



Effective Jazz Ensemble Rehearsal Techniques

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DEMONSTRATION GROUP:

O'Connor HS Jazz Ensemble

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Texas Bandmasters Association 2017 Convention/Clinic

JULY 20 – 22, 2017

**HENRY B. GONZALEZ CONVENTION CENTER
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS**

Effective Jazz Ensemble Rehearsal Techniques

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This presentation represents what I feel are the basics to consider when preparing to rehearse your jazz ensemble. In my 45+ years of performing and directing bands on the college and professional level, I think I've come up with a pretty simple formula, which has worked well for me for many years. I'll enumerate these below in addition to first talking about the preparation, which is of special significance to the aspiring jazz ensemble director.

When rehearsing a jazz ensemble, directors need to take a few very important items into consideration. First, this is essentially chamber music: meaning one person on a part. Except when absolutely necessary, there should be no doubling of parts in a jazz ensemble. If you have more players than are needed in one section or another, consider rotating out so that everyone has the opportunity to play the music the way it was intended. This will help instill a sense of confidence in all of the individual players. Although there may be strength in numbers, this philosophy does not always reinforce learning the intricacies of the style.

Preparation for the Director

First of all, know your band! You need to know the strengths and weaknesses in your group and program accordingly. Try to make learning your ultimate goal, not playing the latest Gordon Goodwin chart. If you have the personnel, go for it! If not, make sure that reaching the goal is not only attainable but also fun for your students. Not all jazz charts require a lead trumpeter with a high "G" or above or a tenor soloist ala John Coltrane. I've been to far too many festivals where I'm adjudicating a band attempting to play music that's just too difficult for them. Not only does this result in a poor performance, but also students do not learn and internalize the subtleties of playing in a big band. As with all learning, it's important to be able to apply what you've learned in one piece of music to the next. Sight-reading on a regular basis is imperative in reinforcing students' ability to interpret what's written on the page, even though it's just an approximation of the final product.

No matter how strong your personnel may be, I would always start with the basics! There's nothing better than hearing a vintage Count Basie chart played correctly. Usually not a lot of flash, but they always feel great! Make a "playlist" which includes a variety of styles to include the classics from Basie, Ellington, Herman, etc. Some of the most successful directors I've met make a point of playing recordings for their students whenever possible – maybe at the beginning of rehearsal when everyone is getting ready would be a good start. It's very important to "model" the pros and figure out why they sound so good.

An Essential Discography

In no way is this list all-inclusive, but the recordings listed below should help you and your ensemble "model" the style of these masters. Not only is it a learning experience, but also a lot of fun listening. When I started compiling this list, I realized that I could probably spend the rest of my career doing it and still not be finished! My apologies to any of your favorites I've left off of this list, but here is a good "starter" list for you and your ensemble, even if you can only find one recording from each band.

Fletcher Henderson

A Study in Frustration: The Fletcher Henderson Story (Columbia – box set)

Duke Ellington

The Chronological Duke Ellington & His Orchestra 1932-33 (Classics)

The Carnegie Hall Concerts: January 1943 (Prestige: released 1977)

The Chronological Duke Ellington & His Orchestra 1947 (Classics)

Ellington at Newport (1956 – re-released in 1999)

Paris Blues (United Artists)

The Far East Suite (RCA)

70th Birthday Concert (Solid State)

Count Basie

April in Paris (1955-56 Verve)

The Atomic Mr. Basie (1958 Roulette)

Chairman of the Board (1958 Roulette)

Basie Straight Ahead (1969 Dot)

Woody Herman

Four Brothers 1945–1947 (2008)

Complete 1948–1959 Capitol Sessions (2001)

The Woody Herman Story (2000) (4 CD Box Set)

Woody's Gold Star (1990)

Glenn Miller

Glenn Miller – The Popular Recordings (1938-1942)

Essential Glenn Miller (Compilation – re-mastered)

Glenn Miller – Greatest Hits (RCA Victor)

