

Notes on Conducting Jazz Ensembles

Listening, Imitation, Improvisation, Cultural, Personal and Historical Awareness

By David Berger

The universal love of jazz and its identification with America is about the personal freedom of expression and democracy in action. In order to be a responsible citizen, we need to be educated and articulate. This is especially true in being a member of a jazz band (a democratic musical society). Your first responsibility as a member is to understand the arrangements. Although the conductor is the final arbiter of taste, each player should bring as much understanding and personal expression as possible.

Knowledge comes from listening and playing experience. Jazz was traditionally learned by going on the road with big bands where you learned from the older players. Learning to play jazz in school is a poor substitute since there is only one older player (the teacher), and he can't play lead in each section.

When we learned to speak, we imitated our parents, then intuitively learned how to put ideas together long before we ever studied reading, writing and grammar in school. Jazz should be the same. Listen, imitate, then create. Without listening and a certain mastery of imitation, creation is uninformed and artificial. You just don't make up language—it must be heard and internalized before you form and say profound thoughts in that language.

Understanding how jazz represents us as Americans is important. When I first became aware that jazz was different from other music, I was 12 years old and immediately felt it was my music. It expressed how I felt, walked, talked, thought and breathed. As an adult, I came to realize that there are no wrong notes for me. Oh, some are better choices than others, but I can go many different ways with it. It's like when you are having a conversation; you can form your sentences many ways and change the subject or go into more depth, etc. Our students are musical toddlers - they need encouragement and gentle corrections to find their own voices.

The Set Up

The first thing I do when I get to a rehearsal is set up the chairs and stands. I like the traditional block set up with the saxes in a line, bones behind them and trumpets behind them. The lead players should be in the middle of each of the horn sections. This way, the other guys in their section can hear them and follow their phrasing and dynamics.

The rhythm section sets up to the director's left of the band with the drums next to the trumpets, the bass next to the trombones and the piano next to the saxes. If you have a guitar, it should be in the crook of the piano—if there is no guitar, the bass will fill that spot.

In the stage plot I use for my band, the trombones/bass are on a riser and the trumpets/drums are on a higher riser so that they can be seen and heard. If there is only one level of riser available, the trumpets can stand so that they will be higher than the trombones. This, however, does not help the drummer who will be hidden behind the piano and bass. When our band performs our weekly gig at Birdland, we have no risers. This means that everyone is on the same level. The best remedy we have found is for the trumpets to stand. The positions of the chairs and stands for the trombones are in between the saxophones, so that the bones will not be playing

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directly into the saxes' backs (and hitting them in their heads with the trombone slides). Similarly the trumpets are situated between the bone chairs. This is as important visually as aurally.

Remember that our audiences need a visual show. The conductor can help the audience to follow the music by cueing the soloists and solis. This guides the eyes in the audience to where the main action is. Their ears will follow.

Amplification

While many stages plots show microphones and monitors, my band rarely uses them. This the maximum amplification situation—used mainly for outdoor performances and large halls with poor acoustics. The ideal in jazz is to use no amplification at all. This means no microphones, speakers, monitors or amplifiers. This way we can hear the sound and human energy of all the players.

At first when you tell the bassist that he won't need to lug his amplifier to rehearsals and gigs, you will be surprised when he doesn't thank you. In fact he will probably fight you and insist that you are making a grave error—that nobody will hear the bass notes. Your response is, "Let's just give it a try and see what happens." The fact is that bass amps were not *de rigueur* in jazz until the 1960's—20 years after jazz had stopped being America's popular music.

So you count off the tempo for your first chart and the bassist starts to play. He realizes that no one will hear him unless he pulls the strings hard with his right hand and firmly plants his left hand to get a big sound. This is exactly what we want him to think. As they say, "Necessity is a mother." The drummer still can't hear the bass, so he starts to play softer. Then all of a sudden, the horns realize that they can hear themselves for the first time in their big band experience. They might even be too loud—can you imagine? So now they have the option to play the whole gamut of dynamics that are marked on their charts. This is very different than life with bass amps where they could only play *f* and *ff*. So now in addition to fast and slow and high and low, we get to add loud and soft to the musical palette.

When you get to the end of the chart, you know the bassist is going to give you an argument because he is no longer louder than your first trumpet. So you ask the horns, "Could everyone hear the bass?" Whereupon the unanimous response will be, "Yes!" You then look at the bassist knowing that you are making him very unhappy. He loves his amplifier. He feels naked without it. He wants to be louder than the first trumpet. He may even tell you that he can't hear himself. You can tell him to move his ear next to the fingerboard and listen closely. The drummer will also complain that he can't hear the bass. You can tell him that if he plays softer and if the bassist works on his sound, he will not have a problem.

