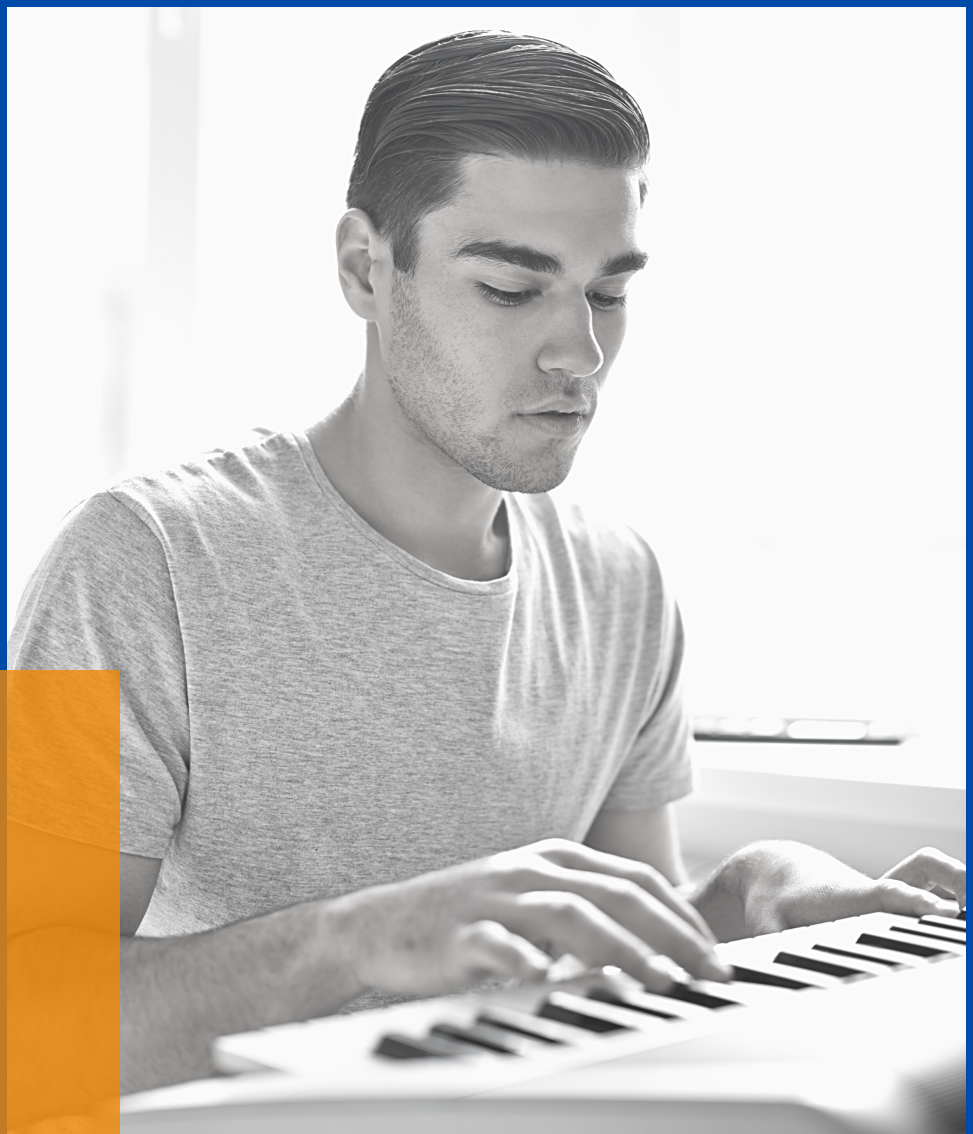
Teaching Arranging in the Choral Classroom

first edition

BY GARRETT BREEZE



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Why Teach Arranging?

Teaching your choral students to arrange will do more to improve their musicianship than any other activity (except perhaps singing)

Arranging is a hands-on way of combining everything a student has learned about music and putting it in to practice.

