Writing for the Young Jazz Band: Balancing Creativity with Accessibility
by Leslie M. Sabina, Ph.D.

In a 1975 article entitled, “What’s the Score on Jazz Band Charts?”, educator M. E. Hall articulates his vision of a good student jazz band chart:

All that is necessary is a melodic line, a harmony to that melodic line, and a third part that could be either a countermelody or a third harmony part.¹

Of course, Hall expands on this brief description and manages to talk about form, harmony, rhythm, instrumentation, and the place of improvisation within a student chart. Lastly, the question of why the “stage band program” needs to have a body of quality literature available is posed and discussed.

This last thought is important. For without authentic-sounding jazz charts to perform, young students will never grasp the language of the music from a first-hand, performer’s standpoint. And although it is obvious that better educated students who have had significant exposure to the jazz language may eventually become supporters of jazz music and musicians, the idea of writing jazz music for a lower grade level is not a task that is pursued by many jazz composers and arrangers.

In 1975 Hall believed: “There is very little good material for a beginning stage band. Apparently, those composer-arrangers who are qualified to develop materials for elementary groups spend their time and effort writing for the better bands.”²

Twenty-five plus years later, Jeff Jarvis, co-owner of Kendor Music, Inc. writes: “…few writers are equipped and/or willing to write quality music at an accessible level for school-aged jazz musicians…”³

And interestingly, in an attempt to determine which jazz compositions are viewed by jazz educators as “most important,” two surveys conducted by Chuck Owen in the 1990s revealed that “the educational charts (charts written expressly for publishers rather than professional, college, or rehearsal bands) which flood the music dealers’ shelves, went virtually unmentioned in either poll.”⁴

Are we to assume that only bad writers are providing music written at the easy grade levels or that jazz educators don’t think much of educational charts? Thankfully—no. Many superior composers have taken an active part in jazz education through composition. “Name” composers such as Lennie Niehaus and John Fedchock, and experienced educators such as Greg Yasinitsky and Doug Beach, have all written many fine charts targeted toward young groups.
Why must this continue, and what would the school jazz scene look like if this were not the case? Jeff Jarvis writes:

For many jazz ensemble directors, the primary selection criteria for charts are accessibility and whether the students like the music. As long as this is the case, someone in the industry will be only too happy to publish music that satisfies only those guidelines. The caveat—every substandard chart that occupies a slot in a publisher’s production schedule prevents better music from being released. As a result, the prominent composer whose superior music is displaced or doesn’t sell becomes disgruntled and ceases writing for educational purposes. He’s likely to be replaced by a willing, albeit less skilled writer. Thus, the quality of available material spirals downward.5

So, for the continuing creative soul of jazz, it can be argued that it is important to have excellent, authentic-sounding charts available for beginning and intermediate school groups.

What are the challenges presented to composers who want to write jazz for young musicians and bands? In a nutshell: Every basic aspect of music has to be considered carefully from an “ease-of-performance” standpoint. Unfortunately, this consideration is often in direct opposition to the many identifying elements of jazz rhythm, melody, and harmony, such as syncopation, non-diatonic passing tones, or 4- and 5- note chord structures. Needless to say, the difficulty level of each of these basic musical elements has to be in balance with that of the others. It would serve no purpose for a melody that is derived from a pentatonic scale to contain numerous 16th-note subdivisions or many different types of syncopated figures. Beyond these basics, music performance elements such as articulations, dynamics, and instrumental ranges also have to be written with the beginning instrumentalist in mind.

Table 1 illustrates various considerations at the very easy through medium easy grade levels, in other words, for charts targeted toward middle- through the lower high-school grades.

Table 1
Suggested Criteria for Grading Jazz Ensemble Material6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Easy (Grade 1)</th>
<th>Easy (Grade 2)</th>
<th>Medium Easy (Grade 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Length</td>
<td>1:30 – 3:00</td>
<td>3:00 – 3:30</td>
<td>up to 4:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>minimum required: 3 saxophones, 2 trumpets, 1 trombone, 3 rhythm; anything up to full (17 pieces)</td>
<td>same as Very Easy (highly recommended)</td>
<td>same as Very Easy (recommended)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brass Ranges</td>
<td>trumpet: D – Eb5 trombone: D4</td>
<td>trumpet: F5 trombone: F4</td>
<td>trumpet: G – A5 trombone: G4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythm Parts</td>
<td>fully written with chord symbols; drums with suggested beat patterns</td>
<td>same as Very Easy</td>
<td>fully written with chord symbols; drums with suggested beat patterns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Two tables formulated by Michele Caniato appear below. These tables may give composers some insight into what a director is looking for in an easy-to-play chart either when heard (Table 2) or viewed (Table 3).

