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Writing arrangements is among jazz's most important—and underrated—tasks. *Josef Woodard* talks to four masters of the trade:

Michael Abene, John Clayton, Gil Goldstein and Vince Mendoza.

Photograph by John Abbott

On any given night, in countless corners around the planet, the fine and not fully appreciated art of jazz arranging carries on like a secret musical power source. The handiwork of arrangers can always be found, hiding in plain sight and sound.

Take, for instance, the Night of Obama. In Greenwich Village, the politically colored Liberation Music Orchestra, the band that Charlie Haden and Carla Bley built, had strategically booked election night at the Blue Note. Smack dab in the middle of the band's late set, news of Obama's victory hit the stage. Everyone in the house went suitably wild. Bley was not in the house, but her ravishing and witty arrangements were very much present and filling the audience's ears and hearts and minds, including a teetering yet triumphant "America the Beautiful" seeping into Ornette Coleman's "Skies of America." Her angularly gospelish new take on "Amazing Grace" was called by Haden, immediately after the Obama victory news.



landscape. “I am happy with most of my projects. I feel lucky, I guess. When I have the deadline and the gun goes off, I can usually find my pace and run a good race. And I can be confident, that after much questioning, I can arrive at a solution that works.”

“Usually, the harder it is to start, the bumpier the beginning, the better it turns out. I’ve found success in surviving my process for solving arranging problems within any deadline. But I must live my process every time and there are no shortcuts, nor can I predict how the answers will emerge. That would ruin the fun, probably.”

Is the work of the arranger underrated, and/or misunderstood? Mendoza

TWO NIGHTS LATER, at the Berlin Jazz Festival, the art of arrangement was a proud centerpiece of the festival’s opening night concert. Vince Mendoza performed his new jazz-cum-classical project *Blauklang*, with a modified mixture of jazz ensemble, string quartet and chamber music elements, opening with Miles Davis’ “All Blues,” gently twisted, and moving into Mendoza’s original suite. Following Mendoza’s project, the ever-game WDR Big Band, based out of Cologne, Germany, and led by seasoned American arranger Michael Abene, supplied a formidable and funky backdrop for soloist Maceo Parker. Parker played and sang the music of Ray Charles, revised and refreshed by Abene’s arranger’s pen.

Through his rubric as head of the WDR band, Abene was also behind last year’s critically acclaimed and Grammy-nominated *Symphonica*, a Joe Lovano project with the WDR and orchestra. A glance at other Grammy nominees in the 2008 arrangement categories—including Bley for her *Appearing Nightly* album and Claus Ogerman for his work on Danilo Perez’s *Across the Crystal Sea*—affirms the creative health of the arranger’s art, even in an era of diminished recording-industry activity.

What do these projects have in common? Only the fact that arrangers continue to play a vital role in the evolution and the realities of jazz, continuing a strong tradition dating back beyond the swing era, when big bands with big charts roamed the earth.



ACCORDING TO ABENE, who has been arranging for four decades, “I tell my students [at the Manhattan School of Music] that arranging is a threefold process. You’ve got to make the artist look good. You’ve got to make you look good and you want the band to sound good and enjoy the music. You’re not just making the artist sound good. There’s a whole bunch of stuff involved in there. You could write great charts, but if it doesn’t work for the artist, it’s not a great production.”

For Gil Goldstein, a producer-arranger whose career has reached into jazz, pop and film work, the trick of sussing out a new project and adapting to working with a new artist is part of the creative

says, “Considering that most people might not understand what an arranger actually does, I would say so. Add to that the wide range of impact that an arranger has on a particular project, and it could get darn confusing.”

“Of course there is always a question of how much of a personal voice the arranger is invited to contribute to a project. It could just be a matter of a few scattered string notes or the complete reworking of a song, a rhythm arrangement or a tone poem for symphony orchestra. Huge impact? Maybe, maybe not. Necessary for the song? I hope so.”



A VETERAN BIG-BAND ARRANGER, Abene has been the head of the WDR big band in Cologne since 2003, and has led numerous projects featuring soloists in big band contexts. Besides the Maceo Parker project resulting in the album *Roots and Grooves*, Abene’s work with Patti Austin on *Avant Gershwin* netted his first Grammy award. Works-in-progress includes collaborations with Gary Burton and saxophonist Bill Evans, and past projects have featured Paquito D’Rivera and Biréli Lagrène.

