

Writing Parts for Other Musicians

by Dennis Winge

When you write your own music that you are looking to perform or record with other musicians, questions arise such as to whether to write parts for them, how detailed those parts should be, what kind of parts, and to how to communicate them. Here are some ideas that may help.

To Tell or Not to Tell

Whether or not to write parts for other musicians depends on the genre and function of music first and foremost. Obviously if you're writing for an orchestra, pit band or big band, you'll have to write out each musician's part. If it's a jazz ensemble, you may not have to write out every musicians' part, but certainly you will need a lead sheet with basic melody and chords at minimum.

For rock and pop, it depends on the context. If you're in a recording studio with pro musicians who haven't heard the material, written parts are essential. If you're rehearsing with your band, you can simply play the song for them and let them work out their own parts, but the more you have written for them, generally, the faster the process of their learning the material will be.

Whether to dictate parts also depends on your personality and the degree of clarity of your vision. Some musicians want every part to be their own creation, and they leave no room for interpretation. This is not an inherently good or bad thing, because there are pros and cons to doing things this way. Miles Davis, for example, was very successful at giving very little or no direction to the musicians he was working with. It could also be that a musician has a very clear vision of what they 'hear' for each part, and so are simply acting in service to their creative vision of the song.

How Much to Tell

Most likely, there will be some sections that you have specific ideas about, and others that are more open-ended. Keep in mind that great musicians will always be musical and they can frequently bring ideas to the material that you hadn't thought of. So unless you have a specific vision for a particular part in mind, leaving it to the musicians can be very valuable.

That said, even very experienced musicians will appreciate your direction. Without it, musicians will often resort to their comfort zone and play in ways that they naturally default to. For me, one of the most exciting aspects of being a studio musician is that, in collaboration with the songwriter and/or producer, I frequently end up playing parts that I would have never thought of on my own.

What to Tell

Once you've decided that there are specific parts for other musicians, how do you make the parts coherent and musical? One key that I've learned (and was also cited in Chick Corea's book "A Work in Progress") is to let each part "sing." In other words, parts should be musical on their own, and be able to stand on their own two feet if necessary.

Have you ever seen a documentary of a famous album where they sit in the control room and the engineer isolates certain tracks? The tracks are cool in and of themselves, yet of course they also support the song. This isn't to say the parts should be busy or any way distracting (unless they are featured part for that section). They should be supportive, but they should also be self-sustaining.

You could consider learning about other instruments, their pitch ranges, how to notate parts. Lately, for example, I have been enjoying how to read and write drum parts. However, since I'm not a drummer, I might just give them a two-bar groove and leave the rest to their interpretation. Another idea is to experiment with parts via MIDI software.

How to Tell

Once you get parts for musicians to play, you can do anything from a simple chord chart or lead sheet to a detailed arrangement. You can use standard notation, tablature for guitarists, etc. In a rock/pop context, a simple chord chart can go a long way for bass, keyboards or guitar, and it's not uncommon to have nothing written for the vocalist or drummer.

If you get a great part that you have created by programming it, you can print out the notation directly and give or email it to them. It's also a good idea to send them the recording in advance. Whether you played the parts or a computer generated them, it can be helpful to make their parts a bit louder in the mix so they can hear them clearly. And if you really want to go the extra step in helping them prepare before you even meet for the next (or first) rehearsal, you can send them 3 versions: one properly mixed, one with their part louder, and one where their part has been removed so they can play along.

At minimum, you could think of a description of what you want in words. In "Improvisation" Derek Bailey talks about composers who simply wrote abstract concepts down on paper and left the rest up to musicians!

Rehearsing the Parts

Consider rehearsing the trickiest sections first before doing the whole tune. If you're not sure where those are, play the tune all the way through and mentally note where the

band struggled, and then go back and only focus on those parts before running the entire song again. Nothing kills enthusiasm more than always starting from the top every time. Plus, all you're doing is strengthening the first parts of the tune and not the more troublesome sections.

You might also consider doing "sectionals" which are rehearsals for a specific section. For example, maybe just you plus the bassist and drummer. Or it could be just you and the vocalist. When the whole band comes back together later, everyone will hear and appreciate the time and energy invested.

In the end, you might ask the musicians for feedback on your having written parts for them. Perhaps they might show you a better way to notate certain things for their instrument. Or, they might tell you a certain way they personally prefer to learn parts. For example, if someone cannot read music or directly tells you they just want to hear it and not read a part, then you know you can skip the paper/ pdf for them in the future. Asking for their feedback is invaluable to you as you increase your skill in conceiving of, capturing, and communicating ideas for other musicians' parts. As with anything else, the more you practice the better you'll get at it.