

Jazz in the Small School ~ “It CAN be done!”

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MYTH #1: I can't have a successful Jazz Ensemble in my school because we do not have a jazz class in our curriculum.

This is the most common misconception about starting a jazz ensemble. It is very easy to put jazz on the “back-burner” when you are not able to have it during the school day. It is becoming harder and harder to find ways to insert a jazz class in your school day and schedule. This is especially true in small school where there are only a limited number of sections of certain classes. However, you will find that if you make the time outside of school, the students will as well. Once a schedule has been set, it is easy for the students to plan accordingly.

MYTH #2: I love jazz, but my students have no interest in playing it.

You can't expect your students to jump at the chance to be involved in something to which they have not been exposed. Have jazz recordings playing in your classroom before and after school. For your concerts, try to program a few jazz-related selections and stress the jazz fundamentals throughout rehearsal. Then, when it comes time to pitch Jazz Ensemble to your students, you can refer back to these selections as examples of when they had already played jazz (and probably liked it!) It is also important that students understand that jazz is a wide variety of music and there really can be something there for everyone to enjoy. You also should be very accommodating to students that play “non-traditional” jazz instruments (flute, clarinet, baritone, tuba). These interested students will only generate more interest throughout your music program...including your traditional band instruments of sax, trumpet, and trombone.

MYTH #3: There is no good jazz music available to fit my ensemble's ability level and limited or “non-standard” instrumentation.

A lot of teachers suffer from their own personal view of jazz and what “good” jazz music is. There are hundreds of titles released for all shapes and sizes of jazz ensembles each year. It is a fact, your students are not going to be able to pull out Stan Kenton, Count Basie, or Buddy Rich classics right away. However, there are many ways to find music that the students will enjoy and will build their jazz skill level. One of the best resources for limited instrumentation beginner music that I have found is the Warner Brothers label. The reason I have used and continue to use a lot of their music is because each selection comes with a full-length recording, music for “non-standard” instrumentations, and the beginning level pieces are constructed to be played with as little as a couple instruments in each section. Hal Leonard and C.L. Barnouse have also impressed me with their very accessible rock and ballad selections. There are also a number of good jazz method books available...these are also great to play with limited instrumentation. The Essential Elements series and Standard of Excellence series both have excellent books available.

MYTH #4: My students were born with absolutely no “Swing Gene”!!!

While every teacher of jazz feels this way at some time, it is important to not get too frustrated too quickly. The key here is listening. It is the same message that everyone from Bobby Shriver to Mike Tomaro suggest to almost every high school level group they clinician. Listening is the key to understanding the fundamentals and construction of jazz. It is important to give your students as much opportunity to listen to jazz as possible. This is especially true when it comes to the pieces that they are performing. I make sure that every promotional recording and original artist recording (if available) for each of these selections we are working on is available to the students to listen to. This is a must for all soloists and percussionists. These members of the ensemble are able to gain ideas for performance from these recordings. As a mentor of mine once said, “Jazz is nothing but imitation and creation.”
