

Brian Balmages – Resource on Adaptable Music

Note: While I do believe there is an extremely important role that 5-part adaptable music plays during this crisis and in a variety of situations, I have chosen to focus my efforts on 3- and 4-part writing, especially at lower grade levels. The advantages I see to this approach, which offers every instrument access to all 3 (or 4) parts...

- Complete adaptability regardless of instrumentation. Trumpets only? No problem. Flutes only? Fine!
- Opportunities to “flip the band” – bass voices learn more about melodic lines while upper voices learn about the function of harmony and the bass line
- By giving students access to all parts, there is also an opportunity for them to work on an entire piece in a distance learning environment

Template / Layout:

For grade 1 and 1.5 music, I am trying to only have 3 parts (not 4). The “score” includes two treble clef parts and one bass clef part, but that is not how I write the piece (see below).

For grade 2 music and up, I aim for 4 parts. The score has three treble clef parts and one bass clef part (again, I do not write the piece this way).

Approach:

What I have found that works best is to begin by writing just for trumpets (all parts, whether 3 or 4). I typically limit the range to a low written A (concert G) and, with grade 1, max out at a written C (concert Bb). However, in grade 1 and 1.5, you’ll need to think about the clarinet part since we don’t want them going over the break, or doing so only very limited (and probably only the 1st part). In writing for trumpets only, the music then transposes easily to flute, clarinet, Eb instruments, and all bass clef instruments. The only octave adjustments will need to be clarinet (break), oboe, tenor sax and horn. That can be done in the part extraction phase. I personally do not think the score needs to show every instance the music breaks into octaves. The simpler the score, the better.

Score formatting:

Once I know it works for 4 trumpets, I then move everything to concert pitch and drop the 4th part down the octave and check. (The 4th line functions as a typical bass line. So in many cases, that part may be cross-scored and be higher than some of the other parts. Even in this case, I like to make sure the piece will still work, even if it winds up in a few different inversions).

Alternate Parts:

I have decided to include an alternate T. Sax / Horn line. Since we know that parts do not often work pedagogically for these instruments, having a separate part really helps a lot. Note, this is in ADDITION to the other adaptable parts they receive.

Accompaniment Parts:

I like to include a very basic piano part. It should be VERY simple. Not a reduction at all. Something that is extremely playable by the average director, but helps fill out the piece, especially if they do not have a bass voice (i.e. flute ensemble). I also include chord symbols whenever possible, in case a guitar player wants to play along.

Percussion:

I include light percussion (3 staves maximum). Note that mallet players also get the 3 or 4 adaptable parts. So in some cases, there may also be a separate mallet part on top of that. In other pieces of mine, there is no additional mallet part listed under “Percussion.”

MP3:

Finally, I am encouraging everyone to have mp3s so kids have something to play along with at home if necessary (not just the full piece, but accompaniment parts only if possible).