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Arranging in the Digital World
Corey Allen

Chapter IV
Sequencing Tips

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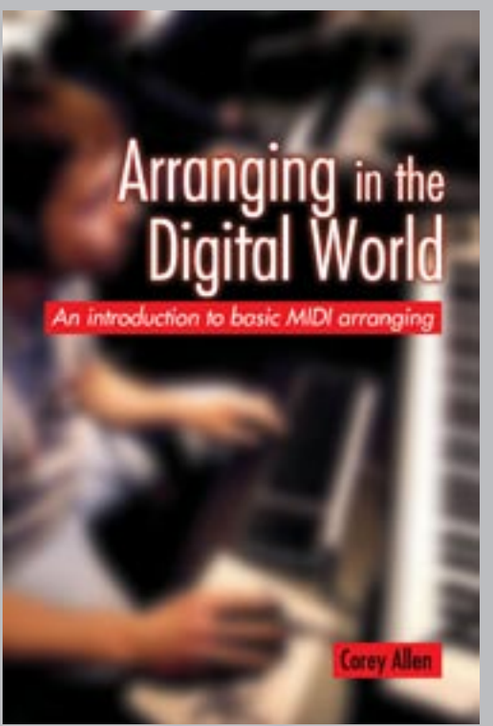

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CHAPTER IV
Sequencing Tips

To create successful, authentic-sounding sequences, you need to know a little bit about how the instrument you're trying to represent is actually played in its acoustic form. Piano players new to sequencing make a common mistake of playing every part as if they're playing a piano. The resulting sequence usually sounds too busy and cluttered. Using the *controllers* on your digital keyboard, such as *pitch bend* and *modulation,* helps lend authenticity to the parts. Several models of digital keyboards have velocity maps built into the programs that give the same note a different sound depending on how hard or at what *velocity* you strike the key. The most common example of this feature on digital keyboards is the electric bass sound. On many keyboards, if you choose an electric bass program and strike a key with a normal *velocity,* it will simply sound like an electric bass played normally. However, if you strike the key with a *forte* attack, you'll hear a slap bass percussive snap.

> ***HINT:*** The ability to change tone color by velocity requires that you practice your keyboard technique. I suggest you play through all of your patches to find which sounds are altered by changes in velocity and get used to employing all the color possibilities your keyboard has to offer.

Wind Instruments

Wind Instruments

If you're playing a flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, or horn part, you must remember that these instruments can play only one note at a time. So, be careful not to suddenly play a chord in the middle of a long stretch of single notes. And speaking of long stretches of notes: Players of wind instruments have to breathe. I suggest that as you play a passage, exhale! When you need to take a breath, stop

playing. You'll be surprised how much more effective your horn lines will be. Bending the pitch of a trombone with either a pitch-bend wheel, joystick, or ribbon can be a very satisfying effect. Warning: This can be overdone.

Guitar

I can't count the number of times I've seen someone choose a perfectly good guitar program on a digital keyboard, play Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," look me straight in the eye, and say, "This doesn't sound like a guitar!" The standard guitar has only six strings; on its best day, it can play only six notes simultaneously. Because of the way the six strings are tuned, *open voicings* are better than very *close voicings*. Generally speaking, a given guitar chord will contain only four or five notes. As a rule, to get a more authentic guitar sound, roll your chords. This will give you a strumming effect. Don't play all the notes of a guitar chord at once (as with a piano).

Fret Noise & Pitch Bend

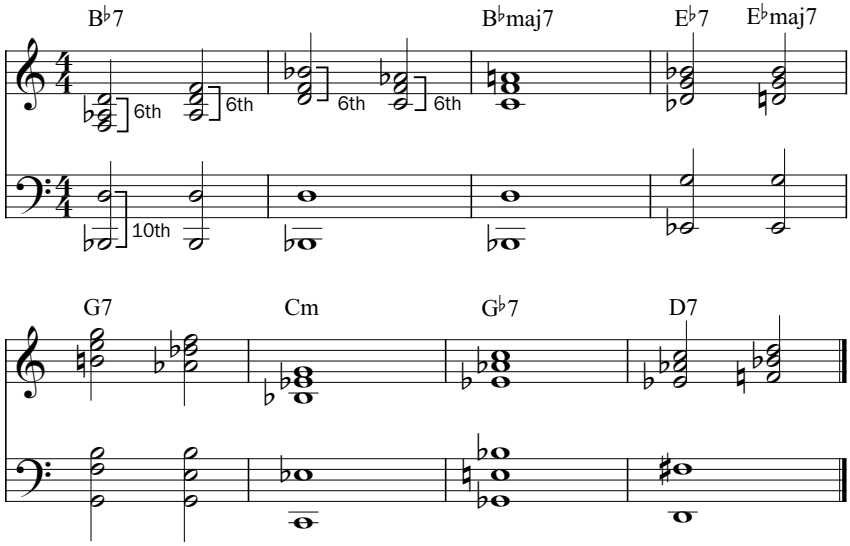
Here again, pitch bend can be a very handy effect, especially in rock and blues styles. If your digital keyboard is General MIDI compatible, within the GM sound set is a program called "fret noise." When a guitarist moves his left hand, there is a noise caused by the friction of the hand going over the strings. As you're sequencing an acoustic guitar part, simply add the fret noise sound on a separate track of your sequencer. You'll be amazed by how real it can sound.

