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# **3 SECRETS TO UNLOCKING THE JOYOUS BIG BAND SOUND**

**ESSENTIAL  
TECHNIQUES FOR  
THE ASPIRING  
ARRANGER**

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# FOREWORD



Firstly, I'd like to thank you for downloading this guide. The art of big band arranging is a deep one, and so while it would be impossible to cover the entire aspect of arranging for big band in this short guide, I'd like to give you 3 essential tips that I've used in every chart I've written to achieve a full, joyous big band sound.

I've always been inspired by the music and arrangements of Count Basie, Sammy Nestico, Gordon Goodwin, Chris Walden, and many more, and one thing they have in common is that they know exactly how to voice the instruments in a way that really makes them sing.

As a result, these masters have been hired again and again for 'their sound', or their signature. I'm hoping that after reading through these techniques, you'll be inspired to try out some new flavours on your own and see how they sound. It's really all about experimenting, and seeing what works/doesn't work. We always have to use our ear!

Anyway, without further ado, let's jump in to the first technique!

# 1: EMBRACE SIMPLICITY



Contrary to popular belief, even though there are 13 horns to arrange for (4 trumpets/4 bones/5 saxes), you can actually get some great results just by taking a regular triad and spreading it among all the instruments. One key to a full and rich sound is **embracing the simplicity in a regular major or minor chord**, and knowing how to voice them appropriately. Don't overcomplicate by adding too many notes in the chord!

A solid understanding of the harmonic series can really help here. There's a concept in jazz called the 'low interval limit', which essentially says the lower you go in the register, the further apart your intervals must be in order to ring out and not sound muddy.

Practically, this typically means **leaving an octave or more between your lowest voices** (bari sax/bass trombone) and the next harmonic voice. For example, in a 7th chord like C7 (dominant 7th), a common technique is to place the root (C) in the lowest instrument, the 3rd and 7th in the following higher voices to form the foundation of the chord, then applying appropriate alterations to the highest voices to achieve dissonance as desired.

Without this fundamental root/3rd/7th structure at the bottom, you'll hear an **empty, wimpy, and unsatisfying dominant chord** that's begging to be revoiced.

## 2: POWER VOICING

This is one of my favourite techniques, used in charts throughout the world and taught to me by Jason Goldman, one of the core big band arrangers for Michael Bublé.



This is typically used in a **shout chorus** where the entire band is playing, and is applied to **strengthen the lead melody** and make it more prominent.

Essentially, what's happening here is that the **1st trumpet and 4th trumpets are voiced an octave apart**. Assuming that the lead trumpet has the melody, this will give the melody additional depth and support, allowing it to be more easily heard in the context of the full band.

For example, if you listen to [this example](#) at 1:38, you'll hear the trumpets blaring their melody. The 4th trumpet is actually playing exactly one octave below the 1st, reinforcing the melody and making it fuller.

If you try applying this in your next shout chorus or climax, I have no doubt you'll start smiling instantly when you hear the playback in your notation software. It's such a good feeling when the lead melody is properly supported!

## 3: LEAD CLARITY

Nothing is worse than a muddy lead melody. Trust me, hearing that rub against the lead is one of the saddest things you can witness, and so there's a general rule of thumb to follow that will ensure that your melody is clear, defined, and heard properly.



The rule is: **the interval between your melody and your first harmony voice must be a minor 3rd or larger.**

Why does this work? Well, anything smaller than a 3rd (minor/major 2nd) is considered a dissonance, no matter where you are in the register. When we hear dissonance in jazz, it's typically a good thing, but **not when it's between 2 voices that are only a 2nd apart.**

Not only does a 3rd or more provide beautiful colour between the voices, but ensures that you'll avoid this clashing crunch between the top 2 voices, and you'll hear the melody much more clearly as a result.

Of course, arrangers break this rule all the time, but **only for an intended effect.** If you're trying to keep your lines clear and fun, without any unexpected rubs or clashes, it's always best to avoid minor/major 2nds in the top 2 parts. It's a big one!

# THAT'S IT!

You've made it my friend! Thanks again for downloading this guide and reading through these 3 key tips to making your big band arrangements better. Keep in mind, this doesn't just apply for the large ensemble, but also for smaller groups; in fact even more so, as there are less instruments to cover up bad arranging technique.



If you'd like some resources to dive in further to, here are some recommendations:

**Pandemonium Big Band** (YouTube)

**The US Army Field Band** (YouTube)

**6 Steps to Big Band Writing** (YouTube)

**Jazz Arranging Techniques** (book)

**The Complete Arranger** (book)

**Inside the Score** (book)

**Arranging for Large Jazz Ensemble** (book)

That's it my friend! Thank you so much, have a wonderful rest of your day, and I hope to see you inside some more in-depth material soon! Stay tuned :)

Cheers,

Chris