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Choosing the Music for Younger Jazz Ensembles

Listening:

Every rehearsal, even for five or ten minutes, but it needs to be dedicated listening time. Have active listening goals - who has the melody, what is the drummer doing, sax section swing, ensemble togetherness, bass and drums interaction, rhythm section and soloist interaction. If there are good demo recordings of repertoire your band is working on, listen to them and discuss what went well and what can be taken from those performances to be used as goals in their own playing - pitch, clean technique, time feel, etc.

Listen to best examples: Count Basie - Basie Straight Ahead, Atomic Basie, Ellington - Live at Newport, Lionel Hampton - Flyin' Home and Airmail Special, Woody Herman - Four Brothers, Come Rain or Come Shine, Benny Goodman - Sing, Sing, Sing, Stan Kenton - Malaguena, Malaga

Your students are NOT ready for Maynard Ferguson or Buddy Rich yet. They learn all the wrong lessons for all the wrong reasons. Thad Jones/Mel Lewis aka The Vanguard Orchestra is also probably too dense and sophisticated at this stage. The Big Phat Band is also not a great resource as it is bright and shiny and has all the bells and whistles, but can be a little too glossy for my taste - personal opinion.

Music selection:

Vary the styles - swing, latin, ballad, funk

Insist on music of substance, in the style, in the tradition. Nobody needs another arrangement of the latest pop song. Personal preference - Soul Bossa Nova and Hunting Wabbits are out, too.

For swing, easy arrangements of jazz standards are widely available. Also valuable are contrafact charts - music based on existing chord changes but with a new melody. This is a good way to teach standard jazz repertoire but with a new twist.

For latin or straight eighth music - pick something, again, with some substance. Do your research into Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Danilo Perez, Michel Camilo, Arturo Sandoval, Pacquito D'Rivera, Rueben Blades, Machito, and so many others. Nothing with Chili in the title.

Ballads, usually feature a soloist, but don't have to. Straight 8<sup>th</sup> is more achievable for young bands and swing ballads require more sophistication from the entire ensemble.

For Funk - real funk is difficult at this level and usually really hokey because it relies on a more sophisticated rhythm section and rhythm section techniques. Best to stay away from this at the middle school level. High school bands can be quite successful, however. Dixieland/New Orleans grooves can be very successful, though.

#### Tempo:

For swing, keep it at a medium tempo. Swinging is like riding a bicycle. Going slow is REALLY hard, and it's unmusical for beginners so their interest fades immediately. Medium tempos are the most accessible and where the students will feel best about their chances for success. Faster tempos will obviously depend on the ensemble. Any tempo will only be successful to the extent that the rhythm section is successful, so keep that in mind if your rhythm section is weak.

#### Technical parameters:

Range and technique appropriate for your specific ensemble, BUT, make sure each section has something they'll have to practice. If it sounds good on the first rundown, it's too easy. Don't hand it to them. Put it juuuust out of reach and make them stretch to get it. You also want to have music where every section has a moment to shine, something to look forward to and really nail when they get on stage with it. That way, the entire ensemble buys into the experience and works to maximize it.

Watch out for “clustery” voicing in the trombones. Two players seated next to each other playing notes a half step apart WILL drift towards each other if the note is of any substantial duration. Charts with “crunchier” chords can be wonderful, but those chords are best worked on in isolation so everybody can understand what’s going on and how their part fits into the whole. Reseating players IS an option.

Solos and Solo Chord Changes:

Look for music with achievable chord changes - 12 bar blues, Rhythm Changes (chords from Gershwin’s I’ve Got Rhythm), single chord or single scale opportunities (many latin charts have these). If chord changes are too complex, they can be modified or simplified.

Listening examples for improvisation: NOT Miles Davis or John Coltrane. Again, your students are not ready yet. These are jumping off points. Your students will discover a universe of players on these recordings. Start them with soloists they can begin to understand and copy. The first players listed are more melodic and lyrical.

Alto Sax: Paul Desmond, Benny Carter, and then Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderley, and Phil Woods

Tenor Sax: Lester Young, Stan Getz, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, and then Coltrane, Brecker, Wayne Shorter

Bari Sax: Gerry Mulligan, Cecil Payne, and then Nick Brignola, Ronnie Cuber

Trumpet: Louis Armstrong, Clark Terry, Art Farmer, and then Dizzy Gillespie, Lee Morgan, Freddie Hubbard, Wynton Marsalis, Sean Jones

Trombone: Curtis Fuller, Jimmy Cleveland, J.J. Johnson, Slide Hampton, and then Carl Fontana, Bill Watrous, Marshal Gilkes

Guitar: Wes Montgomery, Freddie Green, Jim Hall, Joe Pass, and then Pat Metheny, John McLaughlin, John Scofield, Mike Stern.