Arranging promotes practical application of ear training, transcription, music theory, and music technology

Arranging encourages critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and analytical skills.

It's time to stop treating arranging as an advanced activity that can only be taught after other skills are mastered. Basic principles of arranging can be taught at any level.

About This Course

Exposure to arranging at a young age was one of the things that kick-started my love for music. It enabled me to learn the music ***I*** wanted to play and gave me the tools I needed to eventually start creating my own music.

Unfortunately, arranging is not traditionally part of the curriculum in secondary music education. This course was created to change that by giving teachers the tools they need to introduce arranging to their students in an accessible way.

Contrary to popular belief, your students don't need to have music theory or notation experience in order to start arranging. In fact, arranging at a young age is one of the best things they can do to help those skills develop.

The format of the course consists of four lessons (each with a listening assignment) followed by a final project in which students will arrange one chorus of a popular song for SATB a cappella choir. Students should be encouraged to complete this arrangement with the skill set they feel most comfortable with, be it pencil and paper, computer notation, recording, or live performance. It was designed with ensemble choir classes in mind, giving students the rare opportunity to sing each others music and learn from each other.

I think that you will find teaching and learning arranging in this setting to be a unique and rewarding experience.

UNIT ONE:
BASIC ARRANGING CONCEPTS

THE ONE THING ALL MUSIC HAS IN COMMON

All music is arranged, whether by the original creator or someone else.

THE TWO MOST COMMON CHORDS

Major and minor chords are the basic building blocks of all popular songs.

THE THREE PARTS OF A SONG

Understanding the elements of song form is an important part of arranging

THE FOUR PARTS OF EVERY ARRANGEMENT

The four elements present in every arrangement regardless of style

LESSON ONE:

THE ONE THING ALL MUSIC HAS IN COMMON (IT WAS ARRANGED)

WHAT IS ARRANGING?

Arranging is the practical side of the creative coin. It's deciding *what* should happen *where* and *who* should do *what*.

For the composer, arranging is the art of taking original musical ideas and figuring out how to put them together in the best way.

For the songwriter, arranging is the process of deciding what type of song form to use and what the accompaniment should be.

For the performer, arranging means taking a piece of music and adapting it for a particular ensemble or purpose.

THE TWO TYPES OF ARRANGING

TRANSCRIPTIVE arranging stays true to the original song, preserving as much of the source material as possible while still making it work for the intended performer. For example, taking a piece written for SATB choir and revoicing it for two-part choir.

TRANSFORMATIVE arranging is the creative adaptation of an existing song into something new and original. This is often done by adding new musical ideas (for example a brand new accompaniment) or altering what is already there (like taking a classic rock song and making it swing.)

FAMOUS EXAMPLES OF ARRANGEMENTS

MAKE YOU FEEL MY LOVE by Adele

Originally written by Bob Dylan, Adele's version became more popular!

HIGHER GROUND by Red Hot Chili Peppers

The Red Hot Chili Peppers recorded a drastically different version of Stevie Wonder's original song which went on to be used in a variety of movies, tv shows, and video games!

HALLELUJAH by John Cale

When Leonard Cohen first wrote "Hallelujah," his record label refused to release it. After John Cale's cover was featured in the movie Shrek it went on to be covered by more than 300 artists!

LISTENING ASSIGNMENT #1

"Teaching Arranging in the Choral Classroom" by Garrett Breeze

WRITING PROMPT # 1

Pick two of the example songs given in the lesson (Make Me Feel Your Love, Higher Ground, or Hallelujah) and listen to the original version and the arranged version. Describe the differences between the two versions. This could include things like tempo, instrumentation, musical ideas, key, style, accompaniment and anything else you notice. What do you think was the intended effect of these changes and do you believe they were successful? Which version do you prefer, and why?

