

## **Starting a Successful Jazz Program at Your School**

### Introduction to Jazz

Whether you are a new band teacher, a veteran looking to start a new program or a band director who has moved to a new school, starting up a jazz program can be a daunting task. Not only do you have to set up the program and recruit new students, but once you've established it, like any other program, you must keep those students coming back year after year. There are many resources out there dedicated to helping you recruit and retain students, but let's focus on the instrumentation and the set-up here.

### History of Jazz

First, a little history on Jazz. Just like any other form of music or art, it's not like one day there was no jazz and then the next day, poof, it was there. There was a progression and an evolution of the sound. But no one will argue that jazz was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It grew from roots in the popular African American styles of music, blues and ragtime. Jazz is characterized by swing and blue notes, call and response vocals, polyrhythms and improvisation. Jazz is often called "one of America's original art forms."

Since its birth, jazz has become one of the most popular styles of music around the world and has spawned many different styles within the genre, like bebop, hard bop, free jazz, jazz fusion and many more. One of the key characteristics of any style of jazz is improvisation, which means spontaneously playing new melodies over the repeating cycle of chord changes of a tune. This is what makes jazz so fresh, unique, evolving and timeless.

### Jazz in Music Education

A jazz ensemble is a great group for any school music program because it helps students learn to improvise, be confident in their playing and be a leader (because they may be the only one playing those notes, instead of, for example, being one of several clarinets playing the same thing.) It also helps young musicians with sight-reading. For these reasons, and probably many more, being in jazz band can help kids of all ages, from middle school all the way through the collegiate level.

Be sure to communicate these benefits to students, parents and the greater school community. This will help with those tricky tasks mentioned earlier: recruiting and retaining students.

### Instrumentation

Let's get into the actual creation and set up of a jazz ensemble. The core group of most school jazz programs is the big band. The traditional instrumentation of a big band is five saxophones (two altos, two tenors, one baritone), four trumpets, four trombones, piano, bass (both upright and electric), guitar and drums. Of course, depending on the size of your program, the number of students and your budget, you may need to tinker a bit with your ensemble.

Auditioning students is a little different from how you might place them in a concert band or wind ensemble instrumentation.

For the saxophones, the lead voice will be the 1st alto—place your most consistent and confident player here. The baritone saxophonist should be a strong player, as well. If you can determine who your best saxophone improviser is, have him/her be the 1st tenor chair. In general, the 2nd tenor part is challenging, so do what you can to teach and mentor this student.

For the brass section, put your strongest trumpet student with the best high chops as 1st trumpet. Second trumpet chair is the main solo chair of this section. Your trombone section will be like the trumpet section, except that improvised solos seem to get placed in the 1st and 2nd trombone parts almost equally. The fourth part is typically a bass trombone part.

For the rhythm section, one of the most important pieces of direction might be for them to remember to “play the time.” Help them learn to understand the unique roles of their instruments within the ensemble and remember that “more” and “louder” aren’t always the path to take here. For a guitarist (if you have one in your group) and the keys player, you can help them comp by writing some basic rhythm patterns that they can use for various grooves.

While placing students in the right chairs and helping them understand their roles in the ensemble will go a long way, the best thing you can do for your students is let them to listen to jazz—and a lot of it!

Introduce them to famous jazz players like early pioneers Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton, the fathers of jazz Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, contemporaries like Dizzie Gillespie, Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis who heralded the birth of cool jazz, modal jazz and fusion. Even if you don’t have a vocalist, introduce your students to the women of jazz who have been at the forefront of the genre, like Bessie Smith, Nina Simone, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday. Like all music, jazz is an auditory art form, so your students need to understand what tradition calls for it to sound like. Starting each rehearsal with 5 minutes of music, or sending students home with listening homework, will help immensely in their training.

### Jazz Instrument Specifics

We laid out the instrumentation for a school jazz program above—let’s talk about more specific instruments for each of your players.