Sauter-Finegan

The Sound of the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra (RCA Victor, 1952)

New Directions in Music (RCA Victor, 1953)

Adventure in Time (RCA Victor, 1956)

Benny Goodman

The Famous 1938 Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert Vols. 1, 2, & 3 (1938, Columbia)

The Great Benny Goodman (1956, Columbia)

Benny Goodman And His Orchestra (1977)

Thad Jones/Mel Lewis

Presenting Thad Jones/Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra (1966 Solid State)

Central Park North (1969 Solid State)

Consummation (1970 Solid State/Blue Note)

New Life: Dedicated to Max Gordon (1975 A&M)

Live at the Village Vanguard, ...Featuring the Music of Bob Brookmeyer (1980)

Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra (1982 Finesse)

Stan Kenton

Stan Kenton's Artistry in Rhythm (Capitol No. 167 '45-'48)

New Concepts of Artistry in Rhythm (Capitol 383 1952)

Kenton in Hi-Fi (Capitol No. 724 1956)

Cuban Fire! (Capitol No. 731 1956)

Stan Kenton Conducts the Los Angeles Neophonic Orchestra (Capitol No. 2424 1965-1966)

Buddy Rich

Swingin' New Big Band (1966 Pacific Jazz Records/Blue Note Records)

Big Swing Face (1967 Pacific Jazz) – Live

The New One! (1967 Pacific Jazz) – aka Take it Away

Mercy, Mercy (1968 Pacific Jazz) – Live

Rob McConnell & The Boss Brass

Rob McConnell & The Boss Brass (1971)

Nobody Does It Better (1977)

Live in Digital (1980)

All In Good Time (1982)

Gordon Goodwin

Swingin' for the Fences (2001)

XXL (2003)

Airmen of Note

My apologies for including only one of our “premier” military jazz ensembles, but this group is still very near and dear to my heart! You can access all of the “Note’s” recordings at this website:

<http://rewindplay.com/airmenofnote/sounds/sounds.htm>

The Saxophone Section

The usual jazz ensemble saxophone section consists of 2 altos, 2 tenors and 1 baritone saxophone. There can be other combinations depending upon the style and sound desired, but this arrangement is the most typical. Saxophonists are also regularly called upon to “double” on woodwinds to include flute, clarinet, bass clarinet and even double reeds at times. The lead alto player will be called upon to play soprano saxophone at times and the baritone player may be asked to play alto as well. The lead (1st) tenor will also have a soprano part from time to time as well. Some of the more unusual combinations will be the result of “custom” arrangements, where the arranger is aware of the strengths and “doubles” of all of the players in a section. During my tenure with the USAF Band’s “*Airmen of Note*,” our staff arranger at the time, Mike Crotty, would ask each one of us how many instruments we owned. It was not unusual for one of my lead alto parts to include alto sax, soprano sax, flute, clarinet, piccolo and alto flute as well! This is of course not typical and in this case, Mike knew all of the players in the section very well.

I would consider the “classic” saxophone section sound to be the Count Basie Orchestra of the mid to late 1950’s and beyond. With Marshall Royal at the helm, not many sections played better together or made a better “section sound” than this one! Of course, we would have to include Duke Ellington’s saxophone section, led by Johnny Hodges, as another example of this “classic sound.” This is where I usually start with all of the bands

I've worked with over the years. It's been my experience that they need to listen to and understand this sound before we get into the rigors of doubling, etc.

Good intonation in the saxophone section depends upon each player's understanding of his or her "role" in the section. The "lead" alto player is by definition the leader of the section, but he/she is dependent on the baritone player in setting the pitch. They enjoy what we could call a "symbiotic" relationship in that many times they'll be playing the same part in octaves. When the lead alto and baritone are "in sync," it becomes much easier for the rest of the section to do their job well. The rest of the section needs to "fill in" in the gaps harmonically and dynamically between the baritone and lead alto to add fullness and support to the overall sound of the section. The lead player dictates phrasing and no one internally in the section should add scoops or bends that are not initiated in the lead part. The dynamic shape and direction is set once again by the lead player even though all of the parts may not be always moving in the same direction.

