

# “Icing The Cake” With Your Jazz Ensemble

*Neil Yorke-Slader*

Rehearsing any musical ensemble requires an “end in mind” approach, both technically and stylistically. The technical element is more obvious, since it represents clear “right and wrong” judgements. The musicians are either playing the correct notes or they aren’t. Where the challenge becomes more sophisticated for the jazz director is with stylistic elements; presenting questions could include:

How should I interpret the articulation markings?  
How should I interpret the swing concept?  
How should I interpret the dynamic markings?

In this article, I will attempt to provide some insights about the stylistic challenges faced by jazz directors in rehearsal. In addition, I will suggest some approaches to optimize the jazz ensemble experience for you and your students, as there are fundamental differences in how individual musicians should approach their role in a jazz ensemble from their role in a concert band or orchestra.

In approaching the rehearsing of any musical work, I believe it is important to remember a couple of key and inter-related statements. The first statement is philosophical, and the second analytical:

1. Music exists to express what words cannot; well-performed music “moves” people.
2. Contrast generates emotional response.

In order to create that musical experience that “moves” both performer and listener, the director must utilize the tools available in the jazz ensemble to identify, foster and enhance opportunities to generate contrast in a variety of forms. There are several core concepts to consider in this area.

## **Articulation**

Diligent attention to staccatos/legatos/accents will enhance the excitement level of any musical work. In well-edited charts, the provided articulations will enhance the stylistic foundation. In addition, they provide signals as to what notes are to be emphasized.

## Dynamic Contrast

Dynamic markings provide a guide to the jazz director, but not the complete picture. Most jazz ensemble charts have block dynamics at specific points in the piece, but provide little of the nuance required for a superior and “moving” performance. Keep in mind that every ensemble has a different volume (by decibel level!) that they would interpret as mp or f; what is more important to attend to is “relative dynamics”. Does the composer indicate that a particular section should be performed more quietly than the previous section? It’s the contrasts that make the piece successful, not the specific decibel level of volume. The jazz director should look at the dynamic markings in the context of the form of the piece. Quite often, an introductory section is orchestrated fully, with a relatively loud dynamic marking indicated (eg. f). It is important to make the adjustment down to a lower dynamic for the initial melodic statement, even if not specifically indicated in the score. If the orchestration is sparse (eg. rhythm section and one alto sax/one trumpet, or rhythm section and one tenor sax/one trombone) for the initial melodic statement, and then more instruments are added for the second melodic statement, the composer has built in his/her own increase in dynamics, even if no dynamic markings are indicated. Conversely, if the initial melodic statement is repeated with the same instrumentation, it is important to impose an mf-f type of dynamic interpretation to ensure that the second statement builds from the first.

## Dynamic Shaping

As in all art forms, music exists in lines, not singular moments (eg. in drama, sentences; in dance, a series of steps or moves). To enhance the sense of musical line, and contribute to the “moving” aesthetic experience for listeners and performers, the jazz director should identify clearly evident peaks in phrases and figures (melodies and backgrounds) in any piece, and work to shape those phrases and figures towards those peaks. Sometimes, dynamic shaping should build to the end of the phrase. Sometimes, more of a “hairpin” (crescendo followed by decrescendo) approach should be utilized. A good strategy is to examine the shape of the melodic line, and interpret the line dynamically in the same fashion. If the pitches in the melodic line are ascending, so should the dynamic shaping; if the pitches are descending, so should the dynamic shaping. Any background figures behind such a melodic line should follow the dynamic shaping of the melody. To help students deepen their understanding of the rehearsal process and their personal engagement in the process, I often involve them in the decision-making about dynamic shaping through careful, leading questioning: Is this phrase building or falling? What should be the loudest note(s) in the phrase? It says forte – so we should play all notes forte, right? (the answer is always “no!”).

One of the most emotive techniques available to a jazz ensemble is the crescendo or decrescendo. However, the effect will only work well if all

musicians are moving dynamically at the same time and the same rate. Planning the structure of crescendos and decrescendos is helpful in this regard. For example, the jazz director might indicate to the musicians that the crescendo should begin on beat 2 and swell to beat 3 of the following bar. That level of detail will pay off.