That leaves him with only one out. He may be too ashamed to admit this, but if he does, he won't be the first. He blurts out, "But it's more fun to play loud all the time." Drummers are not usually known for their subtlety (except for the really good ones), so your only response is to thank God that you are not his girlfriend. Since you can't say that aloud, you can tell him that a sign of maturity is the understanding that "all beauty is the making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are all about." Here I quote poet/philosopher, Eli Siegel. It is the conductor's job to embrace the opposites and make sure that they are not only in balance, but supporting and interacting with each other. Overwhelming loudness is the musical equivalent of fascism.

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No amplification works well in a small room or even a medium size room with good acoustics. We should be able to balance ourselves with no help from electricity. There are two exceptions. You will need an announce microphone. I suggest one with an on/off switch. The other exception is vocals. Vocalists (like the announcer) should be in the front of the band. The vocalist will need a microphone and a monitor. The vocalist will need to have vocals in his/her monitor so that he/she can hear him/herself. A microphone without a monitor is like driving a car with your eyes closed. I don't recommend it. I like to place the vocalist near the piano since the pianist interacts with the voice and often the vocalist depends on hearing the piano notes for cues.

What about soloists? Don't they need amplification? Not usually. A harmon mute solo could use some help. So maybe he could walk to the front of the band and play into either the announce or vocal microphone. Other trombone and trumpet soloists may want to come to the front of the band (they won't need the microphone) for solos of length—especially feature numbers. This gives the audience something to watch. Remember that it's pretty boring for the audience when nothing visual happens for 2 hours. We need to build in visual interest in our shows, i.e. waving derbies and plungers, standing up for solos and solis, walking to the front of the band for solos and solis. Players showing physical interaction when trading fours, etc. helps the audience to understand what is going on in the music. More about the visual show later.

Repertoire and programming

Ninety-five percent of the conductor's job is done by the time you get to the performance. One of the most important elements of your job is planning a show that the audience will like. I do not endorse pandering to the audience. It is our job as educators and artists to elevate our audience and not lower ourselves to their basest tastes.

When I hear an educator tell me that he/she plays pop music with his jazz band because that is what the students like and want, I wonder if the English teachers in his school also poll the students for what they would like to read. I certainly hope not. It is a teacher's job to inspire and lead the students. Teaching them banal pop music and TV themes is not what I call responsible leadership. The best bands play the best music. Period. The students will rise to the level of the music if we give them the opportunity.

So always choose music that is playable by your students. It should be more challenging musically than it is technically. I strongly recommend that you play recordings of the great bands for your students. If they hear Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Miles Davis, et al play the music, they will begin to understand how great this music is and that they can be a part of it.

Listening to jazz once or twice isn't going to make a difference in your students' performance. Your students speak French or Spanish in class for 50 minutes five times a week for a minimum of 3 years and still can't speak the language, so why should we expect them to be able to play jazz when they don't listen to it on a steady basis. I learned jazz by listening for hours every day starting at the age of 12. This was my pop music. I don't expect that all your students will eschew their pop stars in favor of Louis Armstrong (although I read an article about Julia Roberts where she said that she was a loner in high school and would go home every afternoon to listen to Pops. How come I didn't know girls like that in high school?), but I think that you can hip your students to some great recordings and make them available to them. Don't underestimate the power of your own love for the music.

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When I was a kid my father would take me to work with him sometimes. He would take me downstairs to the shipping department, where I would work packing cartons in a room full of a dozen Black and Hispanic men. I guess my father felt that they could teach me and I could do the least damage to the business there. I quickly learned that this was the most fun place to work. As I got older these men would ask my dad how I was doing, so one day he told them that I was playing trumpet in the jazz band at junior high school. The next day Carl Edwards sent my dad home with a package for me. I'll never forget Carl. He was about 10 years older than my dad. He always wore a jacket and tie and a sharp fedora with a narrow brim. Very stylish dresser. His manners were impeccable. He would get to work, take off his clothes and put on his work clothes so he wouldn't dirty his fine looking vines. After he left work at 5 o'clock, he went to a second job in a liquor store so that he could make enough money to send his kids to college. One evening my dad handed me a shopping bag from Carl. I opened it up and found 3 records with a note saying that when I returned them, he would lend me 3 more. There was Dizzy Gillespie's "Have Trumpet, Will Excite", I can't remember the second one, and the third was Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue." On "Kind of Blue" he wrote, "Keep this one." These were new records at that time. Welcome to the kind world of jazz. I've probably lent out 100 records over the years that I never got back. That's all right.