Once your section is capturing the essence of the "classic" sax section sound, it may be time to delve into some music that requires doubling. Some directors have at times added additional personnel to cover flute and clarinet parts, which is understandable, but the ultimate goal is for each *saxophone* player to develop these skills as well. In the professional world, a contactor will typically not hire two players to do the job that one player *should* be able to do. Please do not "add" clarinet or flute parts to your saxophone section to give other players the "experience" of playing in the jazz ensemble. This is a noble thought, but once again not staying true to the style and it's just not the right sound for the group.

The Trombone Section

Typical trombone sections throughout the history of big bands have included two, three, four or five trombones. For the jazz ensemble of today, four is the usual number although five is also not uncommon. A four-person trombone section would consist of three tenors and a bass and a five-person trombone section would add a second bass trombone. The five-trombone set-up became the standard for the Kenton Band in the 1940's and 50's and was a hallmark of the big "brass" sound of that band throughout its history. There are many fine examples of excellent trombone sections over the years, but perhaps the USAF Band's *Airmen of Note* on an album entitled "*Bone Voyage*" back in 1984 recorded one of the finest examples of a trombone section "in sync". Although not commercially available, you can access this recording and other recordings by the *Airmen of Note* at this website: <http://rewindplay.com/airmenofnote/sounds/sounds.htm>

Intonation, blend, and balance follow the same protocol for the trombones as the saxophones. Although the lead trombone is the stylistic leader of the section, we depend upon the bass trombone to establish fundamental pitch for the section. Trombonists usually don't have to be concerned about "doubling," but they do need to make sure they have the correct assortment of mutes that may be called for from time to time. Straight, cup and bucket mutes are commonly called for in the jazz ensemble and from time to time plungers and even harmon mutes, so make sure that these are available to your players if needed. Remember also that adding a mute to any brass instrument will cause it to go sharp, so this introduces an entirely new set of pitch problems you may need to consider in tuning your trombone section.

The Trumpet Section

The typical trumpet section in big bands throughout the years has consisted of three, four or five trumpets. The standard today is four or five players, depending upon the arrangements. Intonation in the section once again comes from the “bottom up,” with the lead player setting the style not only for the section, but also in many cases for the entire ensemble in the case of “tutti” sections. Your trumpet section will be called upon to “double” on flugelhorn and will also need to have the typical assortment of mutes available as called for by the composer/arranger. Straight, cup and bucket mutes once again are the norm with the harmon mute and plunger sometimes called for as well. The harmon mute is typically more of a “solo” mute choice than an “ensemble” mute choice.

A strong lead player is very important for the success of your ensemble’s performance. Not only is range a consideration, but perhaps more important is accuracy. It is often said that the lead player is “not allowed” to make a mistake, and in many professional circles that is true. In an educational situation, however, it is important to insure the success of your lead player(s) by choosing realistic repertoire for their ability. This is not to say that you shouldn’t challenge them to improve, but make sure that your goals, especially in the area of range, are realistic. Many aspiring lead players injure themselves by reaching for notes they’re not yet ready to play, or by practicing incorrectly. As the old fable says, “slow and steady wins the race,” and this is definitely true in the development of your lead player(s). Many ensembles will have two players share the lead trumpet duties simply because of the physical demands of the position. This is not an unreasonable arrangement in a school ensemble and may even encourage players to use the “buddy system” to learn the intricacies of the art of lead playing. Competition may be healthy to a point at audition time, but once your band is set it’s important to make sure that every member of the ensemble understands that this is truly a “team sport.” Every member’s participation, no matter what part they play, is crucial to the success of the ensemble’s performance.

