

Some thoughts on teaching jazz.

By Jeff Graham

Jazz is an aural tradition. Like any language, you must learn to speak it before you can study it and learn to truly express yourself. Therefore to learn and teach jazz we must listen and learn from the great musicians who speak the jazz language with grace, style, and soul!

Is Jazz music a novelty? Is Jazz class/band just to have fun and play the latest pop tunes? NO!! Jazz is an art form that was invented in North America. It is extremely important because it could only have been invented here. Therefore we must expose our students to quality Jazz literature and teach them the importance of Jazz music in our society. I see three problems that we have as educators in getting the right info to kids. Most music educators don't get enough Jazz education training to prepare them. Time is perhaps our worst enemy, as a majority of music teachers offer Jazz as an extra-curricular activity. Lastly is the issue of quality literature. Because of a lack of training, many are unsure of what makes for quality Jazz literature.

Jazz History and Education

With most universities offering education degrees that focus on the concert band idiom, educators are left to educate themselves about Jazz. There is help and a number of resources. A number of excellent Jazz pedagogy books are available from various publishers. They all provide the basic info for jazz set ups, articulation, ideas for soloing etc. The greater problem I see is a lack of understanding of Jazz's importance in our society and therefore why it is so important to expose our students to it. The National Endowment for the Arts web site is a great place to get started. They have a ton of resources and materials, all free! They have a teacher section and a student section. They have an easy to follow interactive mini history of jazz. They also do an amazing job in their online-video presentations of explaining why Jazz is so important to North American culture.

In short, Jazz is the true reflection of America. **Jazz music is freedom and democracy.** Its invention began in New Orleans, a melting pot of European and African Cultures. In the late 1800's and early 1900's we had Europeans wanting to escape constraints of Old Europe as well as the African Americans emancipation from slavery. This all came together and the only music that could come out of it was Jazz. The soul and raw beauty of the blues mixed with the refined clarity of classical music to give us Jazz. We need to teach kids this. Once they understand the role Jazz plays in our history they can more easily identify with it.

Time

If we as educators don't think Jazz is important then our administrations will never think it is important. I know so many of you who do your Jazz bands as an extra-curricular thing. On top of that a lot of you are teaching Math or Social or whatever to "fill" your timetable. This is crazy for so many reasons. Make Jazz Band a part of your timetable!! For High Schools it's easy. Jazz Band 15/25/35 is a locally approved course that a number of divisions currently use. (Not to mention Ensemble 15/25/35 = Jazz Combo's) If the kids get credit the division/school gets funding. If the division/school gets funding then it needs to be a part of your timetable!! I run the High School Jazz Bands outside the timetable but get "credit" for it by receiving "In Lieu" preps. Junior High is no different really. When I taught Jr. High my Jazz bands were in the timetable. I had about 20 to 25 kids in there for grade 8 and grade 9 which was still larger than a number of CTS courses, i.e. Foods, Fashion Studies. So why not have Jazz Band as an option for kids? Plus Jazz bands have a way of really promoting school culture. Special events for the school, or dinner dances can really add to the school and community. If you can make your Jazz band important to your administration they will make things happen for you. If you're struggling don't accept the status quo.

Tune Selection

Picking the right songs for our students is our biggest challenge. It is through the tunes I teach Jazz history, improvisation, style, and independence. We can't teach Jazz history if we are not playing Jazz. In recent trips to festival, as an adjudicator and a spectator, I have had many conversations with colleagues who are having difficulty choosing music.

