# ARRANGING FOR STRINGS
# Part I
# (School and Amateur Ensembles)

# by Vince Corozine

Arranging music for strings requires an awareness of the spacing of the harmonic series, a grasp of counterpoint (imitation and canon), and an understanding of a variety of bowings and string effects.

String students enjoy playing in sharp keys (G, D, A, and E) as they find these keys technically easier to play in than in the flat keys. Playing in sharp keys is also more resonant for the strings.

The typical school orchestra is likely to be deficient in violas and cellos. Therefore, it is recommended that the viola part be written in treble clef for the third violins.

## APPROACH TO SCORING

Merle Isasac, a successful arranger for school orchestras and string orchestras sets forth a working model of how he approaches the scoring for strings.

1. Begin with a pencil sketch of three or four staves.
2. Place the principal melody at the top and the bass, which determines the harmony, at the bottom.
3. Fill in the second violin part, making it a duet with the first violins.
4. Add the viola part to make three part harmony in the upper three voices.
5. Write the cello part as a countermelody or it may double the bass part.

(Taken from the Instrumentalist Magazine June, 1989)

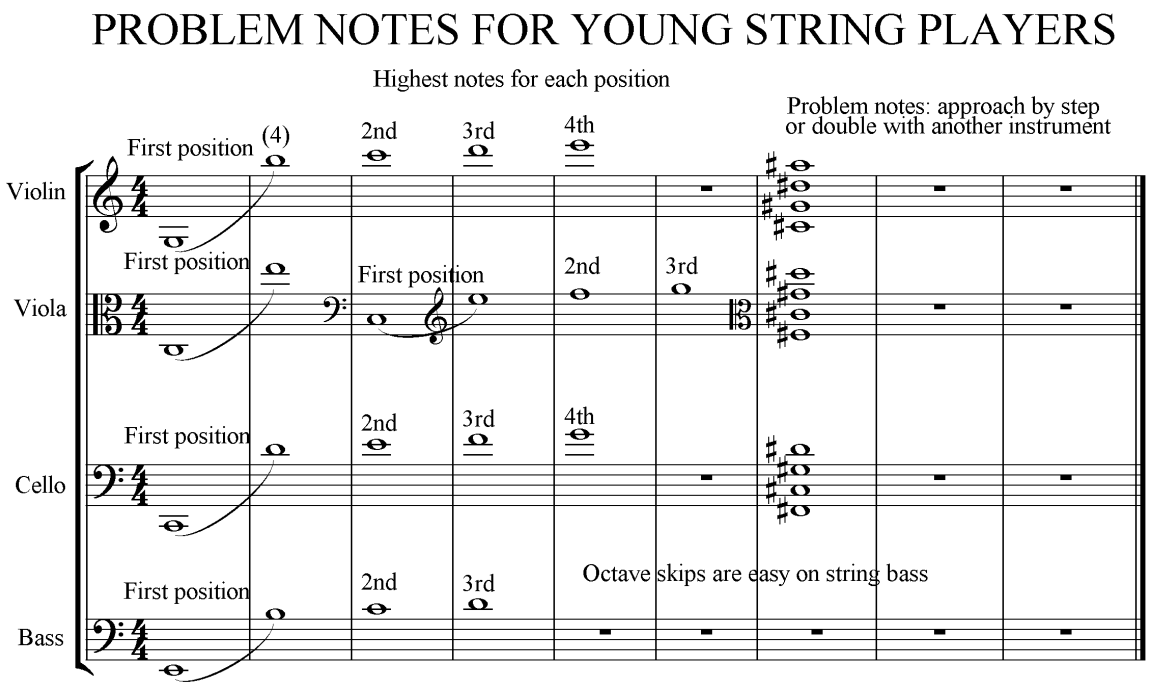
The parts should be readable, melodic (singable) and rhythmically interesting.

Young string players need to be instructed and reminded when and when not to slur, when and where to shift positions, and whether to use an open string or the fourth finger.

Isaac goes on to say that, the first violin part should remain in first position most of the time, except for an occasional shift to third position. The cellos shouldn't include a tenor clef, and the second violin part should be less difficult than the first violin part.

When arranging a well-known classic, the melody and the harmony part should not be changed, though the inside voices may be altered to make them easier to play and sometimes a change of key is advisable.

The following is a chart that list notes that can be problem for string players.