“I’m really doing some diversified projects,” he says. Diversification is one of the job requirements for a good arranger, who must be flexible and adaptable to varying situations. “You’ve got to be open-minded,” he says. “You can’t get lazy.”

Laziness was not an option with Abene’s elaborate work with Lovano on *Symphonica*, involving big band and orchestra. Looking back at the working process, Abene recalls getting together with Lovano and surveying possibilities among Lovano’s impressive original songbook. “We spent an afternoon together, going through music and pounding out ideas. He said, ‘Just go ahead, do whatever you want to do. It’s cool.’ That was the process,” he says, laughing. If he makes it sound easy, Abene adds that “the hard part came after that.”

And it is hard work, a labor-intensive act that blends creative, political and practical considerations. While others in the field moved laterally into arranging, Abene recognized his passion early on. “Since

I was 13 or 14,” he says, “I realized I wanted to be an arranger. I loved that whole process. It’s like a giant jigsaw puzzle to me, putting all these pieces together. I treat arranging and composition the same. When I do an arrangement, it’s like a composition to me. It’s not like one is easier than the other. They’re both difficult.”

Asked about early influences, Abene touches on his eclectic tastes by pointing to Ellington/Strayhorn but also George Russell’s more cerebral writing, as well as Gil Evans. To some degree, Abene is rooted in tradition, as well, noting the Count Basie charts of Neal Hefti and Ernie Wilkins, and even the music he heard on his father’s 78s, the stuff of Benny Goodman and Fletcher Henderson.

“They all had an influence,” he comments. “You draw from everybody and then, hopefully, you mold it into something of your own. To this day, I enjoy listening to some of the old Basie records and even Duke. I’m still trying to figure out what he was doing. There will be three instruments and you can’t figure out who has the middle and who has the top.

“I like Bob Brookmeyer, going back to when I first heard him, 40 years ago. Maria Schneider has a good history, but she will tell you she got a lot of stuff from Gil Evans and previous people. [Jim] McNeely and Mendoza will tell you the same thing. Everybody has a lot of influences. Duke got stuff from somebody, Mingus got stuff from Duke, this one got stuff from Mingus and Duke, and they’ll give you a list of names.”

Abene studied at the Manhattan School of Music at a time when his classmates included Ron Carter, Eddie Gomez, Hugh Masekela and Larry Rosen [the R of GRP, who years later hired Abene to head up the GRP big band]. During his school days, Abene says, “I was playing with Don Ellis, and when I got the call from Maynard, I told my father ‘I’m splitting.’ It was a great excuse to get out of school. I felt I wasn’t learning. I was learning more just by writing for bands. That’s how I learned to write for strings, when I started doing studio work.

“There were some embarrassing moments,” he admits of his early arranging work, “but that’s how you learn. You have to do a quick fix sometimes. But that’s cool. I don’t mind that. I’d rather try something, and go with the ‘wrong and strong’ method. I’d rather go down fighting.”

Decades later, Abene—who spends nearly half the year in Germany—benefits from the European embrace and support system for jazz big-band culture, which is, ironically or not, an American invention. “As far as arrangers and composers go, the bulk of the work is in Europe, because of a lot of these radio bands and privately-funded bands in different countries. You don’t have that outlet here, except maybe the military bands. There are some excellent military big bands. The drag is that you have to join the military. Germany alone has four or five radio bands.”

Through his history with the WDR band, Abene says, “at this point, I don’t feel that I’m just writing for an 18-piece band. I’m writing for individuals, which is really nice. Hopefully, they feel the same way. I know who I think should be playing a lead or a solo on certain kinds of things or certain grooves. Since the guys are there all the time, it’s not like a nomadic band. Since I’ve been in Maynard [Ferguson]’s band in the early ’60s, this is the first time I’ve had a band of individuals to write for, on a consistent basis.

“When I joined Maynard’s band, in 1961, all the bandleaders were still alive, so there was a lot more going on. People were graduating from the music schools, like Northwestern, North Texas, Manhattan School

of Music. These guys who graduated had a place to go play, whether you were a player or a writer. Now, a lot of those bands are gone.

