

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

Issue 1 | Spring 2021

Layers of Inclusion

Arranging Music for Multi-Leveled Ensembles

John Myers, PhD

Bard Academy and Bard College at Simon's Rock

Working with a group of students that includes a wide range of instrumental abilities as well as age groups can be challenging in any discipline, but there are specific approaches that can open possibilities for learning and participation so that the need for challenge and accomplishment can be addressed.

For music, this can take the form of layered arranging, so that advanced and less experienced students can function in the same temporal space.

At Bard College at Simon's Rock, our performing ensembles (Jazz Ensemble, Chamber Orchestra, and Chorus) started to enroll a combination of Academy and College students soon after the founding of the Academy (Simon's Rock's two-year accelerated high school program, taught by the College's faculty) in 2015. While we have always tried to accommodate a range of abilities within these classes, the wider age distribution of a potential six-year arc¹ naturally led to more consideration of this factor.

Because of our relatively small general population of around 400 students, even with a surprisingly large portion of those students having an interest in music, our instrumentation changes from semester to semester. We include canonic jazz repertoire from a wide range of time periods and styles. While it is possible to purchase arrangements, but always necessary to modify them, music faculty often find it more practical to create arrangements from scratch. These conditions also make it possible to customize the arrangements for both skill level and instrumentation.

THE APPROACH

The idea behind the multi-layered approach is to associate degrees of melodic and rhythmic activity with specific lines; a part for a less-experienced student will exist on the same timeline, but will be more sparse and less complex. This extends into the harmonic sphere as well. Major articulation points can be reinforced musically, but without breaking the momentum, freeing the more

capable musicians to work on the more detailed nuances of phrasing and improvising over the more harmonically demanding portions of an arrangement.

LAYERED ARRANGEMENT IN PRACTICE: “BLUES FOR ALICE”



Image: Charlie “Bird” Parker in 1947

I have employed the technique of layered arranging on “Blues for Alice,” by Charlie Parker², pictured left.³ This piece is a typically intricate bebop melody and chord progression, which is appropriate for the college level in terms of repertoire. However, like many of the modern jazz compositions of the bebop period and after, the more complex structures were firmly grounded in the articulation points of earlier, simpler pieces, so that the phrase structure and fundamental harmonic of the earlier pieces were preserved.

This made it convenient for the great improvisers to continue the tropes of their own musical experiences. In “Blues for Alice,” the underlying structure is the three-phrase group of the blues form, established in many genres of American music for well over a century.

measure 1 Fmaj7 I7 F I	measure 2 Em7b5 A7 viiø7 V7/vi	measure 3 Dm7 G7 vi7 V7/IV	measure 4 Cm7 F7 ii7/IV V7/IV
measure 5 Bb7 IV7 (Mixolydian) Bb IV	measure 6 Bbm7 iv7 (mode interchange)	measure 7 Am7 D7 iii7 V7/ii	measure 8 Abm7 Db7 (passing chords)
measure 9 Gm7 ii7 C7 V7	measure 10 C7b10 V7b10 Bb IV	measure 11 Fmaj7 Dm7 I7	measure 12 Gm7 C7 ii7 V7 C7 V7

Figure 1: Table showing simple harmonies in blue text

Most commonly, the three phrases of the blues form are expressed within a twelve-measure structure, divided evenly into four measures. This provides a scaffolding for improvisation in cyclical time similar to the theme-and-variations form in Western classical music, and also similar to other global music languages in which cyclical time is an essential structural element. In its simplest form, as used in folk and popular styles, the blues harmony might consist only of simple I, IV, and V chords, with modal melodic patterns woven within. Charlie Parker's harmonies insert secondary dominants and passing chords which target into these, presenting a more challenging landscape for the improviser. In the chart above, the simple harmonies are shown in blue, and Charlie Parker's changes are written above these.

In my own arrangement, I start with Charlie Parker's melody and harmonies, giving the advanced students playing melodic instruments a chance to meet the technical challenges of the piece, which includes modal interchange, chromatic passing tones, and the twists and turns of compound structures. Another practical benefit for these students is that they acquire repertoire and vocabulary that they could use in later stages of their musical development. Meanwhile, the drummers are invited to accent the exciting articulation points in Parker's melody. These rhythmic accents subvert the essentially binary, or "square" aspect of the underlying phrase structure. For newer students, their easier parts in the arrangement reinforce these accents without requiring the players to render the entire melody.

The figure displays two side-by-side musical staves for the piece "Blues for Alice". The left staff is labeled "original melody:" and the right staff is labeled "accent point:". Both staves show the original melody in blue. The left staff also includes "simplified parts:" for Piano (Pno.), Violin (Vc.), Bass, and Drums. The right staff shows the "accent point:" for the same instruments. The score is written in 4/4 time and features various chords and rhythmic patterns. The original melody is in the key of F major, and the simplified parts are in the key of F major. The right staff shows the accent point in the key of F major, with a blue double-headed arrow indicating the relationship between the two staves.

Figure 2: "Blues for Alice" score with the author's notations in blue

After a few cycles, my arrangement moves to sparser harmonic rhythms that allow the less-experienced improvisers to solo modally without having to constantly adjust their intervals. I still use extended chords in this simpler section, but in a way that does not interfere with modal improvisation. For example, a F7b10 (more commonly written as F7#9) chord can include the minor third of a simple pentatonic minor scale that beginning improvisers might use. The score

above shows, in an excerpt from the beginning of the melody, that the asymmetrical accents in Charlie Parker's melody can be preserved, even in the simplified parts. In this case the accent is after the second beat of the 4th measure.

Finally we return to the original melody in a *da capo* section, reaffirming our tribute to the composer. In presenting a simplified progression in the middle of the piece, we are to some extent reversing the historical trend toward increasing complexity in tropes based on the blues, and then restoring it.⁴

Overall, the pedagogic goal is to provide an environment where the college-level students can work with level-appropriate material, combined with a chance for less experienced students to participate supportively and non-destructively. I aspire to offer a structure for those students who wish to continue to develop as improvisors, so that they may build their own tropes—extending “the blues” into a new century!

DR. JOHN MYERS teaches music, cultural studies, and electronic arts at Bard Academy and Bard College at Simon's Rock. He earned a Master of Music degree from Howard University, and a PhD in Ethnomusicology from the University of Maryland. He is a composer, guitarist, media developer, and author. His monograph *Way of the Pipa* was the first book in English on the subject of the Chinese lute.

NOTES

- 1 Because Simon's Rock has a BA as well as an AA program, it has become possible for students to proceed from the Academy to the AA, and then to the BA.
- 2 Charlie Parker, "Blues for Alice," Verve Records, 1951. A recording of the first four measures of Parker's melody has been uploaded as a supplement to this article. The file is titled "blues_for_alice-original.mp4."
- 3 William P. Gottlieb, "Portrait of Charlie Parker, Carnegie Hall, New York," 1947, Monographic, Photograph, <https://www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.06911/>.
- 4 A recording of the simplified chord progression of the same four measures sampled from the Parker's original has been uploaded as a supplement to this article. The file is titled "blues_for_alice-simple.mp4."