

Starting and Developing a Jazz Program at the Middle School Level

Presenters: Christopher James Lawrence & Dr. Barclay Moffitt

School: John Muir Middle School, Burbank, CA

Overview of the JMMS Instrumental Music Program

Total students: ~225

Ensembles offered:

- Beginning Band
- Intermediate Band (Wind Ensemble)
- Advanced Band (Wind Ensemble)
- Beginning Strings
- Intermediate/Advanced Strings
- After School Jazz Band

The Impact of Jazz Band on Our Program

The jazz band has provided a significant boost to the overall music program. Students are genuinely excited about participating, performing, and improvising. Jazz band gives students something to look forward to and challenges them musically. The repertoire is different, engaging, challenging, and fun. Participation in special performances and events are incentives for students to join and stay motivated. Students love playing jazz—it energizes them and adds variety to your routine, keeping engagement high. Jazz ensemble literature reinforces core musical skills: intonation, ensemble blend, sight-reading, scales, articulation, and dynamics. Incorporating jazz also allows you to teach improvisation, an important California State Standard often overlooked in traditional wind ensemble settings.

Recruiting Students for Jazz Band – Getting Started and Building Momentum

Our rule at John Muir is that jazz band students must be enrolled in concert band, symphonic band, or string orchestra, with at least one year of experience. Don't wait until you have a full big band—start with whoever is willing to show up and rehearse. A small jazz band or large combo is a great way to begin. Use fun, colorful flyers for students and parents explaining why jazz band is exciting and why they'll want to join—cool music, improvisation, special performances with their friends. Ask parents to donate snacks (chips, cookies, etc.) a couple times a month after rehearsals. As the program grows, introduce attendance agreements and behavior requirements for participation. Make jazz band a privilege earned through good behavior and responsibility in core classes (wind ensemble or string orchestra).

Scheduling Jazz Band Rehearsals

At John Muir Middle School, we hold jazz band rehearsals after school on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 3:10–4:00 PM. On Fridays, I often devote part (or all) of our wind ensemble's rehearsal time to working on jazz literature. However, only students who attend at least 90% of our after-school rehearsals are eligible to participate in special performances—such as in-school assemblies, trips to contests, festivals, and theme parks. If you're unable to make jazz band an elective for a grade, use incentives like these to encourage and promote good attendance and commitment. When a dedicated class period isn't possible, consider before- or after-school sessions—even one or two per week can make a difference. If outside-of-class rehearsals aren't an option, dedicating part of your regular wind ensemble rehearsals to jazz still brings great benefits.

Jazz Band Instrumentation – Traditional vs. Flexible Approaches

Traditional jazz band instrumentation: 5 saxophones, 4–5 trombones, 4–5 trumpets, piano, bass, guitar, drums, and percussion. At John Muir Middle School, our primary

goal is to get as many students as possible excited about jazz and improvisation. Because of this, we welcome non-traditional instruments: flute, clarinet, euphonium, French horn, tuba—often, these students become some of our best jazz performers. We explain to students that if they continue in jazz at the high school level, they'll eventually need to learn a traditional big band instrument. When we have too many players on a particular instrument, we rotate students for performances to give everyone a chance. Eventually, you may even need to start two jazz bands. In reality, your ensemble may look very different at first, and that's okay!

Jazz Band Set-Up – Woodwinds and Brass

We use a traditional three-row block set-up: Front row: Saxophones and woodwinds Middle row: Trombones and low brass Back row: Trumpets. Lead trumpet, lead trombone, and lead alto sax should be as close to the center of their sections as possible. Typically, first tenor sax, second trombone, and second trumpet are seated closest to the rhythm section, with lead players next. Lead players should play louder than the other parts in their section—especially the lead alto sax. The rest of the section should follow the lead player for both balance and style. For non-traditional instruments:

- Flutes and clarinets: front row with saxophones
 - Tubas or euphoniums: middle row with trombones
 - French horns: back row with trumpets Trumpets can sit during rehearsals and stand for performances—choose what works best for your group.
-

Jazz Band Set-Up – Rhythm Section

The rhythm section is set up to the director's left, in close proximity for optimal communication:

- Drums next to the trumpets (back row)
- Bass next to the trombones (middle row)
- Piano/keyboard and guitar in line with the saxophones (front row). Bass and drumset should be in line with the trombone row; piano/keyboard and guitar should align with the saxophone row. Pianists typically play with their backs to the audience so the piano lid can project sound toward the band. Keyboard players (no lid) should face the sax row. Guitarists are most often seated next to tenor sax 1; if there's no guitar, the bass can fill that spot. Amplifiers for bass (and

keyboard, if applicable) should be placed at least three feet behind the players and angled diagonally across the band so both the band and audience can hear. Visual communication is key: bassist and drummer should have clear sight of each other's hands and faces to synchronize the beat. Whether the bassist is beside the hi-hat or ride cymbal is a matter of preference—find what works best for your ensemble. Piano and guitar should be close together for harmonic cohesion and clear non-verbal cues. If stage space is limited in your band room, it's sometimes acceptable to place the rhythm section to the right of the band—but never split them up on opposite sides. Keep all rhythm players together for tight ensemble playing. Bass part options: bass guitar, upright bass, or keyboard bass. For very young bass players, consider doubling the part with keyboard bass—piano students often have the skills and sense of tempo to support the band. If your school lacks a strings program, recruit bass players from within the band—students who already read bass clef (trombone, tuba, baritone) are often strong candidates for electric bass. For acoustic bassists, use a pickup to connect to an amp. For bass guitar, Fender Squier offers quality, affordable options for beginners.

Rhythm Section Equipment – Essentials & Recommendations

Drum Set & Percussion: Drum set should include: 20" ride cymbal, 16" crash cymbal, 14" hi-hats; shallow snare 5 inch Evans UV1; mounted tom; floor tom; bass drum; proper drum throne (not a chair). If a full drumset isn't available, divide the drum parts among multiple students (e.g., one on snare, one on cymbals). Include multiple percussionists: two congas on stand (Toca Brand, for Latin/ballads/pop), timbales (Matador Brand, with proper sticks), and a variety of auxiliary instruments (cabasa, guiro, shaker, maracas, wind chimes, cowbells, agogo bells, triangles, finger cymbals, vibraslap, claves, tambourine, wood block, rain stick). Vibraphone or xylophone is excellent for solos and expanding percussion roles.

Keyboards & Bass: Ideally, have two keyboards: one for piano, one for bass (if you lack a bass player). Both can be used for reinforcement. Look for keyboards with sound sampling (upright bass, bass guitar, Hammond organ sounds). For acoustic bassists, use a pickup to connect to an amp. For bass, Fender Squier offers quality, affordable options for beginners.

Guitar: Recommend hollow body guitars for jazz; Gretsch makes good models under \$500. Amp Settings (Starting Points):

For amps: Fender Rumble (bass), Fender Frontman (guitar), and Roland amps (keyboards) are reliable choices. Guitar: All EQ knobs at 12 o'clock, then bass ~10-11, mids flat, treble ~1-2. Use neck pickup and roll tone knob down for warmth. Bass: EQ at 12 o'clock, bass 5-8, mids 4-7, treble 3-5. Add compression if available for smooth notes. Always use the instrument's own volume/tone controls for blending and warmth. The goal is a warm, clean, blended sound—listen and adjust to the whole band, not just the technical settings. Keep rhythm section equipment grouped together and set amps so both band and audience can hear clearly.

Get Them Playing Immediately

As a full-time middle school band director, I know firsthand that today's students have short attention spans and crave active engagement. The best classroom management strategy is to have students playing their instruments right away—idle time leads to distractions. Choose material that students can put together quickly, experience early success with, and genuinely enjoy. I **HIGHLY** recommend investing in and starting with a good method book. I have listed several in the additional resources section of this handout. When students feel successful and have fun making music together, they'll be excited to return and keep improving. Prioritize playing and positive experiences over lengthy explanations—momentum and excitement are key at this stage.

Structuring a Successful Rehearsal & Choosing Materials

Establishing a consistent rehearsal structure helps keep sessions organized, efficient, and focused—especially important for young musicians. Investing in a quality jazz method book system is one of the best ways to ensure students receive solid instruction and stay on task. Jazz method books are designed to get even the youngest players making music right away, with clear lesson progressions and built-in pieces. Method books also provide fully arranged compositions, so students can experience the excitement of playing real jazz charts early on. An effective rehearsal might look something like this:

- Tone Building/Tuning Warm Up/ Articulation exercises
- Call and response rhythms
- Scales
- Improvisation exercise
- Rehearse pieces for upcoming performances

Selecting Jazz Band Literature

For your first couple of songs, consider starting with mostly rock-based or even eighths songs—students relate to rock and can play confidently from the start. Gradually introduce swing, Latin, bossa nova, and ballads as students develop. JW Pepper offers a wide range of charts (many for immediate download). Listen to recordings and review scores before purchasing. Start with "Beginning" and "Very Easy" grade levels for young bands, but always check the chart's real difficulty by reading the score. Try to mostly avoid arrangements of modern pop and rock songs, even if they might be "popular" with students. Sometimes, directors choose an arrangement of the latest viral song that they see on JW Pepper's site with hopes of getting students excited. Instead, focus on well-written charts that develop rhythmic, harmonic, and improvisational skills, and introduce students to new styles found in jazz music. If you are looking for a rock based chart to get your kids started on, there are plenty of well-written jazz rock charts that achieve all of these musical goals and that students will still love! Many recommended charts include parts for flute, vibraphone, clarinet, horn, treble clef euphonium, and tuba. For very young bands, use only two trumpet and two trombone parts to avoid overwhelming brass sections. For 7th–8th grade, use no more than three parts for trumpet and trombone—extra parts often double or add tricky harmonies. Most charts sound fine with some parts left out, especially for beginning groups.