WRITING PROMPT # 2

Pick a song you might like to arrange yourself and find two additional arrangements of the song. (Hint: Use search terms like, "cover" or "remix" if you're having trouble finding something.) Describe the differences between the three versions. What do you think was the intended effect of these changes and do you believe they were successful? Which version do you prefer, and why? If you were to create your own version of this song what would you do? (Treat this like a brainstorming session; your ideas don't have to be fully formed.)

LESSON TWO:

THE TWO MOST COMMON TYPES OF CHORDS

You don't have to understand music theory in order to have good ideas. After all, many of history's most greatest songwriters (people like Paul McCartney, Michael Jackson, or Taylor Swift) were unable to read music. That being said, in order to make informed decisions as an arranger you have to understand the music that you are reworking. This lesson is a very brief overview of basic music theory for songwriters. If you are interested in learning more, your teacher can help you.

A **CHORD** is a combination of three or more notes, named after, and built around the root note. (Which is usually, but not always, the lowest note.)

A **MAJOR** chord starts with the root and adds the note a major third (four half steps) above it, as well as the note a perfect fifth (seven half steps) above the root. Thus, a **C MAJOR CHORD** contains the notes **C**, **E**, and **G**.

A **MINOR** chord is built the same way, except with a minor third for the inner note. In this case, a **C MINOR CHORD**, would contain the notes **C**, **Eb**, and **G**. Major and minor chords have a distinct sound quality which you should learn to recognize.

Songs are built around **CHORD PROGRESSIONS**, a repeating pattern of major or minor chords designed to accompany the melody. This progression usually relates to the **KEY** or **SCALE** a song is written in, with one chord, usually the first, functioning as the "home" or TONIC chord to which all the other chords want to return to. Verses and choruses often have different chord progressions which relate to each other.

C MAJOR CHORD

HOW IT IS WRITTEN :

Uppercase "C" (most common) or CM

OTHER WAYS TO THINK ABOUT IT

- Do, Mi, Sol
- 1, 3, 5 of the Major Scale
- A perfect fifth with a major third in between

C MINOR CHORD

HOW IT IS WRITTEN :

Cm (most common) or lowercase "c"

OTHER WAYS TO THINK ABOUT IT

- La, Do, Mi or Do, Me Sol
- 1, 3, 5 of the Minor Scale
- A perfect fifth with a minor third in between

FAMOUS SONGS IN A MAJOR KEY

MAKE YOU FEEL MY LOVE
by Adele

HALLELUJAH
by John Cale

HEY JUDE
by The Beatles

DON'T STOP BELIEVING
by Journey

EYE OF THE TIGER
by Survivor

I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU
by Whitney Houston

HAPPY
by Pharrell Williams

SUGAR
by Maroon 5

FAMOUS SONGS IN A MINOR KEY

HIGHER GROUND
by Red Hot Chili Peppers

UPTOWN FUNK
by Bruno Mars

SHAPE OF YOU
by Ed Sheeran

PARTY ROCK ANTHEM
by LMFAO

YEAH!
by Usher

CLOSER
by The Chainsmokers

COUNTING STARS
by OneRepublic

I WILL SURVIVE
by Gloria Gaynor

LISTENING ASSIGNMENT #2

"Teaching Arranging in the Choral Classroom" by Garrett Breeze

WRITING PROMPT # 1

Pick two songs each from the lists of major and minor songs. Listen to them and give a brief summary of how you think the choice of chords impacts the melody and lyrics. As best as you can, analyze the chord progression and briefly describe some of its characteristics (how does it make you feel, how does it fit in with the lyric, how often do the chords change, are there a lot of chords or just a few, do the verse and chorus use the same progression, etc.)

WRITING PROMPT # 2

Pick three songs that you would be interested in arranging for your final project. Listen to them and give a brief summary of how you think the choice of chords impacts the melody and lyrics. As best as you can, describe what characteristics of the chord progression stand out to you.

LESSON THREE:

THE THREE PARTS OF A SONG

UNDERSTANDING SONG FORM

To properly arrange a song it's important to understand what each section is designed to do. Popular songs have three main components:

VERSE - The "storytelling" part of a song, typically conveys the most information and builds to a chorus, hook, or title line. Usually repeats with different lyrics but the same melody.

