

Clarity in the Jazz Ensemble: Rehearsing Through Shifting Orchestration
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One way in which contemporary writers for large jazz ensembles maintain interest, create excitement and control and manipulate intensity in a piece is through shifting and developing orchestration. Modern repertoire frequently challenges players to turn on a dime, rapidly grouping and regrouping in various combinations. Like a lively party, groups of instruments combine and recombine, with members of the original group splintering off to form new alliances, finally opening up into a powerful 6-voice chord at the climax. When executed well, these timbral shifts lead the listener toward that inevitable “big band moment.” But problems in execution can cause the piece to sound fractured and disconnected, and the big arrival to be less than satisfying. Keeping a few principles in mind can help the ensemble shift orchestrations gracefully.

- I. Focus
The principal line (melody) must be clearly audible at all times. Who has the melody at any given time? Everyone in the ensemble should know, especially the rhythm section. (John Riley: the drummer has to know the score better than the conductor).

- II. Clarity of counterpoint
Long notes generally support moving lines. The most important part of any long note is its attack, the point at which it’s a rhythmic event. With the aid of the drummer playing “rehearsal hat,” have melodic players sing their parts, then sing with fingers, and finally play with the rhythm section and supporting parts joining. Be sure to line up ensemble comping figures with the melody where they intersect (comping figures either complement or support the melody—usually 50/50). The drummer can help achieve clarity by understanding how the texture unfolds, and supporting all concerted figures.

- III. Accurate intonation
Tune backward through the ensemble and across the section. Players in front can hear players behind, but not the reverse. The trumpet section needs to be the most in tune section of the band! I like to tune the lead players together, then tune the rest of the band to the leads. This is, of course, only a starting point for good intonation. To ensure ensemble pitch, everyone in the ensemble must keep their ears open

- IV. Uniformity of style
Articulation and dynamic shaping must be uniform between all players playing in rhythmic unison. Sing first, then play slowly, then up to tempo. Try to get students to internalize the rules of articulation, but it’s ok to write them in at first. Be aware that commercial arrangements are often mismarked (> written when ^ is intended, incorrect slurring). Correct these where they occur. It’s possible to swing with just about any slur/tongue combination (Dexter Gordon and Kenny Dorham tongued nearly every note, and no one would accuse them of not swinging), but some combinations facilitate swing whereas others inhibit it. The most important principle is uniformity. In block passages, rehearse the band in cross section (1st trumpet, lead alto, 1st trombone; then all the seconds; then

the thirds including tenor 1; then everyone else). This helps ensure that the style is consistent, through to the lowest parts of each section. Alternately, have the leads demonstrate together, then have the rest of the winds play **without** the leads. One of the differences between a good band and a great one is how deeply the style runs through the wind sections. Each player should sound exactly like the lead, only at a different pitch level.

V. Timbral blend

Blending combinations of contrasting instruments presents many challenges. Saxes are more powerful in their lower register, brass in their upper. Tone color shifts subtly through the range of every instrument (Ellington, Mood Indigo). Take time to make certain that all colors are heard. Many writers utilize the “rule of three” when scoring—three players on a line (or one, but never two). This helps soften intonation and stylistic disagreements.

VI. Consistency of time feel

Transitions are often places where time tends to move around. Imagine the potential for errors when there are 3 or more orchestrational transitions in 8 measures! To avoid missteps, the entire ensemble must be mentally in the timestream at all times. Rests are actually periods of preparation for the next entrance. Think of performance as a relay race—each handoff of the baton must be smooth and timely. The rhythm section’s pulse needs to be impervious to shifts in weight in the ensemble as well.

VII. Awareness of changes in density

Writers use higher density (more voices) to create higher intensity, But paradoxically, each division of the forces into more voices reduces the perceived volume (and tends to slow the tempo). The ensemble must understand how the density evolves, and compensate by moving much more air where the ensemble divides the most (phrase endings are the typical places where this will occur).

A new rehearsal setup

Many of the principles discussed today can be facilitated by changing your rehearsal setup. Instead of the traditional block, on occasion set up your wind sections facing inward toward each other (leave the rhythm section alone—don’t disturb the motor!). The brass players rarely get to hear the saxophones, and the trumpets may struggle to hear the trombones. In passages with cross sectional orchestration, it is critical for the players to hear each other. At festivals I often see directors bring a soli group down front to play together. This is of course impractical when the orchestration shifts frequently, but this setup may simulate that experience in rehearsal. To add a challenge, mix up the wind sections. Have each player sit next to a player on a different instrument. This is a great way to rehearse more block oriented (tutti) material such as classics from the Basie library. It forces each player to listen across the band to line up with their section mates. The band that listens, plays together!