“With a lot of my composition students, I tell them, ‘Look, the only way to get something going is to start your own band and find some little club that will pay the door, pay two cents a gig. The point is, you’re playing your music. That’s the important thing.’ You could write great stuff, but if nobody ever hears it, what’s the point? That would be the most maddening thing in the world.”



IN THE CASE OF MENDOZA’S *Blauklang*, the mission was more about fulfilling a personal creative mandate than satisfying outside parties. With an instrumentation distinctively mutating jazz band and chamber ensemble elements, the piece was created on a commission from West German Radio and the ACT label. Originally, the title itself, and its underlying concept, involved a musical response to a painting exhibition in Duisburg, Germany.

“However,” Mendoza says, “the essence of my approach to this music was not so much to ‘paint’ with music but to capture the feeling of the music of the era of Miles and Gil, in particular *Kind of Blue*, i.e.,

“I wanted to be an architect and I think arranging is the closest analogy to that job in music. You must build a structure that functions properly, with a particular purpose and location that restricts you in one way yet frees you in another. Arranging is a sharing and collaborative process; like the best architectural solutions, form and function must coexist.” –Gil Goldstein

the space, attitude, harmony and approach to improvisation within the boundaries of various forms.”

Through projects such as *Blauklang* and in other orchestral or chamber-esque work, Mendoza’s affinity for classical music comes through, as does the sense of searching for ways to meld his musical impulses, both in and beyond jazz.

Still, he says, “Bridging those worlds has never been a calculation as much as a reflection of my experience as a musician through my life so far. *Blauklang*, in a sense, was more of a traditional jazz project, and the choice of instrumentation had to do with that realization. Jazz is a very personalized art form. In a way, form and its development are guided by the improviser. So I am always thinking about who will be playing something that I write, regardless of whether the themes are original or part of an arrangement.”

As for influences along the way, Mendoza asserts, “I have found inspiration in all styles of music, and the best composers are always adept at presenting their own music in the best manner, no matter what the ensemble or soloist might be. Bach wrote the best counterpoint and this helps immensely with my ability to dance around a soloist in an arrangement. So did Alban Berg, but in a much freer manner. Brahms was a big influence on me, melodically and texturally, as was, of course, Stravinsky, for his intervallic structures and rhythmic writing. Duke Ellington, Thad Jones, Gil Evans, all for different reasons, have shaped my approach to composing and as a result my point of view with regard to arranging.”

For Mendoza, arranging was a byproduct of his original intention



Vince Mendoza

to focus on his own compositions. “I never aspired to be an arranger of other people’s music,” he admits, “but in retrospect it has been a great way to be involved with many talented musicians that I would not have otherwise encountered working on my own projects. It has greatly enriched my life as a musician.

“As a composer, every time I prepare my own compositions to be played by a musician or an ensemble, I am arranging. It is presenting material from a certain musical point of view. I fell into arranging as a way to include other guest artists into concerts of my own music. After that, writing for other artists became of interest to me.”

One of those artists was the late Joe Zawinul, who Mendoza collaborated with in different ways over the years. At the 2006 Berlin Jazz Festival, Mendoza’s work with the WDR big band took a very different turn, in a project of music by, and featuring, Zawinul. As different as this context was from Zawinul’s primary direction in the small groups Weather Report and the Zawinul Syndicate, the resulting WDR Band recording, *Brown Street* (Heads Up), ended up being the swan song in Zawinul’s discography during his lifetime, released months before his death in 2007.

Mendoza arranged all but one of those charts, and translating Zawinul’s music to the big band setting had unique challenges. “I have to say that the difficult part of writing that music was dealing with the *aura* created by the original versions,” Mendoza says. “Of course, the other difficulty rested in the improvisational nature of Joe’s music and how much or little of the originals was to be retained in the arrangements. As far as Joe was concerned it would have been most of it, to the exclusion of my approach to orchestration and counterpoint.

“However, I thought that some of the Weather Report or Syndicate performances and improvisations might not translate as well to 17 people. But we can’t forget that Joe often played like a big band, and you never lost sight of his rhythmic and textural sense. This part was rather easy to translate. And of course I owe a lot of my musical impulses to Joe, so in a way the process was an organic one.”

