



Critical Listening *in the* **JAZZ** *Rehearsal*

by Brian C. Wesolowski

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The typical middle school or high school jazz ensemble rehearsal is bound by endless limitations: after-school-only rehearsals, students' scheduling conflicts, credit versus non-credit participation, festival preparations and community concert preparations. In many situations across the United States, band directors struggle simply to maintain actively performing jazz ensembles at their schools on a consistent basis. Some music programs are fortunate to have a jazz ensemble implemented into their curriculums, where it may meet every day or on a rotating basis. Other programs rely simply on the student volunteer platform, meeting before or after school on a semi-regular schedule.

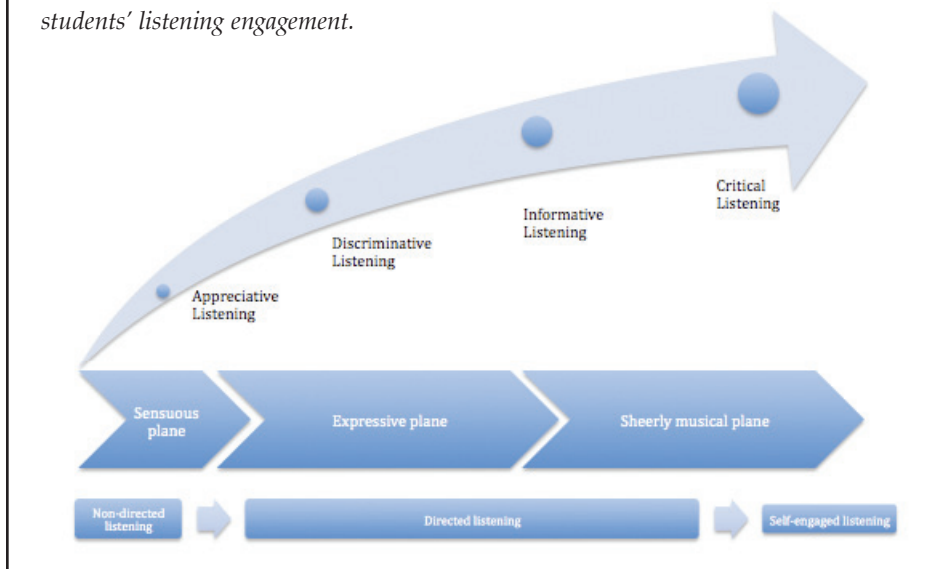
One cannot argue that time management is often a contributing factor to the success of a jazz program at the secondary level. So, when do we have time to listen? Typically, four modes of listening can occur in a jazz ensemble rehearsal: 1) background music as the ensemble members set up and break down; 2) a listening session geared toward particular artists of historical significance; 3) active listening models for the development of performance

repertoire; and 4) listening as a method for developing jazz style and nuance. These experiences often include directed and non-directed listening. The level of the students' engagement is based upon the director's expectations, specialized knowledge in the jazz genre and instructions on how the students should be listening.

Any opportunity in which students are exposed to jazz recordings can be valuable to their musical growth and development. However, the depth and breadth in which students are asked to engage and think critically about their listening experience needs to be further examined.

Kline (1996) offers four types of approaches to listening from a non-

Figure 1. *The relationship between the Kline and Copland listening paradigms and students' listening engagement.*



musical perspective that equate well with music performance:

Appreciative listening: A type of listening for pure enjoyment. The quality of appreciative listening is based on four factors: the presentation of the stimulus; the student's expectation; the student's perception; and the student's previous experience with the stimulus.

Discriminative listening: A type of listening in which the listener derives meaning from subtle nuance in sound. The attention to and the awareness of sound structure lead to a more proficient level of discriminatory listening.

Informative listening: A type of listening in which the primary concern of the listener is to understand a particular message. Three key variables of this type of listening include vocabulary acquisition, concentration on the stimulus and memory recall.

Critical listening: A type of listening that involves analysis, critical thinking and judgment. Important aspects of critical listening include

source credibility, logical argument and psychological appeals.

In his essay "How We Listen," Aaron Copland (1957) claims that we listen to music on three mutually exclusive planes:

Sensuous plane: The level of listening akin to surface level listening, such as music as background music. This level deals primarily with sound elements as a soundscape rather than having any type of inherent meaning. What instruments generate the sound, and how does that sound change aesthetically?

Expressive plane: The level of listening in which the listener finds emotional meaning behind the music. How does the music make you feel?

Sheerly musical plane: The level of listening in which form, structure, melody, harmony, rhythm and tone color are recognized.

Figure 1 organizes the relationship between the listening paradigms of Kline and Copland.

Appreciative listening and the sensuous plane pertain to the idea of non-directed listening. In the example of hav-

ing a jazz recording play while students set up, some students may recognize the song, and some may make a value judgment of the aesthetic qualities of the piece, but others may not even realize music is playing. In most cases, the students will not prioritize their listening for the purpose of learning.

