

THOUGHTS ON STARTING A JAZZ PROGRAM

By Mike Tracy
(revisions in italics)

Remember the old movie plot where the ingenious individual says "let's put on a show" and everything falls into place? We all know it just is not that simple. Starting or expanding a jazz program for the typical band director is like that improbable movie plot. It is not as simple as getting the students together and counting off a tune. Many areas will need to be considered and addressed. For the first time, director could be confronted with a style of music that he or she might not have any experience with, much less, training. The task may seem overwhelming; however, the results can reap reward that will benefit everyone involved.

The teaching of jazz and improvised music has developed greatly over the past *forty* years. And yes, an individual can be taught to play in a jazz style and even improvise. Once viewed as an after school activity to appease the restless members of the band, a quality jazz experience can be an invaluable teaching tool for the orchestra and chorus students as well as the entire band. It is no longer enough to just play old dance charts. Today's music educator must be able to teach improvisation in addition to conducting a 'tight' ensemble. The teaching of jazz is becoming another skill that music educators must have in order to give our students a well rounded musical experience.

Whether working with middle school, high school, or college jazz bands, it has been my experience that common concerns and problems will occur. While every director will have special skills, each program will have weaknesses and needs that will play a factor in the direction and scope of their particular jazz offerings. Many of these areas will pose little or no problems while others will need to be handled as the program matures and takes shape.

The following is an outline of areas that I believe will need to be considered when starting a jazz ensemble at any educational level. If you have a jazz ensemble or are considering starting one, I encourage you to take a moment and consider these points.

1. Attitudes
 - How do you, the director, view jazz? Can it be taught? How will it benefit your students?
 - What are your student's attitudes toward jazz?
 - What is your administration's attitude?
 - How will your band parents view a jazz band?
2. Experience, limited knowledge
 - How much experience do you have *listening to jazz? Playing jazz?*
 - Have you participated in a jazz clinic or workshop?
 - *Were classes in jazz and improvisation offered required in your educational background? Did you take them? If not, why?*
 - Can you, *do you improvise* (You don't have to be another Charlie Parker or Miles Davis)?
 - Are you willing to learn to improvise with your students?
3. Direction
 - Will your main interest be in rehearsing the ensemble? If so, how will you deal with the improvised solos?
 - Will improvisation be emphasized? How will the ensemble be rehearsed?
 - If the approach is to be a balance of ensemble and individual improvisation, how will this be accomplished?
4. Educational Offering
 - Is the jazz band to be viewed mainly as entertainment for school functions?
 - How can the jazz ensemble be as educationally rewarding as the band, orchestra, or chorus?
 - How can the material be varied to cover a variety of styles?
5. Listening, points of reference
 - Do you have access to jazz recordings - i.e. Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz?
 - *Do you know where to obtain jazz recordings (CDs, MP3s, etc.) and videos (DVDs, youtube, etc.)?*
 - *Are you familiar with the jazz web sites?*
 - Are there jazz concerts in your area?
 - How can you get students to listen to all styles of music?

6. Instrumentation

- Traditional or standard big band (5 saxes, 4-5 trumpets, 4-5 trombones, piano, guitar, bass, and drums).
- If you have limited instrumentation consider:
 - Combo (various combinations)
 - Play-along recordings
- Combination of all three for the most effective, yet time consuming approach.

7. Funding

- Will the jazz band be part of the regular band budget or will you have additional funding?
- How much should you spend for:
 - Music. Where do you find charts? Can you borrow music?
 - Piano/keyboard if unavailable at school?
 - Guitar and bass amps. Use students amps *or provide school equipment?*
 - Drum set. Use student set *or provide one?*
 - Odd instruments (baritone and soprano saxophones, flugelhorn, etc.)
 - *Quality sound system for sound reinforcement and for audio recordings.*

8. Rehearsal time

- Can you schedule an in-school rehearsal?
- Do you have time and would your students attend a before of after school rehearsal?
- When do you start the group? After the football season or from the beginning of the school year?
- If not an in-school rehearsal, how long will the group rehearse?

9. Selection of music

- Where do you find quality music/material?
- How do you establish a library from scratch?
- What type of music will you choose:
 - Traditional
 - Pop/rock
 - Originals
 - Commissions

- Will improvisation be a consideration when choosing material? If so, how will you determine what to purchase?
10. Teaching improvisation
- Are you willing to spend valuable rehearsal time teaching all students to improvise, not just the ones with solos on their parts?
 - Are you willing to work or even learn to improvise yourself?
 - Are you familiar with the various approaches one can use when teaching improvisation?
 - Do you have the opportunity to attend clinics and/or workshops dealing with the teaching of jazz and improvisation?
11. Additional assistance
- Grants
 - National Endowment for the Arts
 - Local arts councils (*state, region, and local*)
 - Local arts organizations
 - Artist-in-Residence programs
 - Local musicians
 - Visiting artists/educators
 - Area college and university faculty and students
 - Musician's Union
 - Concert opportunities
 - Local musicians

There are now numerous books, articles, and related materials available to interested educators, from novice to seasoned. I would encourage you to visit www.jazzbooks.com to familiarize yourself with current literature, instructional aids, and associated materials.