Also represented in Mendoza’s resume is work for risk-taking “pop” artists, including Joni Mitchell, Elvis Costello and Björk. Has he found that those artists were more creatively open to his ideas than some

jazz artists who might be rooted in a longer, deeper tradition? He responds by noting, “Don’t forget that ‘pop’ artists, as much as they are trying to forge new territory, are also adhering to a certain path blazed before them. The best ones make their voices known while taking from various traditions that came before them. In Joni’s case there are many paths.

“I think that all the people that you mention were particularly open to experimentation with various aspects of the presentation of their songs. They were all particularly interested in the painting of their lyrics but otherwise open to the manner in which it was done. That is tremendously liberating to a collaborating artist.”

Mendoza, who is based in Los Angeles, has also found ripe opportunities working across the

Atlantic. He has frequently worked with the Metropole Orchestra, including recent projects based on music of John Scofield, Ivan Lins and an orchestral take on Zawinul.

He goes so far as to say, “I owe a lot of my development as a composer and musician to the opportunities brought to me by European organizations, festivals, radio and TV. I know that there still exists a cross-section of the European community that believes that art and music are vital to the quality of their culture, without regard to its economic value.

“Money comes and goes—mostly goes these days—but art lives on in the fabric of our community. The question is, what kind of fabric will it be? I’m not sure whether European ears are more qualified than any others, but the important part is that they take the time out to listen.”



LOS ANGELES-BASED JOHN CLAYTON—who, like Mendoza, teaches at USC—is an ace bassist and composer-arranger-bandleader who has been at the helm of the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra for many years. Clayton has played with and/or arranged for Diana Krall, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Quincy Jones and countless others, and he also came to the business of arranging through a side door. As a young bassist with a rare fluency in both jazz and classical music, Clayton worked with the Amsterdam Philharmonic and in a pivotal stint with the Count Basie Orchestra.

“I’m definitely a late-blooming arranger,” he confesses. “I didn’t really get bit by the writing bug until about my third month with the Count Basie orchestra. Memorizing the book allowed me to focus on what I was hearing and then make a stab at writing myself. Although I never studied composition/arranging in college, I knew how to transpose for instruments. The first piece I did for the band smelled awful. They were kind and encouraging. I knew it sucked. I did some homework, didn’t give up and never looked back. I owe the Basie band so much.”

Part of Clayton’s due diligence in bolstering his understanding of the big band vocabulary was to consult the masters. As a young musician, he says, “I transcribed and analyzed Thad Jones, Quincy Jones, Billy

Byers, Duke Ellington, Oliver Nelson, Ernie Wilkins, Johnny Mandel and Robert Farnon. They were my big, early influences, among others.”

Another facet of his continuing education has been Clayton’s work with the CHJO, a high-functioning musical laboratory at his disposal. That work, in turn, influences work in other areas. “Writing for big band has surely introduced me to color combinations that I use elsewhere,” he says. “However, writing for a jazz brass section will give different results than writing for most symphony orchestra brass sections. The same is true for woodwinds. In my jazz world, I’m usually afforded the opportunity to write for a person, a voice, rather than an instrument. I write for Jeff Hamilton’s drum sound or my brother’s alto flute sound, etc.”

As an arranger-for-hire, Clayton knows about the sometimes-wild variations in emotional temperature and artistic bearings from gig to gig. Still, he says, “I’ve been lucky with the artists I work with. I haven’t had too many out-of-the-ordinary challenges. Hmm. OK, I’m lying. I’ll keep those names to myself, but there is a short list of people who made things more difficult than they needed to be.

“Overall, it has been pretty straight-ahead. The weirdest vibes come when they’re insecure about their musicianship and try to impress you. What comes out of their mouth is poop. If it’s ever too weird, I give them a toothbrush and go on my merry way. Life’s too short.”

Reflecting on which arranging-producing experiences have impressed him most, Clayton points to projects with his big band and jazz legends Milt Jackson (“an honor and joy. I can still see his reaction to the shout chorus of ‘Bags’ Groove”) and Carmen McRae (“what a thrill to record as her bassist and do another project as her big band arranger. She showed me an immense amount of respect, but not nearly what I had for her”).

