

Arranging for Brass: A Church Musician's Primer

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Luckily for most reading this, you aren't afflicted with the terminal condition of being a brass player. As someone who has played brass for most of my life, I can assure you that without exception, all other instrument families are far better suited to live among humans than we brass players.

That said, I still have had the blessing and opportunity to be asked to play for countless church services during my time as a brass player. Many of those occasions have been with other brass players (which poses a rehearsal etiquette nightmare for the director, I assure you!).

Unfortunately, I've also had the displeasure of playing some less-than-ideal arrangements and orchestrations. This causes problems for brass player, choir, director, and congregation alike. Balance issues, tone issues, the ability to create a pleasing sound: all these things are affected by shoddy arrangements and orchestrations (for the purpose of this article, "arrangements" and "orchestrations"—while they mean two different things—will just be referred to as "arrangements" for the sake of brevity).

The purpose of this article is to leave you, gentle reader, with a few concrete tips on how to arrange for brass so that your special services aren't marred by any number of things that poor arrangements are capable of doing.

As with most musical things, there are always exceptions to the rules. I'm giving you enough information to be better at arranging for brass, but not so much as to clutter your mind with unnecessarily arcane notions unsuitable for non-brass players and/or the morally suspect.

Finally, the recommendations in this article are written with a good high school/average college age player in mind. Every player is different in his/her abilities, but I've really tried to "shoot for the middle" so as to be as inclusive of as many playing situations as possible.

Transpositions and clefs

Brass instruments are pitched in C (also known as "concert pitch") Bb, or F. Concert pitch brass instruments include: trombone, euphonium/baritone, and tuba. They require no transposition (except for rare instances—read on). For all practical purposes, a baritone/euphonium can play the exact part as a trombone with very little trouble.

Trumpets are usually pitched in Bb, although they are also pitched in C. To keep things simple, unless you know what you're doing or have been asked to do otherwise, the safest bet is to write for trumpet in Bb.

Horns are pitched in F.

So how do transpositions work, exactly? It's really rather simple: if you asked a brass player to play a C on their instrument, their transposition would be the real pitch that they produce. For example, when you ask a trumpet player to play a C, he will finger a C, however, the pitch that comes out will really be a Bb when checked against a piano or a tuner. Behold: Trumpet in Bb.

If you asked a horn player to play a C, she would finger a C on her instrument, but the real pitch would be an F if you checked it against a piano or a tuner. Stand in shock and awe: Horn in F.

To summarize: trombone, euphonium/baritone, and tuba require no transposition. They can read directly from a hymnal if need without any trouble or mental gymnastics whatsoever. Trumpets need their music transposed up one whole step. Horns need their music transposed up a perfect fifth.

Depending on the instrument, brass instruments read either treble or bass clef. Trumpets read in treble clef. Horns read mostly in treble clef as well, however, if there is an extended passage of ledger lines below the staff (for my tastes, the E three ledger lines below the treble clef and lower), then the horn part may be written in bass clef, though the transposition remains the same. As with any instrument, keep clef changes to a minimum.

Euphoniums/baritones read in bass clef. The one exception is that some players are former trumpet players. This means that they'll read in treble clef **and** their transposition is up a ninth (or an octave plus a major second). You'd do well to ask your baritone/euphonium player what clef they read in: if they read bass clef, you're in the clear, and no transposition is needed. If they read in treble clef, you will *always* transpose up a ninth.

Trombones and tubas read in bass clef.

The graphics below show a concert score with each instrument playing a middle C (on the left). The graphic on the right shows what the transposed note would look like:

Trumpet in B_b

Horn in F

Trombone

Tuba

Trumpet in B_b

Horn in F

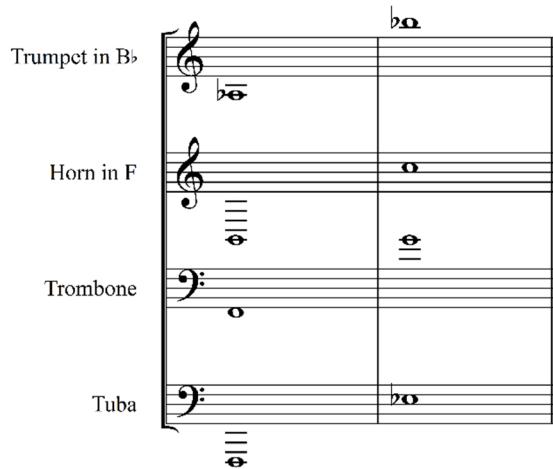
Trombone

Tuba

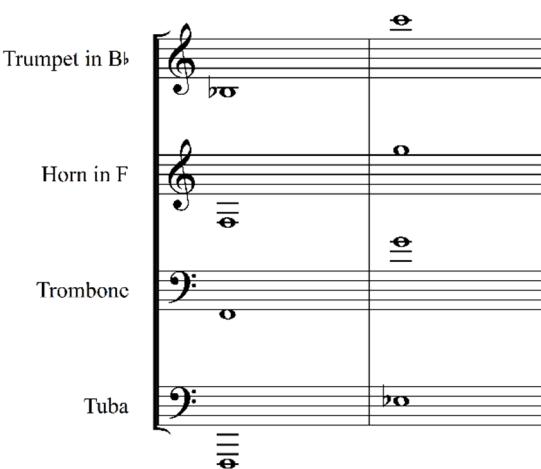
One final note: unless you're playing the most difficult tonally ambiguous music, all brass instruments like having key signatures (I left them out of the examples above for clarity). In orchestral music, often the horn is written without one, but for what you're doing in church, please put in a key signature!

