

Some Basic Tips on Improving Jazz Ensemble Scores at Festivals and Contest

Freddie Mendoza

One of the many things I am asked to do as the Co-coordinator of Jazz Studies at Texas State University-San Marcos throughout each year is to sit on three to four person panels, and judge jazz ensembles, at all levels, from around the state of Texas. While the following article may not be appropriate for a seasoned jazz director—whether it be at the middle school, high school, junior college, college, or University level—I see the same simple errors committed over and over again. These common mistakes always result in lower contest scores, no matter who the judge, and are easily addressed with a bit of careful attention by the director. While many of the points may seem common sense to some, they are repeated from contest to contest, festival to festival, time and time again. I am listing the following items not necessarily in order of importance, though I will state at times, that some are more crucial to consider than others. The considerations listed below refer to contest selections, not school concerts, a discussion which may be saved for another day.

Pick Music Within the Technical Range of the Ensembles Ability

The first and probably most important consideration when preparing for contest is music selection. The most common error I see by directors of all skill levels, is programming music that is simply out of the technical ability of the band. There are many reasons for this. Many directors fondly remember a piece they played from their own high school, or college experience, and force their poor students to try and master the same, often times difficult music. They might also simply go by the fact they recognize a certain title, and fail to consider the difficulty level of the arrangement. These days most jazz ensemble music is “graded” in some fashion, either through the use of letters, numbers, or descriptive terms. (For example: Grade 1-7, A-G, or beginning, intermediate, advanced, and professional.) Typically, the lower the letter or number the easier the chart, the higher the marking the harder. These “grades” refer to trumpet ranges, rhythm section difficulty, and/or the presence

of doubles in the woodwind/saxophone section. Students are well aware when they are executing music successfully, and music that is too hard can be demoralizing to a band who wants to sound good for themselves, the judges, and the audience. The music should be challenging, yet success must be in reach of the ensemble.

The first and perhaps most important considerations are the lead trumpet ranges, rhythm section difficulty (especially in the bass and drums) and difficulty of trombone parts. A director should start here first. If a piece is too high for the lead trumpeter, and stays at this level or range, you run the possibility of damaging—even permanently—your lead players’ chops. If the music is too difficult for the bassist/drummer, the band will be dead in the water before even starting. While the level of difficulty of the sax/woodwind parts should be considered, this is usually much easier to overcome than the brass and rhythm parts. Any good judge would give higher marks to a band playing easier music the band can execute well, than harder music that is played in a sloppy, loose manner, with many missed notes.

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Do Not Pick Music That is Not Jazz!

I have yet to meet a judge—and I have worked with many of the best—who appreciate rock, or pop tunes arranged for jazz ensemble, current or otherwise. One of the main points of a jazz ensemble is to introduce jazz music to young students. This type of program may work for school concerts, but you really cross the line from jazz ensemble to pep band, basketball band, or dance team music—which IS IN NO WAY JAZZ ENSEMBLE MUSIC!! I can almost guarantee you will not receive any credit from judges if you present this at contest! I should also dispel the myth right here and now...jump swing IS NOT JAZZ IN ANY WAY SHAPE OR FORM! My best advice—just let it go! There is simply too much great music out there that is actually jazz music, written in almost every type of groove imaginable. The common argument from directors who unfortunately pick these tunes is often “it makes the music more accessible”. This is simply not true, and if we can put this to bed right now, how much better would the world be for all of us!

Pick a Well Rounded Concert

A typical, 20-25 minute, well rounded contest program consists of three to four tunes, and should include 1-2 swing tunes, a ballad, and some type of “straight-eighth tune” such as a Latin, Rock, or Funk. There should also be a good variety of tempos. The slow tempo is taken care of by the ballad, but the other selections should include a medium tempo, and an up-tempo selection. A good blues tune thrown in the mix is always appreciated by judges, as this was the first type of song from which true jazz evolved. It

also be noted that Rag-time music is not jazz music, as it contains no improvisation, although it was one of the pre-cursors to the jazz style, pre-1900.