From the younger, poppier end of the spectrum, there was Clayton’s work with Queen Latifah. “She was awesome,” he effuses. “She met every vocal challenge I threw her and delivered. She’s a real pro and sings great. It was humbling and nice to receive a Grammy for arranging for her.”

Both Clayton and Hamilton can be found onstage—big stages, at that—with Krall, an association with deep roots. “Having known Diana since she was 19,” says Clayton, “I must say that it has been fun to watch her grow, develop and become so popular. And now that she is doing so well, she’s *hiring* Jeff Hamilton and me instead of paying us for lessons. Life is funny.”

One of the challenging yet rewarding projects for Clayton, in fact, was the acclaimed 2005 album *Christmas Songs*, with Krall supported by the CHJO. He says, “This was a challenge because I didn’t want to ‘step’ on Diana’s voice, her style and timbre with the fullness of the big band, yet I didn’t want to dumb down the band. I think I got pretty close.”

On Clayton’s plate at the moment is a large-scale project he calls *Red Man, Black Man*, reflecting on African-American and Native-American roots. The first installment of the project had its premiere at the 2006 Monterey Jazz Festival, with Kurt Elling in the lead. Clayton also plans to do more player-specific writing, showcasing the voices of members of his big band. Tapping into an Ellingtonian aesthetic, he says that “their individual voices are so distinct and unique that I’m always inspired to do something for them.”

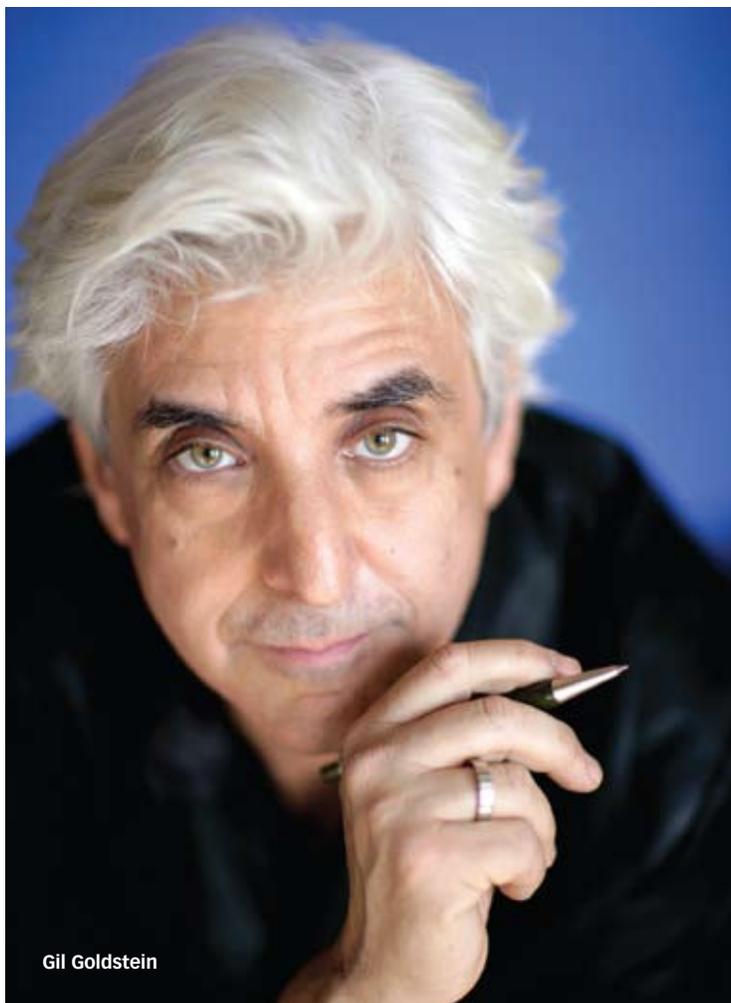


TO CALL GIL GOLDSTEIN AN ARRANGER tells only a fraction of the story. A keyboardist (and accomplished accordion), producer, teacher

and arranger, Goldstein embodies the notion of an integrated, multi-task-ready musician. By his own account, the various aspects of his work are “all connected. I try to think like an arranger when I play. I compose what needs to be composed while in the arranging process and all of my teaching is aimed at getting students to understand how to make music ‘sound’ according to the principles set forth in the overtone series.