The Rhythm Section

The rhythm section is perhaps a “mystery” to many new jazz ensemble directors as most of us are not rhythm section players. It’s very important to understand the role of each member of the rhythm section and how they need to work together to help establish the proper time and “feel” for the band. Contrary to popular belief, although your drummer and bassist are crucial in setting the “time” for your band, playing the “time” is the responsibility of every member of the ensemble.

Your drummer is the “engine” of the band. Many younger players focus on “chops” rather than good time, and this is something I often hear at festivals from younger drummers. Good technique is absolutely necessary, but that doesn’t mean complexity. Some of the best drummers I’ve had the pleasure of working with over the years just kept things very simple but played with impeccable time and feel. Listening and emulating the masters of this style is important for any player who wants to be the “engine” for his ensemble. Harold Jones, who was the drummer for the Count Basie Orchestra for many years and now Tony Bennett’s drummer, is a master of simplicity. He never plays with the ferocity of a Buddy Rich or Dave Weckl, but what he does play is always right!

In the swing style, the hi-hat on 2 and 4 is standard as is a ride pattern or simple quarter notes on the ride cymbal. Many young players will play what we used to call “4 on the floor,” quarter notes with the bass drum, but this is not necessary in any chart you might perform today. The “time keepers” on the set are the cymbals as mentioned, with the “drums” being used to highlight or “kick” ensemble figures. There are many method books out today that provide an excellent overview of these techniques with the appropriate exercises, but perhaps one of my favorites was written by long-time Frank Sinatra drummer Irv Cotler and is called *“I’ve Got You Under My Skins.”* It includes original recordings and charts to play along with and is a great place for any aspiring big band drummer to start. Of course there are many newer publications on the market today that are available and also address many of these same concerns.

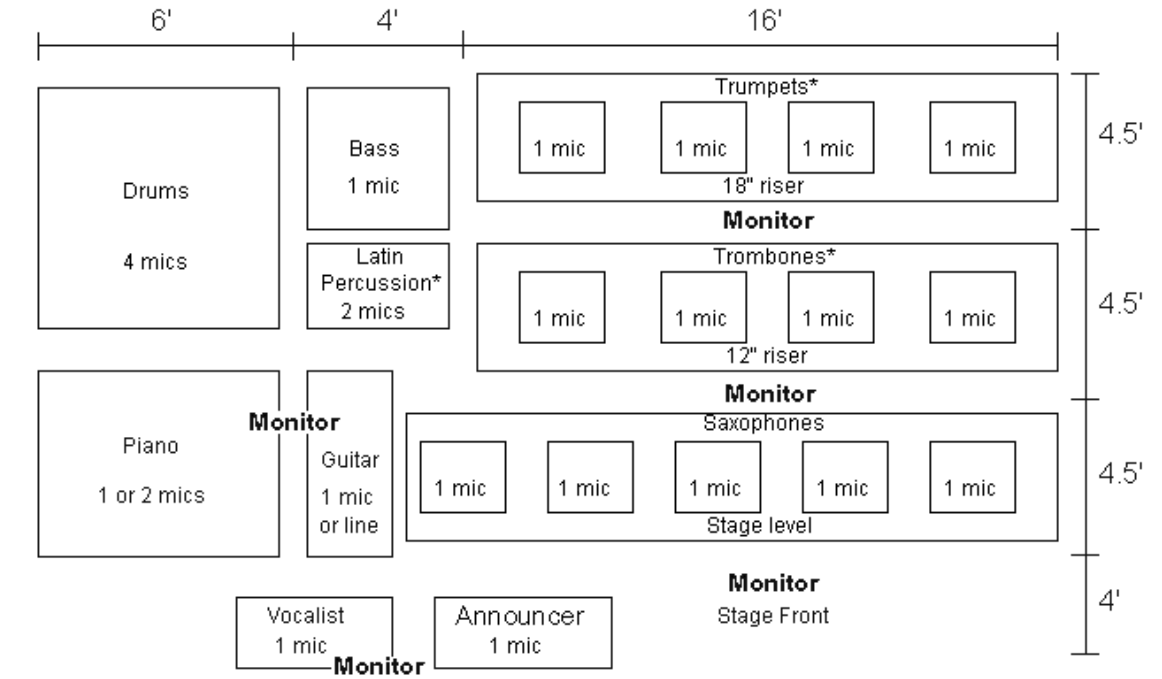
Your bassist can be considered the “heartbeat” of your band and needs to work side by side with your drummer to establish a great feel or “pocket” for the ensemble. Many directors do not have the choice of electric vs. upright bass, but in many situations the upright is the preferred choice unless electric is specified in the arrangement. You can go with electric if necessary, but just know that you won’t be able to get a totally “authentic” sound in many of the standard swing tunes with that instrument. In the traditional swing style, quarter notes are the key. I often have my drummer and bassist just play simple time with quarter notes in the bass and just the hi-hat on 2 and 4 in the drums to start. Then I add quarter notes on the ride cymbal. Except for a little coloring or “kicks” with the snare or bass drum, that’s all you need to make a great feeling rhythm section. As with drum set, there are many texts available that address playing in a big band rhythm section. Two of my favorites are *“The Evolving Bassist”* by Rufus Reid and *“The Bottom Line”* by Todd Coolman.