Intonation

It's probably a good idea, once the band members are settled in their seats, to tune everyone up. Once we start playing notes other than Bb or A, it's a whole new world. Intonation has to be a personal commitment.

When I was in my 20's I worked often with my trumpet teacher, Jimmy Maxwell. Jimmy became famous in 1939 when he replaced Harry James as lead trumpet in Benny Goodman's band, the most popular band in the country at that time. In 1943 Jimmy left Benny to become a studio musician and had a fantastic career until he was in a car accident 40 years later. Jimmy played the best of the best work and was respected by everyone in the business for his great musicianship, humor and mostly for his respect for the music. He would always show up early to a gig or rehearsal, take his horn and mutes out of the case, put his pencil on the music stand and then walk over to the piano and tune himself to that instrument's version of (as he called it) "the elusive 440." We worked together hundreds, maybe thousands, of times in a period of about ten years. Each time he would tune to the piano. I made sure that I was in tune with Jimmy. He was the lead player, so it was our responsibility to play with him.

Jimmy taught me about the hierarchy in a band. Each member of a section must respect the phrasing and dynamics of the lead player. When the brass section or ensemble plays together, the lead trumpet is the boss. I've always had my own ideas on phrasing and dynamics, which I can express as the conductor or arranger, but as a trumpet player, unless I am playing lead, my job is to make the lead player sound good. All those great ideas I have in my head? Save them.

Conversely, when one is playing lead, it is your responsibility to bring expression to the music. Too little expression is dull and too much is annoying. You don't want to destroy the integrity of the music, but you do want to flavor it with your own personality. I recommend listening to the great lead players of the past. Here are some of my favorites:

Trumpet: Snooky Young, Ernie Royal, Jimmy Maxwell, Al Porcino.

Trombone: Britt Woodman, Lawrence Brown, JJ Johnson.

Saxophone: Phil Woods, Johnny Hodges, Marshall Royal, Jerome Richardson.

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Phrasing (and all of jazz language) is not only learned from lead players and big bands, but also from the great soloists. After all, it was Louis Armstrong who taught everyone how to swing. Charlie Parker and John Coltrane have also been influential on all instrumentalists. Just because I played the trumpet didn't mean that I couldn't use information I'd heard in a saxophone or piano solo. Maxwell told me that Armstrong was influenced by opera singers. Our trumpet lessons included playing vocaleses in the upper reaches of the trumpet in beautiful operatic style. The next time you see the movie, "The Godfather", and hear Jimmy play that haunting trumpet solo, you'll know what I mean by operatic style. When I hear Wynton Marsalis play, I am reminded of how well he has internalized this same bravura concept.

The Read-Down

Now it's time to play. I like to start with an easy, comfortable, swinging chart. In an academic setting, if we are not pressed for time, I like to open it up and let everyone play a solo. A blues will work well or some other tune with easy changes. Ellington's "Stompy Jones" is a good one. It uses the same chord progression as "Happy Birthday."

The drummer is the *de facto* leader of the band. He is the strongest voice and the most dedicated to rhythm. He's the only one who doesn't have to worry about pitches—it's all about rhythm and color to him. The bass and the drums must come to an agreement on the beat and keep it locked in for the entire performance. There are many places in the beat to put the note. Some play a little on top (ahead), some right on it and some a bit on the back end (late). We are talking miniscule amounts of time here. Everyone has a different time feel. That is part of the fun of playing jazz. However, when we play in a band, it is our responsibility to play together. Swing is dependent on that. Sometimes when everyone is feeling the music as one, it's so swinging that it feels like the instrument is playing itself. Those moments produce a high that rivals any on earth.

Before reading down a new chart, Herb Pomeroy would always talk it down. He would alert the players to anything that might be tricky, and always pointed out keys, key changes, repeats, 1st and 2nd endings, DS's, DC's, codas and *fine*'s. This takes a minute or two, but saves lots of time and confusion in the end.

Next I recommend reading the entire chart down from top to bottom. Even if you have to stop several times, start where you left off and keep plowing through. You want to give the players an idea of what the entire piece is about. This works great for pieces of normal length, but is not practical for pieces of symphonic length. That type of chart (anything with a lot of written material and a length over 10 minutes) is best tackled by dividing it up into manageable sections of several minutes each.

