

*Strengthen Concert Band and/or Orchestra with Jazz**by J. Richard Dunscomb*

Why Jazz? It is my belief that the concert band and/or orchestra should serve as the core of any successful instrumental music program. A successful jazz component can however strengthen the entire instrumental program. The winners in this scenario are musically enriched students who enthusiastically stay with the program.

It is clear that very few universities prepare their students to teach jazz. This creates a significant void when the emerging director finds himself in front of a jazz ensemble. All directors want their jazz ensembles to be successful—and they can be! Planning and implementing a jazz program can most easily begin with a design that provides a foundation and structure. Incorporating a jazz ensemble that focuses on the individual as well as the ensemble is certainly one of the keys.

Today establishing a jazz curriculum that complements the entire program means utilizing the National Music Standards. Jazz music meets each of the standards. We must also be prepared to assess teaching the jazz ensemble.

The similarities in teaching concert band/orchestra music and jazz are many and should be embraced. The differences are few and learning them is as simple as learning another style of music. The initial key to success is to listen to jazz—that means both the director and the students. Can you imagine performing a Baroque work without ever studying and hearing the Baroque style?

The first steps: Having enthusiasm for jazz is contagious and can create a vibrant center for learning. It is essential that you not only study the musical score of each selection to be rehearsed but also listen repeatedly and critically to a recording of the specific arrangement or at least music in the style of the chart performed. The more prepared you are, the more rewarding, educational, and fun it can be for everyone.

It is important to have clear and realistic approaches for teaching jazz including jazz techniques and resources. Approach the rehearsal as an informal concert, and program the rehearsal so that there is a variety of styles and tempos. Strive for balance: the new additions to the folder with the “almost ready for performance”; the music that emphasizes open solo sections with the more intricately arranged; the driving, loud, and furious with the subtle, delicate, and lightly swinging compositions. It is always a good idea to begin and end the rehearsal with music that the group plays well. A simple outline for a rehearsal could include the following:

- A chart the band is familiar with and plays well.
- Sight-reading a new chart.
- A moderately difficult chart that will require time to rehearse.
- A chart that is difficult and will require time to rehearse.
- A chart they know and play well.

The role of the conductor/director: While the role of the jazz ensemble conductor is similar to that of a concert band/orchestra conductor, it does vary in meaningful ways. Conducting the jazz ensemble is similar to a coach of an athletic team—creating an atmosphere of teamwork is essential. Conducting the jazz band is a visual reflection of the band’s sound. Traditional conducting techniques are used sparingly in a jazz ensemble; however, there are specific jazz techniques that can help the performers. The standard way to count off a tune verbally in four is “1-click, 2-click, 1-2-3-4.” In rehearsal, the click can be the metronome or fingers snapping, while in performance it will be your fingers snapping. You can help students focus on this issue of steady time by having them take turns during rehearsal of counting off a tune.

Using the continuous conducting patterns of a concert band or orchestra is inappropriate with a jazz ensemble. In jazz ensembles, the conductor is needed for tempo setting, cues, dynamics, balance, attacks, phrasing, musical interpretation, cut-offs, and much more, but *not* continuous meter patterns. You should conduct in a traditional manner when there are ritardandos, rubatos, or meter changes and for cueing entrances. But even in these situations, you should conduct the beats only as long as it is needed. You will find that all of these gestures are needed more in rehearsals than in concert. There is a noticeable degree of confidence displayed by students playing well without a conductor beating time in front of them.

For most directors the two most challenging aspects of the jazz ensemble are improvisation and rhythm section. The remainder of this article will focus only on the rhythm section due to space limitations.

The Rhythm Section: One of the most immediate goals is to achieve clarity of sound in the rhythm section. To accomplish this efficiently everyone in the rhythm section must understand their role, as well as that of each member of the rhythm section. The word “comping” will come up many times and is simply short for accompanying, or being complementary to all that’s going on. This can apply to a variety of settings, such as playing chord changes behind a soloist or supporting a vocalist to help him or her sound good. The number one priority for a good rhythm section is always to complement.

The rhythm section is divided into two segments. The bass and drums are the primary timekeepers; the piano and guitar are the harmonic voices responsible for comping. The piano and guitar have a critical role as timekeepers as well. The rhythm section set-up should reflect these roles. Proper placement of instruments in the jazz band is extremely important and none more important than those in the rhythm section. Visual and aural sight lines are extremely important. The functions of instruments in the rhythm section dictate their placement.

The pianist and guitarist need to be close enough to hear clearly as well as see each other. As shown in the seating chart, the guitarist is seated just off the right side or the upper register of the keyboard. This placement encourages working together and allows for good communication to determine alternating comping responsibilities.

The bass and drums also need to be very close to each other. Depending on the preference of the director and the needs of the band, the bass can be on either side of the drummer. The bass is generally placed between the piano and drummer. This is preferred because it separates the drums from the piano and prevents possible bleed through when the piano is miked.

The bass player must be able to see and hear the drummer’s ride cymbal to help lock in the time. It is also important that the drummer is able to see the bass player’s right hand for the same reason.

All rhythm section instruments should be positioned close to one another so they can function as a compact section. Notice the placement of amps in the set-up diagram, generally three feet behind the player. This is important so all players can hear and maintain the balance of sound. It is through these aural and visual lines of communication that a rhythm section of individuals blend into a unified and cohesive rhythm section. In addition, there should not be a large space between the rhythm section and the wind section.

J. Richard Dunscomb is recognized nationally and internationally as one of the leading experts in the field of jazz music and jazz education. Active as a clinician, author, guest conductor, adjudicator, and consultant he designed the jazz program at Florida International University where he was Professor of Music and Director of the Jazz Performance program. Dunscomb is the international coordinator for the 10,000-member International Association for Jazz Education and has served as its president. In addition, he is on the board of directors for the Midwest Clinic.

JAZZ ENSEMBLE SET UP

