

The Jazz Big Band: Ingredients to Assure Good Ensemble Performances

By Scott Cowan, Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA)

International Trumpet Guild Journal is a quarterly magazine published by the International Trumpet Guild, an organization dedicated to fostering music education among trumpet teaching professionals in the U.S. Gary Mortenson serves as ITG Editor.

This article was originally published in select 2007/2008 issues of *International Trumpet Guild Journal*. Reprint made possible through the kind permission of ITG.

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Part One – January 2007

- Rehearsal Technique
- Repertoire Selection
- Aural Versus Verbal Instruction

I was afforded the opportunity to play in Jazz Big Bands from my youth through higher education. I experienced many styles of leadership, some more effective than others. Some ensembles I played in at the University level were at a professional level. Others were mere reading ensembles sorely lacking in basic technique, intonation, improvisational skills and appropriate feel. Throughout my nearly twenty years of directing jazz big bands and observing a myriad of world class band leaders, I have observed a plethora of ingredients, so to speak, that have contributed to successful performances. The following ingredients reflect my observations.

Ingredient #1: Rehearsal Technique

I would define rehearsal technique as the ability to extract the best results from your jazz ensemble. Good rehearsal technicians know their musical scores intimately. They have clear rehearsal agendas and goals and are able to meet these goals through efficient use of rehearsal time. They seek to communicate what they want in a concise, clear, diplomatic fashion. You may note that these observations differ very little from a conductor of other musical genres. This is true; however, the jazz genre seems to breed many conductors/directors that are simply too loose. Some are ill-prepared, unable to use rehearsal time

efficiently, and end up “winging it” far too much. Effective jazz big band rehearsal technicians rarely “conduct”. That is, they don’t conduct a continuous pattern in front of the ensemble. They reserve those moments for when the ensemble “really needs them,” like out of tempo markings such as *rubati* and *accelerandi*, or other examples of rhythmic “stretching.” Though it may be a matter of semantics, “director” is a better term for someone who leads a jazz big band. A director gives necessary cues and conducts only when needed. When conducting, a “less is more” non-flamboyant style is most appreciated and effective for the jazz big band. Staying out of the way should be the goal and will garner the best results. Most traditional jazz big band literature is void of frequent tempo changes. Once a groove (time/subdivision) is established by a bassist and drummer, it can be non-productive and a nuisance having time dictated up front. Ideally, the horns (brass and saxophones) will hear the groove/time from the rhythm section and adjust with them creating a synergistic ensemble experience. Hence, the concept of jazz as a democracy rather than an autocracy should be the goal in the jazz big band. One exception to the principle of “conducting little and directing much” is with a young or inexperienced rhythm section. Unfortunately, constant conducting may be required to prevent the ensemble from falling apart.

Ingredient #2: **Repertoire Selection**

Picking the right jazz big band repertoire is a practical as well as a philosophical issue. On the practical side, picking suitable repertoire for your ensemble is a critical ingredient for a successful jazz big band performance. Many publishers of jazz big band literature indicate on their scores the difficulty level of the chart. It is up to you, the director, to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your ensemble and determine if your students will eventually thrive or will continually struggle with a chart. Some charts will push your students toward excellence, while others may prove a discouraging experience for everyone. Mixing a program with a variety of rhythmic feels and levels of difficulty generally provides an interesting program for the students as well for the audience. Unfortunately, I have witnessed jazz ensembles “unravel” during performances. This is a terribly embarrassing scenario for everyone. Probable causes for this could include that the ensemble was ill-prepared, under rehearsed, the chart was too difficult, or the tempo was counted off too rapidly.

On a more philosophical side there is a lot of current jazz big band literature available by living jazz composers/arrangers. I have no complaint regarding the selling and performing of the work of current jazz artist. I am a published jazz big band composer and arranger myself. However, I am concerned when I adjudicate festivals and hear no performances of historically important jazz literature. The historically important cannon of jazz big band music is readily available today through the Smithsonian Archives, transcribers, and certain publishers. Finding the music of Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, the Count Basie writers, Thad Jones and others are a critical part of educating jazz students. Audiences also need to be exposed and educated to our historically important jazz big band library. After all, let us not forget this music is indigenously American and a national treasure.

Ingredient #3: **Aural Verses Verbal Instruction**

A quick method to enable students to grasp a musical jazz concept is to demonstrate it vocally or instrumentally. Jazz is most certainly an aural tradition. Most students who have a propensity for music quickly pick up on aural demonstrations. Presenting a concept this way and having the students immediately emulate the example can be fun and quite effective. Teaching the concept of swing sensibility through a verbal explanation can be quite tedious and difficult. However, aurally demonstrating jazz articulations, phrasing, and swing sensibility can expedite the process. Recordings are also indispensable. There are many nuances in jazz that are only really comprehended when heard aurally. If one is explaining the concept of pitch bending to a the saxophone section, “cut to the chase” and play an

appropriate recording of the Count Basie saxophone section or pick a recording of Ellington's star lead saxophonist Johnny Hodges.

