Learning To Transcribe and Write Music

by Mark Cole

I recently transcribed the toughest piece of music that I have ever been asked to do. The Christmas medley entitled '**Christmas Songs**' is almost 11 minutes long and includes a full symphony orchestra and choir with two soprano soloists. It's from a recording entitled 'A Carnegie Hall Christmas'. Parts of it were so fast that I had to slow it down in Garageband so I could listen to all the parts going on.



This is the time of the year that I often get asked to transcribe and rearrange music for Christmas concerts and productions. This year has been especially busy. I've done almost twenty different Christmas and worship arrangements for various organizations. Some have only taken me a few hours to do and the toughest one (Christmas Songs: 307 bars & a full symphony orchestra) took me almost 2 weeks.

Over the years I have become quite good at transcribing music. I've done Country, Rock, Gospel, Jazz, Big Band, Classical, Worship and Pop styles. Sometimes the arrangements are just for solo with a rhythm section, some are for full vocal sections, some are with brass and string sections and some with full orchestras.

If you want to begin to understand how different styles of music work, transcribing music is one of the best ways to learn. If you want to understand the intricacies of how to write for a rhythm section, string section, brass section, woodwinds, percussion and vocals; transcribing music is an invaluable practice.

Transcribing music is also a great way to develop your musical ear. When you transcribe music, you begin to hear chord progressions and the inner workings of songs. If you want to become better at playing music 'by

ear,' try transcribing some of your favorite songs. It will develop your 'ear' and musical sensibilities like no other endeavor will.

One of the secrets of transcribing music is to first listen to the bass line. The bass line will give you the foundation of the chord structure. Next, listen to the melody and then fill in the chords.

One of the best ways to double-check your transcription is to play along with the song after you've finished writing it out. I usually put on headphones and play along with the chord chart. If you really listen, you will quickly pick out any inconsistencies between your chart and the original recording.

Question: Are you ready for a new challenge? Are you ready to take your musicianship to another level? Try transcribing music. You will learn so much!

Resources:

- The Technique of Orchestration (extensive book on writing for instruments)
- Cubase Scoring Basics

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The article above and many additional insights may be found on Mark's blog at http://markcole.ca/

Check out Mark's new book - "Leading Worship ~ Notes from a Grand Adventure" available in Kindle or Soft Cover Editions. This is a great gift for the musician or worshipper in your life.