Getting Started

Once the band has read the chart down, your main rehearsal job begins. Listen closely to the read down and make mental notes of all the problems the band is having and all the spots where you need something special. Most bands do not read well and need more practice reading. The main advice I give about becoming a good reader is:

1. Look ahead. Before you play the chart and while you are resting, look ahead to whatever looks complicated or tricky and work it out, so when you actually get there with the band, you are not really sightreading.

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2. Emphasize the accented notes, downbeats and last notes of phrases—the big gestures. You may miss some of the eighth notes and sixteenths, but it is more important to keep the time and keep your place in the music. If the big stuff is in place, the details will fall in line.
3. Read like you are performing on a concert. Play all the dynamics, accents and phrasing as if this was the final performance before an audience. If you rehearse like you are performing, music is always fun. If you rehearse like you are rehearsing, you get in the habit of playing with no energy and sloppily. This will carry over to the other players and into your performances. Everyone needs to play 100% all the time. When that happens, the band improves.
4. If you make a mistake, keep going. Make a mental note to look at that spot before the play the chart again. You might also want to get your section to address it, if others made the same mistake. Sometimes it is good to ask the conductor if he can run down a spot again, unless he has beaten you to the punch. In general section leaders are the ones to address the conductor. This is the case in symphonic rehearsals, but in jazz the writing is not always sectional, so if there is a tricky passage for the tenor and 4th trumpet, either of those players should make sure that it is taken care of.

Sectionals are the best way to take care of details in the horn parts—especially for passages that are technically difficult. Jimmy Lunceford's saxophone section rehearsed by themselves every day—and it showed. An hour once a week for the 3 horn sections should transform the ensemble. When I work with high school bands, I like to spend a half hour with each individual player coaching them on their parts. If I can get each of the 12 horn players to phrase their parts well, the ensemble will be great.

After the read-down I will usually go to the beginning of the chart and isolate the problem spots one at a time. Occasionally I will start at the end of the chart and work backwards to the beginning. My choice is to start with the simple and progress to the complex. I will work on each problem spot until it is fixed. I am a bit of a stickler for detail and may make a band play a figure 10 or 20 times until they get it right. Then the next figure may take half as many times. After a while they realize that I mean business and they start to concentrate and do what I ask of them. At first you may feel like you are being a slave-driver, but as the band starts to sound better, they will appreciate your diligence.

What to Do With Your Arms

As little as possible. Large movements convey loud volume and slow the music; small movements help it speed up (basic conducting). The two questions I ask myself are:

1. Does the band need help, and if so, what is the least and clearest gesture I can make?
2. How can I help the audience to understand what is going on in the music and create something visual to keep their interest in the music.

The role of the jazz conductor (and for that matter any musical conductor) is a tenuous one. Small ensembles don't need a conductor, but as the ensembles grew in size and the arrangements grew in complexity, a need arose for one person to make the big decisions. In the greatest bands (Ellington and Basie) the conductor was the leader/pianist. Basie's music required very little, if any conducting—he would start almost every piece at the piano and set the tempo before the others joined. He could wave his hand for the final cut-off. Since his music was dance oriented, there were no tempo changes or other complicated issues that his well-rehearsed and experienced band couldn't handle by itself.

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Ellington's music was another matter. It is highly coloristic and at times involves tempo and meter changes as well as many surprises. And unlike Basie, Ellington was an extrovert who on occasion loved to get up from the keyboard and throw his arms and body around urging the performers to get into the spirit. His performance was at least as much for the audience as it was for the band.

In jazz we generally use a 2-measure aural count-off, "One, two, one, two, three, four." That is 2 half notes and 4 quarter notes. Fast tempos are generally counted off in two, "One, two, two, two." Those would be half notes in cut time. The reason we use a count-off instead of just conducting a downbeat is that one of the hardest things for a jazz band to do is to play in tempo, and establishing the tempo is the hardest aspect of that. Most bands take 4 to 8 bars to finally settle on the tempo. This is confusing to the listener. As listeners (and or dancers), we want to know what the tempo is on beat 2 of the first measure. By giving the band 2 bars of preparation, they should be able to accomplish this (if the conductor is clear and the players listen and concentrate). When I rehearse most student and professional bands, they are lax in this respect, so I have to stop them a few times after 4 bars or so and require them to concentrate on my count-off. This is a bad habit that few leaders correct.

