

Please Welcome Our
Newly Added DOE
Staff Member!

VIP Coordinator

**Kendra Ellington
Nafziger**

Kendra graduated from Ball State University with a degree in Vocal and General Music Education with a minor in German. Kendra taught K-6 Elementary Music for two years at Concord Ox Bow Elementary School in the Concord Community School District in Elkhart, IN. After teaching two years, she chose to pursue her business as an Independent Sales Director with Mary Kay full time. She is thrilled to join the DOE team at Conn-Selmer because she loves music and helping people. Kendra enjoys singing in church, playing violin in the Elkhart Symphony and piano at her home, running, playing with her two puppies and spending time with friends and family.



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Shall We Swing?

Starting a Jazz Band at Your School

by Joe Allison - Eastern Kentucky University

Perhaps a brief prologue is in order – I first put this together several years ago, during the wonderful times when I was teaching high school band (has it been that long ago?). In my opinion, the rationale is just as compelling as it once was, if not more so with the economic and social pressures facing the existence of school instrumental programs. Keep an open mind – you may become a bigger hero/heroine than you are now!

Before we consider how to start a jazz band in your school, let's think about why you would want to do this in the first place. My guess is that your class schedule is already full, afternoons and evenings are already taken up by rehearsal and performance activities, and you - the director - are exhausted! Most likely you aren't a "jazz" by trade, anyway. Why would you choose to add yet another set of responsibilities to your otherwise full calendar? What benefits can a jazz program have for your program and you, anyway? Glad you asked!

Simply put, the jazz ensemble is just another type of chamber music group that has unique and special attributes. Not only will your students be charged up with the possibility of rehearsing and performing this type of literature, but "your public" will be thrilled to experience this type of offering.

What does “just another chamber group” mean? Rarely does any experienced instrumental educator need convincing of the assets of small chamber ensembles. Not only is there a world of worthy literature for students to explore, but the benefits of small-group study can have significant (and dis-proportionate) impact on the entire instructional program. Students get the benefits of one-on-a-part playing, which quickly strengthens their sight reading skills and expressive playing. It’s amazing how much more aware and discerning each student becomes when they can no longer rely on others on the same part to help “carry the load”!

Obviously, students interested in a career in music will benefit in a variety of ways from this activity. Jazz and related popular styles of music are a viable career choice. Probably more so than the “legit” genres, as much as I hate to say it. At the least, students preparing to become instrumental instructors at the high school and college levels are increasingly in need of jazz experience in both performance and pedagogy as a requisite for employment.

The limited financial commitment to this activity can be a sound investment. Very few instruments that are not included in the concert band are required, other than a functioning keyboard (which can certainly be a piano), a drum set (often owned by students) and either an electric or acoustic string bass. If no one has a bass instrument in your school, you can always use another keyboard for a functional bass line – after all, it is sometimes done that way in the recording studio! Students are usually more than willing to provide their own rhythm section equipment for the opportunity to learn about and perform the type of literature that this opportunity affords. An expensive state-of-the-art sound system is simply not needed, and many proficient groups choose to perform acoustically “unplugged.”

Yet another positive effect of this aspect of your program is what it will do for the recruitment and retention of students. The entire program will be viewed as more current and comprehensive by the student body and community-at-large.

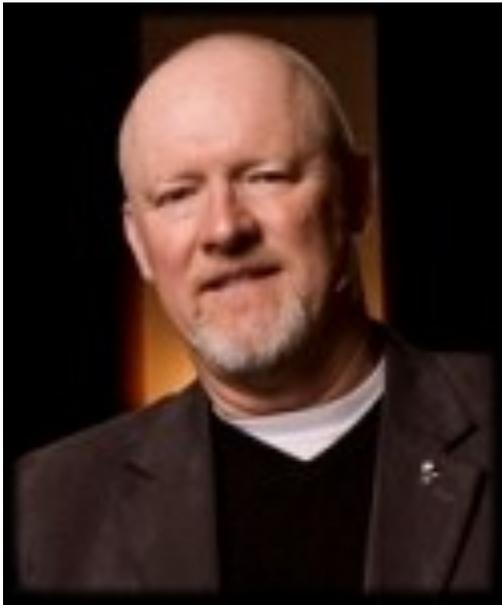
Additionally, this avenue of activity will keep some students in the program that would otherwise move on to other pursuits. You may even find enthusiasm for integrating jazz into other aspects of the program. Many “serious” composers utilize jazz-flavored materials with concert band, marching band, and other musical media.

Not only are the aforementioned educational attributes of a jazz program desirable, but the practical benefits are substantial, as well! Very few ensembles have the versatility for public exposure as the jazz ensemble. Economical and easy to transport, this group is welcome in a wide variety of settings from the most formal to the ultra-casual, indoors and out. The literature itself appeals to all age groups and demographics. This ensemble is a more practical alternative to patrons asking for your “Football Band” in March (or even July!). Because of its universal popularity, this group can fund itself and other components of the total instrumental department. For many experienced programs, the only problem in this area is the possibility of over-exposure!

Even as this all seems compelling, there is a significant consideration that deters some directors, and that is the literature itself. Long surrounded in “mystery” from those who were not serious “jazzers” in college, the “code” of jazz can outwardly seem impenetrable to directors with little or no experience in the related idioms. This is especially true when it comes to teaching and learning the techniques of improvisation. The good news is that there is a wealth of instructional materials, performance literature, and recordings to “bridge the gap” between the “newby” and the “serious swinger”. Most find the “vail of secrecy” to be a myth - when all is said and done, jazz is just another group of styles! It’s really inappropriate to call any program without this component a comprehensive one.

Convinced yet? Then what do you do? How much time will this require to be successful? What if there are no class slots for a jazz class in your school’s master schedule?

A functioning jazz program simply does not require placement in the master course schedule. Many directors have established viable programs in public schools by meeting with the jazz group one or two sessions a week, either after school or at night. Many do not begin the jazz activities until after marching band schedule is completed in the fall. Flexibility seems to be the constant, as high achieving directors have simply made the jazz activity schedule fit into the established routines of the total program, rather than sacrificing one activity for another. If you have or can get a scheduled class meeting for jazz ensemble and the appropriate students can take the class, then you are indeed fortunate! If you are not as propitious as this, then you are in the majority! Don't let that deter you from providing your students, yourself, and the community with one of the most positive, worthwhile experiences our craft can provide. You will redeem the benefits of your efforts several-fold! What are you waiting for? Shall we swing?



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Dr. Joseph H. Allison is currently Professor of Music serving as Director of Research and Outreach for the Department of Music at Eastern Kentucky University. Dr. Allison also serves as the Director of the Stephen Collins Foster Music Camps at EKU. He is also a co-founder of The Marching Roundtable (www.marchingroundtable.com). He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Music Education (French Horn) from East Tennessee State University, a Master's Degree (Percussion) and the Doctorate in Musical Arts in Conducting from the University of South Carolina. Dr. Allison is the former Director of Bands at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Associate Director of Bands at East Tennessee State University, and Director of Bands at Sumter (SC) High School, Greenwood (SC) High School and Richmond County (NC) Senior High School. He serves as an adjudicator, clinician and consultant for concert, marching and jazz events throughout North America, Europe, and Japan.

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