Arranging Tips
by David Ezell

Writing arrangements can help a music director to enable music volunteers to perform at their best, in terms of musical style and technical ability.

Arranging with a computer works well because:
- You can learn more about how the music is going to sound by listening to each part played with the right instrument sound.
- You can be more objective and comprehend better if you listen to your work without thinking about how to play the keyboard.
- The sheet music you produce is easier to read.
- If people leave or join the music program, or you get a new idea, it's easy to rewrite an arrangement when you reuse the song.
- It is a reliable way to save and backup your work.

The two most popular programs for arranging are Sibelius and Finale. Sibelius is gaining in popularity. Finale has been around longer. Sibelius is used by the Music Ministry Team of the Unity Worldwide Ministries for exchanging files between team members and for preparing music for publication.

To me, Finale's advantages are that you have more precise control over the look of the page and it allows for the addition of audio tracks to a file so that you can hear and share an entire arrangement, including vocals.

The advantage I see in Sibelius is ease of use. Most of what you need to do frequently is available without changing tools for each task. There are also fewer dialog boxes to navigate through.

Both Finale and Sibelius have discount prices for paid employees of church and school music programs. Whichever program you use, here are some guidelines to use in writing:
- Make sure all parts of the chord are covered, especially the root and 3rd, and the 7th, if any. Use inversions judiciously to make the bass part more interesting.
- A good arrangement has an intensity curve, building as the piece continues.

Techniques for building an intensity curve include:
- Playing louder, higher, and/or faster (more notes, not a different tempo)
- Using more interesting chords
- Changing the instrumentation
- Making the texture more complex
- Making the rhythm and tempo more regular

- Suddenly backing off and rising again

In jazz arranging, whether written or improvised, the essential roles are the bass, the melody, the comp (accompaniment) and the drums. (It is possible to leave the drum parts for improvisation even if other parts are written out.)

- The bass should start every new chord with the root, and approach the next root stepwise. This gives a strong feel to the harmonic changes, and leaves the other chord members for the melody and comp parts.
- In circle of 5ths progressions like ii-V-I, the melody many times includes the 7th of one chord going to the third of the next.
- The lowest note of the comp should usually be the 3rd or 7th. Above that can be added 5ths, 9ths, or 13ths—either normal, sharpened or flatted.
- When writing an 11th over a major chord, it is best that the third not be played, because it conflicts with the 11th.
- The comp does not have to include the root, because the bass player covers it, and the overtone series of a chord works best when the root is at the bottom.