

# Jazz Conductor is NOT an Oxymoron

*Techniques and Tips for the Jazz Ensemble Director*

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St. George Dixie Center*

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# The Rehearsal

- Always be prepared
  - a. Before each rehearsal select which pieces are going to be rehearsed
    - i. Listen to the recording (focus on the original version, but be aware of the others)
    - ii. Study the score
      1. Form (roadmap)
      2. Chord progression
      3. Voicings
      4. Instrumentation/orchestration
    - iii. Determine potentially challenging spots

# The Rehearsal

- In the beginning
  - a. Always start on time, even if people are missing
  - b. Tune carefully
    - i. Asus or Amin for saxes
    - ii. Bbsus or Bbmin for brass
    - iii. G, D, or A for bass
      1. Make sure everyone waits their turn!
      2. Make sure everyone who isn't tuning is quiet
      3. Negate the noodler
    - iv. Tune until it's in tune
    - v. Avoid singling out individuals, until necessary (and then be respectful)

# The Rehearsal

- Blessed be the pacemakers
  - a. Start with something familiar
    - i. Helps the band feel a sense of accomplishment
    - ii. Rehearsal doesn't get derailed or bogged down too quickly
  - b. Move on to something more challenging, or read something new
  - c. Continue with something more challenging, or read something new
  - d. End with something familiar, and try to end rehearsal at the end of a piece
  - e. End on time, it helps with trust and predictability

# The Rehearsal

- Hear all evil
  - a. *Things to listen for during rehearsal*
    - i. *Wrong notes and wrong rhythms (all)*
    - ii. *Time (all)*
    - iii. *Style/articulations (all)*
    - iv. *Balance/blend/dynamics (all)*
    - v. *Intonation (all)*
    - vi. *Comping/chords (rhythm section, soloists)*
    - vii. *Sound/gear (guitar, bass, drums)*
    - viii. *Fills/set-ups (drums)*

# The Rehearsal

- What to do
  - a. *Wrong notes - stop and address after the second offense*
    - i. *Slow the tempo down*
    - ii. *Sing or play it for them*
    - iii. *Loop the passage*
    - iv. *Listen to the recording*
  - b. *Wrong rhythms - address after the second offense*
    - i. *Slow the tempo down*
    - ii. *Clap and/or sing the right rhythm by yourself or as a group*
    - iii. *Omit ornaments*
    - iv. *Remove melody, play rhythm on one pitch only*
    - v. *Loop the passage*
    - vi. *Listen to the recording*

# The Rehearsal

- What to do two
  - a. *Time*
    - i. *Work with a metronome (on 2 & 4)*
    - ii. *Encourage internal subdivision*
    - iii. *Encourage listening to the rhythm section (hi-hat, ride cymbal, bass, etc.)*
    - iv. *Listen to the recording*
  - b. *Style/articulations/phrasing/cut-offs*
    - i. *Have lead trumpet (or whoever is on top) to play the passage, or ask them for clarification*
    - ii. *Sing the passage for them and then have them sing with you*
    - iii. *Listen to the recording*



# The Rehearsal

- What to do two, too
  - a. Balance/blend/dynamics
    - i. Conduct more
    - ii. Encourage them to listen in to the section leaders
    - iii. Encourage them to know if they have the melody or not
    - iv. Record rehearsal and then listen as a group, or have them listen to it on their own
    - v. Listen to original recording(s)
  - b. Intonation
    - i. Re-tune
    - ii. Isolate problem, find out where the unisons and octaves are
    - iii. Encourage them to know what chord tone they're playing
    - iv. Know the tendencies of each instrument

# The Performance

- Entering the stage right
  - a. Walk confidently
  - b. Smile
  - c. Acknowledge the audience
  - d. Don't dilly-dally

# The Performance

- To speak or not to speak    *“I’ll play it and tell you what it is later.” -Miles Davis*
  - a. Play first, speak later - especially if someone spoke before you*
  - b. If you do choose to speak first
    - i. Make it short and sweet*
    - ii. Adjust the mic up or down quickly before you speak, if necessary*
    - iii. Stay the same distance from the mic while talking*
    - iv. Avoid starting with “um” or “ah” while speaking on mic**

