

A Tuba In The Jazz Band?

An Open Letter To Band Directors Regarding Jazz Band Instrumentation

By Stefan Kac

<http://www.stefankac.com>

stefan [at] stefankac [dot] com

Dear Band Director,

As a professional tuba player and music teacher who specializes in jazz and improvisation, I am writing to express my concern about students of yours who play instruments not found in a so-called "standard" jazz band. Adhering strictly to this "standard" instrumentation may be more convenient, but it also serves to discourage the rest of your students from getting involved in jazz. To prevent them from participating is not only contrary to the spirit and history of the jazz tradition, but also contrary to the responsibility of a music educator to nurture a love of music in their students wherever it has the potential to exist.

The very notion of a "standard" jazz band instrumentation is an idea that belies the diversity of styles and approaches which comprise the jazz tradition. Throughout each and every stylistic movement in jazz history, there have been major contributions made by players of all kinds of instruments, including players of the instruments now considered "standard" who also doubled on other "non-standard" ones. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is unfortunate that the instrumentation of large jazz ensembles has ossified rather decisively over the course of jazz history to include only a few of the instruments found in a typical concert or marching band. It is also too bad that music publishers have invested disproportionately in making compositions available which conform to this particular instrumental configuration. This is the way things are; I am asking you to consider the way things could be.

Ask yourself the following questions: could insisting on a "standard" jazz band instrumentation be keeping some of the best musicians at your school from getting more involved in jazz? Could it be preventing others who have yet to develop an interest in jazz from doing so? Could opening the jazz band to players of all instruments actually make your program stronger by exposing more of your students to new technical and musical challenges? Could this also contribute to the establishment and maintenance of a positive learning environment whereby everyone feels included? Could not doing so lead to discontent among students who feel left out for arbitrary reasons? At most schools, the answer to each of these questions is an emphatic "Yes!", which is why I am writing to recommend that you allow *any* student who expresses interest in joining or auditioning for your school's jazz band to do so, regardless of the instrument they play. In support of this recommendation, I would like to offer my perspective as someone who benefitted immeasurably from the generosity of band directors who put matters of participation before those of instrumentation.

When I took up the euphonium in junior high school, I was very fortunate to have a band director who encouraged all members of the concert band to join the jazz band as well, regardless of the instrument they played, and without an audition. He put in countless hours of his own time rearranging the charts in order to accommodate all of us, ultimately writing out many additional parts so that the group would be properly balanced, and so that everyone had a part that was in the correct clef and transposition.

He undertook this task anew every year for decades, and, as far as I know, is still doing it. While there were written solos in many of the published parts, he encouraged any student who felt comfortable doing so to improvise a solo instead, and occasionally soloed with the group himself (he was an accomplished reed player who had played professionally in his younger days).

I count myself as exceptionally fortunate to have stumbled into this situation as this was the spark that ultimately led me down the path I've since taken, namely towards a career in music as a tuba player who specializes in improvising. After switching to tuba in high school, I went on to earn a performance degree at the University of Minnesota and begin my professional career in earnest. In 2005, I became the first tuba player ever accepted to the Jazz Ahead residency program at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. I've been heard at a myriad of Minneapolis venues with a myriad of different groups, from duos to big bands, dixieland bands to free improvising collectives, classical music to jazz to avant-garde. This includes my own projects The Pan-Metropolitan Trio, Stefan Kac Quartet, and Ingo Bethke, all of which are dedicated in whole or in part to performing my original compositions. I have independently recorded, produced and released my own CD, with another in the can at this very moment. I've also attracted a small but dedicated group of tuba, euphonium, and trombone students at the West Bank School of Music in Minneapolis, the vast majority of whom were already playing in their school's jazz band when they came to me for lessons.

I mention all of this not to brag, nor to advocate specifically for the tuba as an underrated and wrongly stereotyped instrument. My story is but one of many, and not even a minor footnote in the grand scheme of things considering the many eminent jazz musicians who have come before, as well as the ones who are alive and working today. I am writing to make the more general case for allowing *all* students who have the inclination to play in the jazz band at least a chance to audition, regardless of the instrument they play. Your first thought may be that by making one exception for the tuba player, you would be forced to make many exceptions for flutes, oboes, clarinets, horns, bassoons, strings, and mallet percussion, as well as for additional players of the standard instruments, who would end up doubling existing parts. If that is indeed the case, that tells me that you have not just one but many students at your school who are interested in jazz, yet do not fit into the "standard" big band instrumentation. Even if they are not tuba players, I find it no less disappointing that they would find themselves shut out, and would urge you to give them a tryout. You might be surprised.

