

SONIC SOUP - BRIDGING THE ARRANGER GAP | Grant Norsworthy

There's a gap that exists between the composition of a song and the performance of that song. In that gap, there is the arrangement of the song.

I call this arrangement stage of song development a "gap" because (IMO) song arrangement - and the arrangement for each individual instrument within the song - is often largely overlooked by teams of church instrumentalists.

Let me try to put it another way:

GUITARISTS/KEYBOARDISTS - There's a massive difference between, on the one hand, simply reading a chord chart - "slabbing" out every note of every chord that appears on the page (or screen) from start to finish of a song - and, on the other hand, crafting a musical part for your instrument that complements the overall arrangement of the song.

DRUMMERS - It is possible to play whatever drum beat and fills that you spontaneously feel fit well with our song (as long as they're using the same tempo and time signature) but our overall song arrangement could be so much better if your drum part was crafted more intentionally, with greater consideration to the other instruments and voices and the overall sound of the song.

BASSISTS - Apart from the notes that make up the melody, your notes are the most important notes of our song's arrangement. Putting some thought into *how* you play those notes can make a massive difference to our overall sound and how well our song connects. For example, arranging your bass part so that it locks with the drummer's beat to form a foundational groove that supports the vocal melody will be a lot better than if you don't.

If our instrumentalists are not giving proper attention to the arrangement of their individual parts - and the arrangement of the song overall - our songs will be sonically soupy. Sonic soup - that gluey, messy, over-bearing sound of a poorly arranged song - will not engage your congregation to sing worshipfully to God as well as an intentionally and musically arranged song.

You can get a more detailed explanation of this sonic soup concept in my previous articles including ["SONIC SOUP OR A SONIC EMBRACE"](#)

A sonically soupy, poorly arranged song will tend to have instruments crowding each other - fighting over the same sonic real estate. They might be playing rhythms that do not complement one another or perhaps they compete with the melody.

A well-arranged song has instruments that leave space for one another or support one another. They will always recognize the primacy of the vocal melody of the song.

Not so many years ago, instrumentalists in most bands/orchestras and other musical ensembles were usually reading pages of full notation - a series of symbols, markings, numbers, and words that told the instrumentalists exactly which notes, when and how to play. The notation had been written by a professional arranger.

Back then, any instrumentalists who were not reading notation almost always had that experience in their background. They knew how to read notation - relying on the work of a professional arranger - but now they had moved beyond that and were able to arrange *and* play. Perhaps even improvise.

This is not always the case now - perhaps especially within teams of church musicians. Today, instead of reading professionally arranged musical notation, church band members are typically given access to a professionally arranged sound recording and a chord chart. Often - and to detrimental effect - the sound recording and the chord chart are in different keys from each other. The sound recording might be used for general

familiarization but is usually underutilized as a guiding arrangement.

In most cases it is left to each individual band member to arrange their own part. With just a chord chart to look at and only a shallow cognizance of the sound recording, we lose the benefit of the professional arrangement. Without the benefit of a professional arranger, guitarists, keyboardists, and bassists tend to just robotically read what is on the page. Drummers tend to play whatever feels right to them.

Most are so focused on their own “playing what’s written” task, they might be completely unaware of what other instruments are playing and the overall song arrangement. We can easily end up with a sonically soupy song slab. The congregation will most likely struggle to connect.

But our band members must see themselves not just as players of their instruments but also as arrangers. More than having just a general sense of the song and the ability to read a chord chart, they need to be coming to rehearsal with an arranged part for their own instrument that they have prepared and a good sense of the song’s overall arrangement.

MUSICAL DIRECTORS - band leaders, let’s impress upon our team this dual role. We are not just a bunch of individual players. We are also arrangers! We play together. We play as one. If we are going to craft an effective, musical sound - one free of sonic soup’s cacophony - we must fill the arranger gap.

We might be able to create our own, original arrangement for a song - one that is completely and uniquely our own. But that can be time consuming and requires an uncommon level of musical ability. A better place to start is to study the professional song arrangement found in the sound recording by the professional artist. Listen! *Really* listen to that arrangement and especially the parts of the instrument that you play.

We don’t need to try to copy everything we hear. We ought not be trying to reproduce every nuance of the pro-recording. As amateur volunteers, that will probably be beyond us anyway. But we should pick up on the main building blocks of the arrangement. Do our best to incorporate the broad brush- strokes of the parts we hear into our own parts.

GUITARISTS/KEYBOARDISTS – Can you hear what the players of your instrument are doing on this recording? How can you arrange your instrument’s part to fill a similar role? Maybe you can hear that the electric guitar is higher up the neck playing a repeated, eighth-note phrase. Can you copy that? If not, can you come up with a similar repeating phrase that’s within your ability level, using a similar tone, and register? You might notice that the keyboard is not using the same piano sound throughout. In the choruses, it’s using a B3 organ sound played with just the right hand. Maybe the acoustic guitar is one simple raked chord-per bar and not constant strumming. There might be an instrumental motif that is played in the intro and after each chorus that you should learn.

DRUMMERS – What are the different, repeated kick/snare patterns in the verse, chorus, and bridge? Or are sections of the song implementing only the floor tom? Then the floor tom with a kick drum only on the first beat of each bar? Where are those build ups? Where are the dynamic high and low points of the song and how do the drums help make them so effective?

BASSISTS – Can you hear in the recording where the bass is playing simple long, sustained notes? When there are quarter notes? Eighth notes? Are there moments of silence between the notes, or are they all joined together? You may not want to attempt to copy that super complex bass lick heading into the last chorus, but you could work to master the same (or similar) bass/kick drum grooves that are on the recording.

And good arrangers know that we don’t need every instrument playing constantly. We all need to know the joy and musicality of *not* playing from time to time. There’s more about that topic in my article [“SONIC SOUP - RESTS ARE GOLD”](#)

During my younger school years playing brass instruments in concert bands, I got pretty good at “decoding” those dots and lines on the page of my notation. Even though I enjoyed playing brass while reading notation to a point, there was a serious limit to how creative I could be. I did not get to exercise my inner arranger!

Today, whether I’m on bass, acoustic guitar or singing in a band, playing music is much more fun. I don’t have to follow all that detailed information on the black and white page of notation. Nor should I just read and play the chord chart like its simplified notation! I have greater scope for creativity and expression. I’m an arranger too! What a joy! A joy that more church instrumentalists should taste.

The instrumentalist who is growing as an arranger gets to listen to and be inspired by the professionals’ arrangements, has the chord chart to keep them on track, and (hopefully) a Musical Director (MD) to give guidance when needed. Within those boundaries, we get to create our own arrangements. But as we arrange - as we create - synergy is the key. As we arrange, we must be aware that we are one part of something way greater. And let’s never take our eye off the goal of warmly inviting our congregation to sing along as a heartfelt, passionate, sincere expression of worship to God.

“The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” Aristotle

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