



Difficulty Considerations in Jazz Ensemble Repertoire

When choosing repertoire for any ensemble, accurately assessing the level of difficulty of the music relative to your group is very important. In the jazz idiom, rating systems to help with this are best and most politely described as inconsistent, and in fairness this is because of the nature of jazz repertoire itself as a medium for featuring the often virtuosic whims of specific ensembles and individuals.

So how do you decide if a piece is a good fit for your group without playing it first, especially if you as a director don't have a library worth of experience to draw from? The following are some basic considerations to use when evaluating repertoire.

First and foremost, know your ensemble: All of this information is relative to the skill level and experience of your specific ensemble, and often specific individuals within the group. When I am the primary director of a group I make sure I have at least a general idea of the abilities of every player as it relates to range, improvisation, and keys and styles they're comfortable with. The more familiar you are with the actual abilities of your group, the more useful the rest of this information is.

Ranges: Range is the most common consideration brought up in assessing difficulty, in particular lead trumpet parts. While this is valid and you shouldn't choose music that will cause bad habits or counterproductive frustration in any part, I can't stress the following points enough:

- *Ranges in jazz charts may be more extended than in concert literature for the same players.* While the pedagogy doesn't change, it is common practice for players to use different equipment to produce different tone qualities, making extended range more efficient and achievable.
- *Never tell a student that a note is "hard" or "high" or "out of [their] range".* If they think they can play it or want to learn, let them try and guide their habits without letting them know if it's supposedly difficult.
- *Push your players.* If they feel comfortable with a C, find a chart with a C#.

Given those caveats, the following is a table of what I consider the general upper ranges for wind instruments in easy (middle school, early high school), medium (average high school), and advanced literature. This does not mean every chart in these categories follows these ranges or vice versa, but if I were writing a chart for an unspecified band of these levels these are the ranges I would keep in mind.

Instrument	Easy	Medium	Advanced
Saxophones (All)	Written “G#” above the treble clef	Written “C#” above treble clef	Any non-altissimo note (up to written “F” above treble clef)
Lead Trumpet	Written “G” on top of treble clef	Written “C” above treble clef	Written “G” an octave above treble clef
Section Trumpets	Written “E” in treble clef	Written “A” above treble clef	Written “D” above treble clef
Trombones	“D” above bass clef	“F” above bass clef	“Bb” above treble clef, lead may go higher

It’s also worth reiterating that your own knowledge of your players supersedes any of this information. Don’t presume a chart is appropriate for your players or vice versa based on the highest note in the lead trumpet part.

Tempo: This is fairly intuitive in terms of what is difficult or not, with two possible exceptions. First, slower is not necessarily easier especially for swing; “medium swing” tempos of roughly 120-180 bpm are generally easiest with harder *and* slower charts outside that range being proportionally more difficult to play at a high level. Second, as jazz is a groove-based music there are generally specific “pockets” where the chart works best. Don’t be afraid to experiment with changing a tempo to suit your group’s abilities, but make sure the performance tempo suits the music as well.

Keys: Keys are a somewhat divisive topic in terms of difficulty. I personally don’t think any key is “harder” than another one, and rather is just less familiar if it’s not used as often. That said, wind instruments are made in specific keys and therefore there are tonal centers that require more and less adjustment to play in tune. Fundamentally this area can be treated exactly the same as however you would treat your concert band, with the understanding that guitarists and bass players tend to have different common keys (A, D, E) than wind players (F, Bb, Eb).

Styles: In a modern setting the term “jazz” includes a huge variety of styles, and different groups will find different styles more or less difficult. I keep two main things in mind when assessing stylistic difficulty:

- *Can I get the rhythm section to sound good?* In general if the rhythm section gets the style down, I can get the winds to match it. The reverse is not necessarily true.
- *How much aural experience does the group have with this style?* As with keys, difficulty often has a lot to do with familiarity. I always try to introduce students to new styles, but I also try to make sure there’s some common ground with something they’ve heard a lot in or out of the classroom.

Solos: The difficulty of the solo section of any chart comes with the same basic considerations as the chart itself; the harmonic structure (chord changes), the duration, the style, the tempo, etc. The main added consideration is the relative importance of the solo to the piece itself; if it is a feature or a “head chart” that is mainly a vehicle for improvisation, make sure you have players with the skills to make the chart successful.

Duration: Duration is an often unconsidered aspect of difficulty. Achievable ranges in brass may suffer if repeated for too long without a rest, rhythm section players may develop bad habits if pushed too far past their endurance, and the ability to hold the audience’s musical interest as an ensemble is a skill that takes time to develop. In general, I think the upper limit for duration on “easy” charts is 4 minutes, “medium” is 6 minutes, and “advanced” is 8+ minutes.

It is worth mentioning that “opening up a chart for solos” should still take these limits into account. If you want more soloists add another chart, otherwise you are likely to lose musical interest and build poor improvisation habits rather than good ones.

Instrumentation: Instrumentation tends to come into play in two different ways; first when trying to fill the standard parts in an ensemble or include extra players, and second in more advanced literature with “doubles” or extra instruments played by the same player. In both scenarios I have the same default rule; when possible use the original instrumentation. While directors and players can be reluctant to change instruments and worry about forming bad habits, there is significant research showing that developing instrumentalists gain more from learning another similar instrument than they lose by dividing their attention. That said, I also never shy away from including another instrument as long as it makes sense in the musical setting, and sometimes the act of trying to make it fit is the most fun and enlightening part of working on the chart.

The following are generally considered “standard doubles” that each player should expect to be able to perform in an advanced chart:

- Saxes: all saxes (soprano, alto, tenor, and bari), flute, and clarinet. Bari sax commonly calls for bass clarinet.
- Trumpets: flugelhorn and all mutes (straight, cup, harmon, plunger, bucket)
- Trombones: all mutes (straight, cup, plunger, bucket); harmon is uncommon in section work but exists. Trombone 4 is often bass trombone, and occasionally has a tuba option.
- Guitar: hollowbody or hardbody electric, nylon or steel string acoustic, and nearly limitless pedals and processors (distortion, delay, reverb, chorus, etc.)
- Piano: keyboard/synthesizer
- Bass: upright and electric, occasionally calls for 5-string electric

Auxiliary percussion is its own category, and in general each chart will list those parts separately. Often the scenario here is the opposite of that shown in the winds, and in a professional setting these instruments all have players that are specialists and masters on that specific instrument in that style. In an educational setting I don't shy away from players trying any instrument, but it's also not a healthy expectation to assume that a player will be proficient at drum set, vibes, and all the various Latin percussion without proper instruction and practice.

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