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**Dr. Larry Fisher, Editor (professor emeritus)
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania
IAJE Research Chair**

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Outstanding Charts for Jazz Ensemble: Data from a Recent Survey

Michele Caniato
Fitchburg State College
Fitchburg, Massachusetts

A recent survey of expert high school, college, university, conservatory, and professional jazz ensemble directors across the country has yielded a list of 146 outstanding charts for jazz ensemble. This paper begins by comparing this data with a previous survey of quality jazz ensemble charts made by Chuck Owen in 1992. Composition of panels, percentages of charts found in both surveys, and data on most selected composers are reviewed.

If outstanding jazz ensemble music is treated as valuable, enduring repertoire, rather than a disposable, volatile commodity, the need for commentary that helps the ensemble director appreciate, learn, and transmit this music is evident. While commentary on jazz ensemble performance practice is available to the director, commentary on specific literature is scarce. Sources on both topics will be reviewed.

While catalogues and recommended repertoire lists are valuable tools for selecting jazz ensemble literature, after the initial choice or recommendation individuals are left to their own devices in addressing the musical challenges posed by the charts themselves.

This paper surveys criteria for sorting jazz ensemble charts according to individual ensemble learning needs and abilities, and overviews analytical areas for the systematic study of this music.

THE TWO SURVEYS

In 2002-2003 I contacted sixty-five individuals, with eighteen respondents: Kevin Blancq, Brian Coyle, Thomas Everett, Lou Fischer, Victor Goines, Fred Harris, Keith Javors, John La Porta, Richard Lawn, Jeff Leonard, Bart Marantz, Bob Morgan, Ted Pease, Dave Rivello, Haig Shahverdian, Gunther Schuller, Dee Spencer, and Janis Stockhouse. A previous study on quality jazz ensemble music was done in the early 1990s¹. In Owen the participants were: David Baker, Louie Bellson, David Berger, Bill Dobbins, Jon Faddis, Leonard Feather, Clare Fischer, Chuck Israels, Richard Lawn, Wynton Marsalis, Dan Morgenstern, Doug Richards, Loren Schoenberg, Gunther Schuller, Neil Slater, Billy Taylor, Martin Williams, and Herb Wong. The two eighteen member panels featured only two overlaps (Lawn and Schuller), reflecting the focus of the recent survey on ensemble directors, including many at the secondary level. The similarity of some of the findings between the two surveys is quite remarkable: out of twenty-one "most important compositions" selected by the panel of experts in Owen, twelve (57%) are present here (seven received multiple selections and five single inclusion).

Title	Composer	Votes in Owen	Number of Selections in Caniato
Ko Ko	Duke Ellington	9	3
Cottontail	Duke Ellington	6	2
Tone Parallel to Harlem	Duke Ellington	5	1
Moten Swing	Eddie Durham	4	5
Three and One	Thad Jones	4	3
All About Rosie	George Russell	4	1
ABC Blues	Bob Brookmeyer	3	1
Early Autumn	Ralph Burns	3	1
Harlem Airshaft	Duke Ellington	3	3
Shiny Stockings	Frank Foster	3	5
A Child is Born	Thad Jones	3	2
To You	Thad Jones	3	1

In addition, out of ten charts selected by the readership's poll in Owen four (40%) received multiple selections in the recent survey. The welcome fact that new works have been written since 1992 only emphasizes the connection between results further.

The data on most important big band composers (Owen) and on most selected composers (Caniato) also reveals a substantial percentage of shared artists:

Most Important Big Band Composers			
Owen	votes	Caniato	number of charts recommended
Duke Ellington	16	Duke Ellington	21
Thad Jones	12	Thad Jones	11
Gil Evans	12	Charles Mingus	9
Billy Strayhorn	9	Bob Brookmeyer	9
Benny Carter	7	Bill Holman	8
Fletcher Henderson	7	Sammy Nestico	7
Bill Holman	7	Oliver Nelson	7
Eddie Sauter	7	Bob Mintzer	5
Oliver Nelson	6	Billy Strayhorn	5
Sy Oliver	6	Frank Foster	3
Bob Brookmeyer	5	Lennie Niehaus	3
Don Redman	5	Maria Schneider	3

