

# Arranging for Guitar Orchestra

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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## 4th Movement - The Score

In this section we'll find out about arranging for Orchestra

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## A dream come true?

### Are there any Guidelines?

In many respects, adding an alto or requinto, and adding a bass or a contrabass must look like an arranger's dream come true - more notes, more sound spectrum, more choice....

And...more work

Are there any guidelines that will prevent that awful moment at the first rehearsal when the players stare at the arranger, and the arranger stares at the players, and everyone is quite sure that whatever this new arrangement is, it's not musical....

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### Tonal Issues

Purely by virtue of the body size, the lowest notes on the alto and requinto contain less fundamental than the same note on the Guitar. Less "Welly" in modern parlance. So although the higher instruments can come right down low, the tone is a little inferior and the projection poor. Of course, up high, the tone and projection can be quite startlingly bright and powerful.

The bass and contra have the opposite characteristics, where the mid-range is much warmer than a guitar playing at the same pitch. This is a positive bonus, of course, in generating a powerful and resonant bass-line even in those refrains in which the bass comes up an octave the first time through.

On the bass, where there are typically two monofilament strings and four over-wound strings, one must be careful not to write music that makes the third string work hard under the fingers, because it's more prone to nail noise from the right hand.

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### Pitch Issues

However you look at it, the untrained human ear regards the highest line it can hear as the tune. But Symphony Orchestras are able to bring out a haunting melody in the cellos, accompanied by the higher instruments.

How?

Not only by making good use of differential volume between tune and harmony, but also by exploiting tonal variations which help the tune cut through. Though guitars have a range of tone that is quite extraordinary, the overall tone envelope doesn't have the range of a symphony orchestra, and the bass Guitars don't have much edge to cut through with the tune.

To invert the harmonisation like this isn't impossible - I've done it myself, with stunning musical effect - but it needs the upper players to play really quietly - more quietly than they expect. Dropping the alto and requinto completely, or moving them down their range a little will help, as these instruments have a tone which is especially bright, and therefore distracting.

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## Sustain Issues

The sustain on a high pitched note is not as good as a lower note - think about the pizzicato on a double bass and on a violin. In a (symphony) orchestra, of course, the high notes are generally sounded by instruments with indefinite sustain, for example the flute and the strings. Some care is needed in a Guitar Orchestra, when taking a tune up high, perhaps for the climax of the piece, because it can sound staccato and empty.

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## Spatial Issues

One needs to regard the extra Guitar Orchestra instruments as additions to the Guitar Ensemble, and not as replacements. That is to say, they occupy a different space in the musical spectrum.

Let's show you what I mean, by documenting a little trial that I did.

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## A Worked Example

### The Original

My [Tiny Trios](#) - a collection of trios for beginners - were conceived with the express aim of making a rich and full sound with only three Guitars. What happens if we rework a Tiny Trio to use Guitar Orchestra Instruments?

Here's bar 33 from my easy arrangement of J'ai Un Bon Tabac, part of which you can [hear](#) two of my pupils play...

33

Bar 33 from my published edition

How might one rework this for Alto, Prime and Bass Guitars?

I'll replace the top line instrument with an alto guitar. I won't change the notes on the page, so it sounds a fifth higher than the notated score.

And I'll play the bottom part with a bass guitar. That will come out a fourth lower than notated, and in key with the alto. So the alto and bass can play together from the original score, and the gap between them is an octave wider.

The middle part? Let's leave that on the Prime Guitar. But the tune is in a new key now. So I'll transpose the middle part into the new key. Do I go up a fifth or down a fourth? Hmm decisions.

Well, let's tell you the answer. The answer is that whichever way I transpose the middle part, the piece sounds less attractive than the original!

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### Simple Attempt 1

If the middle part goes up a fifth to match the alto, the bass line seems detached from the music, and the top part seems crowded.

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Printed score for Alto, Prime and Bass Notes as heard - the gap between

Printed score for Prime, Prime and Bass  
with Prime moved up a fifth

Notes as heard - the gap between  
Bass and Prime is too large

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## Simple Attempt 2

If the middle part goes down a fourth, the top line seems detached, and the bass seems woolly.

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Printed score with Prime moved down a fourth

Notes as heard - the sound is too gruff

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## Some Recommendations

So how would I rearrange a Tiny Trio for Guitar Orchestra? I need to ensure that the chords that the parts make aren't too widely distributed, and the way to increase the overall pitch range of a chord is not to move its notes wider apart, but to add extra notes. And I mustn't forget that I will have more than 3 instruments available, as it's a pretty small Orchestra otherwise!

Here are three ways to include these new orchestra instruments and to make sure they add, rather than take away from the music.

- Believe it or not, a simple yet satisfactory rework of the Tiny Trio for extra instruments is simply to double up certain parts in octaves. I can use the extra pitch range of the new instruments to widen the distance between tune and bass by one octave, using the method I've just described. I'd move the Prime up, (that's to say, I'd go with the first attempt I showed you) because it's better that the sound is bright rather than woolly, on such a joyous piece. I'd have a second bass line, played on another Prime, an octave above the one shown above. This would close the gap in the orchestration in much the same way that a cello often shadows a double bass in a symphony orchestra.
- A bigger step is to widen the pitch range by two octaves. In this case, the alto part is written a fourth higher (and sounds an octave higher), and the bass is written a fifth lower (and sounds an octave lower). The whole piece then needs to be transposed up a little to prevent us falling off the bottom end of the bass. Now there is oodles of space "inside" the music to duplicate the bass (an octave up) and the tune (an octave down). The sound is full and bright, and definitely rich, much like a piano duet compared to a piano solo.
- And the obvious and most sensible step would be to write more countermelodies and harmonies, so that there are five, instead of three, lines. More players, more parts!  
This, as educational books are apt to say, is left as an exercise for the reader....

It's an important concept that the Orchestra instruments are an *addition*, not a *replacement*, to a Guitar Ensemble. Overlooking this fact is perhaps the most likely reason why the extra instruments would seem to add little to the sound.

Maybe this article will get you thinking just a little!