Your pianist has the task of creating the harmonic framework for the ensemble but mainly for your soloists. “Comping” in a big band may not be very exciting, but when done correctly can add a lot to your band’s presentation. Many jazz charts today will have both written parts with chord voicings indicated, but some will just have written chord changes and expect your pianist to know what to do with them. Most younger pianists do not have the experience with creating a “hip” sounding voicing, especially with dominant chords, so they may need to also get some help from several texts that are available. Both Dan Haerle and Hal Galper have a variety of books available on jazz voicings for the keyboard player. It’s important to remember that most chords will sound best on the piano when kept in the middle range. It’s also not necessary to play ALL of the notes in a chord. In an extended dominant chord, many players will leave out the root and the fifth, as they don’t necessarily add to the color or function of the chord. Your pianist should also try to “model” both big band and small group pianists, as he/she will need to function in both capacities: big band pianist for the ensemble and small group pianist for soloists.

Perhaps the least glamorous position in the rhythm section belongs to your guitarist. In traditional settings, your guitarist is a “rhythm guitarist” who plays quarter notes or half notes and helps establish time with the drummer and bassist ala Freddie Green. Green made this style a hallmark of Count Basie’s rhythm section for over 40 years. Today’s guitarist, however, will be also called upon to play melodic lines with the horn section, play solos and also “comp” behind solos. When comping, it’s important for the pianist and guitarist not to play simultaneously, especially behind soloists. Playing together in the traditional sense (ala Basie as mentioned above) will work fine, but players tend to clash rhythmically when asked to play together behind a soloist. I usually have our pianist and guitarist either alternate choruses behind the soloist (this provides a nice color change), or take turns playing behind different soloists. As many younger guitarists come up in the rock tradition, they are not used to jazz voicings or reading written lines. As with the rest of the rhythm section, there are a variety of texts available to help with this process.

Two that are available include *“How to Play Jazz for Guitar”* by Jamey Aebersold and Corey Christiansen and *“Intermediate Jazz Conception for Guitar”* by Jim Snidero.

Preferred Stage Plot



*sometimes use 5th trumpet, and/or 5th trombone, and/or latin percussion positions.

Final Thoughts

This presentation is in no way intended to be the “catch all” for the aspiring director, but a starting point for making some great music. As with any musical organization, a good foundation with emphasis on the fundamentals is essential to create a well-polished final product. There’s no substitute for listening, modeling and emulating the masters of this style. I wish all of you the best as you pursue this uniquely American art form, Big Band Jazz! If you have any comments or suggestions regarding this presentation, my contact information is listed below for your convenience.

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