### **Shaping Notes of Length**

The mantra “shaping notes of length” will go a long way to achieving the sense of rhythmic pulse, inner energy and dramatic effect required to achieving that “moving” musical experience for all. Essentially, if any note is long enough to be played in a legato fashion, it can be shaped in a clearly “pulse” or “fp” manner to give it dynamic variety within the individual note, and provide a shaping to support the stylistic concept. By utilizing this approach, each note of length ends up at a lower volume (after the initial pulse) that allows it to build in energy as part of a crescendo to the identified peak in the phrase. Often, notes of length are background notes provided for harmonic support; shaping them also ensures that they are “out of the way”, not overwhelming the melody being stated by other instruments. A caveat to this philosophy is that, taken to an extreme, shaping of notes can be overdone. The context within the piece should provide guidance as to whether a note is best to be simply pulsed rather than pulsed and shaped towards another note or group of notes. When a note is to be shaped towards another note (e.g. crescendo), a good rule of thumb is to stay down for half the note (after the initial articulation and pulse) before beginning the crescendo. This approach has two benefits: the “fp” effect is dramatic in that the “f” is followed by a significant amount of “p” time, and it also makes very clear when the swell begins. Note: in some ballad contexts, the shaping of a series of half note and/or whole note background figures that provide harmonic support should be more linear (e.g. crescendo to bar 35, then decrescendo to 37) than note-specific.

### **Solo Sections**

The ensemble can contribute greatly to the emotive nature of an improvised solo (I’m referring to the solo section in a regular jazz ensemble piece, not a ballad featuring one particular soloist). Obviously, careful attention to all background figures will enhance the result. Using some of the techniques outlined above (articulation, dynamic shaping, etc) with background figures will support the style of the solo section, and add variety and energy. Another concept worthy of attention is the building of intensity and volume behind the soloist. This begins with a discernable, overt drop in rhythm section (and anyone else still playing) volume at the start of the solo section, even if there are no dynamic markings evident in the score to suggest it. Only if there is room for the soloist and the ensemble to build intensity can there be the variety necessary to achieve the emotional response desired. Ideally, the solo becomes a conversation with the rhythm section, as melodic and rhythmic input from the rhythm section musicians supports and promotes the work of the soloist. It is certainly acceptable (and in

educational settings, often helpful) to plan the shape of the solo (usually “build to end”!) ahead of time, and have all musicians involved in the solo section aware of the goal. The band should then drop down again in volume and intensity for the next soloist and begin the process again.

## **Reinforcing Style**

The idea that the drummer is the only one in the jazz ensemble responsible for establishing and maintaining the style of a particular piece (e.g. rock, swing, funk) overlooks the profound impact that all members of the ensemble can have through how they approach what I will call the “signpost notes”. In styles in which the notes are played rhythmically as notated (e.g. rock, funk, various latin), emphasizing notes on the beat and notes that imply the beat (off-beat notes tied to the next beat or off-beat notes followed by a rest on the beat) will support the foundational rhythmic nature of the piece, and add variety and sophistication to the overall ensemble effect. In swing style, emphasizing beats 2 & 4 in the rhythm section will reinforce the style, whether it is 2 & 4 in the guitarist’s four quarter note chords, 2 & 4 in the bassist’s walking bass figures, or 2 & 4 in the drummer’s ride cymbal pattern. In addition, ensembles should emphasize any off-beat notes ending melodic phrases that are followed by a rest on the beat, and emphasizing off-beat notes in multi-eighth note melody lines that are peak notes in phrases (the highest pitch in the melodic line).

Understanding these two approaches outlined (rock/funk/latin vs. swing) above is a critical matter for successful stylistic interpretation. For example, depending on the style of the piece and the context in which the figure occurs, the do-daht figure (two eighth notes, the first legato, the second staccato or marcato) would be interpreted in completely different ways. In rock/funk/latin, the emphasis would be on the legato note because it was on the beat, unless what immediately followed the figure was a rest, in which case the marcato note would be emphasized because it implied the next beat. In swing, the marcato note would be emphasized.

