

Contemporary A Cappella Arranging in 10 Steps

Contemporary a cappella has been around for over a decade, resulting in a dynamic and rhythmic sound and style that differentiates it from barbershop, doo wop, close harmony, and other a cappella styles. Learn how to create a great contemporary a cappella arrangement using a tried and true 10 step formula.

1) Choose a Song.

Oddly, this is often the most difficult step. If you're a free lance arranger, or just arranging for fun on your own, your decision is usually either made for you, or you have no restrictions. A group's musical director, however, has many considerations. It's easy to come up with songs that would be fun to arrange, but usually there is a question of what's needed in the repertoire. If diversity is important to you, consider prohibiting songs by the same artist or composer and songs that are stylistically the same.

I'd also recommend avoiding songs that are performed by other a cappella groups often – your group will make a name for itself much more quickly if you develop your own sound and your own repertoire. You should also be sure your group has a great first and last song, and a great encore. Usually these songs will be most effective if they're up tempo. Your group should also have at least one ballad at its disposal.

It should go without saying, but before you settle on a song, be sure you have someone in your group who can sing the solo (if you're planning on a solo line in your arrangement). A great arrangement of a great song with a poor soloist usually appears to the audience as mediocre (or worse). The soloist is the most important vocalist in any song, and since as arranger you're in a way crafting everything around this central voice and melody, you'd better be sure that you have the right voice to get the job done.

Ponder This: Which songs have made great a cappella arrangements? Which have made poor ones? Why?

2) Listen to the original repeatedly.

This principle is the same as in foreign language study; listen to the song over and over again. While you're concentrating, and while you're not. You will begin to hear sounds, textures, rhythms, and chords that you never heard before, some of which are very subtle and mixed quietly in the background.

Many a cappella arrangements suffer from not integrating the subtle, often almost subliminal, musical elements that define a song. There are times when “doing the obvious thing” in an arrangement isn't most effective. When you've listened to a song to the point that you can hear it in your head while it's not playing, you've fully integrated it. And besides, it helps later on when you find you don't need to listen back to the original recording as often.

Try This: Close your eyes and try to hear a recorded piece of music you know well in your head, voices, instruments, and all, just as it is on the recording.

3) Buy the Sheet Music - Get a midi file - Look at & listen to other arrangements of the song.

“What? Isn't that cheating?” Let's put it this way: would you rather spend your time transcribing the melody and chords or focusing on the more creative elements of arranging? I thought so. Stravinsky admitted to "stealing" musical ideas from others and himself, and he wasn't the first great musician to do so. Whereas there is a plagiarism case to be made from someone copying a paragraph out of a book, there's no ownership of a musical texture, or vocal lick, or arranging trick. The artistry is in knowing when and where to use these various elements.

Caveat emptor: often there are mistakes or simplifications in the printed music (melody and/or chords), but if you've more or less memorized the song, you'll catch them. All you need is a close approximation of the solo in many cases anyway, as the soloist should learn the solo directly from the recording. Also, there are sometime some interesting decisions made in vocal/piano or guitar arrangements that sometimes spark a new idea. Most songs you'll want to arrange are in print – just go to your local sheet music store, and if it's not in stock they can order it.

As for midi files, there are countless web sites devoted to the storage of midi files; just use a search engine, and look for the song title, artist, and "midi" all at once. If it is or was a popular song, you'll almost certainly find it. Although the lyrics won't be included, you can surf over to a lyrics site and pull the lyrics down (although only the more popular songs have made it to midi, lyrics can be found for almost anything recorded.)

Other arrangements of a song can be heard on various a cappella albums, and can be found in a number of places (like from CASA - www.casa.org). Although you don't want to lift entire passages note for note (that's too blatant, and not appreciated by the original arranger), you can see what decisions she made, appreciate what works, and learn from the less effective sections.

Ponder This: Name a great work of art that's based on another great work of art. How do they inform each other?

4) Decide on a Form.

Sometimes there's no decision to be made, and other times it will take a great deal of creativity to know how to sew together the important sections of a song that has too much “instrumental filler.” The longer the original, the more likely you'll have to cut something.

Listening to and watching a cappella is a heightened experience. In a sense, everyone's a lead singer, and the audience has many more personalities to deal with than in a band, but not so many so that it's like watching a chorus. People concentrate and pay attention to a cappella more than most instrumental music, which is why less is often more. Say what needs to be said as poignantly as possible, and avoid unnecessary repetition.

