about spontaneity and responding to others then turn up and rock.

... has limitations, depending on who's in there with you. Musicians are prone to forget what they did last week.

**with
notation**

... let's you work in minute detail, getting every note exactly right, with a system that let's you communicate complex ideas to large numbers of musicians.

... requires substantial formal training and access to musicians who can read music.

GENERAL ARRANGEMENT TECHNIQUES

A piece of music will have a structure before you consider arrangement features but an arrangement can do much to help support and shape the journey of a song, emphasizing the highs and lows, keeping the sound interesting and always evolving.

A typical arrangement technique is to add something to the 2nd verse or 2nd chorus, giving a sense that the song has evolved and we're not just hearing the same thing again. The opposite is also a useful technique – take instruments out of a section and it has a strong impact.

If there are 4 choruses in your song, try to get some variation in your arrangement so we're always listening to something new. Maybe chorus 2 gets added bvs (backing vocals), chorus 3 has no bass, chorus 4 gets a new organ line and extra percussion.

CHORD AND STRUCTURE CHARTS

You don't have to use traditional notation to write down something useful! You can create a 1 or 2 page chart that will be immensely helpful in communicating your ideas to others, whether you are developing an arrangement in a live room, or for a recording.

The chart should contain the sort of information that you want to communicate and your musicians want to know: things like, song structure (verse, chorus, solo etc), chords, where instruments come in or drop out, breaks and maybe lyrics. Much of this information musicians will quickly memorise, but the chart takes some of the confusion out of communicating ideas, and means there's something to refer to when you rehearse again next week.

Here's an example of a chord and structure chart for Shooting Star by Tinman.

Shooting Star by Tinman

132 bpm, syncopated, slightly shuffled 16s feel.

Bass, percussion, electric piano, synth strings, pizzicato, harp, lead vocals, backing vocals.

Intro	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
Verse 1	Am9	/	Dm9	/	Am9	/	Dm9	/
	Am9	/	Dm9	/	Am9	/	Dm9	/
Chorus 1	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
Link	Am9	/	/	/				
Verse 2	Am9	/	Dm9	/	Am9	/	Dm9	/
	Am9	/	Dm9	/	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
Chorus 2	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
Middle 8	Fmaj7	/	G13	/	Fmaj7	/	G13	G#dim
Chorus 3	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
Outro	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13
	Am9	/	Dm9	G13	Am9	/	Dm9	G13

Intro electric piano, strings and vocal scats. Add pizz riff and percussion. Add bass

Verse 1 main lead vocal, simpler drum groove, held piano chords, spread harp chords.

Chorus 1 double tracked lead vocal, pizz riff, busier drum groove.

Link bass and percussion like the chorus, piano chord, syncopated sample.

Verse 2 bass and percussion drop out for 1-4bars, then come back in 5, playing as in verse1. Extra high string line.

Chorus 2 as chorus 1 (but double the length)

Middle 8 busy, syncopated piano and bass, Big harp fill in last bar.

Chorus 3 as chorus 2 but syncopated piano (like the middle 8). More scat vocals.

Outro lead voc stops, leaving just sparse scats. High string line reappears.

DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

- Drums and bass play a bigger role
- The intensity will build slowly rather than chop and change
- A repetitive, uninterrupted groove is better to dance to
- An intro and outro of drums is often used so DJs can sequence records easily



DRUMS IN DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

Drums play a major part and using them to give dynamics to your arrangement needs extra thought.

Drum fills in dance or urban music are as much about leaving things out than adding more. For example, if you leave out the bass drum for the last bar of a verse, it will sound like a lift when it returns for the chorus.

Where a sampled loop is used this can be chopped up to give variety, there is even a programme (Recycle) which will do this for you. You can edit or move notes to give more options for fills and breakdowns during your arrangement.

Sounds may become fashionable for a period of time and are an important commodity if you want to be in the correct style.

TIP

Drums can sometimes be heard on their own and sampled as a loop. This loop can be edited to give individual hits; this will make recreating the style you want easier to begin with.



PERCUSSION IN DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

Percussion is really an integral part of the drum programming and will usually be thought of at the same time. Many layers of instruments will be fitted around the basic pattern and then introduced gradually as the arrangement progresses. This will add to the intensity of certain sections, sometimes at the expense of tuned instruments.





