

## **Teaching Jazz – Music Selection, The Rhythm Section, The Teacher’s Role as Mentor/Coach**

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### **MUSIC SELECTION**

My experience as an educator and my years of evaluating new jazz music for *The Instrumentalist Magazine* have allowed for me to develop a list of priorities and a system for looking at and listening to potential charts for the big band. Here are a few things to think about when selecting music:

#### **Know your band**

The student groups you will teach will each have different strengths and weaknesses. Your choices should both play to the group’s strengths and also help develop your weaknesses. For example, don’t play a saxophone feature such as *Four Brothers* if you have a weak or unbalanced saxophone section – DO find a piece that offers a sax soli that is achievable and a bit challenging to give them something to reach for.

There are resources that help to categorize the jazz big band canon. Use these to explore the best-of-the-best charts as you gain experience in selecting tunes that are best for your ensembles.

Know your students instrumental ranges, reading skills, and improvisational levels. As you review potential scores, look for things such as key signatures, rhythms, ranges to be sure they will challenge but not overwhelm the players. Look at the solo section chord changes to see if they are age/skill appropriate for your soloists. Closely review the rhythm section parts to see if they offer extra notation help in the way of suggested piano and guitar voicings/chord charts, written bass lines with chord changes, and useful style patterns and accompaniment figures for the drum set player. Finally, see if the chart has any extra parts for non-standard instrumentation if needed. Otherwise, you may need to re-write parts for this on your own.

#### **Have a programming plan**

You should program for your jazz groups as you would for your wind band, orchestra, or choir. Take the time to listen to recordings, view sample scores, and read reviews of the music you are looking for.

What are your goals for the ensemble? You may need to put together 3-4 concerts, plan for a dinner dance, play for the student body, and play at a jazz festival or two. Each setting will offer different opportunities for music choices.

Will you expect your students to be able to improve their sight-reading skills? Will they be expected to learn less, the same, or more music than your other ensembles? How will this be affected by the need to balance learning improvisational skills? Will the students be able to interact with professional jazz musicians and how might this affect music choice?

## THE RHYTHM SECTION

In my view, the rhythm section is the most important aspect of creating a good band. It is very difficult to “hide” an inexperienced bassist, drummer, or pianist. So where do you begin?

### **Listen to exemplars**

The jazz tradition has always relied on deep listening and analysis for passing on its essential elements. Be sure that your students know that it is okay to “steal” musical ideas, timbres, rhythms, and other musical elements when learning how to play in the jazz style. The great jazz trumpeter Clark Terry described this learning process as moving from Imitation to Assimilation to Innovation (<https://www.jazzadvice.com/clark-terrys-3-steps-to-learning-improvisation>).

You must get your students to find exemplars (there are many lists available on line) on their instrument and listen intently and repeatedly to absorb the ideas, sound, and character of that musician. Here is a historical listening list I compiled for the Jazz Education Network: <http://jazzednet.org/resources/jazz-listening-101/> . This might be a good general starting point, but here is a list of jazz musicians by instrument:

<https://music.unl.edu/jazzstudies/HaarSuggestedJazzListeningList.pdf> .

**A young pianist** may be able to read and recreate the written voicings and rhythms on a jazz chart, but they must also learn from hearing how professional pianists create the same thing organically in order to start creating their own voicings and comping.

**A young guitarist** may only know how to read tab and will need guidance on reading notes/rhythms and chord symbols. Through listening, they will hear what the norms are for guitar playing in a big band setting and can settle in on a specific approach to master. For much big band playing, guitarist must play in a rhythm guitar mode in the style of the Basie Band guitarist, Freddy Green (<http://www.freddiegreen.org>).

**Young bass players** who don't read notes and/or chord symbols must make rapid and challenging improvements that benefit from a planned approach. Quite often, the lack of music reading skills is offset by having a strong ear. Listening and imitating for these kinds of young musicians may be a great way to begin. The development of a walking bass line follows some easy to understand musical concepts, and these concepts can be introduced one-by-one and added to a player's abilities as they go. One book that addresses this process is: *Crawl Before You Walk: A Beginner's Method for Creating Powerful Walking Bass Lines*, by Tom Harrington (<https://www.amazon.com/Crawl-Before-You-Walk-Beginners/dp/0739000632>).

**A young drum set player** may not have moved much beyond a basic set of beats (or styles) learned through listening to their favorite bands. The jazz idiom is very foreign to most students, and the concept of swing versus straight time will need to be developed. Listening to professional drummers of the swing style will help, along with presenting them with well written patterns to learn and incorporate into their motor memory. One such source combines written and aural examples: *Essential Styles for the Drummer and Bassist*, v. 1 & 2, by Steve Houghton ([https://www.amazon.com/Essential-Styles-Drummer-Bassist-Bk/dp/0739013548/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1525807178&sr=1-1&keywords=essential+styles+houghton](https://www.amazon.com/Essential-Styles-Drummer-Bassist-Bk/dp/0739013548/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1525807178&sr=1-1&keywords=essential+styles+houghton)). With a source like this, drummers and bassists can see and study a written example of a variety of styles, as well as hear them being performed.

### **Listen to each other**

Set up is critical to the successful communication between rhythm section players. There must be an easy way for them to make eye contact with each other for giving non-verbal cues. In addition, the drummer, bassist, and guitarist should be able to see each other creating the attacks on their instruments. Most often, young players do not take advantage of their eyes when playing. Being able to see the drummer striking the cymbal, the bassist plucking the strings, and the rhythmic strumming of the guitar can all help players to “lock in” to the pulse more tightly.

### **THE TEACHER’S ROLE AS MENTOR / COACH**

As a jazz teacher, our role changes from director to a more coach/mentor model. Although a jazz ensemble may seem like any other large ensemble (and in many ways it can be), you will be teaching students who are usually one on a part. Coaching chamber groups share this aspect with both the jazz band and, in particular, jazz combos. Part of your role is to build student investment in the learning process through active involvement in decision making, personal expression, and creative control.

As a coach, it is important to be able to model good jazz style and/or be able to point the students to exemplars both recorded and live. You must embolden students to gain confidence in their individual roles within the group, promote listening habits (both historically and when performing), and encourage self-expression by developing their own sound and creative improvisations/compositions.

Nothing helps a student become a stronger jazz musician than being able to improvise on their instrument what they hear in their mind. This single skill may be the most important one to help learn, through helping students to build a useable vocabulary of jazz language. One new curriculum addressing this training is: <http://www.shedthemusic.com> – Check it out!

### **One More thing....**

I recently saw this article, and it reminded me of how important our job is especially when it comes to the ways we teach and students learn:

*What We Should Learn from Jazz Band Teachers*, Psychology Today. 4/29, 2012.

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/memory-medic/201204/what-we-should-learn-jazz-band-teachers>)

Want online access to my materials? Go to: <https://www.davidfodor.com/jazz-teaching-info>