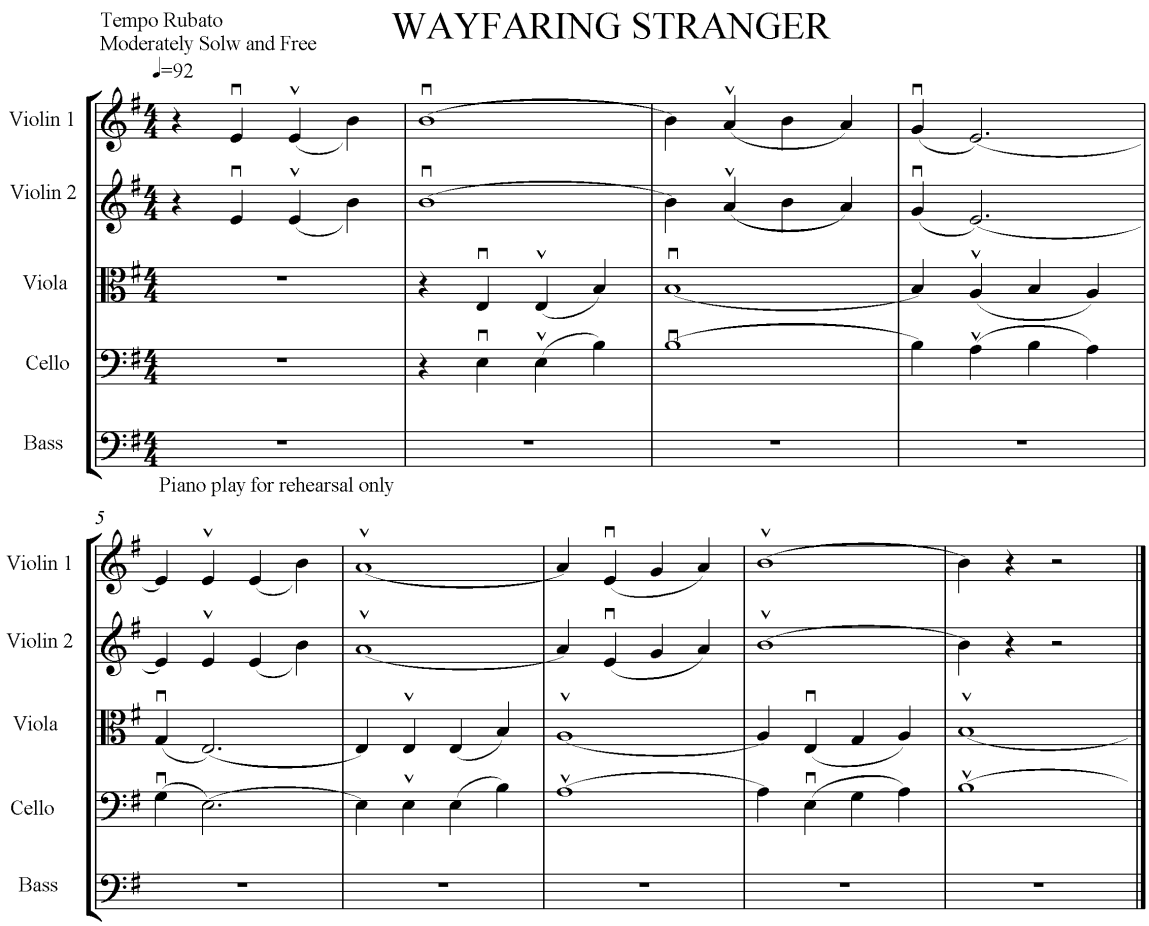



Rimsky-Korsakov in his “Principles of Orchestration” describes the top string of each instrument:

Violin-brilliant, Viola-Biting and nasal, Cello-chest voice, Bass-penetration.

