



Mike Hober

PERRY HALL

Cultivating Aural Imagination To Elevate the Writer's Craft

In addition to my work as a pianist, composer, and arranger, I have had a long career as a jazz educator, first at SUNY Binghamton, then at the City College of New York, the Manhattan School of Music and at the BMI Jazz Composer's Workshop, where I had the honor of teaching alongside Jim McNeely. Over the years I have developed a variety of strategies to help students deepen their skills as composers and arrangers. This involves teaching the rules of the craft, but I also try to cultivate an intuitive mindset that encourages the ability to hear in a way that can significantly complement rules and established methods. In this master class, I will

elaborate on just a handful of these ideas, with the goal of illustrating how intuition, and a well-developed "aural imagination," can significantly improve a writer's craft.

Pitch

I believe the most important thing in orchestration/voicing is the awareness that you are writing a specific sound that occurs at the intended pitch, not just writing the pitch. While pitch is a fixed and determined entity, its sound can be endlessly variable—and a good writer must be able to hear this.

Activate your aural imagination; ask yourself what it actually sounds like—not just the

melody or the harmony, but how it registers—the color, the impact, the default dynamic. How does it compare to, blend and balance with, or complement other already existing sounds? I often tell students that if they write in concert without picturing what the instruments are actually doing, and then push the transpose button, I will be able to tell—the compromise will reveal itself.

This is why I always write transposed: I feel it brings me closer to the conception of the actual sound in the very moment I am writing. When I think of alto saxophone playing the pitch of middle C, I imagine the alto playing the A shown in Example 1 on page 86. The

idea of middle C is only a part of the necessary information.

Determining whether a pitch registers as high, middle or low also depends in large part on which instrument is playing it. Take, for example, a middle D. Picture this on flute, trumpet, baritone saxophone, guitar, trombone and, finally, piccolo (see Example 2). On the flute it sounds low, but on the baritone sax it sounds high; on the guitar and trombone it sounds mid-range, while on the piccolo it's so low that it isn't even on the instrument. The pitch is identical, but the sound (which includes the color, the impact, the default dynamic, as well as the density, transparency and weight) is entirely different.

The ability to imagine how a pitch will actually sound is also vital to assigning your instrumentation. Just because a pitch is within an instrument's range doesn't mean it will actually sound optimal.

Let's take the concert F pitch in Example 3 as an illustration. Should you assign it to the baritone saxophone (Example 4)? This note is certainly within the instrument's range, and it's not difficult to play—but what are you trying to achieve? If an exposed, reedy and singing lushness is what you are after, then this might be a good choice; but if power is your goal, consider the other options: what about tenor trombone and bass trombone, tenor saxophone, alto

saxophone or guitar (Example 5)? It's the same pitch, but which sound better matches your intent? The point is, never assign pitches just because they happen to be within the range of an instrument. Use your aural imagination to evaluate which orchestration will best express what you are hearing.

Range

Like most writers, I try to write within each instrument's optimal range (mostly, but not exclusively), and taking sound into consideration, rather than just pitch, can help you avoid the mistake of *unintentionally* writing outside the optimal range of an instrument.

This applies to sectional writing as well. I remember a comment that trumpet player Marvin Stamm once made at a reading of student jazz orchestra compositions: He said he wanted to "have a talk" with the writer who "wrote all of that saxophone music for the trumpets." He was referring to a trumpet-section passage that had been written in low-register four-part soli that would have been more suitable for saxophones because of the range. The top voice was fine, but the writer had not considered the optimal range of the trumpet section as a whole; in that low register, written in soli, the sound was "muddy" (though, when they played the first trumpet part in unison rather than soli, they sounded fine.)

But saxophones would have sounded fantastic on that soli. This is why I tell students to try to write what is "indigenous" to the instruments. Each instrument (and section) in a jazz orchestra has its own unique qualities, and when composing and arranging/orchestrating you should capitalize on those strengths, rather than asking them to do something that might be better achieved by a different instrument or section.

Dynamics

Using your aural imagination can also open up new ways to deal with dynamics. If you want a specific melody or passage to be louder, for example, you can use orchestration and composition (rather than just a higher dynamic marking) to achieve what you are looking for.

Let's consider the melody shown in Example 6. How can we make it louder? A default solution might be to put all four trumpets on it, because trumpets are loud, right? But assigning the trumpets to the melody would sacrifice too much of the target dynamic intent, regardless of what is written for the saxophones and trombones.

A more successful approach (Example 7) might be to write the saxophones on the melody in octave unison (in this case they are actually stronger than the trumpets in terms of rel-

Example 1

#1 Alto Saxophone

Example 2

#2 Flute Trumpet Baritone Sax Guitar Trombone Piccolo

Examples 3–5

#3 #4 Baritone #5 Tenor/Bass Trombone Tenor Sax Alto Sax Guitar

Example 6

#6 even 8th ♩ = 138
A7alt A9#11 G,11 Eb9#11

Example 7

#7 Concert Score
even 8th ♩ = 138
2 Altos
1 Tenor
1 Tenor, Bari
Trumpets
Trombones

Example 8

#8 Concert Score
Trumpets
Trombones
E,11 #11

Example 9

#9 Concert Score
Trumpets
Trombones
E,11 #11

ative range), and then compose new music for the brass in a register that easily achieves the dynamic. In other words, it's not just about which instruments are capable of high volume; it also has everything to do with range, and what combination of sounds can achieve the dynamic you are looking for.