# The Performance

- What to do if the microphone is malfunctioning
  - a. Check to see if it's on
  - b. Look at, or in the direction of the sound crew
  - c. Avoid tapping on or blowing into the mic
  - d. Avoid showing your frustration
  - e. After 5 or 6 seconds and a couple of tries, just speak to the audience without the mic

# The Performance

- One, Two, you know what to do
  - a. Be sure the musicians are ready to play before you count it off
  - b. Snap on 2 & 4 for swing tunes (except very fast swing)
  - c. Snap on 1 & 3 for latin, straight-8ths, and very fast swing tunes
  - d. If there's a pickup, the big beat just before the first note should be emphasized
  - e. Slower tempos need less beats of count-off, faster tempos need more
  - f. The tone of your voice should reflect the music's initial volume and intensity

# The Performance

- Traffic cop and other duties
  - a. Help the band with the roadmap
    - i. Universal gestures are used to indicate repeats, cues, vamps, D.S., Coda, etc.
  - b. Help adjust microphones, printed music, and amplifiers
  - c. Acknowledge soloists during the piece
  - d. Keep your eyes where you want the audience to focus
  - e. Keep your groove on, within reason
  - f. Less is (almost) always more while conducting

# The Performance

- Moving right along
  - a. *Banter in between pieces*
    - i. *Be brief and plan out what you're going to say, while still allowing room for spontaneity*
    - ii. *How much and what you say can depends on the mood, instrument changes (woodwinds, electric bass) and other considerations*
    - iii. *Acknowledge special folks in the audience (i.e. administrators, composers/arrangers, etc.)*
    - iv. *Change it up - consider not talking after every piece, switch up solo acknowledgements*

# The Performance

- The final countdown
  - a. Just before the last tune, thank the important people in the audience (i.e. sound crew, guests, host, previous performing groups, audience, the band, etc.)*
  - b. After the last tune, have the band stand up (bowing is optional)*
  - c. Acknowledge the band (and any guest artists) before taking your own bow*
  - d. Exit the stage and only come back if the audience really wants you to*
  - e. Only play an encore if the audience really wants one, and then keep it short*
  - f. Always come back on stage or hang out in the lobby to greet people, to sign autographs, and to help promote the sales of merchandise*



# Conducting Basics

- Back to the basics

- An ictus is the small bounce at the bottom of each conducted beat*
- The beat plane is the imaginary line where all the icti (with the exception of the last beat of each measure) land - make sure it's consistent*
- The beat pattern should be centered on your body to help with eye contact*
- The beat pattern gets larger when indicating a ritardando, and smaller when indicating an accelerando*
- Preparatory (prep) are always in time and can be enhanced by breathing aloud*
- Mirroring (both arms doing the same thing in opposite directions) can be an effective way to indicate a ritard, a louder passage, or to help decipher meter changes*
  - But, don't overuse it!*

# Programming

- Creating an experience that is interesting, varied, and even surprising
  - a. Has a logical flow
  - b. Highlights the ensemble and its members
  - c. Leaves the audience wanting more, not completely saturated
  - d. Contrast is key
    - i. Tempo
    - ii. Style
    - iii. Soloists
    - iv. Complexity
    - v. Length
    - vi. Key signature
    - vii. Time signature
    - viii. Dynamics/mood

# Programming

- Opener
  - a. Medium length (5-6 minutes)*
  - b. Showcases the “sound” of the band*
  - c. Showcases the best soloists, but not a feature*
  - d. Exciting, and often up-tempo*
  - e. Well-rehearsed*
- Closer
  - a. Exciting*
  - b. Has a big ending, often with an open drum solo*
- Encore
  - a. Short (can be a reprise of a section of a previous chart)*
  - b. Play only if there’s time, and if the audience really wants it*

# Q & A

*Alan Baylock - Director, UNT One O'Clock Lab Band  
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