Range

Recommended ranges: shown as sounded



Recommended ranges: written



These are the approximate ranges I stick to when I'm writing for brass. The graphic on the left is concert pitch, and the other shows the pitch at the appropriate transposition. The ranges are "safe" for most players, and the guide above has served me well for years. I can't stress enough that these are *suggested* ranges, and they're smaller than the generally accepted ranges of the instruments that you'll find in orchestration books and online resources. When you get near the extremes of the above ranges, you can get into a little bit of trouble if you don't have strong players.

Rule of thumb: you will never go wrong if you stick to the middle of the ranges shown above.

Technical considerations

Brass instruments aren't naturally as agile as woodwinds, strings, or keyboard instruments. This is true in terms of leaps as well as fast notes. That's not to say that brass instruments can't play fast, but it's meant only as a caution that if you're trying to arrange Widor's *Toccata*, you'd be wise not to give the trumpets the organ's right hand part! Trumpets and horns do better with linear, fast-moving notes: trombones and tubas have a little harder time negotiating them due to the nature of their instruments. It's easier to slur scale-like lines, so if you have no preference on how it sounds, throw a slur on it.

Brass players are used to multiple tonguing. With respect to technique, it's easier to multiple tongue a single note as opposed to notes of different pitches, even if they are scale-like, but the latter isn't impossible by any means.

Avoid large, fast leaps. They can be hazardous to your aural health.

Refrain from asking players to play quietly in the upper register or to come in suddenly on a high note in an exposed, quiet part. Yes, there are players that can do it, but again, we're trying to make this as playable as possible. Advanced players' ranges can be expanded considerably in either direction, and several of my arrangements for brass reflect this when I know that my brass are excellent players.

Hymns, service music

Adding brass to hymns and service music is a very easy and extremely effective way to utilize your brass players in a service. There are all sorts of brass ensemble configurations to choose from, but here are the basic rules I follow when I write out parts for a standard 4-part hymn:

Trumpet gets the melody/soprano line. A second trumpet will get the alto line.

If there's a horn in the group, I prefer to have it playing the alto line.

The trombone will get the tenor line and the tuba will get the bass line.

If I have a standard brass quartet (2 trumpets, 2 trombones), I'll have the trumpets on the soprano and alto lines, and the trombones on the tenor and bass lines. This works very well with only the occasional slightest modifications needing to be made for range considerations (usually in the bass part).

If I have a standard brass quintet (2 trumpets, 1 horn, 1 trombone, 1 tuba): I'll have both trumpets on the melody/soprano line (they can either play in unison or switch off every verse), horn on alto line, trombone on tenor line, and tuba on bass/pedal line (sometimes down an octave to keep it from getting too high).

For hymns that only have a melody line written in the hymnal, I will take the accompanist's edition of the hymnal and follow a similar format for assigning parts.

If you have only one trumpet, it's OK to use it on a descant (which would take the trumpet off the melody line), but make sure it's a hymn that the congregation (and choir!) knows very well. Same goes with a reharmonized final verse: it's OK to leave the melody out if the congregation (and choir!) is very familiar with the hymn.

Also, don't underestimate the power of having the brass play in unison at certain key points in a hymn: think the first two measures of EASTER HYMN in unison and then breaking into harmony on the first *alleluia*. I've done this before (playing in unison with keyboard and choir), and then when you move into harmony on the next phrase, it's really a dazzling effect for the congregation.

When you have brass on hymns, have them play the first and last verse for sure. Then, depending on the number of verses, evenly spread them out among the other verses. This keeps the brass from getting too fatigued and keeps the congregation from growing weary of them.

Unless you have a really good reason, make sure the keyboard (organ or piano) plays with the brass on all hymns and service music. Brass players generally aren't attuned to the subtleties of what an accompanist does to facilitate congregational singing, and the keyboard player should always be leading that.

Anthems

Arranging brass for choral anthems is a bit trickier, but still very doable. Use some common sense on this one. If there's an intro to the anthem, this is a great place to use brass with or without keyboard. Same thing goes with the ending/coda.

Interludes where the singers are resting are a great place to bring in the brass. This can be with or without keyboard accompaniment depending on what texture and color you want.

Having the brass play while singers are singing can pose balance challenges if poorly handled. One thing that helps to remember is that you don't always have to use all of your brass at once. Sometimes, using two trombones for a *mezzo piano* part is just fine. Trombones, due to their lower range, tend to blend a little easier than trumpets, so consider using them for quiet parts (horns can be included in this, as well).

The lower the singers are singing both in pitch and volume, the harder it will bring the brass down to a level where the singers can compete. Wait for the big, robust singing parts to bring in the brass.