BASS IN DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

In dance records where a 4/4 bass drum pattern is used, like most house, techno or trance tracks, the bass normally plays the root note of the chord it underpins and is used between bass drums, in a very regimented fashion. The bass sound is often a throb or “sub bass”, which is very effective through a club P.A.

In urban styles such as RnB, the current trend is for there to be no bass line or a very subliminal one.

Simple patterns locked tightly to the drums and repeated throughout the song is a feature of this genre.



“REAL INSTRUMENTS” IN DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

Guitar is not much used in dance or urban styles, unless it is highly processed.

A good example of this would be in Madonna’s collaborations with Mirwais. An acoustic guitar recorded, edited, moved, even reversed, then played back in from a sampler using a keyboard. Alternatively, small sections of audio file are manipulated to give the same odd result.

In other examples real instruments are sampled or recreated by sound modules.

Similarly sampled loops of instruments are used to give interesting textures or features. An ethnic instrument can give an effective combination of styles.



SAMPLERS, SYNTHS AND KEYBOARDS IN DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

Due to the lack of real instruments, these are the main tool for building your arrangement.

Sound sources are sometimes made to be genre specific, modules such as the EMU Mo Phatt contains sounds to suit urban productions. So shop around and find the equipment to cater for your needs. Many “soft” synths are available and have the advantage of being saved with your song, making setting up easy.



A solo of any description is a rarity in these genres and generally thought of as un-cool!



VOCALS IN DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

In the RnB genre in particular, arrangement can be solely about the vocals and vocal harmonies. Many layers are introduced in key areas, whilst the rest of the instrumentation remains comparatively flat.



EFFECTS IN DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

These are usually regarded as being used during the mix process, but effects available to a computer using musician cover much more than simple reverb, delay and chorus type presets.

They will be used mainly as features within the arrangement. There will be many more radical processes, some an instrument in themselves.

Due to most ingredients being generated digitally, it is sometimes good to mess up a sound using distortion, overdrive or bit crushing. This will give older, dirty sounds rather than clean and cold ones.

You will probably have heard effects that are designed to do a particular job, being used in an extreme manner and being made a feature not an enhancement. Auto Tune (or "vocoder") is one such example. It was designed to correct timing imperfections on vocals. However, used at its most "full on" setting, it causes a bizarre, robotic singing voice. (For example on the track by Cher – 'Believe')

Another common technique is "filtering". This is where an instrument or group of instruments is passed through a filter, removing a frequency range to make the sound less full. As the filter is opened the sound opens out, feeling like it is growing. This can be a great way of adding dynamics to your track without removing or adding parts. Some arranging can be achieved after production of the finished mix! Sections of the whole track are stretched, altered or treated and used as fills, breakdowns or features.

OVERALL - DANCE AND URBAN ARRANGEMENTS

When using tape as the recording media, you commit each part of the arrangement as each instrument is recorded. You can not easily go back and add or take out a few parts once they are put down.

However arrangement is always ongoing when using sequencers or sequencing software and is changeable right up to and during the final mix. The flexibility and open ended way of working might lead to more time being spent on arrangement, but it enables you to throw in as many ideas as you want and pick the best combinations. It is tempting to keep on changing things, just be careful not to spoil the flow.

It is also easy to be lazy and copy huge blocks of parts from one section of the song to another. This repetition shapes the types of music where computers are used. Odd numbers of bars are seldom heard, instead we hear definite multiples of four or eight bars. Also, new parts tend to come in at the beginning of each section, it is noticeable that things are triggered on the first beat of the bar. It is easy to see the development of a track by looking at the building blocks on the computer screen and it is even possible to colour code a song structure.



All of this gives a tendency to watch your arrangement move by on the screen. Try switching the monitor off, forcing you to listen to your track. Do this a couple of times and write down your ideas so you don't forget them. Only then should you switch back on to programme the fresh thoughts.

Bringing arrangement techniques together.

As more and more rock songs are recorded using computer hard drives instead of tape, so some of the usual computer based arranging techniques can be used. Many ideas can be thrown in and manipulated just like blocks of MIDI parts.