Part Two – October 2007

- Spirit Verses Spiritless Performances
- Section Leaders Versus Lead Players
- The Soloist

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***Ingredient #4:* Spirit Verses Spiritless Performances**

I would define a spirited performance as one that is special, interesting, and memorable; in other words “musical.” Musical performances might 1) demonstrate dynamic nuances, 2) highlight noteworthy orchestration blends and textures, and 3) balance foreground, background, and other supportive material. They may not demonstrate a technically perfect performance but could communicate a highly emotional musical experience. This highly emotional musical experience could be exhibited through jazz nuances such as vibrato, bends, a wide dynamic palette, stylistic integrity and appropriateness, accents, melodic personalization, phrasing, and tone manipulation. A clean performance may be applauded for its technical proficiency but lack all the qualities that make a jazz performance spirited, special or memorable. Listening critically to recordings of spirited jazz ensemble performances can assist a director to guide his or her ensemble to capture the spirit in which the music was delivered. It is this spirit that has the capacity to transform or lift a technically brilliant but dry performance to the highest level of art.

One might seek out examples of near perfect technical performances that are full of spirit. I would reference the Count Basie Orchestra. It is above all a world-class jazz ensemble that exhibits the ultimate level of jazz spirit. Basie’s ensembles also had the capacity to perform charts at a technically brilliant level. This was, in part, likely due to a rigorous performance schedule. Ensembles that play night after night often achieve a technically proficient level that is rarely heard from ensembles that perform much less frequently. Duke Ellington’s band occasionally struggled with technical issues but because their performances were so highly spirited the intense spirit of the performances superseded the technical issues.

Proverbs:

- An obsessive technician tends to create very safe, spiritless performances.
- Too much familiarity with a chart could encourage a stale, lackluster performance.
- Technical imperfect performances packaged with a highly spirited sensibility can be more musical than perfect performances.

Ingredient #5:
Section Leaders Verses Lead Players

Section leaders are often the lead players in the section. However this practice should not be written in stone. It is important that you fill the section leader chairs with the most mature overall musicians in the section. Ideally these section leaders should also be responsible, enthusiastic individuals who are able to work well with their peers. The best section leaders possess a teachable, responsible disposition. They can be trained to lead productive sectionals, saving a director time to focus on refinement rather than on correcting notes and rhythms. They can also assist a director in setting the climate of rehearsals that helps to maintain an environment of professionalism (i.e., keeping chatter to a minimum). They can also be a barometer for section morale.

Lead players are important because they usually play the top note of a voicing. Because of this, they tend to be the most audible voice particularly if they have the melody. The lead trumpet chair quite often plays the melody for ensemble shouts. A great lead trumpeter has the ability to elevate a mediocre brass section to something special. The best lead players have solid upper register chops (brass), sight-read well, are consistent, possess good intonation and can lead their section with stylistic finesse. Some lead players possess the attributes of a good section leader as previously mentioned; however I often find myself but I find myself appointing second or third chairs to section leader positions.

Proverb:

- It is better to appoint a reliable, responsible, zealous individual as a section leader than the strongest musician who might not be the most responsible person, lacks enthusiasm, or might have an inability to work well with his or her peers.

Ingredient #6:
The Soloist

Contingent upon the age or level of your student, put your best soloist forward in performance. If you discover some natural ability in particular students "fan the flame." Provide them with recordings of the masters. Encourage them to take in as many live jazz concerts as possible. Look for materials that will help in the development of their improvisational abilities.

Proverb:

- Encourage everyone to improvise but feature those who excel at it.

Part Three - January 2008

- The Rhythm Section
- The Rehearsal schedule
- Goals
- Ensemble Morale

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Ingredient #7: **The Rhythm Section**

In an ideal situation time and subdivision are generated from the rhythm section (bass, drums, and guitar), not the director. Much big band repertoire is in 4/4 or 3/4 with minimal conducting needed. Therefore, the brass and saxophone sections should be trained to listen to bass and hi hat for steady rhythmic subdivision. Drummers should be taught that a strong, crisp hi hat provides stability for the ensemble. When using brushes it is also helpful for the ensemble to hear an audible “swish” on two and four while “stirring the soup” on the snare. A master of the rhythm guitar was the great Freddie Green of the Count Basie orchestra. He rarely if ever took a solo but provided crisp rhythmic comping which reinforced the rhythmic subdivision generated from the bass and drum kit.

One of my former professors used to plug a metronome into an amplifier, enabling our entire ensemble to hear consistent time. This rehearsal technique keeps ensembles from dragging or rushing in general and with time on specific figures. I have found this to be quite an eye opening experience for my students. Though a metronome will teach students good time, it will not teach a swing groove.

