

KEEPING JAZZ ALIVE IN OUR SCHOOLS

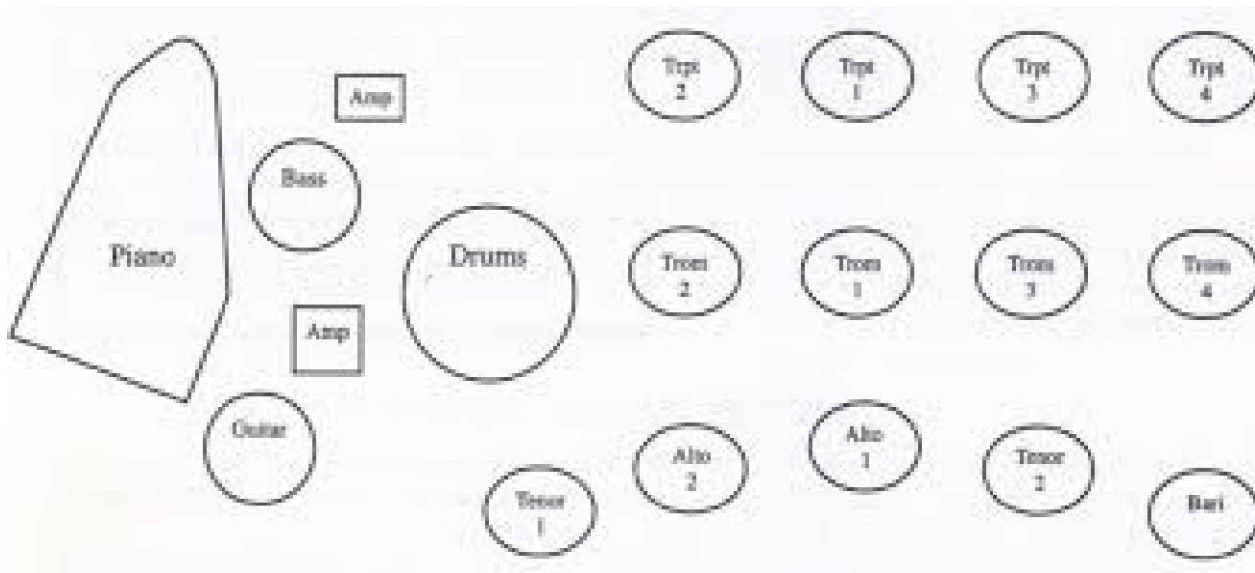
Born in New Orleans at the turn of the century, jazz owes its beginnings to the blending of several elements present at that time including military music, classical music, piano music, vocal music, and small ensembles. These elements combined with the infusion of music the slaves brought from the churches via their African and American heritage, and the boogie-woogie of the piano in blues form. All blended into a new music, *jazz*. Jazz has been recognized by the U.S. Congress as a national treasure.

Jazz gained popularity in dance halls and later in jazz clubs. Today jazz is present in almost every middle school, high school, and university. Most schools have at least one jazz band. Therefore, we as directors have the responsibility of growing and keeping jazz alive.

As I traveled the nation this past year, I heard more than 250 jazz bands. In talking with directors of those bands some have much jazz experience while others are just now beginning to understand the jazz idiom. They all are dedicated to improving their jazz teaching skills.

Following are some of the elements that need attention in many jazz bands. Set-up, swing-style basics, jazz language, listening, improvisation, selecting music, and resources.

The set-up is essential to help create a successful jazz sound. The diagram shows the standard set-up as used throughout the years by Count Basie, Duke Ellington, etc.



Once we know how the band should look, we need to know how the band should sound. This is achieved through listening, listening, listening by both students and directors. Today's students have a smorgasbord of opportunities with YouTube. Over 100 years of jazz can be heard there free! The key to learning jazz by listening is repeated and directed listening.

I find the better bands have a common method for directed listening. It starts with swing style jazz as played by the Count Basie Orchestra, for example "Moten Swing," "Basie Straight Ahead," and "All of Me." There are many Count Basie arrangements for bands at all levels of ability.

Here are some tips on listening and playing in the swing style.

Swing-style Basics

- Listen, repeatedly, to professional jazz recordings to identify and understand jazz styles.
- Identify the jazz sound - the rhythm section is particularly important in this regard.
- Help your rhythm section focus on listening and swinging together.
- Have your wind section listening carefully to each other and blend.
- Strive for clarity of sound throughout.
- Identify the steady beat or pulse, use a metronome to help.
- Understand the swing eighth-note concept.
- Identify characteristic jazz nuances, shapes, and musical language.
- Work on developing a groove.
- Be able to sing confidently with jazz syllables, connecting visual and aural skills.

Improvisation is the heart and soul of jazz music. Many of the successful director's use listening to jazz standards as a starting point. They have students transcribe portions of solos by singing them and then playing them on their instruments. Others begin by using improvisation method books, CDs, DVDs, etc. Both approaches work but must become a part of every rehearsal. Today's pros are still working on their improvisation skills and so must we.

Selecting appropriate music for the jazz band is a key to success. Here again jazz standards are highly recommended. Here are some tips that will help:

- Know the best arrangers for your groups level.
- Does your rhythm section need written parts?
- Evaluate your groups strengths and weaknesses.
- Practical range of lead trumpet.
- How about soloists – review the chord changes.
- Are written solos, scales provided, etc.?
- Select for your programming needs – concert, festival, etc.

We are fortunate to have many resources available that can help us teach jazz. It is important for all directors to become familiar with resources available. Check out my new jazz band method “Jazz Zone...The Beginning.” See and hear it at www.jazzzoneonline.com.

By all means make jazz “fun” for your students. This begins with your enthusiasm for the music. I hope to see you at some point swingin’ with your jazz band.

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