

Stephen Schwartz Comments on Orchestrations and Working with Orchestrators

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Working with Orchestrators 1

Question:

It is my understanding that most of Broadway's composers write primarily a piano/vocal score, and do little or no arranging. I find this quite understandable, considering the immense creative load of composition. What is your relationship, then, to your arranger and/or orchestrator? How much do you participate in the arranging process?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I always have a very close relationship with my orchestrator. To skip to question 5 for a moment, these days with the advent of MIDI programs, I tend to play a song into my Disklavier and then have the piano part printed out for the orchestrator (the program we tend to use is Studio Vision, though I have worked with Performer and occasionally Q-Base as well.) Then I go over the music very carefully with the orchestrator, talking about possible instrumentation, orchestral colors, style and tone, and so on. These days, I tend to insist that the orchestrator do a synth version of his arrangement so I can hear it and make changes, with the understanding that there are certain things a live players will achieve that are next to impossible on synths, though you'd be surprised how close you can come. So by the time I finally hear the orchestra in the pit or walk into the studio for the orchestral session, there are very few surprises, which is how I like it.

Working with Orchestrators 2

Question: [A question about working with orchestrators]

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think each composer has his own individual style of working with an orchestrator, from those who practically do the orchestration themselves, as Leonard Bernstein often did, to some who basically hire someone they trust and then give them essentially free rein. I tend to be in the middle somewhere. If it's a pop show with a rhythm band, such as GODSPELL or MAGIC SHOW, I work out the arrangements myself with my band members. For more orchestral shows, I will meet with the orchestrator, after he has familiarized himself with the score, and we will confer to determine the size and instrumentation of the orchestra. Then we will go song by song, and I'll sometimes make specific comments, such as "this line would be good on oboe" or "I could use a French horn counter-melody here", or I'll just talk about my intentions for the feel of each part of the song. Specific unusual instrumentation often comes from me, as in the case of the digeridoo for CHILDREN OF EDEN or the use of Orff instruments in the same show, but also is often suggested by imaginative orchestrators. Lately, with the advent of digital samplers and home studios, I have tended to work in a different way, which is to have the orchestrator do the arrangement on his synths and samplers, so I can hear what it will sound like. Then we make adjustments and changes. Once that's done, it can be transferred to acoustic instruments. That way, I don't have any major surprises when I walk into a recording studio with a huge orchestra sitting there, and changes made at the recording session are minimal.

Orchestrations: That "Broadway" Sound

Question:

I'm looking for tips that may be able to help me achieve that "Broadway orchestral sound". I've heard a numerous amount of musicals in my time, and some of them just seem to have "that sound."

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In answer to your question about orchestration: In my opinion, what principally gives an orchestration "that Broadway sound" is, in a word, brass. The traditional Broadway orchestra is heavily tilted towards the use of brass instruments (mostly trumpets and trombones), for a few reasons. Brass instruments have a lot of punch to them, they're useful for the kind of energy that Broadway choreography generally demands, one or two trumpets can easily drown out the rest of the orchestra to carry the melody, and the economic necessity of Broadway orchestras being considerably smaller than symphony or opera orchestras means that one cannot have a traditionally sized string section (16 violins, 8 violi, 8 celli, etc.) -- one is usually stuck with, at most, 4 or 6 strings entirely, which doesn't make a very big sound (though the advent of computer-sampled strings and thus keyboard doubling of a small string section helps). So there is a greater reliance on brass instruments than in traditional classical orchestration, and I believe that has come to be heard as the "Broadway sound".

Probably the quintessential example of this is the brilliant orchestration of GYPSY. I would recommend your getting a hold of the orchestral score for GYPSY and looking it over; another good example of this is FUNNY GIRL (both Jule Styne shows, Mr. Styne being pretty much the exemplar of the Broadway sound.) Maybe I've misunderstood what you are asking, but I hope this response will be helpful to you. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

What makes a good orchestration?