It is a good idea to learn the classical beat patterns. I rarely use them when we are playing swing. Here are some of the times that I will use a beat pattern:

1. Change of tempo.
2. Change of meter.
3. The rhythm section is not playing time.
4. Ballads and other non-swing feels.

My job as conductor is to make sure that everyone in the band is in the same place, so I will delineate the form—laying downbeats on the beginnings of 8 or 12 bar phrases. This is not always necessary, but a certain amount of it reassures the players that they are in the right place. I also will cue entrances and strong rhythmic figures. Again, this is basically for reassurance. Once the band knows the chart, and the drummer is setting up many of the figures, this becomes unnecessary for the band, but still has a function for the audience.

Like a drummer setting up a figure that starts after the beat, it is best to conduct the downbeat and let the band react to your cue, rather than conducting the upbeat with the band. This is clearer for the band and looks cool to the audience. Chuck Israelshipped me to this when we were performing the "Harlem Nutcracker" many years ago and it's been working great ever since.

When I was in college I had a terrific conducting teacher named Dave Riley who once said to us, "I'm going to conduct this piece, and I'm not even going to use my hands". He conducted with his head, shoulders, feet, everything he could muster, but no hands. I can't tell you how much mileage I've gotten from that little demonstration.

There is a great quote of one of the great symphonic conductors—Strauss, I think. He said, "Never look at the trombones. It only encourages them." Another famous conductor stood on the podium before a major symphony orchestra, tapped his baton on his stand, and began to raise it into his preparatory beat. Before he gave the downbeat and anyone came in, he waved them off and matter-of-factly told them, "Too loud already." These are

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humorous anecdotes, and surely jazz has many of its own, but they speak to the power of the slightest gesture and intention.

Some conductors are extremely charismatic. I heard Sonny Greer tell a woman, “When Duke Ellington walked in the room, it was like someone turned on the lights.” I was always amazed at how great certain musicians would play when Thad Jones was conducting them, but how mediocre they could be without him. I have had the great fortune to work with Quincy Jones on numerous occasions. Aside from my normal trumpet playing and arranging duties, he would often call on me to rehearse the band or orchestra for a few days until his arrival the day before the show. At that time he would step onto the podium, lovingly look the musicians and flash his trademark warm smile. Then he would give a count off and everyone would play twice as good as they had ever played for me. Some kinda magic. All I can say is that Quincy made us all feel like he hired us because we are the best people in the world for this job, and so we all wanted to live up to his confidence in us.

All this said, the physical art of conducting should be about personal expression. It’s really 99% looking cool and 1% making sure there are no train wrecks. You want to make the band and audience feel relaxed and confident while conveying the story of the music with your body.

The Rhythm Section

Bass players and drummers need to shade the music as much as the horn players. Bassists: a slight crescendo to a downbeat resolution adds urgency and a sense of forward motion (this must be done without rushing). If the band is playing dynamics correctly, there will be moments when even the bass player can play softly, though these will not be many.

Drummers: play more strongly when playing in 2 – fewer “notes” will seem weaker unless they are played more strongly. The same goes for bass players.

Do not emphasize the high hat on 2 and 4, or accent the ride beat that way, unless the music is in a strong 2 feel with heavy down beats on 1 and 3. The purpose of the slight accent on 2 and 4 is simply to counterbalance the preponderance of musical information occurring on the 1st and 3rd beats. Overemphasizing the off beats only throws things out of balance in the other direction and impedes the swing.

The drummer has 5 basic functions:

1. Keeping the time. This means playing the groove in a way that is so infectious that everyone in the band wants to play it that way. Most drummers try to beat the band into submission by playing louder. There is the famous story about Benny Goodman. He had a new bassist playing his first gig with him. During the entire first set, Benny kept waving his hand behind his back at the bassist. When they finally took a break, the bassist walked over to Benny and asked him if he wanted him to play louder. Benny responded, “No, better.”
2. Delineating the form. Changing cymbals, cymbal crashes, little fills that let the band know when the phrases or choruses start. This is a subtle art.
3. Setting up figures. Knowing *when* is as important as knowing *how*. This all depends on the music and the player.
4. Commenting on the ensemble and soloists. This is the main function of the pianist as well. Pianists should ignore the horn figures 99% of the time and play in the holes. If the band is playing voicings,

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either rest or play a single line melody. If the band is playing unison or there is a soloist with no written backgrounds, comp using chord voicings. Always try to complete the arrangement. This goes for all solos and everything that everyone in the band plays. Use the motifs in the chart as material to develop.