“Skill in composition as well as improvisation feeds directly into the skill set that is the good arranger. Of all of those hats, I have been composing less lately but I’m hoping to rebalance that. I feel that all are interdependent and nourish one another.”

Most recently, Goldstein’s handiwork as an arranger could be heard



Gil Goldstein

in the well-received jazz standards album *Speak Low*, from pop-soul crooner Boz Scaggs, and on David Sanborn’s *Here and Now*, a horn chart-fortified tribute to Hank Crawford. Both projects successfully bring a jazzier contextualization for artists who have had more direct links to pop and pop-jazz.

Goldstein admits that “the project with Boz was an ideal working relationship for me, as an arranger, producer and player. He had ultimate trust and faith in me. This is an essential in the arranger-artist relationship. He could openly and easily articulate and express in his singing and guitar playing exactly what he wanted. I have a similarly great relationship with Dave Sanborn. We have worked together on his last four or five albums. But *Here and Gone* really features the arrangements. I think I know how to write for him and we have a way of arriving at happy solutions to problems.”

Goldstein also points to his working relationship with Chris Botti as a model, as well as a “once-in-a-lifetime relationship” with Michael Brecker. The late saxophonist, says Goldstein, “almost never changed anything I did for him, or could clearly describe why he didn’t like something and then I could quickly change it and satisfy his requirements.

“In order to be a great arranger, you need a great artist. Gil Evans needed Miles to blossom, and so do arrangers of today need great artists to find their voice and style. You need to be able to hear inside what the artist wants, and then imagine the elements that are needed and what needs to be left away.”

From early in his life in music, Goldstein recalls, “I always wanted to be an arranger. One of the first records I ever bought was an Esquivel recording. I bought it because I liked the cover. However, it blew my mind to hear the ‘extreme arrangements,’ as I think of them.

“I also wanted to be an architect and I think arranging is the closest analogy to a job in music. You must build a structure that functions properly and with a particular purpose and location that restricts you in one way, yet frees you in another. Arranging is a sharing and collaborative process; like the best architectural solutions, form and function must coexist.”

Clearly, given the variety of his projects over the years as well as the range of his working musical knowledge, Goldstein has an eclectic grasp of music and a broad, accessible vocabulary. Still, when it comes to guiding influences, Gil Evans, says Goldstein, is his “one hero and influence.”

After meeting Evans in 1981, it was “love at first sound and hearing.” Goldstein performed a concert with Billy Cobham and Evans, went

on to play with Evans regularly and “benefited from his wisdom and commentary. And later came studying the notes that he wrote and they way he reworked music. No one has achieved his level of re-thinking, artistry and brilliance with a few bright lights popping in his wake. He wrote some good compositions, but it seems like his greatest compositional moments were attached to already existing structures, like the introduction to ‘So What.’ He wrote something that sounded like Bill Evans would play, and it’s the perfect setup for what is to come.”

As to the nagging question of whether arrangers get the credit and respect due them, Goldstein feels it’s “a loaded question. I can’t imagine an arranger that is as satisfied as one that makes his living as a composer or producer, for example. The main reason is the lack of royalties, which tends to devalue the worth of arranging. Sometimes, in the best examples, the arranger and/or orchestrator crosses into the domain of composition.

“We have all contributed intellectual properties to existing songs, which serves to enrich the original and give it another life and *raison d’être*. It would be nice if the industry could find a way to acknowledge that when it happens and reward the arranger, beyond the love of one’s craft. There is a long list of names of arrangers and orchestrators who help to transport a musical idea to a higher plane from Gil Evans with Miles, to Sid Ramin with [Leonard] Bernstein, to Billy Strayhorn with Duke.

“I don’t regret that I’ve been able to enlighten music for others to shine over and hope to continue to be able to do it for many more years to come, as I seem to be getting the hang of it, more and more. It would be nice to have some residual money coming in for the work done, but the real victory is the ability to continue to do something one loves.” **JT**