The Art of the Arranger: an analysis of the creative processes and decisions involved in arranging chamber music

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Abstract: This article analyses the art of the arranger as far as creative processes in arranging chamber music. It also brings ten musical examples. The author cites the arrangements, discusses and compares them with the originals.

Key words: Arrangement, double bass, chamber music, piano trio, Yardarm Trio.

Having demonstrated the need for a chamber-music repertoire for the double bass, and having justified the means of arrangement to bring music from the past into that repertoire, I would like to discuss some processes I use in my craft as an arranger.¹

Arrangement is a large tent under which is camped an assortment of pieces that have little to do with one another in their manner of construction, relationship to an original, purpose or design. Arrangement is so broad a classification that it is almost a meaningless term unless further defined. In arranging music for my Yardarm Trio (violin, double bass and piano), I use diverse methods to meet disparate objectives. Yardarm Trio arrangements fall into several kinds, all they differ in the amount of borrowing, the measure of original material included, the degree of reforming or restructuring involved, and the extent to which they are intended to "sound original".

To explain my use of various techniques and methods and to define the types of arrangements used to create music for the Trio, generic descriptions of practices alone will not serve. I must speak about my work on particular pieces. Only then will I be able to make sense of my efforts. To describe the aims, creative processes used, and decisions made to meet those aims will require me to dissect individual works. For each of these works, I shall state what I have changed of the original material, how and why I have changed it. Space limitations compel me to select prototypical examples.

I shall choose four pieces that use different approaches to arrangement and which I believe are demonstrative of my arrangements as a whole. Two of them are occasioned to sound as if they were written by the original composers – who, parenthetically, happen to know as much about the modern double bass as I do. The third is an arrangement of songs for soprano and the Yardarm Trio, which is more stylistically diverse. The fourth is a piece in the manner of that 19th-century genre, the opera fantasy, involving some original composing. After reading about my handling of these pieces, those interested of my work will be able to extrapolate a great deal about how I approach the art of arrangement.

The first composition that I shall use as an example, *Haydn's Trio in E*,² is a piano trio converted into a "Yardarm trio" – an ensemble of piano, violin and double bass. The adaptation for the new ensemble is far more than a mere transcription of a cello part for double bass, however. My arrangement involves recrafting sections of

the work to create something new and more suited to my purpose – developing a good piece of double-bass chamber music.

The double bass is not a cello and reading cello parts from chamber works on the double bass often produces unsatisfying results: works out of balance and sounding "like transcriptions". Composers often treat the double bass as a poor cousin of the cello, which it is not. Writing for the instrument as if it were a "low cello" produces unidiomatic parts.

The double bass sounds more like a contrabass viola than it does a violin or cello. That the double bass does not have a sound that is as focused or projects as well (undoubled) as a cello is something not to run away from, but to embrace. That the double bass is not the bass of the bowed stringed-instrument family, but the contrabass – capable of playing lyrically in both the contrabass and bass registers – is something to celebrate in its writing. With those acoustical and registral properties comes a singular and beautiful sound, and an opportunity to function in a unique context.

Yardarm Trio arrangements, which were experimented in rehearsal and concert situations, work acoustically. The pieces, when performed in a good hall, sound right: three instruments in balance, each contributing a unique part to the music. The purpose of my writing, publishing, and performing arrangements is to bring great chamber-music pieces from the past into the double-bass repertoire. The arrangements will serve to do that only if they work in performance, pleasing both audience and performers.

When creating these arrangements, I pay a great deal of attention to making the double bass function as an integral part of the trio, voicing it to sound right in the context of the piece and the ensemble. This attention is nothing more than what good writing for the double bass – or any other instrument – demands, but it is something that the double bass has seldom received, and – with rare exceptions³ – never received in chamber music from past centuries.

The second work that I shall use as an example is not an original trio at all, but a duet for violin and piano, Beethoven's Zwölf Variationen über "Se vuol ballare" für Klavier und Violine.⁴ The arrangement involved fabrication of a bass instrument part. The third work is a collection of 12 songs chiefly of Irish and Scottish origin that were originally arranged by Haydn with a piano trio accompaniment, but which I totally reworked into new arrangements.⁵ The fourth piece that I shall treat as an example is my Fantasy on Rigoletto.⁶

Before discussing the Haydn *E Major Trio*, I should explain a bit further my aim, my means, and the results. The *Trio* is intended to sound as if it were written by Haydn for a modern double bass, but how can it? The modern double bass with both its tuning in fourths and its modern fittings did not exist in Haydn's day.⁷ Anyone who knows how Haydn wrote for the double bass of the period would remark that the composer never did this or that in writing for the instrument. Nevertheless, overlooking the anachronism, the arrangement sounds like much of Haydn's music played on modern instruments. The difference between my writing for the double bass and Haydn's writing for the cello in the 1790s results in a sonic difference that is less than the one created by playing the original fortepiano part on a modern Steinway. The sound of the modern double bass in solo tuning (see below) is not far from the sound of a cello equipped with gut strings when played in the registers that Haydn used. Yet

the double bass part in my arrangement is a fully satisfying part, challenging even to an advanced player and on a par with the violin and piano parts.