Question:

Dear Stephen: What in your mind makes a good orchestration and orchestrator? Why do you think Bill Brohn is so talented and respected in the business? Every recording I have that he has orchestrated seems to appeal to me very much - whether it's Wicked, Mary Poppins, Les Miserables, My Fair Lady, Oklahoma, Miss Saigon....Hope all is well! Nick.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Nick: There's so much that goes into what makes a good orchestrator that it's hard to answer the question anything but superficially. I think above all it's the ability to translate the composer's emotional intention for the piece using just the right instrumentation -- that is, having it feel, say, chilling when it's supposed to, or triumphant, or poignant, etc. A lot of the skill of an orchestrator is in the instruments you DON'T hear -- the glue so to speak that holds the arrangement together, so that it doesn't feel choppy or clumsy. At both of the above skills, Bill Brohn is an absolute master. By the way, I passed on your complimentary message to him, and he was very pleased indeed. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Me and My Orchestrator

Question:

Dear Stephen, I am very interested in the relationship between composer and orchestrator. I assume the two have many meetings and that the orchestrations for a show are a work in progress until the sitzprobe. But what I wondered is how the orchestrator shows what he is doing while working without an orchestra? For example Did Bill Brohn give you a midi version of his orchestrations for Wicked for your opinions? Or do you just look over the orchestral score and pick out lines you had envisioned differently and trust in the rest of the work? With today's technology it is easy to orchestrate via

software on a computer, this also makes me wonder how it worked in the days of Working and The Baker's Wife? Thanks for any light you can shed on this subject. With great respect, William

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear William: Thanks for writing. In response to your question: If it is possible in terms of time and the orchestrator's familiarity with technology, I would prefer to be able to hear a mock-up of the orchestration using synths and samples. This is how we worked on the orchestrations for GEPETTO and PRINCE OF EGYPT, for example; because a huge orchestra is going to come into a studio with limited time to make changes, one wants to get things sorted out in advance as much as possible.

With a show, however, there is seldom time to do a synth version. And there is generally sufficient time to make changes during orchestra rehearsals and previews. So what I did on WICKED (and the same therefore held true in the days before synths) was to look over the scores, but basically to wait until I heard the orchestrations played. Then I would ask for changes where I felt they were necessary. If one has a good orchestrator (as I certainly did with Bill Brohn) and if one is as thorough and articulate as possible in discussing the orchestrations before the fact, there are seldom really major changes necessary. So I guess my answer would be that in an ideal world, of course hearing the orchestrations on synths first would be preferable, but it's not always possible. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Percussion (Drum Set) Parts

Question:

Hello Mr. Schwartz, I know that you work with orchestrators and collaborators, but I have a significant question: How are the drum set parts of your scores written out?

I'm currently working on the first musical theater production I've attempted, and it's being looked at for performance by GVSU once it's completed. I'd like to know if it is customary to write out drum parts, or if it's acceptable to write out only important or specific parts and then have the set player vamp the rest of the time. I wanted to ask you because many of your drum parts in Wicked and COE are highly stylized and effective.-CDDCostas Dafnis

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mr. Dafnis: Generally, I have found it more effective to do what you suggest for drum parts -- to indicate a basic rhythm, to write out important or specific hits or fills you want in certain bars, and then let the set player make his or her choices. This is particularly true if you will be at rehearsals and can discuss with the drummer where he or she may not be doing what you like. Often in fact, I simply indicate things like "fill" in a drum part, rather than writing out specifically a fill that I know any good drummer will improve upon (and indeed, probably play slightly differently from performance to performance.) In the case of WICKED, we had the excellent Gary Seligson as our original drummer, and Gary was with us for many rehearsals before we had the rest of the orchestra, so the drum parts got worked out gradually over time. Now a lot of what Gary did is written into the parts for other players, but the point is, it wasn't written originally before Gary had arrived at what he was going to play. I don't know how useful this is to you in your specific situation, but I hope this response helps to clarify some things for you. I wish you the best with your first musical theatre production. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Orchestrations: That Broadway Sound

Question:

Maestro Schwartz, I am thinking about getting back into writing again and was wondering if you have any suggestions on orchestration techniques.