I once heard a professional bassist by the name of John Golsby define a swing groove as “an agreement to disagree.” He communicated that a swing “pocket” or “groove” is created between a walking bass and a ride cymbal pattern that is ever so slightly not together. I have found that having my bass players in the driver’s seat with the ride cymbal just slightly behind the bass subdivision opens up a swing “pocket” or groove. This agreement to disagree creates a width in the sound that is non-existent if the ride cymbal and bass are playing exactly together.

Width is the pocket or groove that professional musicians refer to. When a rhythm section finds a mature pocket or groove, it feels and sounds fantastic. An entire horn section playing slightly behind the rhythm section creates a laid-back effect. This rhythmic tension between the horns and the rhythm section can create much excitement and interest for select passages.

Tempos are critical for good performances. Find the tempo that allows your ensemble to shine. Use a metronome (quietly) for accurate count offs if you do not trust yourself. If tempos sag or rush during a performance quietly walk over to the rhythm section and address the situation. The horns should catch any slight tempo alterations from the rhythm section.

Drum kit proverbs:

- Snare chatter should enhance, not distract or disturb the groove or pocket.
- A drummer must learn (through aural examples) when and how much to kick figures. Too much kicking distracts, not enough is boring.
- It is critical that the horns hear a rhythmic subdivision at all times (e.g., hi-hat)
- Good time is developed through metronome assistance.
- Good time is consistent.
- Fills must be in time and not disturb a groove.
- A swing groove and good time is not necessarily the same thing.
- Up tempos should be thought in terms of large sections rather than each beat: a horizontal verses vertical conception.
- A great drummer can help transform a mediocre ensemble into something special.

Ingredient #8: **The Rehearsal Schedule**

Rehearsal scheduling poses its own set of challenges regarding good jazz ensemble performances. Many primary and secondary educators are forced to schedule jazz band rehearsals before school starts (as early as 6:00 am) or after school ends. Fortunate are those directors that have jazz ensemble rehearsals scheduled into their weekly school days. If a director has a choice, choose a time that will enable students to be the most attentive and alert. With early morning or after school rehearsals, a director may find his students struggling with fatigue, which inevitably leads to inattentiveness, less retention, and ultimately less productivity. However, rehearsals of any kind are better than none. Those directors who are implementing a jazz program, regardless of when they must rehearse, should be applauded and affirmed for their dedication. If rehearsal frequency (one rehearsal a week) or sporadic rehearsals (skipping weeks) is an issue, scheduling a string of special rehearsals directly prior to a performance will increase the plausibility of a good performance. Consistency, however, will garner the best results.

Proverbs:

- Frequency leads to competency.
- Frequency leads to increased retention.

Ingredient #9: **Goals**

Successful directors keep the big picture in mind. One of Stephen Covey's principles from his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, is to "begin with the end in mind." Successful directors implement obtainable goals, carefully mapping out their rehearsal time. They know which tunes need to be worked on today, how and when to isolate difficult passages, and are able to pay attention to the details without losing precious time obsessing about them (majoring on the minors). They are willing to

move on for the sake of the big picture. These goals assist in preparing and empower students for successful performances.

Proverb:

- Better to define how many choruses a soloist will take and when backgrounds will enter than risk a musical collision.

Ingredient #10: **Ensemble Morale**

In my years as a director and member of countless jazz ensembles, I have seen the impact that morale has on an ensemble. I have witnessed a disgruntled saxophone section quit a band at the conclusion of a gig because of poor management skills on the part of the director. On the other extreme, I have seen mediocre ensembles produce above average performances through smart management. A good director has the power to motivate an ensemble towards performances at a higher caliber than anyone suspected was possible.

Ensemble Morale is affected by:

1. Rehearsal pace. A snappy rehearsal pace keeps students on their toes, cuts down on distracting chatter, and usually expedites the learning process.
2. Over-rehearsing. Too much familiarity with a chart can produce boredom and take the edge off performances.
3. The same soloist. Resist giving most of the solos to the same individual, particularly if there are other qualified candidates.
4. Listening to your players' musical opinions. If they are good suggestions, use them. This can help establish student ownership.
5. Rehearsal quizzes. Instigation of assigned passages or an entire chart to be evaluated at a given time, in my experience, has been a huge motivator for college students. If tested publicly, it is critical the director handle the testing procedures with efficiency and grace. Let the students know these quizzes have the potential to affect their class grades. These quizzes also communicate to the students that you are dedicated to an ensemble of excellence. Most students relish the feeling or experience that they are a part of something significant and special. Quiz instigation also cuts down the amount of time a director must devote to basic rhythms and pitches during rehearsals. This in turn frees up critical time to focus on important nuances.
6. An overly militant, explosive style of leadership. This style can kill student enthusiasm.
7. Syllabus requirements that are not enforced. Distrust and/or disrespect will likely result.
8. Performance opportunities. Contrasting venues and locations can be motivating and fun. Frequent performances will contribute to a "tight" ensemble experience and boost student confidence.

Proverbs:

- Make your students feel at ease, have fun, laugh often.
- Expect much, be available, be a good listener, be a role model in behavior and speech.
- Respect is earned, not demanded.