Here, I've also chosen some basic hits or "comping," being careful not to step on or distract from the melody. The music is now much louder than it was when the trumpets were playing the melody. Of course, there are many other possible variations/combinations to this solution (four saxophones in true unison, with the baritone mixed into the trombones; four-note trombone voicings with no root; or with the baritone on the root, or on the fifth in bar 2). The point is, working through multiple iterations, with your aural imagination fully activated, will help you find an orchestration that best expresses what you are after.

Economy

Thinking about orchestration as transactional is another useful way to train your aural imagination. When you assign notes to a player, that player is no longer available to do something else. Was it a good investment of that instrument?

Let's use the Trumpet IV part in Example 8 to illustrate this. Ask yourself, is Trumpet IV contributing enough in this open voicing? Its note is a 10th below Trumpet I in its mid-low range, doubling a note in Trombone I in its mid-high range, placing it at a marked volume disadvantage to both of these instruments. Could you get better value by moving Trumpet IV somewhere else?

In my solution (Example 9), I moved Trumpet IV up so that the trumpets are now in closed position (a common practice, and for good reason). This helps minimize the range-related volume issue (particularly acute in trumpets), and also removes the doubling of Trombone I—a note that certainly needed no reinforcement. It also mitigates the overly open nature of upper-register trumpets voiced in perfect fourths, which in this context would sound thin.

These voicing variations demonstrate just a sampling of how much can be done by reinvesting a single instrument. (The first four trumpet voicings also retain the original quartal intent.) They are all essentially "correct," but activating your aural imagination will enable you to determine which voicing will take your writing from "pretty good" to great.

If orchestration is transactional, it is equally important to economize your resources. In other words: Don't waste their breath! Here, a sense of overall effort should also guide your decisions. For example, be considerate about rests, especially for brass. Leave

your soloists time to both rest and to “travel.” What sounds better: a 16-bar passage for four trombones, where Trombone II leaves out all of their notes as they walk up front for their solo, or beautifully crafted music for three trombones where the happy soloist nestles in with the rhythm section after a nice little rest?

Continually picture yourself in the players’ shoes (or chairs)—this is their brain on your notes, not your brain. This kind of consideration will show respect for the players, and signals appreciation for them playing your music so well.

Study/Imitate/Assimilate/Evolve

The best way to train your aural imagination is to study other writers. Stravinsky said, “Lesser artists borrow, great artists steal.” To me, this says learn the language, study scores, train your ears, and know the history and what it sounds like. How extensive is your vocabulary of voicings? You can expand your toolbox by studying some great examples: Sammy Nestico’s tuttis on “Hayburner,” Thad Jones’ hits on “Three And One,” Bob Brookmeyer on the intro of “American Express,” Maria Schneider behind the tenor solo on “Hang

Gliding” or Jim McNeely on the shout of “Extra Credit.” You can’t learn language in a vacuum—have a look at scores, and listen a lot. This also includes listening to your own music. Take every opportunity to participate in readings, organize a group reading with other writers, or even start your own big band. Like looking in a mirror (or listening to a recording of yourself playing), the truth will be staring right back at you.

Craftsmanship

Brahms said, “Without craftsmanship, inspiration is a mere reed shaken in the wind.” In other words, having an idea or a blast of conceptual brilliance probably won’t get you sonically far enough in terms of expressing your idea or conception. Listening to a lot of music will not only train your aural imagination, it will also help you learn the possibilities of the craft—and this is what will elevate your writing. Of course, practically anything played by a good band can sound “pretty good”—but “pretty good” is nowhere near good enough, and the only way to go from good to great is by using your imagination to explore solutions that are not only technically “correct,” but sound exactly right as well.

Studying lots of music (and not just jazz) can also expose you to some of the most exciting ways to bend the rules, go beyond accepted conventions and develop your own voice. I often point out that “always means usually, and never means not so often.” In other words, there is the potential for anything to be the right thing to do at a particular given moment. Context is everything, and what something actually sounds like should always be your guide.

But craftsmanship remains vital, because knowing the rules will help you find the sound you are looking for. Don’t worry that there will be nothing left to write after all of the “don’t do this, don’t do that” in the learning process—the speed at which your vocabulary will expand will far outpace the “cleaning up” of substandard craft. As your aural imagination evolves, you will realize that the possibilities are endless. **DB**

Mike Holober has released six recordings as a leader and can be heard on more than 75 recordings as a sideman. His current projects include The Gotham Jazz Orchestra, Balancing Act (a jazz octet with voice) and The Mike Holober/Marvin Stamm Quartet. Holober’s jazz orchestra credentials include composing and conducting for the WDR Big Band, hr-Bigband and Westchester Jazz Orchestra, where he has written projects for artists such as Miguel Zenón, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Al Foster, Dr. Lonnie Smith, Eli Degibri and Avishai Cohen, among others. He recently returned to the helm of his own stellar big band with the 2019 release of *Mike Holober & The Gotham Jazz Orchestra: Hiding Out* (ZOHO), a double CD featuring two multi-movement suites along with other works. Holober is a full professor at the City College of New York, where he has taught for 25 years. He also teaches jazz composing and arranging at the Manhattan School of Music, and served as associate director of the BMI Jazz Composer’s Workshop from 2007 to 2015. He was recently endowed as the inaugural CCNY Stuart Z. Katz Professor of Humanities and the Arts for his project *This Rock We’re On: Imaginary Letters*, an extended work in the form of an oratorio for jazz orchestra, voice, cello and percussion. Visit him online at mikeholober.com.