Getting Started with Improvisation – Call & Response & Simple Scales

Improvisation is like language, we like to learn some words and phrases to copy first, just like we did with our moms and dads and friends as kids. I.e. "Hello, how are you?" instead of "Db-7#19 demolished". Remember, it's not a theory study/math equation at this age. We start our students with the call and response rhythms written in Dean Sorenson's Standards of Excellence method. Each song provides six clear call-and-response rhythms for students to echo, both by singing and playing. Rhythms are written with articulations, and the syllables are provided to sing to the kids, making it easy for any director to lead. Students first sing the rhythm, then play it back on their instruments. The rhythm section has a simple, written groove to play—great for building ensemble skills and groove. After a day or two, move on to the scale exercise that accompanies the song (usually a basic 12-bar blues). The scale is clearly written for all instruments—woodwinds and brass play the scale together while the rhythm section

works on their groove. After playing the scale, select 4–5 soloists per day—start with confident students. Encourage soloists to use rhythms from the call-and-response exercises and just a few notes from the blues scale. As confidence grows, add more notes. Alternate between band playing the blues scale and soloists improvising (e.g., scale → solo → scale → solo). Emphasize: everyone in jazz band will learn to improvise a little, even if not everyone solos at the concert. Warm-ups are a safe, supportive place to try improvising.

Developing Soloists to an Intermediate Level

Once an improviser can match ideas from call and response and play scale ideas, it's time to show them some simple blues and melodic vocabulary they can use over various musical scenarios. Taking parts of the melody of the song you're playing is a great way to further this, and an almost guaranteed success since it's already tested. Plan a melodic phrase, lick, or idea for the kids to play over a specific moment in the solo. For example, at bar 1, 5, and 9 of a blues form, play this blues line from the melody or one you came up with/borrowed. In doing this they will feel confident that at that time they have a slam dunk moment no matter what, and they are subconsciously learning ear training, rudimentary thematic development, the shape of the tune, and begin building vocabulary to use in future solos. Rhythm and time are often the challenge with young and experienced improvisers, and practicing subdivisions can make it much more comfortable to start ideas and have them fit in the grid, whether its swing or funk or salsa etc. Have the whole group clap 4/4 quarter notes and sing eighth notes like “12341234”, then try a syncopated metric move like eighth notes “123123123123”. Works the same with triplets over 4/4! Humans connect to rhythmic structure immediately, and kids will shock you how quickly they can learn seemingly complex variations and shapes just by copying. As a further challenge, have them try the idea on a different beat or rhythm. For example, if it usually starts on beat one, try beat 2. Or, a syncopated push on an upbeat like the “and of” 4. That naturally creates energy and dialogue in the solo. This is also the magic moment where sharing some meaningful, fun, swinging, funky jazz recordings can change their playing for the better.

Useful Recordings for the Educator

To learn and teach cooking, one must eat a marvelous meal. To learn and teach literature, one must read beautiful poetry and works. To learn and teach jazz, it is strongly recommended the educator listen to some iconic recordings. Start here in no particular order, and feel free to find your way into other recordings by the artists:

- Kind of Blue - Miles Davis (Favorite Track “All Blues”)
 - Atomic Basie - Count Basie Big Band (Favorite Track “Splanky”)
 - Ellington at Newport - Duke Ellington (Favorite Track “Take the A Train”)
 - Frank Sinatra - Sinatra at the Sands (Favorite Track “Fly Me to the Moon”)
 - The Genius of Ray Charles - Ray Charles (Favorite Track “Let the Good Times Roll”)
 - Blowin’ the Blues Away - Horace Silver (Favorite Track “Sister Sadie”)
 - Groovin’ High - Dizzy Gillespie/Charlie Parker (Favorite Track “Salt Peanuts”)
 - Big Swing Face - Buddy Rich (Favorite Track “Big Swing Face”)
 - Time Out - Dave Brubeck (Favorite Track “Take Five”)
 - Moanin’ - Art Blakey (Favorite Track “Moanin’”)
 - Clifford Brown/Max Roach - Study in Brown (Favorite Track “Sandu”)
 - John Coltrane - Blue Train (Favorite Track “Blue Train”)
 - We Get Requests - Oscar Peterson (Favorite Track “Days of Wine and Roses”)
 - Getz/Gilberto - Stan Getz (Favorite Track “The Girl from Ipanema”)
 - Ella and Louis - Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong (Favorite Track “Cheek to Cheek”)
-

