

# How to Arrange 4-Part Harmony for Strings

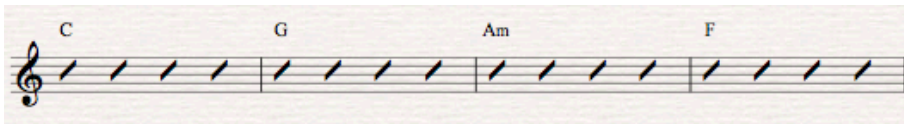
## part 2

by [Ryan Leach](#) – 23 April 2014

In the tutorial **How to Arrange 4-Part Harmony for Strings** we looked at how to take an existing four-part harmonization and have it effectively performed by a string orchestra.

**In this tutorial we'll take it a step further by learning how to use that same foundation to create more interesting variations.**

Let's imagine we're writing a background string arrangement for a song, using this typical pop progression as our model:



By the end of this tutorial we'll learn how to come up with this arrangement:

## Four-Part Harmony

The details of four-part harmony are beyond the scope of this tutorial, but studying the subject is well worth your time.

Some basics to get you through for right now are:

1. Every chord should be complete (root, third, fifth, etc. are all present).
2. As little movement from one chord to the next as possible is desired.
3. Contrary motion between voices is preferred.

In the world of pop music you can get away with a lot less precision with the "rules" of four-part harmony. For example, parallel fifths and octaves in a background string parts don't really cause your listener a lot of distress, even though in a more exposed passage they might be less acceptable.

Here is an example of how to arrange strings in four-part harmony behind our given piano part



## Adding Moving Lines

The first thing we can do to bring this arrangement to life is introduce more motion. A simple way to do this is to insert passing notes between leaps. For example, in the viola part from bar 2 to 3, the distance between the notes is a third. Also, in the cello from measure 3 to 4 is a third. By simply filling in the gaps, with we create a little more energy:



A more noticeable technique is to change the entire voicing. (Depending on how you do it, here is where you might run into some "technical" violations with parallel motion. However I believe for our purposes and style, if the overall structure is sound the overall arrangement will still sound good.)

So for example, we could break the chords into half notes, and have the second half note move the top three voices down to the next available chord tone:



Or we could break the chords into quarter notes, and have rising arpeggios:



Notice how the more notes we have per measure, i.e. the busier the parts, the more they stand out. If you just have the piano background busy parts might be fine, if you have an important vocal line you might need to be more careful about distracting away from it.

A very simple but effective technique is to use a four-part harmonization as your skeleton for which notes to use, and then break up the arrangement into separate parts. This is especially useful on verses or other parts that you want to be simpler.

For example you could just use the violins:



Or just the viola and cello:



Or a more complex arrangement such as a building pyramid for a crescendo effect. This could be done from the top down or the bottom up:



# Rests

Rests are an often forgotten gem of composing and arranging. People are always so concerned with filling the space with notes that they forget how amazingly powerful silence can be. You can instantly make a whole note arrangement more interesting without adding a single note by inserting rests.

Rests at the end of phrases give a sense of breath as well new motion when the next phrase begins:



Rests at the beginning of measure can feel like "negative accents"; they draw attention to the moment by the absence of an articulated note:



And of course you can mix and match:



# Articulations

Another way to bring life to an arrangement is to articulate the notes. You can break up a whole note into a pulsing rhythm in a lot of different ways, such as into forceful quarter notes:



Or driving eighth notes:



We can also mix the changing voicing technique with articulated notes, perhaps for something like a film score style effect:



# Runs, Fills, and Combinations

All of the above techniques can be mixed, and you can top it all off with some extra garnish like runs and fills.

In the same way that a drummer might play a fill into the next bar, your strings can do something similar. Usually simple scales runs and arpeggios are the most effective approach, because they give a burst of energy without drawing too much attention to themselves as important motivic ideas.

Here is just one example:

- Violin I quarter note rising arpeggios, with octave scale run into the first measure and out of the last measure
- Violin II & Viola pulsing 16ths with voice changes
- Cello forceful pulsing quarters, with an arpeggio fill into each bar



The image displays a musical score for three string instruments: Violin I, Violin II & Viola, and Cello. The score is written in standard musical notation with a treble clef for Violin I and a bass clef for the other two. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two systems. The first system consists of three measures. In the first measure, Violin I has a quarter note rising arpeggio (G2, A2, B2, C3) marked with a forte 'f' dynamic. Violin II & Viola have a pulsing 16th note pattern. Cello has a pulsing quarter note pattern. The second system also consists of three measures. In the first measure, Violin I has a pulsing 16th note pattern. Violin II & Viola have a pulsing 16th note pattern. Cello has a pulsing quarter note pattern. The second measure of the second system features a 7-measure arpeggio fill in Violin I. The third measure of the second system features a 7-measure arpeggio fill in Violin I. The score ends with a double bar line.

## Conclusion

Notice how we always use that very simple whole note arrangement as our guide first. We know it sounds good, so any modifications we make to it will have a firm foundation.

I hope this tutorial has shown you that you can begin to approach very complex and interesting arrangements by applying simple techniques to a simple harmonization.

As you listen to strings in other music start to ask yourself what the underlying basis is. Often what on the surface seems like a complicated arrangement is not so complicated after all.