So what to do? First step is learning a little bit about Jazz history so you have a starting point. Then set aside a fair amount of time to pick out charts. I go to the web sites of publishers I like (and even some I don't) and listen first to their mp3 samples and choose music based on the following;

1. Devote at least 50% of your Jazz band's music to the greats or straight ahead swing jazz. While I write/play/perform new forms of Jazz, I teach a lot of straight ahead jazz. It's our duty as professionals to expose students to the greats and swing is a key component of Jazz. I start with Basie/Ellington in my groups then move to more modern/funky music. As High School teacher's we are even able to play actual Basie and Ellington charts. The records are in the same key! Students can transcribe solos.
2. Teach them how to swing!!! Play some med tempo greasy blues tunes like the Basie Band made famous. They don't have to be the exact tunes but there are a number of "big note" versions of Basie tunes out there. "Splanky" and "Front Burner" are two of my favorites. Plus a lot of writers write in the style of Basie so there a lot of charts out there that do the job.

Avoid too many fast swing tunes, while impressive, they don't teach the kids much. It is monkey business really. Because the tunes are so fast players end up playing straight 8th notes. When the solo section hits we have to endure listening to a student meander through choppy quarter note solos that make no sense.

3. Teach them all to solo a little bit. Some people say; "There is no time! By the time we learn the parts and get the band sounding ok it is performance time!" Answer = **Play easier music!!!** I have heard a number of bands playing music that is simply too hard for them, particularly when solo time comes. Allow your students to express themselves through improvisation. It's the true essence of Jazz. Keep it simple! Pick tunes students can solo on. Blues tunes or tunes with simple chord structure provide the easiest vehicles for student improvisation. For most students navigating chord changes will be out of reach in the beginning stages. If your students are in private lessons then your life just became much easier. Again, tempo needs to be a great concern when speaking about improvisation. Tunes that are too fast will frustrate students. Lastly, NO WRITTEN SOLO'S!!! That is simply not jazz and the subject of my next article.
4. Pick music that requires independent playing. There has been a "rash" of poorly written Jazz charts in recent times. Most of it is written in unison or two parts and contain written solos. ARGH!! I understand the need for some easier music to get kids started but the whole point of Jazz music is to hear individuals. Duke Ellington wrote music for the individuals in his band, not simply a song that was arranged for any band. And when someone left Duke's band, any tune that was written for that person was taken out of the folder. Unison tunes give students a false sense of security. Independent playing is one of the corner stones of Jazz. So get through that stuff by at least Christmas and move on to independent harmonized music. Don't sell the kids short let them be individuals!
5. Be very careful of using clarinets, flutes, French horn or any other non-traditional jazz instruments. While we want kids to experience Jazz music, we also want them to have a real experience. Music that includes those instruments also probably indicates a lot of unison playing. If those kids really want to be in Jazz band then suggest they play a Jazz band instrument. I have a lot of kids who play two totally different instruments with much success. My current Bari-sax player plays French Horn in Concert band and she is killin' in both bands!
6. STOP BUYING CRAP! My real complaint is with publishers who produce the crap and sell it as jazz. But why do publishers produce this stuff? Because educators buy it!!! I am talking about the latest pop hits (or worse, hits from the 60's and 70's which the kids cannot relate to at all) arranged for big band. ... Alright that feels better. Look if you need to play

Santana's latest hit or Louie Louie arranged for big band than sell it for what it is; fun, dorky pop music. I'll admit I played "Iron Man" this year with my top group. They all understood however that it was just for fun. We even transposed into a major key in the end of the song. I would never ever play anything like that at a festival though; in that situation it is important to stay true to the art form of Jazz.

The three problems, lack of education, time issues and tune selection can be remedied. They do require some work and perhaps a different approach in certain situations. If you have been left with little to no Jazz education then take a few moments over the summer to explore this North American art form. Also spend a little time thinking about how to make your job easier by including Jazz band as part of your timetable. And finally, to deny our students a close look at quality Jazz literature is a travesty. I believe Jazz is so important because of its place in North American history and it provides students with every thing they hold dearest. It gives the opportunity to be individuals and express their thoughts through music.

If you have any questions about teaching jazz or just jazz music in general please contact me at grahamj@fsd38.ab.ca. If I can't help you find the answers I'll find a person who can.

Jeff Graham