#### *Saxophones*

In the beginning, the saxophone (originally a military instrument) was simply a part of the jazz ensemble, blending in instead of standing out. When players such as Sidney Bechet, Frankie Trumbauer and Coleman Hawkins came along, they showed how mesmerizing the saxophone could be. These players (and many others) elevated the saxophone to featured soloist and sometimes even the lead instrument in a jazz group.

For the woodwinds section, you’ll need two altos, two tenors and a baritone to start. If you’re looking for guidance on great saxophones to feature in your ensemble, the Yamaha brand is ideal. The Yamaha YAS-26 Standard Alto Saxophone, Yamaha YTS-26 Standard Tenor Saxophone and Yamaha YBS-52 Intermediate Baritone Saxophone all have pro-style features on horns that are durable, playable and deliver consistent tone for your students.

#### *Trumpet*

The trumpet, like the saxophone, is another classic instrument that has its roots in the military but has now become a fixture in the jazz genre. It’s always been the “lead” instrument in New Orleans and Chicago styles of jazz and it carries the melody of most tunes. This is because the trumpet is a loud instrument which allows for the melody to be heard, regardless of what the other instruments are doing. Famous trumpeters like Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis and Wynton Marsalis paved the way for jazz trumpeters.

We mentioned above the traditional set up is to have four trumpeters. If you're looking for a great trumpet for your students, check out the Bundy BTR-300 Student Bb Trumpet. It's manufactured to give student trumpeters great response and its large bore makes it easy for a beginner to blow. You also can't go wrong with another Yamaha instrument, the Yamaha YTR-2330 Standard Bb Trumpet, which is one of the most popular student trumpets on the market. The design of this horn makes it durable and easy to play and even promotes proper playing technique with its adjustable third valve trigger.

### *Trombone*

While the trombone started out as a melody instrument, it has evolved (as the players got better and more dynamic) to sometimes serving as a solo instrument. Players like J.J. Johnson and Jack Teagarden began to experiment more with the trombone and found that it can hold its own along with the saxophone and trumpet. It's now featured in standard big band group setups with four trombones, as mentioned above. The low brass instrument is still growing in popularity, though if you have left-handed students, they may find the trombone difficult to play.

Yamaha excels at student instruments and once again is featured here as a great selection for your students with the Yamaha YSL-354 Series Student Trombone. With a quick response, accurate intonation, and rich and full sound and durable construction, it's a great student trombone. For your bass trombone, we recommend the Getzen 3062AF Custom Series Bass Trombone which offers amazing power and performance. Its three interchangeable leadpipes with varying openness lets your bass trombonist customize the trombone to his or her playing style.

### *Drums*

Getting into the rhythm section, the drums play a key role in jazz, as they do in many other types of music. However, unlike rock or country music, drummers in jazz should learn that less is more and to not only use the loud end of their playing spectrum. Teach your drummer(s) to back off keep time with the high hat and ride cymbal. Instruct them on how to "feather" the bass drum so it subtly reinforces the bassist. Show your percussion students how to blend and balance the dynamics with the rest of the band. Again, a key teaching tool will be to have them listen to jazz drummers, and even better, have them watch some videos on YouTube or other resources so they can see and hear the various techniques that famous jazz drummers, like Buddy Rich, Elvin Jones, Gene Krupa and Art Blakey.

If you're looking for guidance on a great drum kit to include in your new jazz program, we once again turn to Yamaha and suggest the best-selling Yamaha Stage Custom Birch 5-Piece Shell Pack with 20 inch Bass Drum. This is a great kit for beginning drummers and is one of Yamaha's most affordable birch drum shell packs.

We also love the Pearl Roadshow 5-Piece New Fusion Drum Set, which is a complete drum set package to get your students off on the right foot. It is durable and everything is adjustable for different different-sized players. It comes with all the essentials including a bass, toms, floor tom and snare along with 3 cymbals.

### *Keys*

The piano (whether represented by a full sized piano or a keyboard) has been an important part of jazz since the genre's inception. Its role is multifaceted because the piano offers melodic and harmonic capabilities. You'll find that many jazz musicians and composers play the piano and use it for teaching jazz theory and set arrangement, regardless of their main instrument.

