



John Vanore

J PAUL SHIMONE

Creating an Alternative Large Ensemble

When I first decided to form my alternative ensemble, I wrote a couple of arrangements. Taking a step back, I realized that each was just “another chart”—not a chart that would be especially identifiable. I kept experimenting to achieve my own uniqueness in my arrangements and shape an identity.

My alternative ensemble was formed from my love of being a soloist and playing in big

bands. We began in the 1980s and have produced four albums. The instrumentation defines the viewpoint of this article: four trumpets, two trombones, French horn, two saxophones doubling and a rhythm section of guitar, bass and drums. I wanted the power and explosiveness of the large ensemble with the intimacy of a small group. Your choice to create an “alternative” ensemble should mean just that. Webster says

alternative is the choice between possibilities.

Creating art always comes with or is associated with a certain amount of risk. Art strives to take us somewhere we haven’t been, create a lasting impression and challenge conventional wisdoms and traditional thinking. The development of your ensemble insists on the strength to turn your back on accepted norms.

We can identify elements of risk in our own favorite musical artists. Risk makes them unique—original with a voice.

Decisions demand and encompass a vision: a new ideology, so to speak, of what to do and what not to do—the not possible being even more defining. Accept that there is no pedagogy for the alternative ensemble; you must create it.

Arrange with intrinsic versus generic value. In deciding to use “Footprints” as my classic/standard on my *Culture* (Acoustical Concepts Records) recording project, I felt the need to not just arrange the tune. There must be hundreds of arrangements of this great classic. My objective was to take a different point of view with merging/integrating the expected with the unexpected.

Approaching the piece in 4/4 with the core being the funky bass line that suggests/embellishes, the original opening identity sets the tone for the drive of the tune, with chosen sections briefly swinging in contrast. The band plays melody as ensemble color also. The intro restates with French horn, and bass trombone is used as an unexpected device (and only once).

An example of what not to do can be in the ensemble chorus. Using the “drop 2” technique to voice would not be especially unique versus creating the multiple voice color combinations to identify the group. Design is the keyword: Like the layers of paint described below, my brush was the voicing character, and how the voices were implemented created the uniqueness of the ensemble melody.

Own yourself. Design your techniques. Create arranging and compositional “devices” that can be implemented in your writing, helping to define it to be more compelling and interesting rather than mechanical. If a device seems to be something you’ve heard before, reject it. Work it until it is your own. Again, there is no pedagogy for the alternative large ensemble.

“Eat the paint.” Visit other mediums. My phrase “Eat the paint” is to encourage analytical comparison to painters—masters of color and form. Take a close look at some paintings. Spend a day at a great museum and choose two or three painters whose work resonates with you.

Bring a notebook, and “research” a color. Plant your face as close to the paintings as allowable (“eat the paint”) and work up an analysis of how colors were used. Start with one artist and one color (e.g., red). Catalog and relate the texture, saturation, density, layers, amount of usage, significance to the overall work and anything else that strikes you. What is the percentage of red to the whole? How many shades are there? What other colors are used in that particular red (the blend that makes the identity of the color for that painting)? Is the color red consequential to the execution of the painting or is it just a highlight?

My sonic example is the single use of soprano sax and French horn in the eight-measure interlude in my piece “Curiosity” (32 seconds into the recording). For me, this was use of light and shadow—unpredictable, and it doesn’t reoccur. Relating to alternate disciplines can be the beginning of your chord voicing design.

Watch a movie and turn off the sound. In its absence, you’ll notice how the score provides life to the movie. Engage in edits, wide shots, depth and cinematography. Consider saturation and contrast (we might call these unison and tutti, or close voicing versus spread voicing). Apply the visual use of these words to your sound and orchestration.

Others need to know. Recording the alternative ensemble is most important as a means

to preserve and communicate your work. In other art forms (painting, writing, film), the medium of the art serves to preserve it. Our vision needs to be preserved through recording. This is where the confluence of recording art and technique become important to the documentation of your work. I can’t over-emphasize the importance of recording to the uniqueness you are trying to convey in your work. Your recording becomes the reference document (picture) of your work. If your alternative ensemble is unique, there will be no other against which to judge or compare.

Think cinematically. Careful choices here will highlight your compositional technique. Just as in film, not all elements are to be perceived exactly the same. For example, depth and perspective engage the listener. The color of harmony, the interaction of lines, the impact of the ensemble and the color contrasts need to be thought of as more than a two-dimensional view—that is how we see a score, and the recording must bring it to life. Again, think cinematically here. Visual depth, contrast and saturation are all applicable to the excitement you can generate aurally.

My *Stolen Moments* (Acoustical Concepts Records) project is testimony to the cinematic approach. The recording is my statement of “Stolen Moments” (the song), which was to be a requiem, an homage and a thanks for the influence of the great arranger Oliver Nelson (1932–

’75). See the intro to the title track and the first few bars of the theme as scored below in Figure 1. The sonic footprint of the introduction sets the tone for the piece, like the opening roll in a movie. The recording perspective disappears in the emotional content of the orchestration.

For online audio and score examples from my *Stolen Moments* project, go to johnvanore.net/media/index.html and click on “DownBeat Master Class.” Notice how my “palette” approach (blending for overtones and color) to orchestration and voice assignment allows for unexpected instrument combinations. An important concept is for the small group to coexist within the large ensemble—or it’s a small group and a large ensemble. Interlude-type sections are brief and are used often in place of the exchange of band chorus to highlight melodies and/or solos.

Elaborate your thoughts in a couple of your own arrangements, then in an original composition. At the conclusion, one of the hardest things will be how you evaluate your own outcome. There should not be similar ensembles as models and references. After all, you just created the alternative. **DB**

Philadelphia-based trumpeter John Vanore is an alumnus of Woody Herman’s big bands. Vanore has fused that experience with the influences of Dennis Sandole and Oliver Nelson to compose for a unique large ensemble, *Abstract Truth*, which imparts the intimacy of a small group and the fire power of a big band. The most recent project is the new album *Stolen Moments* (Acoustical Concepts Records). Vanore is currently Artist in Residence at Widener University. Visit him online at johnvanore.net and acorecording.net.

Figure 1