For comparison purposes with the twelve composers selected in Owen, the first twelve composers who received multiple recommendations in the recent survey are included. Many others received one or two recommendations. Six out of twelve composers (50%) are present in both surveys. In the recent survey Gil Evans received only one recommendation, most likely due to the fact that his scores are not readily available, and writers who emerged in the mid 1980s and 1990s, such as Bob Mintzer and Maria Schneider, are represented. While Charles Mingus is not primarily known as a big band composer and was not selected by the panel in Owen, the Mingus Big Band has made available in the past decade much of Mingus's music in big band format, and the recent survey reflects this. The fact that after more than ten years a different group of expert directors continues to recommend approximately 50% of the charts and composers previously polled, seems to point to the existence of an important jazz ensemble repertoire, albeit in a state of continual evolution, in the ears and hearts of expert performers, composers, and conductors.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE AND COMPOSITION/ARRANGING SOURCES

Choral and orchestral music is accompanied by a sizable critical literature that is available to performers and conductors for the study and informed rendition of that repertoire. Jazz scholarship has traditionally focused on performance and improvisation more than composition and arranging. Resources on jazz ensemble can be divided into two areas: performance practice and composition/arranging. While the first is geared towards the conductor and the second towards the composer/arranger, there seems to be ample room for integrating the two, since it is indispensable for the conductor to approach the compositional aspects of the music, and for the arranger to be aware of the performance implications of the music they study or create. An overview of select materials follows.

Jazz Ensemble Performance Practice

John La Porta pioneered the field in 1965 with his *Developing the School Jazz Ensemble*, (Berklee Press), out of print. Richard Lawn's *The Jazz Ensemble Director's Manual*, (Barnhouse Company), followed in 1981 and has been reprinted ever since, initially with cassettes, now with CDs. Two other resources followed in 2002: *The Jazz Educator's Handbook* by Jeff Jarvis and Doug Beach (Kendor), and *Jazz Pedagogy: the Jazz Educator's Handbook and Resource Guide* by J. Richard Dunscomb and Dr. Willie L. Hill, Jr. (Warner Bros). Both contain much useful information, with the first featuring accompanying CDs and the second a DVD and many resource lists, including repertoire ones. Other sources of interest are John Berry's *The Jazz Ensemble Director's Manual* (Jenson Publications, 1990), and Robert E. Henry's *The Jazz Ensemble: a Guide to Technique* (Prentice Hall, 1981).

Jazz Ensemble Composition/Arranging

Ray Wright's *Inside the Score* (Kendor, 1982) is a classic text that analyzes in detail eight charts by Sammy Nestico, Thad Jones, and Bob Brookmeyer. It includes full and condensed scores, analyses, and recordings. Fred Sturm's *Changes over Time: the Evolution of Jazz Arranging* (Advance Music, 1995) is also a standard text that analyzes in detail numerous arrangements of four tunes over the span of nine decades, and features condensed scores and CD. Don Sebesky's *The Contemporary Arranger* (Alfred, 1984), is a classic arranging text with CDs, and Dick Lowell and Ken Pullig's *Arranging for Large Ensemble* (Berklee Press, 2003) is a recent addition to the field, also with CDs.

SORTING AND PREPARING JAZZ ENSEMBLE CHARTS

After the initial chart selection from a catalogue or through a recommendation and after having checked its availability in print, the following procedures can be used to determine if the chart is appropriate for a specific ensemble: learning from the recording, learning from the score, matching information in recording and score, reaching a final interpretation.

Learning from the Recording

Most classic charts have a commercially available recording. Educational or emerging jazz composer charts frequently have a demo. Publishers supply demo recordings that range from a one minute length to the full chart, with online recordings being generally shorter than the compact disc ones. The percentage of published charts without a recording is quite small. The twelve items listed in the first column can be accessed through various listenings, allowing the questions posed in the second column to be addressed. Items are listed alphabetically for convenience and are not meant to reflect a ranking order.

1	Chord progression	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
2	Featured soloists	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?
3	Form	Is this a standard form or does it have unusual numbers of bars and/or additional sections?
4	Length	Time it. How long? Is this a two minute chart or a twelve minute one?
5	Key	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?
6	Meter	Any changes? Multimeter?
7	Modulations	Any modulations? To what key? Does it return to the original key or remain in the new key until the end?
8	Mutes	Which mutes does the brass need to have and be comfortable with? In what register?
9	Ranges	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?
10	Tempo	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?