Bass: Jimmy Blanton (with early Ellington Band), Ray Brown, Paul Chambers, and then Ron Carter, Christian McBride, Eddie Gomez, Jaco Pastorius

Piano: Duke Ellington, Red Garland, Teddy Wilson, and then Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Oscar Peterson

Drums: Jo Jones, Philly Jo Jones, Max Roach, Roy Haynes, and then Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Peter Erskine, Buddy Rich

Flexible Instrumentation:

Large Ensembles/sections - assign as necessary. Concert band doublings apply. I prefer a single player on each lead part and double the lower parts. Jazz band is different from concert band in that jazz players are supposed to have a personal approach to the music which is then conveyed through the section through that player's performance. That can't happen with two on a part.

Some publishers include a flute part and optional brass parts. I rarely get requests for those, but will create them when asked, usually. I think most individual composers would be open to that as well.

Non-traditional instrumentation.

I'm all for including everyone who wants to learn about jazz. Middle school is the level to do that. Choosing music is a real challenge, though. Generally speaking, straight 8<sup>th</sup> music is more easily adapted for non-traditional jazz instruments and ends up sounding better and more familiar. The more lyrical or melodic, the better.

Other options include playing from a lead sheet, in unison (octaves), to learn repertoire and focus on improvisation. It doesn't have to be complex. When The Saints Go Marching In is a great starting place. Simple standards like Summertime, Song For My Father, Little Sunflower, Centerpiece or Lester Leaps In or Bags' Groove (all 12 bar blues).

Another option is flexible combo charts where parts are offered in Bb, Eb, and concert keys and can be interchanged to fit any group.

Things I ALWAYS write when judging at festivals:

Every band needs MORE dynamic contrast. The quiet parts should be a whisper and the loud parts should sound like your football team just scored the winning touchdown. The ensemble volume level is determined by the rhythm section. If they never change, the horns won't either. They have the power to create dramatic performances. Use it.

Overdo every articulation. Make the short notes short. Make the fat notes really FFFAAATTT. Articulation is the punctuation of music. Speak clearly.

Falloffs are exclamation points, not throwaways. Make the most of them. Aim for them and drive the energy all the way through them.

Listen to each other. Don't play simultaneously, Play T-O-G-E-T-H-E-R, as an ensemble, not a group of strangers. Work on this in sectional rehearsals and listen across the ensemble. Which parts are being doubled? by whom?

Rhythm sections need to actually listen to the soloist and play accordingly. If the soloist starts out strong, the rhythm section needs to play strong, too. If the soloist starts out slowly, the rhythm section can offer full chords for support. The piano and guitar must be audible on stage. Even if they just play whole notes. Don't leave your soloist hanging out there by themselves, trying to improvise a solo over a harmony they can't hear.

More Rhythm Section notes: Not everybody has to play all the time. Alternate comping instruments behind soloists. Have the piano play behind the first solo and then guitar or vibes behind the second, etc. It's a challenge for professional rhythm section players to mesh their styles, much less for students. It's ok to lay out.

Last, but not least, PUT YOUR MUSIC STANDS DOWN AND PLAY OVER THEM. So many bands play directly into their stands or place them at an angle, but vertically, which creates a similar obstruction. So much sound and good work is being lost due to acoustics. If the audience can't see the bells of the brass, they can't hear them clearly which throws off the ensemble balance in unmusical ways.

Links:

Baker's Jazz And More YouTube Channel - [Baker's Jazz And More - YouTube](#)

130 score videos organized into Playlists by style and grade level.

Bye Bye Blackbird: <https://youtu.be/LNf5Xs9zuis>

Heat Index: <https://youtu.be/IPa3kDKBtQ4>

Say What: <https://youtu.be/9Mlv10wapf8>

A Mi Papa: <https://youtu.be/O4vMUqa0YMk>

Aventuras: <https://youtu.be/HsWh06fRyo0>

Samba de los Estrellas: <https://youtu.be/50tWXHGqALY>

Ebony Rain: <https://youtu.be/AQulu4DtWGM>

White Silk: <https://youtu.be/rREHu4JExpI>

3am: <https://youtu.be/48mreBILhgk>

Feel free to contact me with any questions:

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