Your next thought might be that making all of these exceptions will adversely effect the level of the group by making it larger and more unwieldy, by forcing you to relax the standards for those auditioning, and by breaking with the intended instrumentation of the charts against the ostensible wishes of the composers, who did not choose this instrumental configuration capriciously. If that is indeed a troubling thought, then I am left to assume that your jazz band is an exceptionally talented group. A director at a school with a weak music program usually has no such qualms: they may not have enough saxophones, trumpets, and trombones to cover all of the parts in the first place, and hence, a student on any instrument who takes an active interest in jazz is seen as a tremendously valuable asset. Conversely, if your school has enough players available to make auditions necessary and competitive, and if the jazz band is hence an exceptional group that plays difficult music, competes and wins at multiple out-of-town jazz festivals each year, has fluent improvisers occupying "solo chairs" in each section, and is a point

of pride for the school for precisely these reasons, then you may in fact have something to lose by opening the floodgates. Even so, you have more to gain. Great as they may become, the logistical challenges to the band collectively could not possibly outweigh the potential rewards for the individuals who might comprise it. I would urge you to look at each one of your students not as an obstacle to success, but as a necessary component of it, no matter how many of them there are, or what instruments they play. This is nothing less than an issue of duty and responsibility: regardless of what the published arrangements call for, the job of a teacher calls for nurturing students as musicians, scholars, and people. In my opinion, that's more important than instrumentation, especially at the K-12 level.

I'll leave you with the broader observation that in my personal experience, I've endured far greater "tuba bias" within the educational world than in the real world. Contrary to popular belief, playing the tuba is an incredible advantage in today's jazz scene. At a time when many have complained about the excessive academicization of jazz begetting a lack of individuality among emerging young players on instruments like saxophone and trumpet, a tuba player immediately sticks out from the crowd and sticks in people's minds. I have benefitted from this dynamic more than I have been hurt by stereotypes of the tuba as slow and clumsy, but this only became the case after I left academia and decided I wouldn't be back any time soon. It has actually become a cliché in the music world that in forming a band, one does not merely pick players of the instruments one wants, but instead chooses the musicians that one wants, whatever instrument it is that they happen to play. This is the prevailing attitude I've encountered in my short professional career, yet it seems to be the opposite attitude of quite a few high school band directors simply because of the perceived inflexibility of the charts and the subsequent effort required to accommodate other instruments, whether by writing out additional parts, or scrapping the published arrangements altogether and running the band like a large combo. All the way from junior high through college, I was lucky enough to work with band directors who saw these and other tactics not as unfortunate compromises but as necessary mechanisms for fulfilling their obligations as jazz educators. I may never have gotten this far without their encouragement and accommodation, and I'm hoping that any of your students to whom this letter may be applicable might at least be granted a chance to audition for the same opportunities, regardless of the instruments they play.

As you may be able to tell, I've always taken a fair amount of perverse pleasure in crashing the party and being the outsider, but that doesn't mean that anyone who wants to play jazz on an instrument that was not in the Basie band ought to be forced into that role. If a student has a genuine interest in jazz, it is the responsibility of their teachers to nurture that interest, and while you and I both would encourage all of our students to get involved in music outside of school as well as within it, I don't think it's particularly fair or just to impose that burden on certain students and not on others based solely on the instrument they play.

Sincerely,

Stefan Kac
November 7, 2008

P.S. In the appendix that follows, I've listed just a few of the many accomplished players of so-called "non-standard" jazz instruments who are alive and working at this very moment, along with the URL's for their websites. **[Note: the list has been revised and updated as of May, 2011]** This was essentially a brainstorming exercise, emphasizing breadth over depth simply to make the point that virtually every orchestral instrument is viable in the jazz realm, and yet there are many more musicians that I could have cited, and undoubtedly countless others whom I have yet to hear. Some of the biggest names in jazz are on this list, and I would urge you to check their music out for yourself. Would you leave *them* out of your jazz band?

"Non-Standard" Instrumentalists Worth a Listen

(a very incomplete list of musicians living and working today)

(updated May, 2011)

Violin:

Regina Carter (<http://www.reginacarter.com>),

Mark Feldman (<http://markfeldmanviolin.com>)

Cello:

David Baker (<http://www.davidbakermusic.org>),

Erik Friedlander (<http://www.erikfriedlander.com>),

Hank Roberts (<http://www.hankrobertsmusic.com>)

Flute:

Anne Drummond (<http://www.annedrummond.com>)

Hubert Laws (<http://www.hubertlaws.com>)

Clarinet:

Don Byron (<http://www.donbyron.com>)

Anat Cohen (<http://www.anatcohen.com>)

Bassoon:

Paul Hanson (<http://paulhansonmusic.com>)

Michael Rabinowitz (<http://www.jazzbassoonist.com>)

Horn:

Vincent Chancey (<http://www.vincentchancey.com>)

John Clark (<http://www.hmmusic.com>)

Mark Taylor (<http://www.marktaylormusic.net>)

Euphonium:

Tom Ball (<http://home.earthlink.net/~thmsbal>)

Tuba:

Howard Johnson (<http://www.hojozone.com>)

Bob Stewart (<http://www.bobstewartuba.com>)

Jon Sass (<http://www.jonsass.com/>)

Harmonica:

Toots Thielemans (<http://www.tootsthielemans.com>)

Hendrik Meurkens (<http://www.hendrikmeurkens.com>)

Mallet Percussion:

Gary Burton (<http://www.garyburton.com>)

Stefon Harris (<http://www.stefonharris.com>)

Joe Locke (<http://www.joelocke.com>)

Auxiliary Percussion:

Daniel Sadowick (<http://www.danielsadowick.com>)

P.P.S. This is to say nothing of players of "standard" instruments who frequently double on "non-standard" ones, such as Marty Ehrlich (saxophone/clarinet), Dave Bargeron (trombone/euphonium/tuba), and Anthony Braxton (practically anything with a reed on it).