In particular, I'm looking for tips that may be able to help me achieve that "Broadway orchestral sound." I've heard a numerous musicals in my time, and some of them just seem to have "that sound". I know that some of it is choice of instrumentation and some of it is chord structure. If this is too broad of a subject to quickly list specifics, could you please point me to a source that may be useful in defining some of these techniques? I would greatly appreciate it. By the way, some of your work is extraordinary. Is it true you wrote Godspell in two weeks? If that is true, WOW! There is not one mediocre song in that entire show. Bravo!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for your message and the compliments on my work. In answer to your question about orchestration: In my opinion, what principally gives an orchestration "that Broadway sound" is, in a word, brass. The traditional Broadway orchestra is heavily tilted towards the use of brass instruments (mostly trumpets and trombones), for a few reasons. Brass instruments have a lot of punch to them, they're useful for the kind of energy that Broadway choreography generally demands, one or two trumpets can easily drown out the rest of the orchestra to carry the melody, and the economic necessity of Broadway orchestras being considerably smaller than symphony or opera orchestras means that one cannot have a traditionally sized string section (16 violins, 8 violi, 8 celli, etc.) -- one is usually stuck with, at most, 4 or 6 strings entirely, which doesn't make a very big sound (though the advent of computer-sampled strings and thus keyboard doubling of a small string section helps). So there is a greater reliance on brass instruments than in traditional classical orchestration, and I believe that has come to be heard as the "Broadway sound". Probably the quintessential example of this is the brilliant orchestration of GYPSY. I would recommend your getting a hold of the orchestral score for GYPSY and looking it over; another good example of this is FUNNY GIRL (both Jule Styne shows, Mr. Styne being pretty much the exemplar of the Broadway sound.) Maybe I've misunderstood what you are asking, but I hope this response will be helpful to you. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Questions About the Orchestrator...

Question:

Do orchestrators work for hire, for a percentage of the profits of the musical, or for some other means that I have yet to think of?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The orchestrators I have worked with have been for Broadway or West End shows, and thus under a Musician's Union contract. They are paid a certain rate per bar of music; I don't know if that rate varies based on the size of the orchestra. I'm sure you could get that information from the A.F. of M. (the Broadway union is Local 802.) In addition to this payment, which is sizeable, I think they get a continuing weekly royalty from the show, and re-use fees from recordings and subsequent productions. In terms of working with an orchestrator on another basis (while the show is being written and not for Broadway), I don't have experience, so my advice would just be based on common sense: I think you could make a deal where you pay your orchestrator something mutually agreeable and then he or she has some small continuing portion of income from the music, should the show go on (something which can be taken over by a producer if one comes on board.) But really, at the point you're talking about, you can make pretty much any deal that makes sense to both of you.

Question:

I do want to work with an orchestrator, but I wonder: wouldn't having an orchestrator completely limit the amount of control you have on your music's final sound?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

No, because the orchestrator's job is to serve your music, and you discuss every aspect of what he or she is doing in terms of instrumentation, style, etc. If there's something you don't like, the orchestrator will change it (at least he or she should.)

Question:

Supposing I do find an orchestrator... Should I choose someone near me or does it matter? It seems that it would be easier to work with someone close.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Definitely. Though these days things can be done via Emailing mp3 files and synth demos, etc. that makes it less important to be geographically proximate.

Question:

When should I find one? During or after I've finished the initial drafts?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I've only worked with an orchestrator when it's time for an actual production. If you are capable of doing whatever demos you need (just piano or guitar or synths are all fine for demo purposes) and preparing what music you need for others to read as necessary, I don't see any need for an orchestrator until there's going to be a produced show.

I hope these responses prove at least somewhat helpful, and I wish you the best with your project.
Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Also see the Orchestration section of the Wicked Forum archive for specific details.

Books: Steven Suskin, *The Sound of Broadway Music*

<http://www.musicalwriters.com/books/orchestrations.htm>