Brass Sections

Because brass sections naturally sound dense, make sure your *voicings* aren't too thick. A standard brass section voicing has an interval of a tenth between the bottom two voices and either a *6/4 triad* in the top three voices or a chord voiced so that the interval of a sixth occurs in the top voices.

48 *Brass Section Voicings*

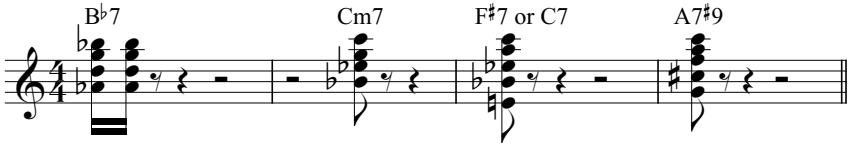
Ex. 4.1.



Brass stabs, which punctuate a phrase, are best when voiced higher (without the root in the bottom) and are best played with a very short *articulation*.

49 *Brass "Stabs"*

Ex. 4.2.



Strings

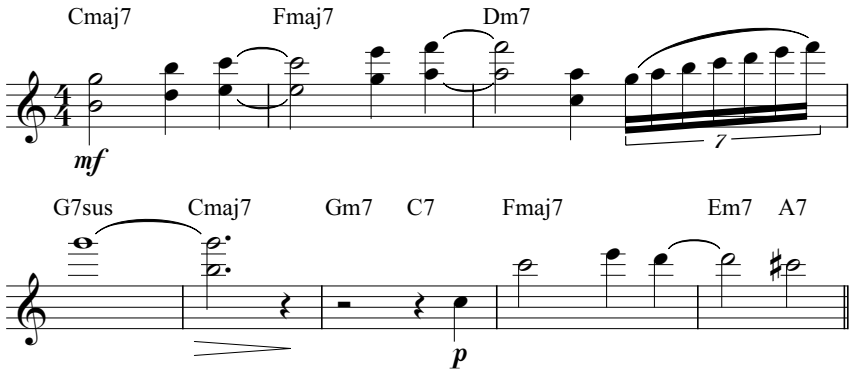
Arranging for a real string section is an art with 400 years of tradition. No group of instruments I can think of possesses such a wide range of tone color and nuance as a string section. We are still many years away from truly emulating with a digital keyboard, all the tonal diversity a real string section has to offer. But, within a very narrow scope, we can satisfactorily replicate some string section clichés.

In general, when arranging for strings, less is more. I once wrote an article for *Keyboard* magazine in which I stated that in a pop music setting, it is very difficult to write bad music for strings. Nearly everything sounds good. Unfortunately, this is not true for the digital arranger. An overreliance on string pads will make an arrangement sound too thick and weigh it down. Single string lines that enter and exit throughout the course of an arrangement are more effective than ubiquitous string pads. A note of caution: When you introduce a single-line string part, be careful not to confuse the listener into thinking that the string line is the melody. A *counterline* should be played at a lower dynamic level than the melody, and it should be less rhythmically active. Avoid using low strings in a pad because this will always make your production sound muddy. In general, stick to violin parts.

If strings are used to articulate a chord progression, think of each note as part of an individual line. Keep in mind how each note leads to the next note and how it forms a line. Make sure the lines you create with this process don't leap around. Otherwise, the parts will sound disjunct. There is really no such thing as a typical string voicing because, as previously stated, string chords are usually the result of individual lines. However, when voicing strings, chords constructed in intervals of sixths are a good place to start. For example:

50 *String Lines and Intervals*

Ex 4.3.



51 *Pizzicato Strings*

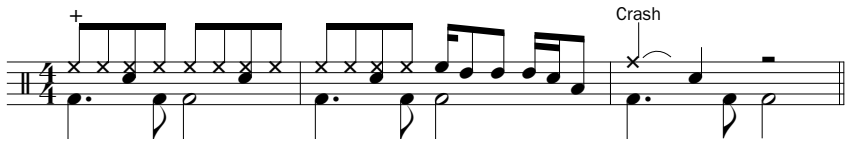
Sometimes a *pizzicato,* or a plucked string, sound is used to add emphasis to melodic phrases. Usually pizzicato strings are unison, although not always.

Drums and Percussion

Finish tom-tom fills with a cymbal on beat 1.

52 *Tom-Tom Fills with Cymbal*

Ex. 4.4.



Don't overplay percussion instruments. Once again, less is more. Develop specific patterns in each section and return to these patterns. This process gives continuity to the arrangement.

Quantizing Drums and Percussion

In swing music, I recommend quantizing only the hi-hat part and playing the other drum parts freely in time as best you can. Doing so has the effect of letting the other parts feel more natural and live.

With Latin or Brazilian music, I suggest that you quantize the hi-hat, bass drum, and the electric bass parts. This type of music requires a higher degree of accuracy in the underlying parts in order for the more surface-level parts, such as the conga and the cowbell, to sound flowing.

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