CHORUS - The main idea or message of a song and is often the most interesting and/or memorable. Usually built around the title of the song.

BRIDGE - A departure both musically and lyrically and typically only appears once (if at all). Provides a break from repetition and often has a "pay-off" moment that leads back to final chorus.

COMMON PATTERNS

AAA - Verse, Verse, Verse
AABA - Verse, Verse, Chorus, Verse
ABABAB - Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus
ABABCB - Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Chorus

Other elements you mind find in a song include:
INTRO, OUTRO, PRE-CHORUS, REFRAIN, RISE, TAG, TURNAROUND, INTERLUDE, INSTRUMENTAL.

AAA

HALLELUJAH
by John Cale

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER
by Simon & Garfunkel

AABA

MAKE YOU FEEL MY LOVE
by Adele

SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW
by Judy Garland

ABAB

HIGHER GROUND
by Red Hot Chili Peppers

FLY ME TO THE MOON
by Frank Sinatra

ABABCB

HOT N COLD
by Katy Perry

HOTEL CALIFORNIA
by The Eagles

LISTENING ASSIGNMENT #3

"Teaching Arranging in the Choral Classroom" by Garrett Breeze

WRITING PROMPT # 1

Pick one song from each category on the previous page. Map out the form by writing the first line of lyric for each section (verse, chorus, bridge)

WRITING PROMPT # 2

Pick three songs you might be interested in arranging for your final project. Identify the song form of each using upper-case letters. Write about why you think that song form was chosen and whether or not you think it was effective.

LESSON FOUR:

THE FOUR PARTS OF EVERY ARRANGEMENT

No matter how complicated or busy a recording may sound, every element you hear can be categorized by at least one of the following roles:

MELODY is the lead line or main musical idea of a song.

BASSLINE is what outlines the chord structure of a song and may or may not be played by a bass instrument/vocalist. Even if a song does not have a bass "line" there will always be something in the accompaniment that outlines the chord progression.

GROOVE is all of the rhythmic components of an arrangement. Everything in a song has rhythm, but certain rhythms or patterns will stand out, providing clues to the style and character of the music.

FILLER is anything else added to the arrangement to make it feel complete (also called the orchestration). This includes things like harmony lines, countermelodies, hooks, musical flourishes and so on. These elements are often used to fill gaps in the vocal line.

OVERLAPPING ROLES

Where this gets a little tricky is the fact that one part of an arrangement can satisfy multiple roles. A piano accompaniment, for example, can provide a bass line, groove, and filler all on its own. On the other extreme, a recording might have 12 different guitars all functioning in the same role. So when you first listen to a song to arrange it, figuring out how these four roles are covered is a crucial first step.

LISTENING ASSIGNMENT #4

"Teaching Arranging in the Choral Classroom" by Garrett Breeze

WRITING PROMPT # 1

Pick any three songs used so far as an example in this course. For each song: 1) Describe the bass line. 2) Identify the most prominent rhythmic patterns in the song, where they occur, and what instruments play them. 3) Explain which parts of the song you consider to be filler and why.

WRITING PROMPT # 2

Pick three songs that you are interested in arranging for the final project. For each, make a list of everything you can hear in the chorus. Pick three musical ideas (other than the melody or bassline) that you feel are the most important to the song and explain why. Do you think the arrangement was successful in making the song feel complete? Do you think the accompaniment did a good job of supporting the melody? Why or why not?

UNIT TWO:
CREATE YOUR OWN ARRANGEMENT

It's time to start writing! In this unit you will chose a song (perhaps one you have already written about?) and arrange the chorus for SATB a cappella choir. At each step of the way you will present to your class and get feedback.

STEP ONE: MELODY

Start with the melody of the song in the soprano part.

STEP TWO: BASSLINE

Assign the bass to sing a homophonic part or an independent bass line.