If students are prompted to engage in a discriminative manner, their focus should be directed to the expressive and stylistic elements of the music. This may include swing style, jazz articulation, use of syncopation, phrasing, tone colors, dynamics, idiomatic embellishments and effects, and the varying aesthetic aspects' sub-genres. Examples of directed-listening questions may include:

How does the treatment of the eighth note differ from Count Basie's band to Stan Kenton's band?

What musical elements of Duke Ellington's band make it sound so unique?

When prompting students to listen in an informative manner, aspects of musical and improvisatory vocabulary should be discussed. This may include melodic and harmonic vocabulary, textural densities, instrument roles in the ensemble and musical form. Specific directed-listening questions may include:

What are the background parts doing melodically and harmonically?

When you listen to the two versions of the tune, how are the melodies ornamented differently?

What improvisational tools does the soloist use to tell a story during the solo?

As students begin to develop their listening skills and build their jazz vocabulary, it is important to implement analytical questions to listening exercises while asking for the students' aesthetic feedback:

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What are the significant parts of the piece?

Was that solo appealing to you? Why? What did you like? What did you not like? Tell me in clear musical terms...

In your opinion, how could that performance have been improved?

The addition of analytical, aesthetic and value-judgment questions initiates the process of self-engaged listening. In this stage, the communication between teacher and student moves from listener-centered, directed listening to a dialogue. Although the student's ideas may not be backed by substantial knowledge of history and vocabulary, the fostering of opinions and the ability to discuss those opinions in an intellectual, educated manner open the doors to further academic development and critical thinking. Teaching students to listen and think critically about music is teaching a lifelong skill. The calculated process of asking leading questions of the discriminative and informative nature coupled with students' listening development in the expressive and musical planes fosters a student who can actively participate in self-engaged, critical listening and musical evaluation. Figure 2 demonstrates examples of topics for directed listening in all four approaches to listening.

Suggestions and Steps for Implementation of a Listening Log and Listening Schedule

- Evaluate the students in your ensemble for prior experience and knowledge of the jazz idiom.
- Map out what topics would be most important for the musical development of your ensemble as a whole and the individuals within your ensemble.
- Coordinate the selected topics with the



- ensemble's performance literature and the availability of recordings.
- Develop a manageable listening schedule that you can adhere to.
- Have a clear and concise measure of assessment for your students' work and participation.
- Have your students keep a listening log and assign small, outside listening assignments. The listening log should be adaptable to the listening level of the students in the ensemble.
- Encourage your students to write critically on the music they hear. Have them write a list of their favorite local and national artists and discuss what aspects of their playing they enjoy.
- Support your students in exploring recordings on their own. The availability and accessibility of online media, such as YouTube, iTunes, allaboutjazz.com and allmusic.com, as well as recordings in local public libraries, can be very fruitful for the developing student.
- Encourage your students to attend live jazz performances in the local area. Have them speak to local performers and discuss music critically with professional musicians.

Figure 2. Topics for directed listening.

Appreciative Listening	Discriminative Listening	Informative Listening	Critical Listening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the discretion of the individual student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swing style • Groove • Jazz articulation • Syncopation • Jazz phrasing • Tone colors • Dynamics • Jazz embellishments • Jazz nuance/effects • Balance and blend • Tone quality • Tempo • Motif identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melodic vocabulary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melodic ornamentation • Formulaic procedures • Motivic development • Thematic improvisation • Guide tone playing • Harmonic vocabulary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmonic form • Chord scale theory • Common chord progressions • Chordal formulae • Texture • Section responsibilities • Individual chair responsibilities • Musical form • Arrangement structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensemble interaction • Ensemble cohesiveness • Ensemble interpretation of a jazz chart • Soloing ability • Quality of musicianship • Musical error • Musical quality • Aesthetic quality • Personalized improvisational voice • Musical spiritualism • Style influence

Text Suggestions for Teachers on the Critical Listening of Jazz

- Barry Kernfeld: *What to Listen for in Jazz*, Yale University Press.
- Paul Berliner: *Thinking In Jazz*, University of Chicago Press.
- Ingrid Monson: *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, University of Chicago Press.
- Gary Giddins & Scott DeVeaux: *Jazz*, W. W. Norton & Co. 📖

About the Author

Brian C. Wesolowski is a Ph.D. student at the Frost School of Music, University of Miami. His research focus is jazz pedagogy, music perception and cognition, and jazz performance assessment.

References

- Copland, Aaron. 1957. *What to listen for in music*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.
- Kline, John A. 1996. *Listening effectively*. Washington, DC: Air University Press.

Figure 3. Sample student listening log.

SAMPLE LISTENING LOG

DATE OF LISTENING SESSION: _____

ALBUM LABEL: _____

ALBUM TITLE: _____

TRACK NAME: _____

PERSONNEL/INSTRUMENTATION: _____

PERFORMANCE CONTEXT: _____

COMPOSITION TYPE (FORM): _____

STYLISTIC FEATURES: _____

RHYTHMIC FEATURES: _____

TEXTURAL FEATURES: _____

TIMING FEATURES/OVERALL IMPRESSIONS: _____