5. Coloring the music. The drums and cymbals add excitement as well as character to the ensemble. Do not forget this one.

Rhythm

The thing that we all do worst in music is playing rhythm. It is the hardest thing to do well, and so we tend to work on the things we do better—like harmony, melody, tone. My number one concern is rhythm. Chuck Israels says that the three most important things in jazz are rhythm, rhythm and rhythm, in that order. Eighty years ago Bubber Miley used to say, “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.” This is still my motto. The first thing that I address in rehearsing a chart is the rhythm. First the overall groove. Break it down to the individual components. Get the bassist swinging, then add the drummer, then guitar (if you have), and finally piano. If each of these guys aren’t swinging, the horns can’t help. Then add each horn section one at a time.

Here’s a little trick in getting each section to swing: play with style and balance. Start with the lowest player in the section and have him play the phrase in question. Have him make the necessary corrections, and make sure that he plays his part like it is the lead part. Lots of personality and energy. Then add the next lowest guy in his section. Now we have a duet. Both players should play their parts like they are playing lead. The bottom player must make slight adjustments to conform to the guy above him. Continue adding players until you get to the lead player. Each additional player must match the volume and intensity of the previous player. This technique works for any combination of horns that are playing in harmony.

Here are two great misconceptions about jazz:

1. If the band doesn’t play together (a little sloppy), it will sound more swinging. The truth is that it will be less swinging and just sound ragged.
2. If we lay back, it will sound like Count Basie. The truth is that the Basie band rarely laid back. This was saved for very special moments. We want to play on the beat with a relaxed feel. Play along with the great records and see where they put the beat. Play every beat as full as possible, arriving at the next just in time.

Phrasing: Slurring, Accents, Longs and Shorts, Swing/Even Eighths

Two things initially attracted me to jazz and continue to interest me; they are swing feel and individual expression. As an arranger, I try to notate as little on the parts as possible and leave as much as I can to the interpretation of the performers. I give them essential information like pitches and rhythms but try to leave much of the phrasing up to them. This way they will bring their point of view to the music. The more I demand, the less they contribute.

It has been the custom in jazz for generations to leave the slurring, accents and longs and shorts up to the performers. The swing era players tended to slur a lot more than the next generation. The object is to make the music sound conversational—like the way Americans speak English. There are many combinations of slurring and tonguing that can work.

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A basic approach that many beboppers use when playing eighth notes is to slur from the upbeat to the downbeat. This is the opposite of the normal tendency in Classical music, but feels good in jazz because it puts a slight emphasis on the upbeat and serves to equalize it with the downbeat.

Another excellent method of tonguing is doodle tonguing. Check out trumpeters Clifford Brown and Clark Terry. Doodle tonguing is produced by saying, “Doodle-oodle-oodle-oodle”, etc. This produces very clean and smooth articulation.

The players in each section need to listen to their lead player’s articulation and match it. We have a tradition in jazz of only writing essential information into our parts. As a player, I rarely wrote on my parts in rehearsals. If I could remember it, there was no need. This worked as long as I was playing my part, but when I would send in a substitute, he might not have enough information. Some players like to write every little detail. This can clutter up the page and be distracting. My policy is only to write what you won’t play naturally. In my own professional band there are a few rhythmic figures that have changed slightly. The players never wrote the changes into their parts because it is more fun for them to play those figures a special way—like a secret code. Of course when we have subs, the sub will miss those figures the first time.

The most noticeable difference between the older bands and contemporary bands is the use of accents. When I first started playing with the great older players in New York, I noticed right away how much they accented. I am speaking about both the frequency and degree of accent. One of my buddies told me that he did a recording session with Clark Terry and that he couldn’t accent as hard as Clark without cracking every note.

Accents give the music excitement and forward motion. You hit the note hard and immediately get soft while you hold the note out. Sometimes we will put a little vibrato and a crescendo at the end of the long note. This gives us forward motion and excitement. I tell the band that they need to accent 10 times harder than they are. After stopping them about 10 times, I will tell them that they are almost halfway there. Then we will continue to play, and I will get them to continue to accent.

We don’t play loud very much in jazz. If we did, the music would sound heavy and un-swinging. If you hold out a long note full volume, we don’t get to hear the people with moving lines and we don’t get to the bassist walking or the drummers ride pattern.