Table 2
**Learning from the Recording**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chord progression</th>
<th>How complex are the chords? Modal tune on two chords? One 7-part dominant chord on each beat? Something in between? Complexity of chords will most likely be reflected in the ensemble voicings, requiring more rehearsal time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Featured soloists</td>
<td>Do I have a strong soloist on that instrument? If not, can the featured soloist be substituted if I have a stronger one on another instrument? Is the chord progression relatively simple so that other players can solo from memory or from scribbled out chord changes if desired?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Is this a standard form or does it have unusual numbers of bars and/or additional sections?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>Time it. How long? Is this a two-minute chart or a twelve-minute one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key</td>
<td>Play cadential chords at end of main section(s). Is it in E major? (your saxes and brass will be playing in C# and F# major...), or in F?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meter</td>
<td>Any changes? Multimeter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modulations</td>
<td>Any modulations? To what key? Does it return to the original key or remain in the new key until the end?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutes</td>
<td>Which mutes does the brass need to have and be comfortable with? In what register?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranges</td>
<td>Determine highest lead trumpet and lead trombone lines. Can the players handle that? Is there one high range passage only or do they play in this range for long stretches of time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempo</td>
<td>Determine the metronome marking. Too fast for my ensemble? Can it be notched down without affecting the chart too much? Is it so slow that they will have difficulty staying together? Any tempo changes? Conducted sections?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unison vs. Harmony | How much of the chart features unison ensemble lines? How much is harmonized? Any cascading (unison to harmony) passages?
---|---
Written vs. Improvisation | Is this a head chart with large amounts of solo space or is it entirely written out? Something in between? This helps you determine how much time to devote to the ensemble and how much to combo rehearsals. The two could run separately to save time.

### Table 3
**Learning from the Score**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Articulations</th>
<th>Are they marked? Are they clear and consistent? If not you will need to add your own, based on the recording, and then have the ensemble transfer them on to their parts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dynamics</td>
<td>Same as Articulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>Is there 8 or 10 brass? Are there additional optional parts such as auxiliary percussion, vibraphone, French horn, which can be utilized?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner lines</td>
<td>Are there inner lines and other detail not heard in the recording? This could be due to playing mistakes or recording imbalance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential challenges for the ensemble</td>
<td>Items that might have not been readily evident from the recording information such as changes of mutes, awkward intervals, balance problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing errors</td>
<td>If voicings and lines don’t make sense with the underlying harmonies there may be printing errors. Likewise if the same chord or passage is repeated and there are obvious discrepancies between the two versions, there might be a printing error. Harmonic analysis should clarify any doubts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Needless to say, the number and types of compositional restrictions can truly challenge even the most gifted composer when it comes to writing well-crafted music in an authentic jazz style for the easier grade levels. And let’s not forget that jazz society sometimes places excessive demands on the fact that an individual’s work must always be fresh sounding or unique. In other words, a jazz composer has to balance the challenges of accessibility with those of being constantly creative in his or her writing.

### Composing the Music

Bill Dobbins believes that all composition involves great clarity. He states that the identity and characteristics of a composition’s primary thematic idea or motive must be clear and that the composer must be able to stay with this original idea. Most likely, a good idea (i.e., the primary motive) will never become tedious to hear—listeners and performers will always welcome its presence. Additionally, a good idea, when reworked by either inversion or transposition, will maintain its original identity. This is important, because when writing for young bands, material must be repeated often, and usually in a consistent manner.

While writing with the idea of accessibility is pragmatic and feasible (albeit challenging), the idea of “creativity” is, fortunately, not determined by tables, checklists,
or other criteria. A composer brings the element of creativity in his or her work through experience, knowledge, and intuitiveness.

I believe that it is possible to be creative compositionally when working as Dobbins suggests, and by using only small fragments of melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic information. Working with small bits of information ultimately benefits young student performers. Too much information (for example, presenting lengthy source motives in a great variety of ways through elaborate melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic variation) will simply overwhelm and confuse young players.

The following original compositions demonstrate how I use brief motives in both accessible and (hopefully!) creative ways within a variety of jazz styles.