While jazz pianists may not get the fame and recognition that horn players do, they are just as instrumental in advancing the genre and it's just as important for your students to understand their role as it is the trumpet, saxophone and trombone players. Pianists like Art Tatum, Thelonious Monk, Herbie Hancock and Ahmad Jamal, along with many others, helped form jazz styles over the years.

When looking to purchase keys for your jazz program, it's likely you'll want to look at digital pianos (keyboards) instead of full-size pianos, so that you're able to move and transport the instruments more easily. Two excellent options are the Williams Legato 88-Key Digital Piano and the Yamaha P-115 88-Key Weighted Action Digital Piano. Both are user-friendly and have great sound quality that produce realistic piano tones, but also give additional options (like additional voices) due to the digital nature of the instruments. Both options are also 88-keys, which mimic full-sized piano keyboards.

### *Guitar*

Not all jazz ensembles and groups will have a guitar player. It's perfectly okay if yours doesn't. Before guitar amplifiers, jazz guitarists were relegated to accompanists, as their instrument wasn't likely to be heard over the loud horns and drums. Today, with amplifiers and electric guitars, jazz guitarists may still play accompanists, but they are now able to project over other players in the group as well.

No matter how (or if) the guitar plays a role in your jazz program, it's still important for students to understand its role and become familiar with some of the great jazz guitarists. Players like Joe Pass, Django Reinhardt, Wes Montgomery and Pat Metheny helped propel jazz guitar to new heights.

If you have a role for a guitarist in your program and you're looking for guidance on good instruments, look at the Fender Standard Telecaster Electric Guitar. Fender is a legendary guitar brand that any student will be excited to play. This beautiful guitar features the classic look and sound that Fender is famous for and will be sturdy and easy-to-play for your students. With a Fender, you'll get excellent tone, consistency and a timeless sound.

### *Bass*

Finally, we've come to the bass, which supplies the low-pitched walking basslines that outline the chord progressions of songs. Through the 1950's, the bass was most definitely represented by an upright bass. From the 1950's through today, players may use the upright bass, the bass guitar, or (sometimes) both, though most players will specialize in one or the other. A few players, namely Stanley Clarke and John Patitucci, have achieved virtuoso skill on both instruments. Other famous jazz bassists include Victor Wooten, Oscar Pettiford, Paul Chambers and Jaco Pastorius brought the bass from merely a rhythm instrument to a full-blown jazz requirement.

If you choose to have an upright bass featured in your school jazz program, the Bellafina Musicale Series Bass Outfit is great for beginners. It has a durable laminated spruce top and maple sides with an ebony fingerboard, tailpiece and endpin to the body. It is easily height adjustable and is strung with D'Addario Helicore Orchestral bass strings that are very easy to play under the left hand.

For bass guitars, we recommend another Fender: the Fender Standard Jazz Bass Guitar. Again, you get the legendary Fender brand, which your students will be so excited to play. The classic offset, contoured alder body with standard pickups and controls provide the definitive bass sound.

### *Sheet Music*

Don't forget the sheet music! Your new jazz program will now need something to play. Choose a classic piece like Watermelon Man by Herbie Hancock. The Grade 2 level is perfect for developing programs and is flexible depending on how many students you have and which instruments they play. You also can't go wrong with the Standard of Excellence Jazz Ensemble Scores, which again provide flexibility depending on your students and their levels of playing.

### **Final Thoughts**

No doubt you are excited, and maybe a little overwhelmed, at the prospect of starting a jazz program at your school. With time and patience, you can help your students understand the importance of this genre of music, which has evolved and continues to morph into new versions of itself. Again, we can't underscore the importance of having your young musicians listen to all types of jazz music to help their education.

If you need any help selecting instruments, call our dedicated Institutional Staff Advisors at 800.346.4448 and they'll be happy to help you with choosing the best products for your program and your budget. We're proud to offer special pricing for music educators. You can also register for the Educator Website, where you can shop online 24/7 with special educator discounts.