Never Take Written Jazz Solos to Contest

This is simply cheating, and any jazz musician, or competent judge can smell this a mile a way. YOU

WILL NEVER FOOL ANYONE and it does not make the music better at all. Improvisation is the cornerstone of jazz music, and if you take it out of the equation you are not playing jazz. I have yet to meet a judge that accepts or prefers this. I am sure judges of all types would appreciate an honest attempt at improvisation much more than a written solo any day, even if it is not of a high quality, whether written by the student, the publisher/arranger, or a talented director. Written solos should however be learned and studied carefully by the student. They are an excellent springboard for students to

develop possible ideas and vocabulary that may be in turn applied to the solo in question, but should never be used as the performance solo. The ONLY time I am accepting of a written solo is if you are playing a transcription of Duke Ellington's Music. The scope of this article prevents me from going into deep explanation of why this is acceptable over other written solos, so you will have to trust me on this!

LISTEN TO AND STUDY THE SELECTIONS as played by either the professional orchestras they originated from, as in the case of a Stan Kenton, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Thad Jones, Woody Herman, Don Menza, or similar selection. If it is a newer tune, sold by a publisher, there is almost always a demo recording. Make sure each band

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member gets a copy to listen to, and studies it carefully. This is paramount to understanding the concept of the style and articulation. Most jazz musicians/judges are already familiar with the style, even if they have never heard the tune, and will know within 4-8 measures or so whether you (the band and director) have done your homework!

Set Up in a Traditional Format, Grounded in Historical Context

I can promise you all, you do not know more than the masters who came before you, and if there was a better way to set up a jazz band, it would have been discovered long ago. A Jazz Ensemble is in no way related to a concert band, or orchestra, other than the use of some similar instruments, and you are not going to reinvent the wheel! The most common mistake I see is the rhythm section is set up “miles” away from the horns. Insist that the festival allow you to move the drums ALMOST ON TOP OF AND EVEN WITH, THE TROMBONE SECTION. The second trombone player, who sits in the band on the rhythm section side, should have the drummer’s crash symbol and high hat practically in his/her lap. The bass amp (which is NOT directional at all) should be behind the bassist and drummer and elevated so they

can “feel” as well as hear the bass sound. This will generate a sense of confidence in both players. The bassist should be slightly to the right of the drummer, and in the “crook” of the piano if there is grand piano present. If there is a guitarist, they should be seated in front of the drums and bass, and lined up even with the pianist. Alternate percussion, if there is any, should be toward the back, behind the drummer and bassist, and there should be line of sight for all rhythm section players. Much of the communication that needs to take place amongst rhythm section players revolves around their ability to see each other, as much as hear each other. This will always result in a more balanced, tighter ensemble, and foster more communication between rhythm section players and soloists.

While this is no means a comprehensive list of considerations, and does not address many other factors, such as rehearsal technique, the above mentioned items represent many of the most common “mistakes” I see, almost without fail from contest to contest, in the vast majority of bands I am asked to judge. If you pay attention to the simple suggestions mentioned above, I can guarantee a more successful performance, a tighter ensemble, and higher marks from the Judges.

Freddie Mendoza is the Co-coordinator of the Jazz Studies Department at Texas State University-San Marcos. His duties include, directing the Texas State Jazz Ensemble and teaching coursework for the department and the School of Music at large. He has been directing Jazz Ensembles ranging from beginning to the most advanced for more than twenty years. His talents are in high demand as professional trombonist, composer, arranger, producer, and is an Artist for Getzen Custom Series Jazz Trombones. He is sought after as a clinician, adjudicator, director, and guest artist at junior highs, high schools, colleges, and universities throughout the nation, and is currently working on his doctorate in Music Education in the elite “Cohort Program” at the world re-known Teacher’s College, the graduate school at Columbia University in New York City.