

Transcribing Piano Music for Orchestra

Notes from Kennan: *The Technique of Orchestration*

Some features will be pianistic rather than orchestral. Translate the effect! Many times a literal transcription will be awkward technically or ineffective.

Problems in transcription:

1) **Key** - If the piece is in a key of more than four sharps or flats choose a more resonant and comfortable key for the orchestra. A 1/2 step higher will add brilliance, a 1/2 step lower will darken the overall sound. For strings, sharps are better than flats for two reasons: the resonance is greater and the fingering is easier.

2) **Sustain pedal** - The pedaling in the piano music may or may not be indicated. To account for sustained harmonies, certain notes must be lengthened in the arrangement. Aim at the general effect. Very often it is possible to divide up the figuration among the various string groups.

3) **Left Hand Accompanimental Patterns** - The arranger may want to change the pattern. If so, be sure to keep the original rhythm. Look for: a) proper spacing - small intervals at the top, large intervals at the bottom and b) spacing gaps between left and right hands - "Lift and respace!"

4) **Widely Spread out Arpeggios** - The harp is best suited for such gestures. However, not all orchestras have one and not all music will allow for one. Nor does the harp have the power and volume necessary to create rhythmic motion. Solutions: a) reduce the spread of the arpeggio so that one instrument can easily play it b) rearrange the figure - divide the figuration between two or more instruments. c) literal transcription by dividing the arpeggio among the strings. In doing so, make sure you overlap the last note played by a group with the first note played by the next group.

5) **Distinguish the melody in the piano part.** It may be beamed together with an accompaniment figure. Break the two up for the orchestral arrangement.

6) **Chord Spacing** - May need to be respaced. "Lift and respace!" You may want to use "interlocking." In the case of 3-note chords, give 2 notes to violin II and divide. The 3rd note goes to the violas. In 4-note chords, divide the viola section as well.

7) **Broken octaves** (or 6ths and other intervals) - best transcribed as string tremolo.

8) **Tremolo in the piano arrangement** - use string tremolo (unmeasured). There are two types: a) bowed (harsh) b) fingered (softer, more placid effect).

9) **Passages with a pronounced soloistic/cadenza like character** - a) retain solo quality (give it to one instrument) b) alter to accommodate the instrument range and technique c) keep general overall effect.

10) **Broken chords and grace notes** - determine if the notation is used either as sheer necessity of playing a chord that is too wide to be played at once or as a "true" grace note. If it is determined to be the former, omit the grace note. If it is determined to be the latter: a) give it to the harp if it is an integral part b) give it to the strings if it is an integral part (bowed or pizz.).

11) **Staccato notes** - give the gesture to the strings with pizz. or spicato or slurred staccato.

12) **una corda** (the soft pedal) - Use mutes or soft dynamics.