1. **Gig Bag (swing)**
   Illustrate with examples (written and recorded)

   - **Tune**
     - original ‘A’ idea: boogie bass line—it is shortened, transposed, retrogradated (m. 6), expanded (new tail); connected or approached with single non-diatonic tone; reused at the end of the ‘B’ section
     - original ‘B’ idea: ascending 5th and scale—it is filled in, decorated, transposed

   - **Arrangement (Medium Easy)**
     - key of ‘C’; brief duration; easy form (Intro/AABA/AABA/Interlude/BA/Ending); brass ranges are within suggested criteria; plenty of unison writing within each instrumental section (melodies) and ensemble (solo backgrounds); background rhythms are consistent; harmony is mainly ii-Vs
     - the only material not related to the original ideas are 1) interlude (but it is highly repetitive), and 2) Intro/Ending (perhaps it is related to the 2nd measure of the original ‘A’ section idea—an inversion?)

2. **Down Roberto’s Way (bossa)**
   Illustrate with examples (written and recorded)

   - **Tune**
     - original ‘A’ idea: ascending major triad—its “answer” is an implied minor variation in the relative major key (Bb) or an implied diminished variation of the original; the answer is inverted and lengthened to form the conclusion of the 8-measure phrase
     - original ‘B’ idea: descending sequential melodic third (with an ‘answer’)—it is repeated as an ascending melodic third (this time the ‘answer’ exploits a minor/major ambiguity)
     - overall chord progression also contains a minor/major ambiguity (is it G minor or Bb minor or (should it be) Bb major?)

   - **Arrangement (Easy)**
- key of ‘g’; medium duration; easy form (Vamp/AABA/4-bar Send-off/AAA/AABA/Vamp); brass ranges are within suggested criteria; plenty of unison and harmony in 3rds/6ths within each instrumental section; background rhythms are consistent
- original ‘vamp’ idea is an important part of the tune as it reappears constantly
- countermelody to the ‘A’ phrase also incorporates minor/major ambiguity
- key changes are relatively easy: g/f/g

3. Down ‘N Up (blues)
Illustrate with examples (written and recorded)

- Tune
- melody #1 idea: two-note figure where the upper note moves away from the ‘home’ (lower) note and cadences a 5th above home; its answer reverses the direction and the home note is now an octave higher than the original home note—this idea is twice repeated at different pitch levels, but always with the exact same answer
- melody #3 idea: this three-note figure is derived from melody #1 and uses the same principle of inversion; it is a rhythmically compressed figure, compared to melody #1, and it too has a two-measure answer that is unaltered in two subsequent hearings
- melody #2 idea: rhythmically, the beginning of this melody contrasts melodies #1 and #3; inversion is better seen as directional changes—first descending, then ascending; it too, has a two-measure answer that is very similar on its subsequent hearings

- Arrangement (Medium)
- key of ‘C’ blues; medium duration; easy form (12-bar blues repeated over and over); brass ranges are within suggested criteria; only unison writing within each instrumental section (melodies); background rhythms are consistent
- send-off idea (for soloists and ensemble shout) is melodically related to melody #1 but rhythmically independent of it
- easy shout figures

4. Philosopher’s Walk (broken swing)
Illustrate with examples (written and recorded)

- Tune
- original harmonic idea: contrary motion figure—triads in treble, 5ths in bass; this is repeated (sometimes with embellishment) and reappears frequently, acting as a device to offset the tune’s divisions (i.e., ‘A’ and ‘B’ sections) — it is the glue that holds the tune together
- original melodic idea: this is a rhythmic/contour figure that is subsequently repeated, transposed, embellished, and slightly elongated throughout the tune; it is usually answered by another closely related (in terms of rhythm and contour) idea
- harmonic motion: with the exception of the original harmonic idea, the tune makes almost exclusive use of ii-V root movement

- Arrangement (Medium)
- key of F minor; medium duration; medium form (intro/AABA/4-bar vamp with melody for shout section/intro (as send-off)/solo over easy modal section/intro/AAB—key change (to G minor) for last—A/intro (functions as coda)); brass ranges are within suggested criteria; shout section is highly repetitive, both rhythmically and melodically, and is block scored; background rhythms are consistent; solo section is only three changes—F Dorian, Eb Dorian, and D Dorian (may be found on Aebersold Vol. 1 play-along)

