

Jazz Workshop Australia presents

Building a Gold Standard stage band

A guide for band directors, parents & students

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This is a brief guide on how to achieve a *gold standard* performance in stage band music. The first part is mainly for band directors, but is definitely worth reading for students and parents so you know what kinds of things you should be working on to achieve excellence. The second part is for students and parents. It is a few quick ideas to help you become a stronger part of your team and what you should practice if you want to become a better jazz player.



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Introduction

Here are the main things a good jazz band (stage band, big band, jazz orchestra) should aim for in performance of jazz repertoire:

- Tone
- Rhythm & style
- Intonation
- Blend
- Balance
- Improvisation in solos
- Rhythm section
- Musical expression
- Ensemble precision
- Presentation
- Balanced repertoire

It is important not to confuse jazz ensemble performance with concert band performance. They are two different things, with different expectations and stylistic requirements.

Origins of Big Band music

A big band (aka. stage band, Jazz band, jazz orchestra) is really a kind of hybrid of a jazz band and an orchestra. It is a jazz band that plays arrangements or “orchestrations” of pieces written for around twelve to twenty players. In early big bands and small jazz groups arrangements tended to be simpler and either memorised or made up spontaneously. Memorised orchestrations were known as “head arrangements”, as they were kept entirely in the musicians’ heads. A lot of the early famous Count Basie pieces were head arrangements.

Over time the big bands began exploring more elaborate and more complicated arrangements. Writers like Fletcher Henderson began creating such complex arrangements that they simply had to be written out. From there, in the early to mid-1930’s onward, written arrangements eventually became the norm. From about this time, relatively early in the

history of jazz music, the old cliché of the illiterate jazz musician really became a thing of the past. It is interesting that it has remained doggedly persistent to this day in some circles!

Over time the art of the arranger became increasingly important in big band music and they began to explore ever more complex harmonies, tone colours and orchestral techniques. However, jazz and improvisation nevertheless remained at the heart of the music.

A Synthesis of Reading & Improvisation

Big band arrangements virtually always call on musicians in the group to improvise as an essential part of the piece. It is, after all, a huge part of what makes jazz *jazz*. Soloists are expected to improvise. So are rhythm sections. Not every member of the band is called on to improvise in every piece, but they should be prepared to be at some time. There are some positions in a big band that have become by tradition the improvising specialists, often called the “jazz chairs”. These include 2nd trumpet, 1st trombone, 1st alto sax, 1st tenor sax, piano, guitar, and drums. However, at various times every part should expect to be called on to improvise.

Big band/stage band music brings together the ensemble, reading and interpretation skills of orchestral music with the freedom, spontaneity and expressive potential of jazz. Both aspects of the music are essential for a “gold standard” performance. An excellent big band will also demonstrate genuine understanding of style in all aspects of their performance through stylistically accurate playing.

Part 1: For Band Directors

A truly outstanding band is technically correct (notes) and emotionally correct (jazz spirit). A perfect synthesis of these two ideas is very rare. A great band also becomes one, a single organism, and can get beyond the notes to express its musical emotion artistically (Brian Lillos, 2006)

Ensemble Precision ←————→ **Musical Emotion**

(must interact)

Tone

Individuals should play with a jazz tone (not “classical” or “rock” or something else). The ensemble should tend to have a focused and powerful sound where appropriate, or a subtle warm sound in gentler pieces such as ballads. Powerful doesn’t mean loud. Brass instruments tend to be brighter and “brassier” than in concert band. Saxes also tend to be brighter and stronger. Rhythm sections should sound like a jazz band and not a rock or folk group. Listen to famous big band recordings for reference.

Rhythm & Style

The one thing we spend most time on in school band rehearsals is rhythm. Many students seem to find rhythm the hardest part of music to get right, especially swing rhythms. The band needs to be able to play each piece in a stylistically correct manner. They also need to be able to play all the rhythms accurately and together.

Intonation

Individuals, each section and the full ensemble should play in tune with each other. The intonation should remain secure at all dynamic levels and in all textures. Dissonant chords sound much worse than simple chords if the band is out of tune. An in tune band sounds brighter and louder or clearer than an out of tune one.

Blend

Sounds within a section should match. The band should sound like an ensemble, not a collective of individuals.

Balance

This applies to the whole ensemble, within each section including the rhythm section and between sections. Generally, no individual part should dominate. Parts at the extreme ranges must be audible and in tune (such as lead trumpet, bari sax, bass trombone). Middle parts should also be audible and in tune (such as alto 2, trombones 2 & 3). Lower parts should support the lead voices, not disappear every time the music gets a bit harder! Often a pyramid balance is most effective, but not always. The pyramid can apply to the whole ensemble and within sections. However, sometimes “sectional” balance is better (each voice equal in weight). Contrapuntal and linear arrangements call for a different approach again.