If you don't understand this point, bring a stopwatch to an a cappella show, and compare performed song lengths with the originals. A 3 minute song on stage comes across as a full 4.5 minute radio tune. Performing "Hey Jude" at its entire 7 minute length would be incredibly tiresome.

Since many songs are written for and recorded with instruments, there are often instrumental solos, long intros, and transitional passages that usually translate poorly to voices. If you've memorized your song completely (and you should have), try singing through from start to finish, and see where you lose interest. Chances are your audience will as well. Also listen for what sounds stupid. Unless your group is well versed in vocal guitar solos, you'll want to skip them.

If you're having a hard time keeping everything straight because there are too many changes, consider making a cassette "splice/dub" with the sections in your new order. In the rarest of occasions you'll find extreme measures are necessary. By weaving in another related song, possibly by the same artist, or by composing a short transition, you may find the answer. On the other hand, you may find that it's just not going to work, no matter what you do. Don't fret – come back to it later, and choose another song for now.

Ponder This: Can you recall a cappella arrangements where the form differed from that of the original? In what ways did that make the a cappella version more or less effective?

5) Lay Out the Paper/Computer File/Cassette

It doesn't matter if you notate music on paper, or use a music notation computer program, or arrange by ear into a 4 track recorder. Each method has benefits and hurdles, and all can result in superior artistry. It's a matter of personal choice. Whatever method you choose to record your arrangement, it's time to set your foundation.

You'll need to choose the number staves and measures per page, which brings up the question of number of parts. If you have a small ensemble, your choice is made for you, as doubling only one or two parts will almost invariably cause an unwanted imbalance. If you're arranging for a small ensemble (like most collegiate groups), consider leaving at least two people per part unless you really know what you're doing. You'll get a much fuller sound, and hedge your bet against out of tune singing.

Also try to designate more basses (or second altos if you're arranging for a female group), because often the bass lines are drowned out live by screaming tenors (unless your group performs with microphones). The bass voice is usually loudest on recordings, after the soloist, and a loud bass line casts overtones that help everyone tune better.

Be sure not to forget to factor in the soloist, and any extra parts, such as vocal percussion or duet lines, that need their own room on the paper. Once you have your final count, consider how many lines you need. The solo should be on the top line, and may be joined by duet or trio parts. You should avoid having more than two parts per line, as the inner voices usually have difficulty following their chord factors in the middle of a cluster.

With two parts per line, the upper voice should have "stems up" throughout, and the lower voice "stems down" (should you need to cross the voices, it'll be apparent). If your final count is 3, 4, or 6 lines, you'll want 12 staff per page paper, and if you've arrived at 5, 10 staff per page is also available. If you're arranging on computer, this isn't usually a concern - you can put each voice on its own line and condense later. If you're recording to 4 track, consider how many voices you want to use, and how many "bounces" you'll need to make it all fit.

Finally, "lay out" the song by counting the number of measures, and making a note where each section begins (verse, chorus, bridge, etc.). Next, fill in your clefs and key signatures. When you're done, you'll have a solid foundation that will allow you to work on sections in any order you'd like without any confusion as to where you are or how it fits formally with the rest of the music.

Ponder This: What notation method(s) do you currently use?

6) Write out the Solo

Take your "prepared" paper/computer file/cassette and write out/sing the solo line from the first measure through the last, including all rests. Having the solo line written down will keep you from losing your place while you're arranging - it serves as a "place-keeper" and a road map.

Often you'll be turning from section to section, and you'll be sure to know where you are at all times if you have the solo line as a road map. Also, for small groups, especially quartets and quintets, the soloist's pitch and rhythm are important to consider at all times. Sometimes the soloist will be the only voice on a certain chord factor, and you'll want to know exactly where the solo will be. In these cases, it's worth the extra effort to make sure the solo line is exactly correct.

Also, remember that a soloist sometimes doesn't sing exactly the same notes and rhythms as the original, or as the last time she performed the song. For this reason,

you should make a note, as you arrange, what sections of the melody need to be sung as written to make the arrangement work as you intend.

Ponder This: What shortcuts can you take when transcribing a solo and what should you make sure is correct?

7) Write out the Bass Line

You'll almost definitely be changing the bass line as you're writing in the upper background parts, but you should at the very least put an outline on paper now. If the bass line in the original song is unique and/or memorable (a hook, or clearly definable counter melody), you're probably going to want to duplicate it as closely as possible.

If it's not clearly definable, then you're free to weave a bass line of your own. Consider vocal range, roots of the chords, and the rhythmic feel of the original as primary factors. The bass line is the song's "second melody" and is usually the most recognizable line after the solo, so make it melodic, catchy, and fun.