STEP THREE: HARMONY

In the alto or tenor part, create a harmony line to go with the melody.

STEP FOUR: FILLER

Using the remaining part add an original idea to complete the arrangement

WAYS TO COMPLETE THE FINAL PROJECT

By providing different options for completing the assignments, this course allows your students to focus on arranging principles.

The "Aural" Track

Record Your Arrangement

**Use an app or digital audio workstation (DAW) to record each part of the arrangement.

Live Performance

**Get a group of classmates together, teach them their parts, and perform for your class! **

The "Notation" Track

Pencil and Paper

Write your arrangement with pencil and paper and have it sung by members of your class.

Music Notation Software

Use music notation software to input your arrangement and playback using MIDI instruments.

STEP ONE: MELODY

NOTATION TRACK

Select a song you would like to arrange. Using published sheet music as your guide, copy the melody of the chorus into music notation software or onto a blank sheet of staff paper. (You will need four staves total. Put the melody on the highest staff.)

AURAL TRACK

Select a song you would like to arrange. Using available recordings as a guide, record the melody of the chorus into your DAW or app of choice, or figure it out by ear and perform live for your class.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- If necessary, transpose the melody into an easier key
- Don't assume that the sheet music is correct. Always listen to the recordings to verify
- However, rhythms may be simplified if desired.
- Use a click track to keep yourself honest
- When recording, make sure you are using a click track and are "on the grid"
- Try not to stress about how your performance sounds, we're focused on the arranging right now.

STEP TWO: BASSLINE

NOTATION TRACK

Add a bassline on the lowest of your four staves. This bassline can be derived from published sheet music, a recording, or be creative.

AURAL TRACK

If recording, add a bassline on a separate track within the same session or file you recorded the melody. (If recording a group it may be easier to re-record both parts together.) If singing live, find someone to sing bass and rehearse the two parts together.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- The bassline can match the original or be more creative
- One way to write a bass part is to copy the rhythm of the melody but sing the root notes of each chord
- Make sure the bass part is in tune or nothing will sound good.
- You may need to change the key again to make sure the bass AND the melody are in a good range. Don't be discouraged! Figuring out the right key for an arrangement is often the hardest part!

STEP THREE: HARMONY

NOTATION TRACK

Write a harmony line in either the alto or tenor lines. This part should follow the rhythm of the melody, go below the melody and utilize different notes than the melody or bassline.

AURAL TRACK

If recording, create another track in your session and record a harmony line in either the alto or tenor line. If singing live, add a third person to your ensemble. This harmony should follow the rhythm of the melody, go below the melody and utilize different notes than the melody or bassline.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- Trust your ear
- Think horizontally, not vertically
- Listen to the original recording and other versions for inspiration (especially other choral versions)
- Your harmony will likely follow the same general contour as the melody, unless there are large jumps in the melody line

STEP FOUR: FILLER

NOTATION TRACK

On your last remaining line, add one additional part. It could be another harmony line, some kind of accompaniment pattern, an idea taken from the source material, or a newly composed line. Use your judgement and do what you think is the best way to make the arrangement sound full and complete.

AURAL TRACK

Create a fourth audio track and record one additional part (or add the fourth person to your singing ensemble). It could be another harmony line, some kind of accompaniment pattern, an idea taken from the source material, or a newly composed line. Use your judgement and do what you think is the best way to make the arrangement sound full and complete.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- If possible, use this fourth part to fill in any gaps or rests in the melody line.
- Don't try to compete with the other voice parts. If they are fast, this should be slow. Strive for variety.
- It does not need to be complicated to be effective

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About the Author

GARRETT BREEZE is a Nashville-based composer and arranger whose credits include film and television, Broadway stars, Grammy-winning classical artists, and many of the top high school music programs in the U.S. With more than 1,000 choral arrangements currently in circulation, he is a sought-after clinician and adjudicator who has worked with more than 250 middle and high school choirs throughout the United States.

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