In all my arrangements for the Yardarm Trio, I use, what is commonly called among double bassists, "solo tuning". This means that I arrange for an instrument tuned A-E-B-F# (a whole step above a standard double bass with "orchestral tuning"); I then deal with it as a transposing instrument. Over the centuries, composers have treated the instruments in a piano trio far more soloistically than they have those of a string quartet, for example. If you'll permit me a subtle use of language to demonstrate, I would offer the following: the phrase three as one describes the nature of traditional writing for the piano trio. In contrast, the phrase one by fourwell describes the traditional writing for string quartet. All this is by way of saying that the more soloistic use of instruments in a piano trio makes me want to perform in the Yardarm Trio equipped with solo strings. These strings make the double bass sound more focused, help it to blend better with the violin, and give it more projection. In classical works like the Haydn Trio in question, the tuning helps the double bass stand acoustically in lieu of the cello with greater ease.

In treating of my work on the Haydn Trio in E, I shall confine myself to remarks about the second movement where I make the largest departures from the original (without, I might add, changing a single note). This trio was the first by Haydn that I set for the Yardarm ensemble. We premiered and published the arrangement in the bicentennial year of the original publication. Many features of the work make it well suited to performance in its arranged form. It is also a startling masterpiece in three superb movements that is not nearly well enough known. Cellists have eschewed the original; double bassists will embrace the arrangement.

The second movement, marked *Allegretto*, is the most startling of the three. For the slow movement, Haydn uses a triple meter (something he had not done for two decades)⁹; he chooses for a key the parallel minor; and he begins with an introduction that seems to announce a continuous variation form in the Baroque manner. Following the introductory unison for strings and keyboard, the strings fall silent and Haydn writes a piano solo of some 28 measures, accounting for more than 40% of the movement.

Haydn's piano trios are often criticized for his practice of treating the keyboard as a solo instrument, something historically exculpable but not in accord with our current "chamber music ideal". Haydn's original is musically magnificent, but to arrive at a more satisfying vehicle for a chamber music ensemble, arrangement can come to the rescue.

The original piano solo is in two voices in widely spaced registers. The bass line is an eighth-note ostinato; the treble, an elegant melody. These 28 measures work wonderfully when set for violin with double bass pizzicato, and the piano at rest. Our chamber music ideal is met, not one pitch of the original is changed, and the piece is unharmed stylistically and formally. The technical problem to be solved was how to reintroduce dominant piano sound after long absence. The solution was to apply a technique routinely used by good orchestrators: to lead in the absent instrument with something incidental in the background before using the instrument full force.



Violin

Double Bass
Solo Tuning

Typ (manana)

Exemplo 2: mm. 7-14 of the Yardarm Trio version.

Another criticism leveled at Haydn's piano trios is that he holds the cello to the subservient role of doubling the pianist's left hand. Again, arrangement can present another option. In measures 48-57, the melody appears in the bass and the eighthnote ostinato in the treble. Haydn sets the melody for piano left hand, doubled by the cello. The arrangement gives the melody to the double bass and creates a left-hand part for the keyboard that supports both the harmonic bass and the acoustical properties of the double bass, without making the new stringed bass-part a slavish double.





Exemplo 4: Yardarm Trio version (same measures).

These are not the only changes made in arranging this movement. When I performed the Haydn *E Major* at the Edinburgh Festival, I did so with the British pianist Kathron Sturrock, founder of The Fibonacci Sequence.¹⁰ Sturrock led me to

Sandra P. Rosenblum's book entitled *Performance Practices in Classical Piano Music,* which changed my thinking about the interpretation of rhythm in Haydn's music. In the chapter on mixed meters and dotted rhythms and the section called "Application of the Theory," Rosenblum writes:

Composers of the Classical period often wrote double dots, but there are still contexts in which the performer should consider alteration. For those situations that are holdovers from the traditional, more casual, notation [the second movement of this trio, a prime example], double dotting is mandatory.¹¹

In the age of notational software, we have little reason to mirror an archaic, shorthand notation. In the arrangement, the appropriate double dotting is applied unapologetically. (Compare the rhythm in Examples 1 and 2, 3 and 4.)