View a block dynamic such as “f” at the beginning of a section to really mean “play the important notes in melodic lines “f” and the rest quieter, and “play the beginning of notes of length (see Shaping Notes of Length, above) “f”, and the rest of those notes quieter. Finding places to “cheat back” the volume will provide the necessary room for the building of volume, intensity, and drama to create the emotional response desired.

## **Unison vs. Harmony Issues**

Wind players in the jazz ensemble always need to be aware if what they are playing is a unison line with other players, or notes in chords. This has several implications. One implication is that unison lines need more attention to blend, whereas chordal notes need more attention to balance. Another is the whole

issue of dynamic level; five musicians playing a unison line will sound five times louder than one. Therefore, if the piece is scored such that a given section goes from playing a unison line to a four or five-part harmonized line, more volume is required from each member of the section when they come to the chordal scoring. Another consideration to be noted is what I call the “fifth trumpet” scenario. If part of the piece is scored for eight brasses in harmony, the Trombone 1 part is a “de facto” fifth trumpet, and needs to be very careful not to be louder than the Trumpet 4 part. Since the Trumpet 4 part is likely scored quite low in its range, and the Trombone 1 part is likely scored quite high in its range, this awareness is important if the result is to be a balanced sound in the ensemble. Another scenario similar to this involves the role of the baritone saxophone as a “fifth trombone”. Usually, the Trombone 4 part is the bottom of the chord, and often the root of the chord. It is one of the parts that define the ensemble sound, much like Trumpet 1 does on the top of the band. However, if the baritone saxophone is scored beneath the Trombone 4 part (eg. if the composer wrote five-part harmony with trombones and baritone saxophone), the Trombone 4 part is then an inner part and requires the resulting sensitivity to balance.

### **Other Considerations**

In a concert band setting, there are usually one or more other musicians playing the same part. One of the integral considerations for all musicians in a jazz ensemble setting is the complete responsibility for one’s part. Emphasizing this philosophy can reinforce the students’ commitment to both the ensemble as a whole, and to the conviction with which they need to prepare and then perform their part.

I would recommend using both a tuner and metronome in rehearsal to clarify issues that arise, and to (in the case of the metronome) ensure a consistent and predictable choice of tempo for each piece so that the musicians begin to internalize a particular “groove” for the piece.

Occasionally, and particularly in the early stages of development of the ensemble or particular pieces, I have found the use of a “box” rehearsal setup to enhance ensemble awareness. It could either have the three wind sections representing three sides of the box (all playing towards the middle) with the rhythm section behind a section, or the full four-sided box. It is of great help in having the trumpets understand how the various elements of the piece fit together, since much is often lost for them when they’re always hearing the piece from the back row.

Have your students play long tones every day. This is a profoundly important key to developing good tone (sound & intonation); it also helps develop stamina. A great deal of what separates a student band playing a chart from an older ensemble playing the same chart comes down to intonation and sound.

Although the primary ingredient for the development of those elements is time, you can focus specifically on them, improving the sound of each individual player, and thus the ensemble sound as well.

Place strong players on the Trumpet 4, Trombone 4 and Baritone Saxophone parts to “bracket” section playing. If it is necessary to hide weaker players, do so on inner parts (ie. 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> for brasses, 2<sup>nd</sup> alto & 2<sup>nd</sup> tenor for saxophones)

Play recordings for your students. View the teaching of style like teaching an accent in language class. The best way to develop a realistic French accent is to listen to people speaking really good French, and then to try to imitate their sound. You can’t learn about style just from a book.

This article began with the idea of having an “end in mind” approach. It is important to have an exemplary ensemble “sound” in your head that you are working towards with your band. This is an elusive concept, only achieved by you if you invest considerable time listening to recordings of big bands to internalize the “sound”. Publishers promotional CD’s, website mp3’s and YouTube videos of your pieces help somewhat; another approach is to listen to the old masters (Count Basie, Harry James, Duke Ellington, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Buddy Rich) or the new masters (Boss Brass, Matt Catingub, Tom Kubis, Bob Mintzer, Maria Schneider, Frank Mantooth)