Don't forget to take into consideration the little things like where your bass (or bass section) is going to breathe, and how fast your bass can articulate and how long he can hold a note. If you're not familiar with bass voices and their sounds and limitations, have your bass sing for you, and listen to a few of the greats, like the Bobs' Richard Greene, Take 6's Alvin Chea, The Persuasions' Jimmy Hayes, and the Nylons' Arnold Robinson. Each has a unique way of phrasing and articulating, and there's much to be learned from their recordings.

Try This: Without thinking about it in advance, sing the bass line to a couple current pop songs. In what way does translating the bass line into your voice change it from the original recording?

8) Write the "Uppers"

From Rockapella to Take 6 to the Nylons, the other upper voices, or "uppers" are usually treated as a unit in contemporary a cappella arranging, but there are a myriad of things to consider. So many things, in fact, that it's impossible to go into them all in any depth here. To give you a shove in the right direction, some of your considerations should be:

- ✓ Rhythmic variety (having these voices sing different rhythms from the solo and bass)
- ✓ Syllabic sounds (words? nonsense syllables?)
- ✓ Voice leading (not writing unnecessary jumps, and making the background lines melodic)
- ✓ Duet/Trio (lock into the same words and rhythms as the melody)

- ✓ Block Chords vs. Counterpoint (all voices acting as a single unit vs. each line separate)
- ✓ Arpeggiation (voices working as a unit, but spelling out chords by singing one note at a time)
- ✓ Instrumental idioms (using the voices to imitate instrumental sounds or textures)
- ✓ Musical Styles (taking ideas from classical, doo-wop, close harmony, pop, R&B, etc.)
- ✓ Quoting other songs (sometimes a fun, clever addition)

Of all of these ten steps, this will prove the most time consuming, demanding, and ultimately most rewarding, as it's here that you get to be your most creative.

Ponder This: When is it most advantageous to have the “uppers” sing the same syllables and rhythms, and when is it best to have them differ?

IX) The Final Touches

Now is the time to go back and “sing through” the entire arrangement in your head. What does it need? Where is it too empty or too repetitious? Too busy? How do the sections fit together? Is there a build throughout the chart? Where are the weakest passages and how can I fix them? It's best to turn your “editor” off when you're originally coming up with ideas, but you do need to turn it back on and look at your arrangement as a whole.

Ponder This: In other creative processes, when do you know you're done? How does your “editor” help, and when does it get in the way?

X) Perform and Learn

If you thought you were finished when you copied and distributed your chart, you're wrong. A great arrangement is one that grows and changes with the group that sings it, and a great arranger is one who knows that no arrangement is finished until it is tailor fitted to a specific group. Do not let your ego get in the way of this crucial step in the arranging process; suggestions from the group, and your own changes after you hear a proper sing-through will only make the chart better. You will be respected and applauded for your flexibility.

When listening to the sing-through, your focus should be on your chart and their performance of it. How does the arrangement sound? Is it what you expected? What differs from your expectations, and do you like it or not? Be honest with yourself, and open to trying a variety of ideas and suggestions. This is when you get to “mold your clay” and the most valuable learning experience you'll ever have as an arranger - use this time wisely.

In case you didn't realize it, many renowned composers and arrangers have had the luxury of writing for the best orchestras and choruses in the world, and could write just about anything that they could imagine. You probably can't. Like it or not, you're arranging for your group, and it's your fault (not theirs) if the arrangement doesn't work. It's your job to make them sound their best. You can push their limits occasionally, but to push them you have to know them, and work within them.

And just as you'll push your group's limits, you should also push yours. There are plenty of standard arrangements in the world, and you're probably not interested in adding to the pile. To be a great arranger you have to know how to write a standard arrangement, and also have the creativity and drive to do something new. Most instrumental arrangers approach a song with the initial question "what am I going to do differently?" whereas many a cappella arrangers approach a song with the quandary "How can I make this sound the same, but with voices?" Consider putting yourself in a perspective that straddles and makes the most of both ways of thinking. The best arrangements manage to maintain the successful elements of an original version, and also bring to it something new.

Once you're finished, and your arrangement is safely in the repertoire, it's time to go back to step #1...

EXERCISES:

- Choose a simple song you know well (Happy Birthday, America the Beautiful, etc.) and arrange it using this method. Notice the ways in which this differs from your usual practice. Are there valuable steps you've been skipping? Are there ways you're used to arranging that are superior to this method?
- Consider the order of these 10 steps. Are there some steps you can take in a different order? Do you prefer a different order?

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