Beethoven's variations on *Se vuol ballare* for violin and piano is a little known but significant work written during the composer's first year in Vienna. Arranging this work for the Yardarm Trio involved the creation of a bass instrument part. This fabricated part emanates from three sources: the violin part – which the new part, at times, doubles at the octave (or double octave); the piano LH (left hand) – for which it either substitutes or doubles at the unison or octave; and freely composed material arrived at by the use of imitative counterpoint or other means.

The objective here was to arrive at a third part that was not redundant but vital, one that sounded as if it were an integral and original part of the piece, one that did not upset balances or muddy the waters, one that added to and never detracted from the music, one that worked acoustically. Thus described, this seems a formidable task, but it was one that I fell upon quite easily. In listening to the piece one day, I simply "heard it with an added double bass part". This creative circumstance is an ideal when making an arrangement. Furthermore, it demonstrates that arranging is not a mere mechanical or technical operation but a participation in the creative process of composition. Arrangement, by its nature, produces manifold departures from urtext, but it is my aim that all breaches with textual exactitude contribute to making the finished product a satisfying artistic whole, in addition to creating an idiomatic vehicle for performance by the Trio. As I practice the craft of arrangement, I take existing music as a starting point and freely alter it – not breaking with tradition, but joining its powerful current – to make the new piece, a serviceable and enjoyable work of double bass chamber music.

The opening theme of the variations is set by Beethoven for violin pizzicato, accompanied by the piano. The accompaniment is simple and homophonic, with chords that progress in like rhythm with the theme. The fashioned double bass part assigns the instrument a canonic pizzicato entrance in the fifth measure. This canon is implied by Beethoven's accompaniment; the arrangement merely reinforces what is already there. *Variation I* follows suit. Beethoven places an accompanying figure in the bass of *Variation II*, which he voices in higher and lower registers in a statement-and-answer design. The arrangement plays off of this by dividing the figure between the double bass and the pianist's LH. *Variation III* follows suit.

In *Variations IV* and *V*, the double bass is mixed into the original interplay between the violin and the piano. In the darker *Variations VI* and *VII* in F minor, the double bass at first pairs with the violin, playing the melody in octaves, and then

doubles the harmonic bass line in the chorale-like accompaniment. Ideas like these and a fair amount of heterophonic doubling continue to inspire the fabricated part.

In *Variation XI*, the last four measures of Sec. A, Beethoven writes two parts in thirds. Single notes in the piano RH (right hand) with the violin doubling a diatonic third below are countered by thirds in the piano LH answering antiphonally. The rhythmic impetus is off the beat with *sforzandi* appearing anomalously as is Beethoven's wont. The obvious choice in constructing a double bass part would be to have this instrument substitute for the lowest note in the piano part. The register is not favorable for this and a more interesting challenge would be to invent an independent part that adds something fresh without "breaking the back" of the passage.



Exemplo 5: Var. XI, mm. 8-16.

I believe that astute musicians studying the score of my arrangement might remark, "Beethoven never wrote so elaborate and soloistic a double bass part in a piece of chamber music". But, unless they knew the original, neither would they guess that the piece was written as a duo and not a trio. In performance, the work sounds like music by Beethoven, not an arrangement. It would be audacious of me to assert that my arrangement of these variations is texturally more interesting than the original Beethoven, and that as a trio the work takes on greater dimension. I shall, therefore, not make that claim.

For the British market at the very end of the eighteenth century, Haydn arranged many English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh folk songs, some of which he provided with the accompaniment of a piano trio. Haydn's trio arrangements were meant to be

enjoyed at musicales by musicians and their friends: they are *not* suitable for concert performance. Haydn arranged only one *stanza* of each song which he supplied with neither introduction nor ending. The instrumental *tutti* starts and finishes with the voice, and each strophe of each song is accompanied exactly the same way.

In my concert arrangements for the Yardarm Trio, I thoroughly reworked twelve of these songs, providing them with introductions, interludes, postludes, codas, and codettas. For most of them, I varied the accompaniment of each strophe and provided instrumental commentary on the text – a practice that became common in art songs only in the 19th century. For a few of them (n. 5. *On a bank of flowrer's* and n. 6 *The White Cockade*, for example), I restored a more folk-like character by using the instruments in a folk-music manner and by making minor changes in harmony. I provided each song with an individual form and with distinct instrumental formulations. In n. 12 *This is no mine ain house*, I interwove between stanzas of the song material from Haydn's Piano Sonata Hob. XVI: 41 (transposed and converted into a trio) to form an elaborate rondo.