There is one more essential fact about accents: in order to accent you have to decide exactly where in time you are going to start the note. Without an accent, the note’s beginning is more amorphous. So when we accent, we play together, or we sound noticeably un-together, and the players will want to fix it ASAP.

When I was young and working in the National Jazz Ensemble with Chuck Israels, Chuck once told me that the music isn’t yours until you play it from memory. Some players are great at reading and making the music sound internalized. Others take a while, while most others never get there. I was very fortunate when I was in grade school to have a piano teacher who had me memorize every piece I played. At first I didn’t think I could do it, but as time went on, I began to realize that after a few weeks of daily repetition, almost anything is memorizable.

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I often ask my brass players to come down front for solos and solis. Many years ago at the *Essentially Ellington* Competition & Festival, the saxophone section from Hall High School came out front to play the soli in “Cottontail.” This was so impressive that from that time on, whenever a band plays “Cottontail” at the competition, the saxes come forward and play the soli from memory. I once judged a jazz band competition where one of the bands played all 3 of their charts from memory—and they were swinging. An added bonus beyond the level of musical performance is the impression that memorization makes on the audience.

There are different ways to play eighth notes, sometimes they are even, sometimes they are even with a little lilt, sometimes triplets and sometimes dotted eighth and sixteenth. The context of the music will determine the interpretation. Sometimes more than one way sounds good and a choice will need to be made. I keep in mind the story and the relationship of swing/even eighths that is being played out throughout the entire piece. Do we want sameness or difference in this spot?

Dynamics

Duke Ellington never wrote any dynamics on his music. He felt the dynamics would be obvious for the most part and that the band would find what worked best for the music. Occasionally the Maestro would explain what he needed. Most often he liked to explain the story that the music is telling rather than to specifically ask for volume, phrasing, etc.

Most bands play too loud. In fact, nearly every band plays too loud. And they only play loud. Some bands will obey the dynamics on the page—8 bars *f* then 8 bars *p*, etc. This is not much better than playing everything loud. The music needs to have thousands more subtleties of dynamics than that. Say a sentence. Was every syllable enunciated at the same dynamic level? Lots of peaks and valleys, right? Jazz is the same. All the top notes get played at the notated volume, the bottom notes are all played much softer. Accent the top notes, ghost a lot of the bottom notes. This gives the music shape.

As you ascend, crescendo. As you descend, diminuendo. Start diminuendos early, crescendos – late. Drummers should play immediately softer after a solo or significant fill. Drummers can really help the accented rhythmic figures by hitting them on the crash cymbal, snare and bass drum. The drummer should figure out the essential accents and lay for them. Making every accent will sound stilted, un-swinging and predictable. Remember that in order to make a hit or a fill, the drummer gives up the ride pattern (or other groove) momentarily. This interrupts the continuity. Every piece has different demands.

Vibrato

It is out of vogue to use vibrato these days. In a big band much of our repertoire is either pre-bop or built on the conventions of the pre-bop so-called Big Band Era. When Ellington wanted to hear vibrato, he would say, “Give me some personality.” When he wanted no vibrato, he would say, “Dead tone.” That pretty much explains the power of vibrato. Section players need to match the vibrato of their section leader.

Saxes and trumpets (and bass) use hand vibrato. I find slide vibrato to be pretty corny in most instances. In the Swing Era the white bands used it, but the black bands didn’t. JJ Johnson didn’t use it. When vibrato is employed by these bands, it is lip vibrato. Check out Lawrence Brown with Ellington. When Britt Woodman replaced Brown, he used less vibrato, but still almost entirely lip vibrato. In the 10 years that Britt played lead trombone for me, I only remember one passage where he used a little slide vibrato on a few notes.

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In general when we play in unison, it is without vibrato. Harmonized passages that should sound cold and impersonal also use no vibrato. For warmth on harmonized passages, we add vibrato. This, like everything else I have said, is a generalization, and there will be the occasional exception to the rule. Saxes in the Swing Bands tended to use a little vibrato on unison passages. If the vibratos don't match, the intonation gets a bit gamy. Hence, no vibrato on unisons is safe.

Dress and Stage Behavior, Standing vs. Sitting

Always look better than your audience. The eyes are our most dominant sense. People seeing a band dressed uniformly will believe they are hearing it play more together. This is a demonstrable human phenomenon. The tradition for big bands is dark suit and long tie. Most likely everyone owns a dark suit. Weddings, corporate gigs, parties, performances with symphony orchestras, etc. all demand tuxedos. Any attempt to dress down or ethnic (dashikis in the 70's) has always looked silly, disrespectful and disorderly to me. I wear jeans and tee shirts at home just like you and your students, but when I'm on the stage, I have a responsibility to my audience. They want me (and the band) to look special. Back in the day when Duke's band came to town, people always talked about how great they dressed. And after all, they were musical royalty.