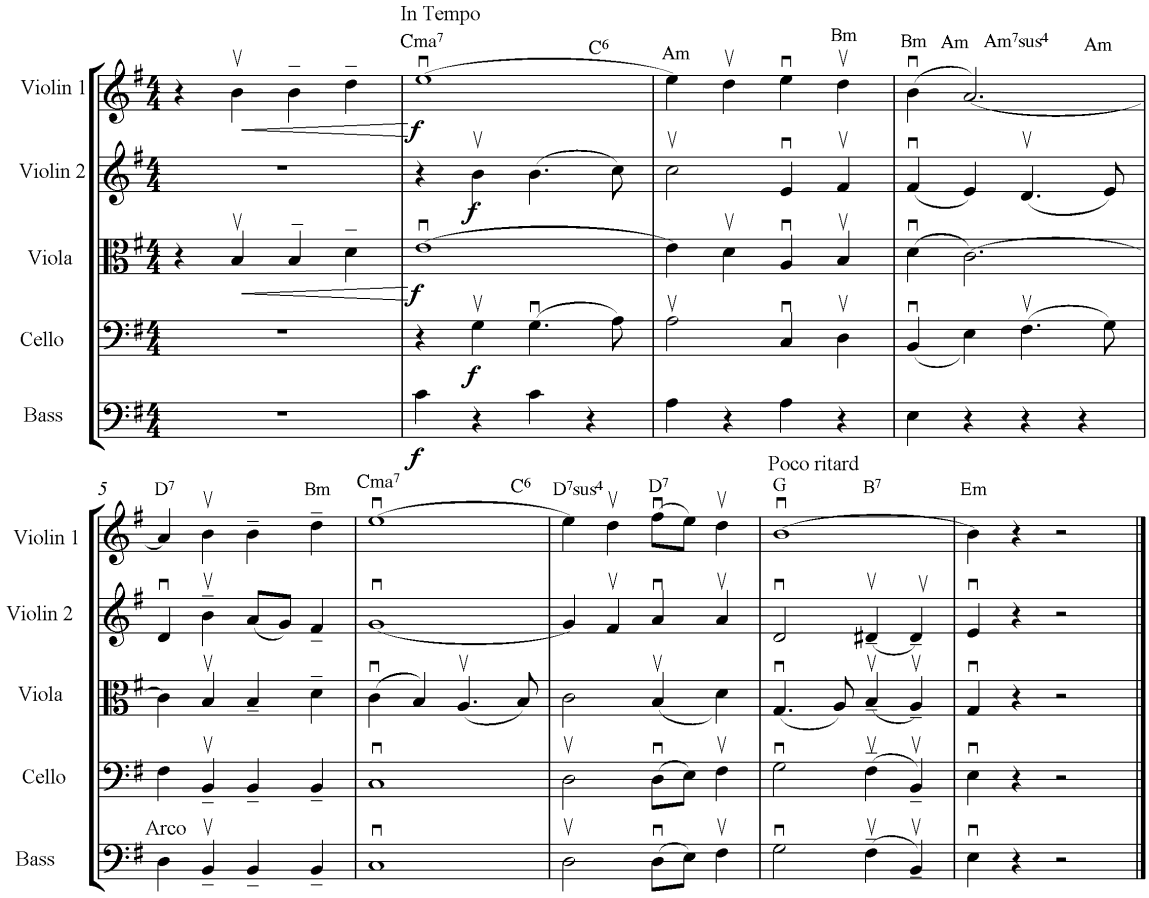
Here is part of an arrangement of “Wayfaring Stranger” for string orchestra that I completed a few years ago.

Observe the use of imitation between the violins and the violas and cellos. Notice that the basses are omitted, as their sound would create too heavy a sound for two musical lines.