If you know you're having brass well ahead of time, make sure to be thoughtful about your anthem choices and how the brass will fit in. If you're paying for brass, you might as well get your money's worth: have them play in as many musical offerings as possible (hymns, service music, anthems, preludes/postludes).

Brass and organ

I'm convinced that in Heaven, there is a concert hall exclusively dedicated to brass and organ music. It's one of the most sonorous sounds one can experience, and it's always a thrill to be able to play in such a configuration.

A few words about writing for brass and organ: organs tend to get buried by brass if the organist isn't using plenty of mutation-type stops: Fourniture, Mixtur, Seventeenth, etc. You need the high brilliance of the 2-2/3', 2', 1-1/3', and 1' pipes to cut through the brass. Brass instruments are essentially 8' or 16' pipes, and since they're usually pointed at the congregation, they have a tendency to be louder than the organ. Reed stops generally do the best in cutting through the brass: save your string stops for parts that are organ only. Stops with a lot of chiff also help the organ to be heard. I have yet to encounter a situation where the organ can or does overpower the brass, so don't be afraid to use that *Trompette en Chamade* during the postlude! Also, if you have a pipe organ that can make some real noise, you'll make your brass *very happy* if during a big hymn or a prelude/postlude, you use the *tutti* and allow them to play out.

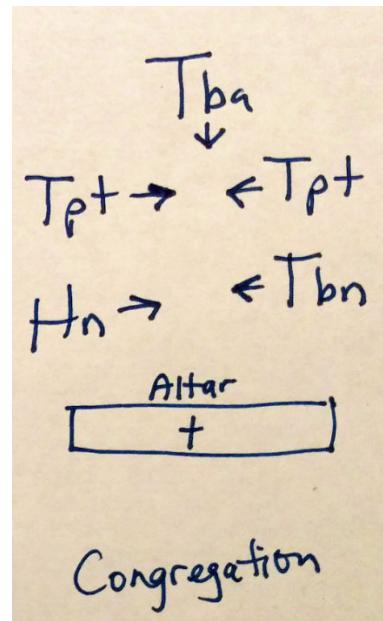
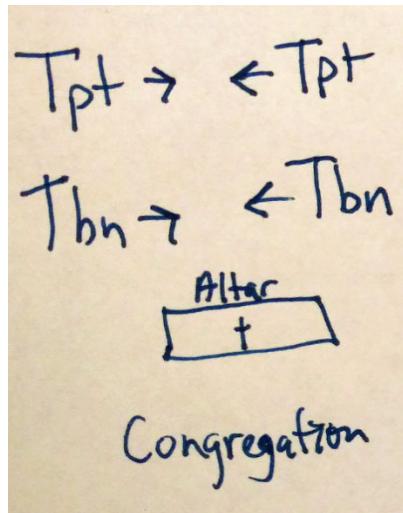
Additional considerations

Due to their nature, when you bring in brass to a worship service, you're already going to be dealing with balance issues. Regardless of the caliber of player(s) you have accompanying you, keep this in mind: the more that your players are allowed to play at their "natural" dynamic (which is always too loud to accompany choirs), the easier their job is and the more at ease they'll feel.

Consider the following when positioning brass:

Don't have them facing the congregation directly without something to buffer the sound (the altar, for example). I prefer having the brass facing inward toward the middle so that the congregation sees the side of their heads, but they don't get the full brunt of their sound.

See my beautiful, hand drawn diagrams below for two suggested configurations for brass: a standard quartet and a standard quintet. The arrows indicate which direction the player is facing. The basic rule of thumb is that the trumpets should be farthest from the congregation, since they're the loudest. In the brass quintet diagram, the horn is placed such that the bell is facing out toward the congregation. The horn isn't an instrument that tends to stick out, so the balance will be fine in this configuration.



At all costs, the brass should be in a place where they can easily hear the organ. When possible, put the brass as far away from the singers as you can without hindering their ability to hear the organ. This saves your singers' ears and saves you some hate mail the next day. Also make sure they're in a place where they can clearly see you at all times during a service.

I actively discourage the use of mutes in a church setting, and so should you.

When I've used brass in the past, I've usually had one rehearsal with the brass separately. One idea is to rehearse the brass about an hour before your normal choir rehearsal. Once choir rehearsal starts, give the brass a break while you warm up the choir. Then bring the brass back for a full, rigorous rehearsal. On Sunday morning, keep from overworking the brass. Check balance, trouble spots, starts/stops/transitions, and maybe one loud section and then stop. Brass have only so much endurance, and it's always better to play it safe than have their lips give out in the middle of the service. Having been on both sides of this scenario, I can tell you that it's no fun!

Closing

I hope you've found some bits of information that'll help you use brass more effectively the next time you use them.

So you can see my advice in action, I've arranged EIN FESTE BURG for you to use. Since the most common configuration is a brass quartet, that's what I've written it out for: 2 trumpets and 2 trombones. This is a fairly standard harmonization, and in the hymnals that I've checked it against, it all checks out.

Blessings to you and your music ministry!