**Convertible Scoring**

Most often there is a shortage of desired jazz band instruments (such as trombones or baritone saxophone) at the beginning jazz band levels. Therefore, in order to have younger-level bands play jazz music that is authentic harmonically, it may be necessary to provide music that is flexible in its instrumentation, namely that which is scored in a “convertible” format. In a “convertible” style of scoring, the harmonic sound is guaranteed within the band because all-important harmonic pitches appear within the ensemble’s designated core’s (i.e., essential) parts. For example, Kendor Music’s Konvertibles series designates the following instruments as essential: Alto 1 and 2, Tenor 1, Trumpet 1 and 2, Trombone 1, and a rhythm section consisting of Piano, Bass, and Drums. Therefore, it is only possible to write (at the most) six-part harmony among the horns. This is usually a sufficient number of pitches. However, if an additional seventh harmonic pitch is desired, it will have to be placed in a “non-essential” part (such as Tenor 2), with no guarantee that every ensemble that plays the arrangement will cover it.

The danger with convertible scoring is that it may tend to provide an arranger with a formulaic style of voicing. This style may quickly become overused. For example, the lead note might always be assigned to Trumpet 1, the lower octave reinforcement to Trombone 1, the next-to-lead note to Alto 1, etc.

Six horns actually provide for a variety of scoring variations—arrangers should take advantage of this fact. There is really no excuse for an arranger to constantly rely on a certain voicing technique when scoring in a convertible style.

**Rhythm Section/Improvisation**

One of the greatest creativity/accessibility concerns with charts written for younger-level jazz bands involve rhythm section notation and improvisation, in other words, those parts of jazz music that are not usually written out for musicians.

It is safe to assume that most 7th grade piano players do not know how to voice jazz chords authentically. The same can be said for instrumentalists who are called upon to improvise within a big band setting—they simply do not have enough experience and knowledge to be able to do this.

When is overwriting in these areas detrimental to improvisatory development in soloists or guitar, piano, and bass players? In other words, is it possible to avoid making a young player so worried about playing a part correctly, to the degree that, later on in
life, he or she is unable to grasp the element of spontaneity that is so essential in jazz performance? The answer may lie in with how comfortable the part is for these youngsters. Arrangers should really be providing only guides for beginners—melodic guides that may inspire or cause a budding soloist to develop or alter a solo line, rhythmic guides that point a bass player in the right style direction, or voicing guides that illustrate how to express the fundamental sound of any chord type. If anything more than a guide is provided, a young musician may simply give up trying to accurately play a meticulously written solo or rhythm or complex voicing. This, of course, ultimately serves no one—the composer’s part will not be played, and the young musician may leave the jazz band (and not appreciate jazz music in general) because the music is “too hard.”

It is always a good idea to be repetitive (both rhythmically and melodically) with rhythm section parts and solo melodies. A young musician will quickly become comfortable with such a part and before long, will begin to alter it by means of his or her own creative process. For example, a three-note voicing may one day change to a four- or five-note voicing, or a swing comping pattern of a quarter note followed by two eighth notes may change to one of two eighth notes followed by a quarter. In many ways, this is what jazz is all about—having musicians discover aspects of the music on their own terms, rather than being spoon-fed constantly.

Sales/Styles Correlation

Lastly, it is interesting to see what types of jazz charts are being purchased in the educational marketplace. While most prominent jazz educators expound upon the importance of original music and pure jazz styles (i.e., music that is swing-derived), directors and their students may seem to prefer music that isn’t highly original (in terms of melodies, chord progressions, and form) or based upon swing practices.

My own sales record with Kendor Music, Inc. seems to corroborate this statement. Unequivocally, my Latin and rock/funk charts outsell my swing charts. For sales through 31 August 2005, my top ten sellers include five rock/funk, three Latin, and (only) two swing charts (with one of them being a blues shuffle).

Although many fine accessible swing charts by great composers are available to educators, Latin and rock/funk charts may more easily lend themselves to achieving a functional performance by a young jazz band. After all, within these two styles of music, rhythm section parts are highly stylized and repetitive, melodies are repetitive and often based upon the easy-to-hear blues and pentatonic scales, and harmony is often repetitive or static and basic in structure.

The reliance on non-swing material is not necessarily undesirable. If anything, exposure to different styles enables young musicians to become aware of the different performance techniques needed in order to play each style in an authentic manner. It is hoped, however, that any young jazz band will eventually include swing style charts in its repertoire, thus forcing young players to move away from concentrating solely upon the
printed page and more upon their individual musical awareness. This is something that is so important in all styles of jazz performance.

Notes


2 Ibid., 78.


5 Jarvis and Beach, 55.

6 Guidelines provided by Kendor Music, Inc.


Sources