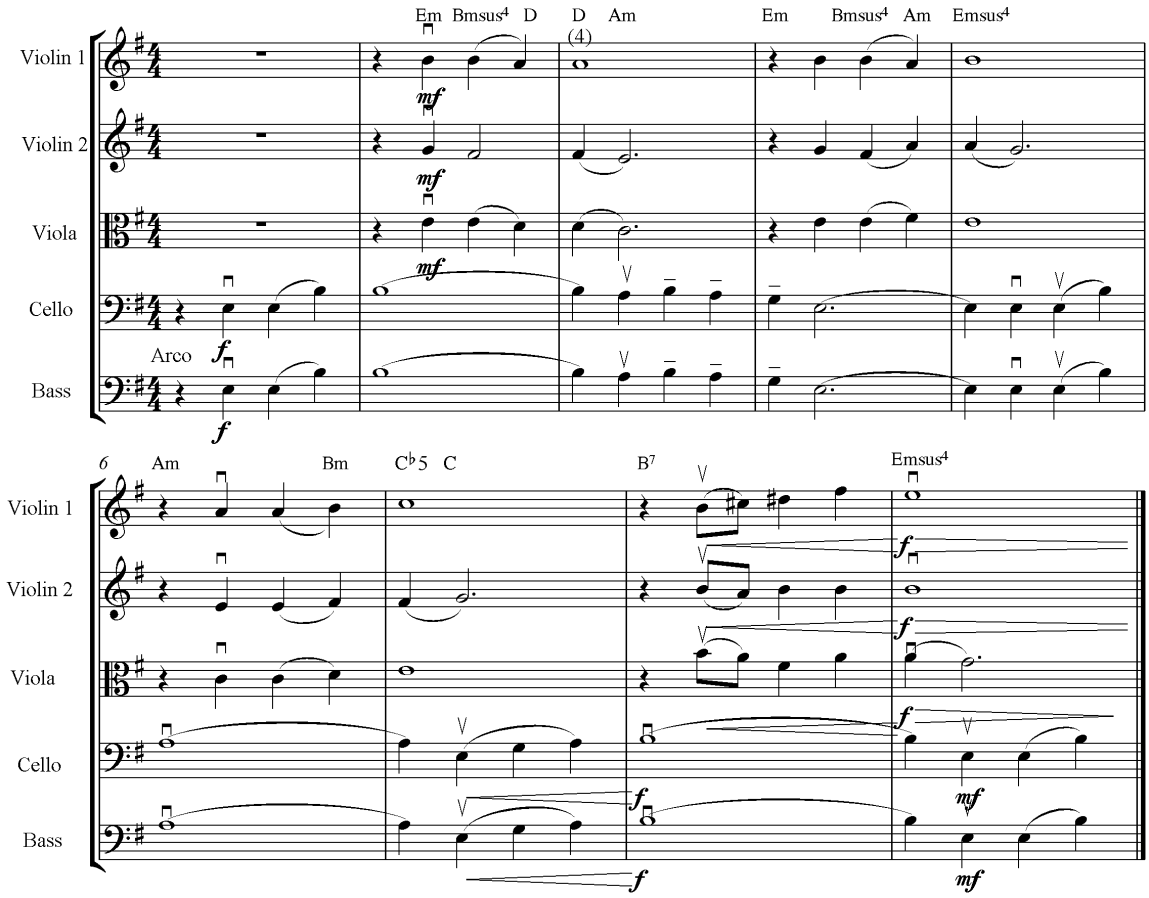



Notice that after sixteen measures of unison imitation, the strings divide into four-part harmony. Examine how the inner voice parts enrich and enliven the sound, along with the addition of a rhythm section. Observe that the bowings are carefully marked so the string players phrase together.

Notice the lines above or below the notes. This *Loure'* or *Portato* bowing means to separate slightly each of several notes taken in a slur. These markings make the notes fuller, broader and add emphasis. The *poco ritard* at the end of the phrase allows the phrase to breathe before the next phrase begins.




The second chorus (nine measures shown) utilizes unison cellos and basses playing the melody, while the violins and violas play three-part harmony and moving lines above.




Here is an illustration of how to apply the compositional technique of imitation to add interest to a string ensemble.