Improvisation in solos

Everybody can improvise to some extent, so there is no reason not to. Solos should be improvised.

Often in student level arrangements a written solo will be included. It is *not* intended that these be used as part of any performance of the piece. Rather, they are there as a study guide for the students to give them an idea of the kinds of thing an improvising jazz musician might play in that context. They can certainly be used as inspiration, if they are any good. But *they should not be used verbatim in performance.*

A big problem with such written solos is that frequently, they are complete rubbish! If they are a transcription of a genuine solo by a noted jazz artist, then they are useful for study but shouldn't be played in performance. Students who have solos have a responsibility to practice how to improvise effectively and in style at least in that piece. It is one of the skills involved in playing jazz music.

In serious jazz music improvised solos form a large and critically important part of each arrangement. It is really a shame when an otherwise well prepared group is let down by weak, unprepared soloists. Solo sections should be worked on with as much rigour as the ensemble sections.

Leaving out the solos, using written solos or choosing pieces without solos are not viable options. They are all to the detriment of the band and seriously undermine its credibility as a jazz ensemble.

Good solos tend to display excellence in the following: Style, tone, rhythmic drive and energy, projection, musical confidence, creatively following the chord changes (if any), quality of motivic/melodic/rhythmic development, level of harmonic understanding, structure, mood, spontaneity, excitement, communication with the audience, communication and interaction with the rhythm section, and a balance of unity and contrast. (Lillos, 2006).

Rhythm Section

In a great rhythm section all members play with excellent time feel and sense of style. The drummer effectively supports the ensemble playing appropriate set ups, fills, solos and punctuations. The pianist and guitarist play together cohesively and "comp" in style. All members communicate with each other and with the rest of the band.

Here is a summary of points to consider (from Lillos, 2006):

- *drum feel*
- *drum support, preparation & fills*
- *guitar and piano fills & punctuation*
- *bass kicks, punctuation, turnarounds*
- *Rhythm Section (RS) punctuation*
- *RS energy behind band*
- *RS energy behind soloists*
- *RS communication with horns*
- *RS communication with each other*
- *Horns playing off RS*
- *Textures*
- *RS musical leadership*

The rhythm section should be balanced within itself and with the rest of the band. At no time should they drown out the rest of the band or a soloist (unless the conductor asks them to for some musical reason). The bass should be heard but not loud. Likewise the guitar, in most situations. It usually sounds best if the rhythm section is a bit softer than the rest of the band. They shouldn't try to play with as much dynamic detail as the horns, but should observe important rises, falls, soft sections and climaxes.

The rhythm section must pay the same attention to detail, sound and style as everyone else in the band, if not more.

There is a very important difference between a jazz rhythm section and a rock rhythm section or an orchestral/concert band percussion section. It is that in jazz the rhythm section is improvising their part most of the time. That's right: even the written bass lines, piano parts and especially the drum parts are intended as a guide only. They show the kind of thing the arranger wants, but nearly always include enough information for the musician to improvise the part during performance.

The lower the level of the arrangement, the more explicit the part will tend to be. This is to help young players who may not be sure what kinds of thing to play. But it is almost never intended that the performer will play exactly what is written. This is not orchestral or concert band music! A well-written big band rhythm section part for students will include some

explicit examples of the kind of thing to play in each section of the arrangement, but will essentially say “now continue along the same lines with your own version of this”. It is in large part up to the individual players to learn how to do this, perhaps working with their private tutor or you outside of rehearsals.

During improvised solos in a jazz band neither the rhythm section nor the soloist know exactly what they are going to play beforehand. They may know the kinds of thing they will do. They will know the kinds of thing that are likely to happen, but can have no idea exactly how it will pan out. What each member of the rhythm section plays is largely dependent on what the others play. And they are all interacting with and responding to the soloist. It is like a conversation between all the participants. It is also like a sporting match: everyone knows the rules and the parameters, but no one can say for sure what exactly will happen when, or what the final result is going to be.

This level of improvisation, this living, breathing spontaneity lies at the heart of jazz music. It is one of its defining characteristics. The less of it there is in a performance, the less “jazz” that performance is. If you are directing a jazz ensemble (stage band, big band, jazz band, jazz orchestra, combo, etc.) then teaching your students to play music in this way is a huge and essential part of the job. Otherwise, it isn’t jazz.

