

Some Thoughts on Big Band Performance in South Africa by Mike Rossi, part 1

For the past 12 years I have been involved with the Cape Town Big Band Jazz Festival as a listener and performer. Now in its 13th year, the festival continues to grow from strength to strength and has traditionally included ensembles from community-based, school-based, and higher education. This year, twenty big bands performed over three days to sold out audiences at the Baxter Concert Hall, University of Cape Town. As an educator and as someone who has years of big band experience, I would like to offer some insight to help improve big band performance across informal & formal school-based and university big band ensembles programs in South Africa.

Selection of material:

In general after hearing performances at all levels, most directors have selected pieces of an appropriate technical level. However, more attention needs to be given to the quality of the chosen material and genre. Swing pieces from the Big Band tradition (Basie, Ellington, Herman, Kenton, etc) are generally in the minority. If a big band (and student) is going to develop and understand the jazz tradition, the director needs to introduce students to music *from* the jazz tradition. Playing mainly pop/jazz (fusion), jazz-rock and South African based pieces do not contain an adequate amount of the *jazz language* for development of a convincing jazz style.

I have experienced few big band concerts in South Africa where there is a theme or connecting thread to the concert. Directors should consider choosing a set work, or music of a specific period in jazz, or honouring an important jazz birth or other related dates, etc. Oftentimes programs are presented in almost variety show fashion with a little of this and a little of that, and no real glue or connection between pieces that links a performance program together. Think of taking the audience (and band) on a *musical journey* of some nature. It's also a director's responsibility to inform and educate students, and even the audience where and when possible.

Conducting:

Jazz band directors do not need to wave their arms and conduct every beat. This practice went out in the late 1930s. Having experienced (heard and/or performed with) live big band performances of Count Basie, Buddy Rich, Don Ellis, Woody Herman, Bob Minzter, John Fedchock, Maynard Ferguson, Stan Kenton, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey and others – none of these band leaders conducted a band by beating beats in front of the band. Most successful high school and college big bands in the States and Europe do not have someone standing in front of the band waving their arms. This serves no real purpose and can often create *time/pulse confusion* among the different sections of an ensemble and even in the audience. Conducting could or should only be needed to cue or correct specific changes in tempo/time, entrances, cut-offs, indicate dynamics, and appoint soloists. The conductor should act as the *voice* of the group and *link* to the audience by announcing pieces, acknowledging composers/arrangers & soloists and other informative material related to the piece or theme of a concert.

Listening:

Within a few measures of a band performance, the audience can clearly hear if the conductor and students have been exposed to a wide range of big band jazz recordings and have a familiarity and understanding of the jazz tradition. Conductors should know what is happening musically within each part of an arrangement;

understand all aspects of the score. Every band director at school level should take the time to prepare a listening list or prepared cd/playlist of the jazz genre that the band hopes to perform. This is also important in terms of developing the ability to improvise –listen, listen, listen!

Set up:

Oftentimes sound issues can be avoided by adhering to a specific set up.

(all instruments looking forward as seated in the band) **Saxophones** – alto 1; middle, alto 2; right of alto 1, tenor 1; outside right, tenor 2; left of alto 1, baritone outside left, **Trombones** – lead in the middle or behind alto 1 when using four trombones, 2nd to the right of the lead, 3rd to the left of the lead, 4th outside left. **Trumpets** –lead in the middle (lined up with alto 1, trombone 1), 2nd to the right of the lead, 3rd to the left of the lead, 4th/jazz chair outside right. It's important to have the jazz tenor and jazz trumpet chair closest to the rhythm section. **Rhythm section** -drums in the middle and closest to the horns as possible, bass; next to the drummer's hi-hat on left, guitar; to the right of the drummer perhaps in the curve of the piano. Piano; facing with the sound board or open lid to the back and toward the other members of the section. The pianist should have a clear line of vision to all rhythm section players and vice versa. The conductor should stand to the side of the band or off stage and only direct from a central point when needed at important times.

Instrument Position:

All members of the band must hold their instrument in a correct manner. The director needs to continually remind players of this in rehearsals. Commonly I have experienced entire trumpet and trombone sections with bells pointed to the floor (The floor can't hear; hee, hee). Trumpet & trombone bells should be held at a 40-45 degree angle. If an attempt is being made to play into a microphone, bring the microphone to the instrument rather than angle an instrument towards the mic - this can also be dangerous to ones lips and other body parts! Saxophones need to sit up straight and bring the instrument to your mouth by using the strap; do not lean over to reach the instrument. Improper positioning on any wind instrument has a negative impact on breath support, sound production and intonation. All members of the ensemble should try to play as acoustic as possible without relying on stage monitors or a house PA. It has been my experience that listening acoustically (with some slight sound reinforcement on bass & piano) achieves a far better performance than when at the mercy of a sound engineer, monitors or PA. When playing on a large stage set up as close as possible and from the middle half of the stage or forward of the stage midway point.

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If you are interested in having Mike assist your program with a workshop or performance dedicated to the big band ensemble please feel free to contact him at michael.rossi@uct.ac.za

Mike Rossi has performed with the Artie Shaw Orchestra, Boston Big Band, Silver Bullet Orchestra, Mike Campbell Big Band, JEN Reading Band, Stan Kenton Orchestra during the Kenton summer jazz camps, the Stan Kenton Alumni Band, African Jazz Pioneers, and other big bands featuring Clark Terry, Maynard Ferguson, Rich Matteson, Hank Levy, Don Ellis, Rob McConnell, Bill Prince, Bill Watrous, Carl Fontana, Cat Anderson, Tony Bennett, and Lou Rawls.

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