11	Unison vs. Harmony	How much of the chart features unison ensemble lines? How much is harmonized? Any cascading (unison to harmony) passages?
12	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.

Selecting some charts without the benefit of an available recording is probably a viable option. In such case the positive advantages of inner hearing exercise by the director and the imagining of the music by the players need to be weighed against the disadvantages brought by the lack of a recorded model. Because a recording can quickly yield necessary information to both the director and the players time considerations remain a factor, as does also the maturity of the ensemble in the outgrowing of its reliance on recorded models for the rendition of the music.

Learning from the Score

If the projected selection poses further questions after the listening sessions, a score can be purchased for an average price of roughly \$10, before buying the complete set of parts. Almost all publishers will allow the purchase of individual scores. Borrowing from a colleague or library is also an option. Conductor scores are best avoided. Too much information is missing. Parts and cues cannot be adequately studied, and they contain frequent errors. The alternative is to make a score from parts, and this is another valuable but time consuming experience for the director or the students.

After obtaining a full score and determining it is legible (some of them aren't), score study can begin. The goal of this process is to learn the score and develop an overall image of the music. There are valuable guides on the subject² and it is beyond the scope of this paper to review all the steps involved.

A perusal of the score will yield the following:

1	Articulations	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.
2	Dynamics	Same as Articulations
3	Instrumentation	Are there 8 or 10 brass? Are there additional optional parts such as auxiliary percussion, vibraphone, French horn, which can be utilized?
3	Inner lines	Are there inner lines and other detail not heard in the recording? This could be due to playing mistakes or recording imbalance.
4	Potential challenges for the ensemble	Items that might have not been readily evident from the recording information such as changes of mutes, awkward intervals, balance problems.
5	Printing errors	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.
6	Voicings	What types of voicings are used? Parallel? "Mechanical"? Mixed? Doublings of lead? Match with what is heard in recording.

Merging Information in Recording and Score

Often recording and score information does not match. The score might have been retouched or modified for publication, changes might have occurred during the recording session, or only a recording subsequent to the original might be available. Common areas of discrepancy are in the number of bars, instrumentation, time feel, solo distribution, and sometimes ranges and keys (in simplified versions).

These can be addressed by rerouting information from the recording back to the score and parts. These choices are guided by practical and esthetic decisions. Some recordings and scores match exactly.

Reaching a Final Interpretation

By now it should be clear if a chart is the right choice for a specific ensemble at this point in time. The information gathered so far can help determine creative changes such as form alterations (addition of intros, vamps, endings, solo section repetition and editing, new solo space devising including duets, “battles,” and collective improvisation), decisions such as the inclusion or exclusion of background figures during solos, and time feel manipulation (“2,” “4,” double time feel, and different rhythm section “feels” and “grooves”). For some charts alterations work, in other cases changes would distort the writer’s concept, but in a living tradition it is imperative to try, even more so with jazz that is an art of adaptation, individuality, and change. They contribute greatly to the vitality of this music, bringing a small group music making quality to the large ensemble.

Conclusion

Commercially available jazz charts are an entity in continual flux, replenished by newly written and transcribed ones and diminished by charts entering the POP (permanently out of print) status. The two surveys seem to point to a partial consensus on a group of important charts within this evolving repertoire. Sorting jazz ensemble literature can be a daunting task. Lists of charts recommended by experts are a fundamental resource for the young director. While informed selection is a fundamental first step, the director needs to utilize the available performance practice and composition/arranging resources for general information, and then reach through recording and score study a clear concept of the specific chart. The players will then bring their own strengths, weaknesses, personality, and creativity to the rendition of the music.

Recipes and formulas in conducting and composing seem hard to find, especially when dealing with quality, unique literature, but rather the music is rendered in ever changing ways through the combined abilities of performers and director. Jazz bands where individual voices of players blend with that of the writer into a sum greater than its parts, have truly set the standard for the best jazz orchestras. The study and performance of outstanding jazz ensemble literature is a continual source of pleasure and a legacy to cherish.

Endnotes

¹ Chuck Owen. Jazz Big Band Composition in the 1990s in the *Jazz Educators Journal* vol. 24 no.3, 1992 pp. 30-33+

² Battisti, Frank, and Robert Garofalo. *Guide to Score Study for the Wind Band Conductor*. Meredith Music Publications, 1990