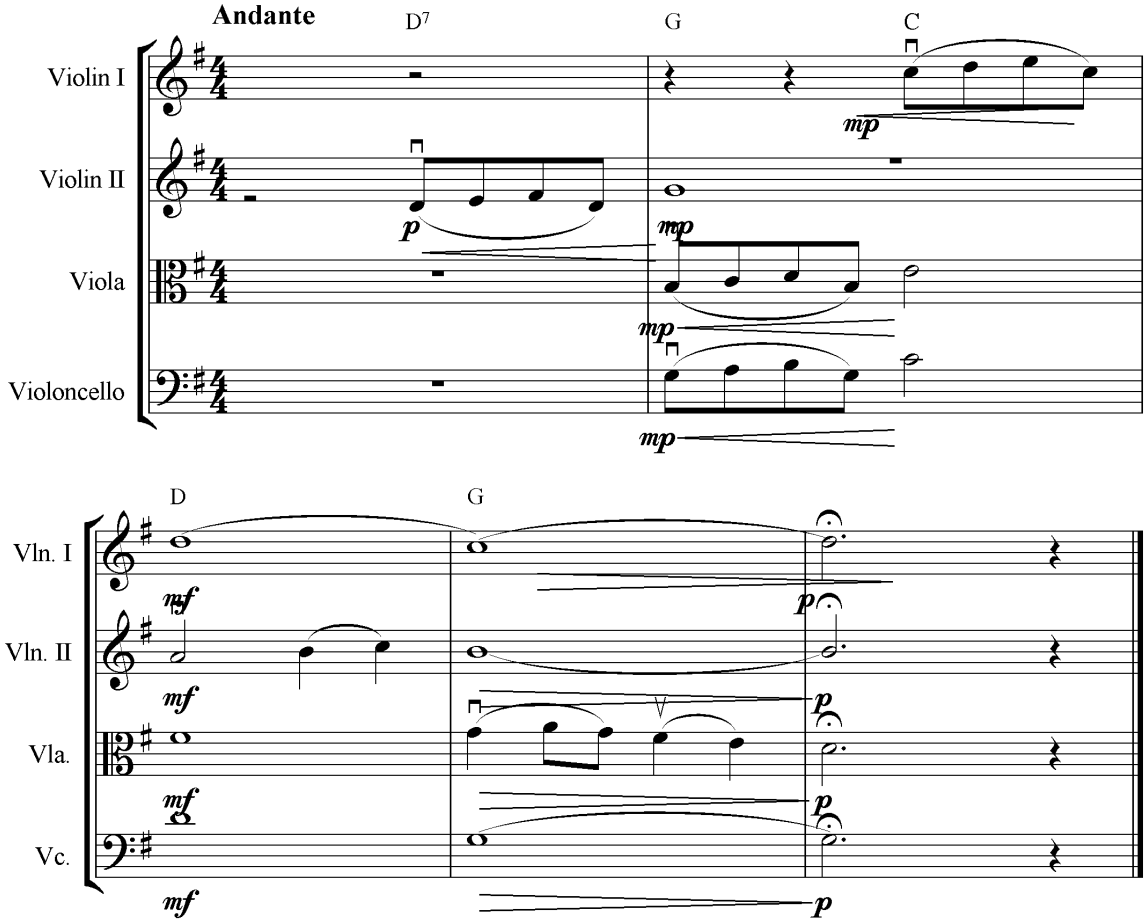
## ARRANGING HINTS

Here are a few helpful suggestions for arranging music for strings.

1. Give plenty of rest to the string basses, since their sound tends to fatigue the ear. Omit them from the bass line in very soft passages. One bass combined with the cellos is sufficient for pizzicato passages.
2. Avoid octave leaps in the cellos, unless a rest precedes the octave.
Violins sound best when written in unison or thirds in the upper register.
3. Have cellos and bass play in octaves. This will provide a satisfactory bass line for the string ensemble.
4. Avoid large gaps between the bass and the next inner voice above-aim for a maximum distance of an octave or a tenth interval.
5. Writing the melody two octaves apart (instead of one octave apart) will produce a full and powerful sound.

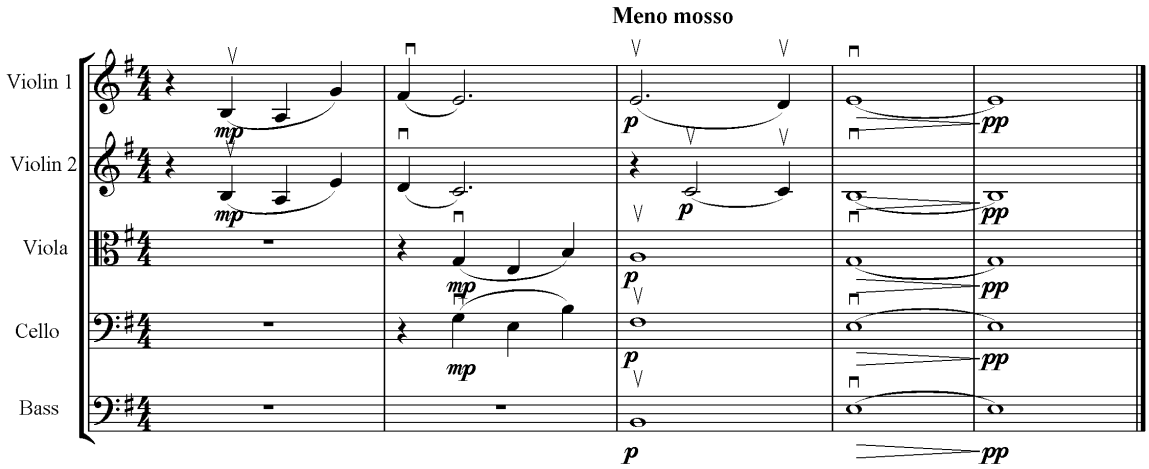
6. The use of counterpoint in the inner voices adds interest and movement to the arrangement.

Here is an example of how to use the compositional technique of imitation to add interest to a string ensemble.




By now, you should be aware that moving lines sound really great in a string section, particularly when they occur in an inner part.

The following example illustrates how the compositional technique of imitation can be effective for an ending to Wayfaring Stranger. Notice that the string bass is *tacet* until the last three measures. This addition of the string bass adds depth to the sound and finalizes the ending by reinforcing the tonic of the E minor chord.




I recommend that arrangers avoid the use of the open E and open A strings on the violin. They are too shrill sounding and the student is not able to play with vibrato on open strings, which takes away from the warmth of the string sound. Include fingerings (4) where needed above an open string.

In Part II , I will discuss the spacing of chords and the distribution of notes according to the harmonic series, suggestions for arranging the same idea in a different way, the advantages or disadvantages between open and close position voicings, and how to achieve an appropriate string balance.