

ORCHESTRATING FOR BROADWAY

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I MAKE orchestrations for musical comedies, operettas, radio shows, etc. In Tin-Pan Alley, where tunes are born so fast that their progenitors would be next to helpless without the aid of my particular type of musical obstetrics. It is my job to nurse to a life of from a day or so to about six months each ditty, jingle or roundelay that my many talented patients are able to bring to a fairly healthy embryonic state.

Orchestrators just happen. All the education in the world will not develop the peculiar gift required unless it is already there, and if it is there education alone is still inadequate to bring the gift up to specialist requirements. There must also be experience of such a wide range that its gaining must in many details be accidental. Less successful men are usually so because of a shortage of such accidental experience. More successful ones always bear out the same theory.

When I was nine my father gave me a trumpet and after a little preliminary sparring I set about playing a piece with my sister (at the piano). The piece was called *The Naughty Pixie Mocking His Mother*, the upper part of which I had already copied out for the violin. To my dismay the first note didn't fit and suddenly the meaning of "Trumpet in B flat" dawned on me, whereupon we got a fresh start and gave a successful rendition of the piece, to the great astonishment and delight of our doting father. At the age of eleven I was given the job of conducting our family orchestra while doing things to the first violin part, my father much preferring to play the trumpet, which he did most capably. At sixteen I had had my hands on a large majority of known instruments and soon began making a living playing the piano, my then current studies in harmony and counterpoint being the excuse and reason for rearranging every piano

part handed me, a practice not uncommon to professional pianists, alas, but of great benefit to me at the time.

Coming to New York a few years later, a period of copying the parts from musical comedy scores gave me the first urge to do the scoring, followed by a much greater urge when I learned how much orchestrators were paid per page for the work. Eventually the chance came to make what is known as print arrangements, arrangements of music for dancing playable by any likely combination of instruments at any reasonable tempo. I made several hundred of these and finally graduated, meaning in this case: was promoted to the "shows."

Taking anything from a whistled melody to a piano sketch from its author to the lighted orchestra pit of a theatrical production demands, as indicated above, a great many things beside theoretical training but if I were asked what the greatest asset one can have in this work is, I should have to answer, "counterpoint." Here is where the admonition of the teacher to his pupil to avoid forced voice-leading comes into its own. The audience, sitting there watching dimpled knees and listening to tiny voices singing out familiar intervals in praise of familiar emotions, has no idea what counterpoint is; but let it be stiff, forced or badly distributed and the knees seem less dimpled, the tiny voices grow tinier and the general atmosphere becomes charged with an unmistakeable *So What?* What the public doesn't know, which is plenty, it very nearly always feels, and that applies to the good things as well as the bad.

Let me say that at no time in all the ten years I have been at this work have I felt that one note of the miles of exercises I did as a student was wasted on it. Rather am I tempted to get out the old worn-out book and start all over again, cleaning up, purifying the counters, making them,—in the language of those who pay to listen to them—prettier.

Now besides this most important point come many others, such as the fact that the whole style of tune-writing and orchestrating changes from season to season, almost from week to week. The change is gradual, but after a few months in Europe, on repeated occasions I have found it necessary to stop, look and do a lot of listening before daring to start afresh at the old work-bench. I

have even, as Tin-Pan Alley calls it, "flopped" on one or two plays, meaning that I had quite some rewriting to do before the result was fit for the sophisticated first-nighters.

Another hazard of the *métier* is the art of scoring for an orchestra to accompany voiceless voices. The operatic type of voice is far too hard-boiled to hold the sympathy of an American musical comedy audience; they want youth, simplicity and tenderness rather than brilliance or "style." This is all to the good except for the poor orchestras, who are obliged to learn a *pianissimo* on their instruments that has no precedent anywhere else. It is the orchestrator's place to know exactly which of these and what combinations of these instruments are at the moment within the exalted circle of the elect, i.e., capable of "playing under" the voice of the particular actor or actress who is to present the song or musical scene in question. This is perhaps the most difficult mechanical problem of the business, and one of the constant worries of the musical director, who is in the last analysis responsible both to the singer for colorful support without overpowering, and to the composer and the orchestrator for such individuality as they have invested in the number on paper.