Exemplo 6: *This is no mine ain house* mm. 14-19 in the Yardarm Trio version: a portion of the Sonata Hob. XVI: 41 interpolated between the first two strophes of the song.

For all of these song arrangements, I used the trio capaciously to create works of real chamber music. As with all pieces composed or arranged for the Yardarm Trio, I made the double bass parts idiomatic and soloistic. In the matter of the songs, although

I used many of Haydn's ideas, most of the musical ideas are my own, and the resulting adaptations are not meant to sound like Haydn. Without being stylistically discrepant, my writing here is polystylistic and perforce neo-classical. This is a departure from my arrangements of Haydn's piano trios.

The arrangements that I am describing follow an order of increasing compositional involvement on my part. Composers and arrangers swim in the same ocean of creative thought; the only difference is that arrangers are tethered to the shore. The work reflecting the longest tether is my *Fantasy on Rigoletto*. I wrote this piece in appreciation of the opera fantasies of yore, greatly entertaining 19th-century style parlor works that range from those for amateurs to those for virtuosi. I chose *Rigoletto* because it is eminently suitable for my purpose, and because I consider it Verdi's greatest stage work before *Otello* and *Falstaff*.



Exemplo 7: The opening measures of *Fantasy on Rigoletto* that stand in place of the *Preludio*.

The opera begins with a *Preludio* that is so orchestrally conceived that I could find no way to convert it into a chamber-music setting. It is also forcefully dramatic and sets the mood with such portent that I was loathe to leave it out. An originally composed introduction met my purpose. This introduction kept the fanfare from the *Preludio*, gave the strings a melodic component that included a few 19th century Italian-opera gestures, and created a stylistically appropriate tonal ambiguity that would make the opening somewhat foreboding.

From there *Questa o quella* would seem to be a good aria with which to proceed, but I chose otherwise. Rigoletto is replete with melodies and duets, and selecting which to use in my Fantasy left me with an embarrassment of riches. I substituted for *Questa o quella* another of the Duke's arias \dot{E} il sol dell' anima from a Scena e Duetto later in Act I.¹² I wanted the trio to allude to the story of the opera, but I would not let that intention vitiate creation of a satisfying chamber work. The second aria simply has a more grateful melody than the first when transcribed for strings. \dot{E} il sol dell' anima would serve to introduce the Duke. With a canonic entrance of the double bass in the eighth measure, I worked the melody of the aria into both of the string parts. From there, I treated it as a duet extended with variation technique.

Following È il sol dell' anima, I backtracked in Act I to the parlante duet of Sparafucile and Rigoletto. Double bassists the world over would never have forgiven me had I left out of my Fantasy the famous scene that, in the original, features a solo cello and double bass. The flow of that important operatic scene seemed to work well in the course of the chamber work and I kept it very much intact. Molding the melody and weaving in portions of the vocal part, treating canonically the cello and double-bass parts (originally yoked at the octave), and other changes allowed me to leave the original structure more or less in tact. Quel vecchio maledivami, only slightly shortened in the arrangement, proceeds in the Fantasy, quite like it does in its operatic forebearer.

With the dark ending of that scene and with the double bass in its lowest register, the cold splash made by the abrupt juxtaposition of the introduction to *Figlia!...Mio padre!* and its continuation in a new key is refreshing. This music for Rigoletto's encounter with his daughter Gilda comes from the very next operatic scene and advances the story line in the *Fantasy*. (The unbridled joy in that music puts me in mind of Verdi and his relationship to his own daughter.¹³ In the arrangement I tried to keep the musical interplay among the parts simple and direct so as not to complicate the immediate communication of the music.) Keys throughout the Fantasy are changed from the opera often by a half-step. The original flat keys becoming sharp or neutral keys, more suitable for stringed instruments.

The Fantasy proceeds with Caro nome transposed to the key of A Major. The melody is given to the double bass with a rhythmic chordal accompaniment in the piano, the violin assigned to commentary from the original orchestra part. Two variations on the aria follow. Variation I, placed in the chromatic submediant key creates an ethereal mood with a sparse texture and a triplet melody in the violin, which suggests the original melody without an over-borne parallel. It is structurally fixed but harmonically and – to an extent – melodically free. Is creation of a variation like this a work of arrangement or original composition? The answer, of course, depends on definition but it is customary for composers to sign works of variations with their own name.



Exemplo 8: MM. 218-235, the beginning of Var. I on Caro nome.

