

# Coaching your ensemble - advice from Wynton Marsalis

- Students need to listen to more jazz recordings. I know it's a difficult problem to overcome because they just don't hear jazz on the radio and their friends don't listen to it. You can't force them to listen. The only way for them to get a feeling for jazz is to hear the sound of it played by some of the best musicians.
- Students need private instruction. I know that it may be extremely difficult with budget cutbacks and students' families' finances. But, if you haven't already, check into the possibility of local professionals to help you in providing some private instruction. Take advantage of group instruction to help ease the financial burden. Encourage any type of lesson, whatever and whenever possible.
- Unfortunately, many rhythm sections are weak. The reasons for this are: 1) students don't understand that jazz is dance music and rhythms should be danceable; 2) most players on bass, drums, and piano have small and timid sounds: drummers sound plastic and restricted; bass players are not pulling sound out of their basses; and pianists lack technical command. *When the rhythm section is weak the whole band suffers.*

How do we address this problem? Remind students that the rhythm section is the heart of the band: they play all the time. Hold separate rehearsals for the rhythm section, if you can. Have students listen to recordings that feature the rhythm section. Direct them to players who swing, like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Bud Powell on piano; Jimmie Blanton, Paul Chambers, and Ray Brown on bass; and Joe Jones, Buddy Rich, and Art Blakey on drums.



Wynton Marsalis rehearses with 2nd place band Foxboro High School before evening concert.

- If you can, hold sectional rehearsals with goals of achieving a balanced sound, hearing the lead line, etc. Make sure players listen to each other. As you know, musicians should always know what instrument has the lead line or lines so that they can play the harmony with the right balance.
- Have students concentrate on rhythm. In jazz, every instrument is also a drum. Instruments must be played percussively - not loud - but with rhythmic attitude.
- Because we don't sing as a culture, kids have a problem singing through their horns. Every melody should be sung unashamedly and with clarion soul.
- In general, the pieces requiring swing get weaker and weaker as they go along because most modern music students aren't used to concentrating for more than a couple of minutes. Even though it's difficult, we should encourage them to reaffirm the rhythm the same way a coach begs his or her team to hustle in the final quarter of a game. We have to play with more rhythmic authority and verve.
- Now for soloing. There can be very good solos, but we have to figure out more ways to encourage our kids to play with personality and confidence. I think the blues is the best tool to teach soloing because the harmonic progression is simple, and it's not difficult for a young musician to hear the form. But once again, students have to listen to the best soloists. Give them a blues to learn and have them listen to a recording of how a great soloist like Louis Armstrong or Charlie Parker played it. Encourage them to play with soul and warmth.
- Another way to encourage soloing may be to have the entire band play a solo from memory using call and response: one of your musicians plays a solo and the rest of the band has to listen and play it back. I'd like to see more soloing going on. No matter how bad students sound, it is important that they have a chance to express themselves even if it's only for one chorus, or eight bars, or even four bars! Soloing is a very important part of jazz.

# Dealing with Duke

The *EE Online Newsletter* provides directors with a forum to ask questions about teaching the music of Duke Ellington. Each month you will receive an email with a featured clinician and topic. Each session offers the opportunity to ask questions, make comments, and receive quality feedback from professionals. A variety of topics are addressed including improvisation, rhythm section, individual instruments, and Ellington style. We will also keep you aware of Jazz at Lincoln Center events occurring in your community.

Participants will receive messages three to four times a month.

*“EE has educated an entire community with student and adult ensembles playing the charts, students and faculty members using the jazz information in American studies courses, and audiences enjoying the music and beginning to understand the genius of Duke Ellington.”*

- *EE Band Director*

## Classroom Suggestions

Beyond playing the charts, a comprehensive study of Ellington enhances the performance of this music. This includes researching the history, personalities, and various cultures embodied in Ellington's music. Here are some suggestions:

- Listen, listen, listen – there is no substitute for listening to original recordings. This includes the Duke Ellington Orchestra (from all eras), as well as recordings by many other musicians who preceded him and were playing or composing at the same time. Listen to James P. Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Maurice Ravel, Igor Stravinsky, among others to further enhance your studies.
- Transcribe solos; note voicings, grooves, swing, orchestrations, etc.
- **Student Essay Contest:** Encourage your students to write a short essay about their personal experience with jazz. (see page 23 for details)
- Use the enclosed list of recommended recordings, videos, and books for a good introduction to Ellington's musical world and life. (see pages 10-11)
- Assign a different Ellington Orchestra member (Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams, etc.) to each of your students to study - research recordings, transcribe solos, identify the characteristics that made the musician unique, etc. Students should be encouraged to share what they have learned with each other.
- The Jazz for Young People Curriculum™ includes chapters on Duke Ellington, big band, and swing with musical examples, listening guides, and expanded classroom suggestions. Use the Curriculum to supplement your band's exploration of jazz. (See page 26 and enclosed flyer)

Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra member Joe Temperley with Foxboro High School.