When you walk on the stand, don't apologize or feel that being shy is an admirable quality. Your audience came to see you play because you have something special to offer them. Walk out there with pride and own it. Welcome the audience as you'd welcome a guest to your home.

After almost every performance my band plays, audience members will approach me and tell me that it is so obvious how much we all love playing the music. The smiling faces, the relaxed body language and the co-signing when someone lights up the room with a moment of humor or brilliance. It's natural to react. Running conversations are a distraction and are to be discouraged for sure, but an occasional outburst of joy and encouragement are part of the conversational nature of our music.

Stand for any solo (soli section) of 8 measures or more – it's polite – not egotistical. Players in the back of the band should come to the front for solos and solis. We can hear and see them better. There is a moment of drama as they walk forward. What is this special thing that is going to happen next?

Some conductors announce the soloists' names as soon as they finish their solo. I don't like breaking the 4th wall. I prefer to wait until after the chart is finished and announce all the soloists having them stand for their curtain calls.

I personally like to hear the leader introduce each piece. It tells me the title (which might be useful information), the composer, arranger, sometimes the soloists (although I'll find that out in a minute). One thing I loved about Frank Sinatra was that he always announced the arranger's name. I had the great opportunity to work with him on a TV show, and at the end of the rehearsal he thanked the orchestra and told us how wonderful we were. He didn't have to do that. He was Frank Sinatra, but one of the things that made him so great was that he loved musicians, songwriters and arrangers. We need more of that in the world.

Telling a short anecdote is fun too—anything to bring the audience into the world of music that the band lives in. Remember the reason we play music is because it is our best way of communicating with other people.

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Duke Ellington described a really swinging show as one where the audience tries to outdo the band, and the band will not be outdone. I love enthusiastic audiences. It's always nice to get some love back.

Vocals

Instrumentalists imitate vocalists and vocalists imitate the instrumentalists. That is how we grow. Audiences love vocalists. With my band, we can perform a half hour of absolutely swinging hip jazz with pyrotechnical virtuosic solos and solis, but when 3 of our guys come up to the microphone and sing some simple 3-part harmony, the audience faces erupt in smiles followed by the biggest applause of the night. Let's face it: most people have no idea what we are doing on our instruments, but as soon as someone opens up their mouth to sing, every person in the audience says to themselves—I do that in the shower, but they are even better than me. They get it. And especially if it's a cute girl in a stylish dress or a handsome guy in a suit—then the singer really can address the listener's romantic longings. Every great big band had a singer or singers. Don't miss this opportunity to connect with your audience. Also, do not forget the added story element that words bring to music.

Programming

Successful programming is about variety and pacing. There are many different ways to skin a cat, but you must first deal with length. A successful set in a club is generally an hour or so in length. Concerts are generally divided in 2 halves: a 60-minute first half, a 20-minute intermission, followed by a 40 minute second half. Encores should be short - 3 or 4 minutes. Concerts that go beyond these limits try the patience of the audience. Concerts that are shorter frustrate the audience. They want more and may not feel they got their money's worth. Composer Hans Eisler said, "An hour and a quarter of music should be enough for anyone."

I try to divide my sets into segments: instrumental, vocal, solo piano, etc. For instance, the second set of the night in a club for me is generally like this:

35 minutes instrumental

12 minutes vocal

5 minutes solo piano

6 minutes barnburner

It is good to vary lengths of pieces. All short is as predictable and boring as all long. Vary lengths of solos. Some pieces will have short solos while others will have long solos. Vary tempi. I try not to play two slow pieces in a row. Also vary grooves. It's nice to throw in a Latin (or other non-swing) number in a set.

I almost always start with a fairly short uptempo groover - something that is easy for the band to play well and doesn't make too many physical demands. It should be comfortable and something the band knows well. This will make a good impression on the audience and also serve to warm up the band.

The last number in a set should probably be a barnburner. This leaves the audience exhilarated. At the end of the first set our rhythm section will play some medium tempo blues at a low volume while I announce the names of all the band members and make pertinent announcements (like don't forget to buy our CDs on your way out). Most importantly, never forget to thank your audience. And while you're at it, you might occasionally thank your band for all their hard work and sharing themselves so generously with all of us.