Thoughts on

**Jazz Ensemble Rehearsal Techniques**

**Dr. Eric Richards**
Director of Bands and Jazz Studies
Sheridan College
Sheridan WY
erichards@sheridan.edu
http://www.sheridancollegemusic.com/

---

**CONDUCTOR Responsibilities**

**Listen!!!** to your repertoire (as part of your own preparation and with your group as part of rehearsal). Make sure that **Rehearsal Listening is Active Listening.**

**Hear!!!**
The effective jazz ensemble conductor must be able to hear and identify jazz rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic vocabulary. Here are some ideas for developing “conductor’s ears”
- Start with Dan Haerle’s [THE JAZZ LANGUAGE](http://www.sheridancollegemusic.com/). Work through each chapter and do a healthy dose of the exercises (conceptual, aural, and keyboard work.)
- Develop a basic competency on the piano for the purpose of realizing chords and sectional voicings. You don’t need to worry about becoming the next Oscar Peterson or Danilo Perez! Go through each chart and play through the changes.

**LONG TERM Planning**
Organize your rehearsal plan. Look at your concert dates, available rehearsal times, and work backward. Allow for:
- Sectionals
- Group listening (!)
- Unexpected lost rehearsals

**REHEARSAL Order**
Try to create a rehearsal order that has a reasonable “ebb and flow” with regard to technical demand, style variety, brass endurance, variety of soloists, etc.

**GENERAL BALANCE and PRIORITIZATION issues**
GENERAL Sectional Roles

**RHYTHM Section**
- Groove/Time
- Harmonic definition
- Support for improvisors
TROMBONE Section
- Harmonic/rhythmic support ("Pads/ Figures")
- Occasional melodists

SAXOPHONE/WOODWIND Section
- Melodists/Countermelodists
In “common practice” jazz orchestration, countermelodies are frequently derived from or elaborations of GUIDE TONES (3rds and 7ths). Learn about these.
- Timbral variety (woodwind doubles)
- Harmonic/rhythmic support ("Pads/ Figures")

TRUMPET SECTION
- Melodists
- Occasional countermelodists
- Harmonic/rhythmic support ("Pads/ Figures")
- Timbral variety (mute colours/flugelhorns)

The contemporary jazz orchestra is an excellent hybrid of chamber music (small band/combo) and large ensemble sensibilities. At the core of every big band is a “small band/combo” (2-4 horns and rhythm section). This “nucleus” must be operating optimally before the “large ensemble” sound will begin to cohere. Sectional rehearsals with the rhythm section and a “small band” made up of just the lead players in the horn section (Reed I, Trombone I, and Trumpet I) can be an effective way of making this happen.

“Volume Pyramid”
Both the conductor and the players should always listen “from the bottom up.” This is critical for intonation, especially with jazz harmony. Thus, try to place some of your strongest musicians (especially the ones with good ears) on bass instruments: string bass, bass trombone, bari sax) You’re welcome, Dr. Sturm.

TROMBONES + RHYTHM Section
In “common practice” jazz orchestration, the primary role of affirming the harmony and groove in the wind section is given to the trombones. Focused work on trombone section time, groove/feel, intonation, balance (Volume Pyramid) and then coordination with the rhythm section will yield great results in the overall ensemble sound.

Work from the inside out.
ENSEMBLE Seating
- As “tight” a configuration as possible. (“Nordic Choir concept”)
- Lead players in the middle of their sections and aligned “on axis”.
- If horn section time needs help, consider placing baritone sax and bass trombone next to the rhythm section.

REPERTOIRE Specifics

FORM
- Learn, then teach the form of the original tune (if an arrangement) as well of the form of the specific chart. Point out significant “aural signposts” to your musicians (e.g., “In the last phrase of the solo choruses, the final resolution back to I is 4 bars long, not 2 measures long.”)

SEEK the SOURCE
If the chart is a contemporary arrangement of an existing standard, go to the source material to establish the context. If the chart is a contrafact, make the connection (learn the original tune and changes, etc.)

FIT
Work to develop an honest assessment of your band’s strength and weaknesses and then program to display your strengths and reasonably mitigate the weaknesses.

Florida jazz educator Don Zentz regularly publishes an overview of music for big band written at various grade levels.

http://www.zentz.org/dzlinks

MORALE
- Cultivate mutual respect.
- Don’t coddle.
- Let your YES be YES, and...
- Maintain and display an appropriate sense of humour.