

THREE ELEMENTS OF A COMPELLING SONG ARRANGEMENT

By Seth Lutnick

Arrangements are the fuel that will send your songs sky high. A compelling arrangement will make the recording process easier, the mix sound better and the finished product full and satisfying. It will save you time and money, and keep you from endless trial-and-error studio sessions that never quite yield the results you want.

How do you create that compelling arrangement?

While a full course on arranging is beyond the scope of these few paragraphs, there are three ideas that will immediately shape your work and dramatically improve the way your songs affect their listeners.

These three elements of a compelling arrangement are:

1. Arc of energy.
2. Counterpoint and drama.
3. Constant freshness.

Let's look at them one by one.

1. Arc of energy.

A good song is a good story. That is my operating principle for arranging and composing. A story keeps the listener interested, thinking about what each event means, wondering what will happen next. You want your listeners to stop and wonder as you take them on a musical journey.

This is not only accomplished by the composition -- words and melody -- but by the energy of the arrangement. A solo piano has one type of feel, wailing guitars have quite another. If a song has only one energy level and flavour, it gets tired very fast, the story has been killed. The best songs build to a climax, then may drop for an interlude, and build again to the finale. That is interesting, that is dynamic.

Energy arcs can be created in so many ways. You can add or remove instruments in different sections, you can switch from a high-hat to a ride cymbal, you can change the octave of the piano part, you can thicken the vocal harmonies, and so forth. You are limited only by your imagination. Use all of these tools to create a compelling arc of energy for your song.

2. Counterpoint and drama.

An element of storytelling is the meeting of characters and how they interact. They may be lovers, enemies, partners or competitors. Musically, this element of drama can be added by using counterpoint.

Counterpoints are secondary melodies. They have their own internal flow, but complement, support or "dialogue" with the main melody. Counterpoints can play parallel to the melody, but are used most effectively at the ends of phrases. They then become a sort of "answer" to what the melody just stated, creating a musical dialogue.

The counterpoints can also be used as the intro to a song, or the basis of a bridge section, or of a coda. They can be played by any of the instruments, or sung by the backup singers. Counterpoints should not be allowed to steal the show, but should make the melody more compelling.

My personal favourite example of use of counterpoint in a song is the ABBA classic, "The Winner Takes It All." Listen to that song and see what a counterpoint (and the superbly crafted arc of energy) can do.

3. Constant freshness.

Truth be told, if you've done the first two elements well, your song will always remain fresh. Nonetheless, constantly bringing new colours in will move your song up out of the ordinary.

There are lots of great ways to keep each moment and section fresh. It might be as simple as changing one note in the lead melody, or as complicated as using an entirely different rhythm. You should be careful, though, to keep the song together as one unit. Too much of a shift can hurt the unity of the composition and is distracting to the listener.

I like to keep things fresh by textural changes, such as having the backing vocals sing the melody and the lead vocal do some free variations. You can experiment with putting different chords here and there, or adding a break, a fill, a tempo change. That feeling of freshness is most important at the beginning of each new section. If you do it well, you can come back home at the end of the song with the original feel. But that original feel will itself be fresh, just like it feels to come home after an exhilarating journey.

These are the three elements that will take your song to the next level. Experiment, enjoy your creativity. But most of all, give arranging its time and its due, and it will reward you greatly.

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