Festivals and Performances – Creating Opportunities for Growth

Aim to schedule a performance at least every 10 weeks—students thrive on having upcoming goals. Jazz band students are especially eager to perform; regular opportunities keep them engaged. Pick a date or school event and set a goal to prepare one or two songs for the student body. Beyond evening concerts, consider lunchtime performances, in-school assemblies, school festivals, and carnivals as accessible options. Once your band can play two or three styles and has some improvisers, seek out festivals or competitions. Festivals and competitions motivate students and encourage them to take performing seriously. Examples: California State Band and Orchestra Association festivals, Music in the Parks (Six Flags), and other local jazz festivals and competitions.

Recommended Charts for Very Young Jazz Bands

- Aardvark Stomp – Charles Booker
- Alligator Alley – Dean Sorenson
- Be Like Basie – Doug Beach and George Shatuck
- Big Sky – Dean Sorenson
- Billy Boy – arr. Victor Lopez
- Birk's Works – Dizzy Gillespie, arr. Rick Stitzel
- Blues Machine- Michael Sweeney
- Blues for Tally – Bruce Pearson
- Buckle Up and Swing – Brad Ciemchomski
- Centerpiece – Harry "Sweets" Edison, arr. Mike Story
- Cissy Strut – The Meters, arr. Rick Stitzel
- Daybreak – Dean Sorenson
- Deck the Halls – arr. Mike Collins Dowden
- Don't Steal Myself – Gordon Goodwin
- Drama for Your Mama – Victor Lopez
- Dreamsville – Henry Mancini, arr. Vince Gassi
- Doxy – Sonny Rollins, arr. Michael Sweeney
- Fat Burger – George Vincent
- Feliz Navidad – Jose Feliciano, arr. Victor Lopez
- Goodbye Pork Pie Hat – Charles Mingus, arr. Alan Baycock
- Green Onions – Booker T. Jones, arr. Paul Murtha
- Greg's Groove – Gregory Yasinitsky
- Groove Fever – Peter Blair
- Gum Game – Doug Beach and George Shutack
- Hello, Bluebird – Ryan Erik Adamsons
- Holiday Jam – Victor Lopez
- Hooked on the Holidays – arr. Victor Lopez
- Isle of Blue – Les Sabina
- Latin Nights – Jerry Nowak
- Lil' Darlin – Neal Hefti, arr. Roy Phillippe
- Little Sunflower – Freddie Hubbard, arr. Mike Story
- Marshmallow World – Peter DeRose, arr. Mike Story
- My Groove, Your Move – Hank Mobley, arr. Terry White
- Night and Day – Cole Porter, arr. Victor Lopez
- Pacific Attitude – Vince Gassi
- Pepperoni Blues – Dean Sorenson

- Rock Hero – Victor Lopez
 - Smooth Honey – Ryan Erik Adamsons
 - Song for Silver – Peter Blair
 - Sonnymoon for Two – Sonny Rollins, arr. Paul Murtha
 - So What- Miles Davis, arr. Michael Sweeney
 - Sweet Georgia Brown-Ben Bernie and Maceo Pinkard, arr. Michael Sweeney
 - Swing Time – Jerry Nowak
 - Swinging with the Stars – Peter Blair
 - Take the A Train – Billy Strayhorn, arr. Vince Gassi
 - Tenor Madness – Sonny Rollins, arr. Paul Murtha
 - Time for a Change- Jeff Jarvis
 - Undercover Bossa- Jeff Jarvis
 - What's Cookin – Victor Lopez
 - Work Song – Nat Adderley, arr. John Berry
-

Methods & Books

- Standard of Excellence Jazz Ensemble Method by Dean Sorenson and Bruce Pearson
 - Essential Elements for Jazz Ensemble Book 1 – A Comprehensive Method for Jazz Style and Improvisation by Mike Steinel
 - Jazz Basics – Fundamentals of Improvisation for the Young Musician by Peter Blair
 - Effective Warm Ups for the Developing Jazz Ensemble by Mike Kamuf
 - Instant Warm Ups- Michael Sweeney
 - Warm ups for Beginning Jazz Ensemble- Chris Sharp
-

Additional Resources

- Free Jamey Aebersold Handbook – Excellent resource for students and directors alike, can be downloaded online for free.
- The Jazz Ensemble Director's Manual – Richard Lawn (Barnhouse)
- The Jazz Educators Handbook – Jeff Jarvis and Doug Beach (Kendor Music)
- Jazz Pedagogy – The Jazz Educator's Handbook and Resource Guide- Richard Dunscombe and Willie Hill (Wingert-Jones)
- **Traditional Three Row Block Seating Chart**