Variation II brings back the Italian 19th century with a light-hearted, virtuosic treatment in the manner of Bottesini. 14

A modulating transition is placed here. I mention it to draw attention to the counterpoint in the violin and double bass parts. It was my intention to imitate Verdian, not Teutonic counterpoint, an interplay that adopts many parallels and octaves, but is nevertheless very effective in performance.



Exemplo 9: MM. 239-250, the beginning of Var. II on Caro nome.

The famous quartet in Act III, Scene III, ¹⁵ which is the summit of Verdi's opera, closes the Fantasy. I begin with the Duke's *Bella figlia dell'amore* and run the course of the ensemble. At the end, I interpose a little cadenza duet for violin and double bass, and bring the Fantasy to its conclusion with a new, vigorous codetta created from music that concludes the chorus *Oh tu che la festa* in Act I. Verdi's quiet ending for the quartet – appropriate in the opera – obviously would not serve to bring the Fantasy to a satisfactory conclusion. Music from the quartet ending the chambermusic piece is meant to leave the audience questioning: "A Fantasy on Rigoletto without *La donna è mobile?*" This omission gives me the occasion for an encore, and the encore an opportunity to bring the whole composition back to the key that opened it. A simple version of *La donna* in A Major, again with a use of Verdian counterpoint between the violin and double bass, begins in octaves and then breaks into harmony. The piano part includes a musical joke; it breaks from its expected course and wanders into a bit of "fantasy" of its own during the introductory measures of the second half

of the binary. The pianist's silly virtuosic display is intended to leave the audience with a smile on its face.



Exemplo 10: Encore - La donna è mobile MM. 44-60, the beginning of binary section 2.

Production of all my arrangements and compositions for the Yardarm Trio published since 1997 have been supported in part by Released Time for Creative Work Awards from Kean University, Union, New Jersey. I extend my gratitude to Kean. I am also grateful to the members of the Yardarm Trio and to other musicians with whom I have performed these pieces for their many valuable suggestions. I add special thanks to my father for his many astute pianistic and musical recommendations. Finally, thanks is due again to Kean University for support

provided to me through Department of Music Travel Funds and a Career Development Grant to attend the 2nd Seminário Nacional de Pesquisa em Performance Musical, Universidade Federal de Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa a arte do arranjador no tocante aos processos criativos envolvidos nos arranjos de música de câmara. Apresenta também dez exemplos musicais. O autor cita os arranjos, discute-os e compara-os com os originais.

Palavras-chave: Arranjo, contrabaixo, música de câmara, trio com piano, Yardarm Trio.

Notes

- 1. See "In defense of arrangement" (a title translated into Portuguese as "Em defesa dos arranjos musicais") *Per Musi: Revista de Performance Musical*, v. III, 2001, Belo Horizonte: Escola de Música da UFMG, p. 17-26.
- Hob. XV: 28 (thought to be from 1797 but perhaps written as early as 1795) was published in its Yardarm Trio arrangement by Ludwin Music, Los Angeles, in 1998.
- Examples of works that use the double bass well in a chamber-music context writing before the 20th century are particularly rare, (if the violone repertoire is excluded). One of the most notable example is Dvorák's Quintet in G, p. 77.
- 4. WoO 40 (1792-1793). Published in its Yardarm Trio arrangement by Ludwin Music in 2001.
- To be published by Ludwin Music in two sets, Six Celtic Songs (available in January 2002) and Six More Celtic Songs (scheduled for release later in the year).
- 6. Scheduled for publication by Ludwin Music in 2003.
- 7. Alfred Planyavsky: Geschichte des Kontrabasses. Vienna: Tutzing, 1970. Also Paul Brun: A New History of the Double Bass. Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Paul Brun, 2000.
- The double bass tuned solo uses a D transposition. Like the Horn in D, it sounds a minor seventh below its written pitches.
- Peter Brown: Joseph Haydn's Keyboard Music: Sources and Style. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 373.
- 10. The Fibonacci Sequence is a chamber ensemble of varying size established in London in June 1994. It has had an active schedule of concerts and recordings since October 1995 when it was made "Ensemble in Residence" at Kingston University.
- ROSENBLUM, Sandra. Performance practices in classical piano music. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 301.
- 12. This aria appears in Act II as the opera is often presented in a four-act version.
- ERIC, A. Plaut. Grand opera: mirror of the western mind. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993. Chapter seven, p. 112-127.
- 14. Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889), double-bass virtuoso, conductor and composer chiefly of opera and effective (if sometimes trite) solo pieces for his instrument, had an acquaintance with Verdi and was chosen by him to conduct the Premiere of Aida.
- 15. Sometimes Act IV.

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