In the case of dancing on the stage a new set of problems arises. Solo dancers and teams are the *bête noire* of the arranger. They seldom know what they want to dance to and, if they do, have no terms to communicate their wants to a musician. In nearly every case in a large production they are called on to dance to a new melody, which is a part of the composer's "score." Imagine the joy of the orchestrator when he is asked to set the old orchestration to the new tune without even a deaf-and-dumb language indication from the dancer as to what features of the arrangement of the old number were valuable.

Chorus dancing is staged by a director, who has names for all of the thousand and one tricky rhythms, steps and formations he uses. Everything he creates should be echoed in the perfect orchestration, so, rather than spend months at a dancing school, this humble orchestrator takes down a sketch of every step, hop, twist, entrance, exit, stop, break, back-bend, split, nip-up or what-have-you,—measure by measure. Then after going home and spending the night wrestling with his figures and translating

them into exciting concord he often gets a phone call saying the "boss" didn't like the routine, so the director has to restage the number. All things considered, we are a peaceful, law-abiding lot, we arrangers.

I have already mentioned conductors and musicians of theatre orchestras. There are fewer really fine conductors than there are great symphony conductors; in fact the fingers of one hand are more than sufficient to count them in New York from whence practically all shows spring. When an inefficient musical director is on the job nothing can sound good; the finest bands, the greatest productions, the most charming music, the most brilliant arrangements all go down the sink when the man in the middle hasn't "got rhythm." This, like all others in the theatre, is a highly specialized art, and is not for any but born troupers, as the expression goes. More than once have I done two shows simultaneously and seen one draw unending favorable notice on its orchestration while the other limped along and remained unsung as far as I was concerned. This solely according to who conducted, and it is usually very hard to put your finger on the exact thing that distinguishes the one from the other, though you recognize the difference almost before either lifts his baton.

The difference in style of playing by musicians is one of the greatest reasons why the orchestral colors keep progressing (in one direction or another). This is particularly true of brass players and the wise orchestrator keeps his acquaintance with many a trumpeter and trombonist. Ever so often some one invents a new mute, or a new way of attacking a tone or a completely new timbre by a new position of the lips. There are many names for what brass players do, such as "rip," "flair," "hot break," "sixteen measure ride-out," etc., etc., most of which material is to be found in good music; but the names and the particular manner of playing are unique to Broadway. The brasses are almost as constantly in use as in the military bands, but are much of the time kept softly underneath the strings and woodwinds so that the fullness of the ensemble is not lost in the quieter moments.

Woodwind sections nowadays often consist of three men, playing piccolo, flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, alto, tenor and baritone saxophone, naturally not all at the same time.

It is simply fantastic what feats of versatility these men perform, and in orchestrating an important show it is necessary to know exactly who is to be there and what instruments he plays.

String players are the least changeable in tone color but it is sometimes a bit of a shock to hear a violinist who plays five or six concerti and reads the most involved passages with great ease get "hot" and start "goin' to town"—which means outdoing the wow-wow trumpets in the matter of off-beat improvisation.

Many interesting memories have already piled up during the period I have spent at the "racket." I shall never forget, for instance, one of the leading producers, on hearing a dance I had written in several shifting keys, (using the device a little ahead of its subsequent vogue) saying he thought the orchestration was too "fuguey!"

Also a letter from Herbert Stothart, conductor and part composer of *Rosemarie*, asking me to come to Atlantic City to help him with some new material, as he thought the show was going to turn out all right. While I was in Paris the French version of the play gave its thirteen-hundredth performance and I had to admit he was right; the show turned out "all right."

The most striking memory I keep of *Show Boat* is having to finish the work in a very short space of time, spending nine days on an average of sixty-two pages of full orchestral score per day. In the course of this play, which covers a period of fifty years, I tried the experiment of treating the banjo in each number exactly as it would have been played at the time the number was supposed to have taken place, saving the modern fox-trot rhythm until the last five minutes of the performance. Picture my thoughts when I attended a rehearsal in Paris and the conductor told me, not without some pride, that he had given the banjo a "blues" part and had added a hot trumpet and jazz drummer to Julie's song in the first act (1880!).

Many such reminiscences could be recounted but I must leave myself room to tell you of the only genuine thrill the job has ever given me. It came when I was asked to make a real low-down overture for the eleven-piece jazz band of Eubie Blake, whose blackness is only exceeded by that of his band. Then I knew once and for all I belonged to Tin-Pan Alley.