Just as a group of people all reading from a script isn’t a conversation, a group of musicians all reading from written parts isn’t improvisation. And without improvisation as a central and defining feature, music isn’t jazz. Therefore it follows that if you are teaching a jazz ensemble then you must teach your students to improvise or at least “outsource” that job to others who can teach it.

Musical Expression

Everyone in the band should play expressively and work together to create a cohesive emotional interpretation of the piece. Some elements of this might include: feel, groove, intensity, energy, spontaneity, capturing the spirit of the music (Lillos, 2006). Dynamics should be used to advance the emotional story

of the arrangement, to shape phrases, to create a climax, to create contrasts and interest. A good band can play with control.

Ensemble Precision

The band must play together and with a cohesive sense of time and style. Rhythms should be accurate, cut-offs precise, attacks clear and together, articulations right for the style. A great band can play with excellent technique with individuals and the group showing a high level of facility. I don’t believe that ensemble precision is the most important aspect of jazz playing, but it is still important. It shouldn’t be ignored: a “gold standard” band takes care of emotion and technique together to create an artistic synthesis.

Presentation

A “gold standard” band is well presented. This doesn’t mean they have to be well-dressed, although in a formal performance they should be. All the musicians in a good band should demonstrate positive body language appropriate to the piece and the context. There should be movement, smiles, enjoyment, energy and a real effort to communicate with the audience. If the performers look like they would rather not be there, then why should anyone listen to them? On the other hand, joy, energy and positivity are infectious and the audience will respond!

Repertoire

Aim to present a balanced program both in concerts as well as in your rehearsal program for the band throughout the year. Include music of various styles, eras, composers, moods, and so on. Avoid playing only rock-style arrangements. Students enjoy playing anything that is treated properly and that sounds good.

Take care with the difficulty of the music you select. In rehearsals include a couple of things that are very hard for the band and many things that are a bit challenging but doable. Also include a number of easy pieces that are fun to play and sound good. In concert don’t try music that is really too hard for the band and sets them up for failure. “Easier” music played well is better for everyone than painfully struggling through very hard arrangements.

Achieving a Gold Standard stage band

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Part 2: For Students and Parents

If you are a member of a jazz ensemble (often called “stage band”, “big band”, “jazz orchestra” or “jazz band”), it means you are part of an exciting team of musicians working together to play music together at the best possible level. It is important that being in the band is fun, but usually you’ll find that the better the band is, the more fun it is. If the aim of your group is just to have a bit of fun and mess about, then this guide probably isn’t for you! This is advice for musicians who want to be good players and members of the best possible band.

Here are a few things that will help you and your band improve:

- You have a responsibility to the group to help make it good!
- Be at every rehearsal. If you have to miss a rehearsal, you should find someone to fill in for you. Arrive on time.
- Try your hardest to play your best at every rehearsal and every performance. You don’t improve by not trying; you just get better at being ordinary. You need to put in effort at training sessions (rehearsals) so that you get used to playing at a higher level. A rehearsal without effort is a waste of time.
- Practise your part between rehearsals. Most bands waste most of their time waiting while the conductor teaches individuals how to play the right rhythms or correcting wrong notes. The band will improve much more quickly if everyone works on basic things like notes and rhythms between rehearsals. That way when the whole band gets together you can work on more important and more interesting things.
- Learn how to improvise. *This is the most important part of playing jazz*, and most people just can’t do it because they have never learnt how or never practised it. Yes, that’s right! You need to practise improvising if you want to be able to do it well in a jazz style.
- If your regular music teacher isn’t a jazz teacher, then it is a great idea to get some lessons with someone who is so that they can teach you how to play jazz. Be careful with this: just because someone can play jazz, doesn’t mean they are good at teaching it. Just because someone is a famous musician, they may not be any good at teaching! Find someone who is well known as a good jazz teacher. They should be able to refer you to past students who have been successful.
- If you are a trumpet or trombone player, always hold your bell above the music stand and point straight forwards.
- Listen to recordings or live jazz. Try to hear professional recordings of the charts your band is playing. This is the only way to really learn what jazz is supposed to sound like. If you don’t listen, you’ll never be able to play it well!
- If you play saxophone, you need to play with a jazz sound in a jazz band, not a “classical” sound. The tone you are asked to use in exams and in concert band isn’t a jazz sound. Use the right sound in the right context.
- If you play guitar, bass or drums, learn what sound you should use in various jazz styles. What is right in rock usually isn’t right in jazz.
- Stand up to take solos (unless you play piano or drums).
- Always take a pencil to rehearsal and mark your music with reminders to yourself and any changes.
- Learn your scales. They really *are* important.