

From Chart to Reality:

The Editorial Role of the Pianist in a Big Band

I am writing to address an issue that I believe needs clarification regarding the vagaries inherent in many of the older published big band piano charts still in use at hundreds of colleges and high schools. The professional jazz pianist will treat the written part with a great deal of freedom, if not outright skepticism. The professional, however, is not my concern. He or she has, from years of experience, realized what the various styles of notation are, and has undoubtedly developed strategies for successful interpretation. Students and others do not have the advantage of this real-world perspective and the professional's strategies are not common knowledge with many high school and college band directors. My purpose, then, is to shed light on the editorially liberal approach used by professional pianists as they perform in a big band setting.

The Role of the Pianist in a Big Band Setting

As someone who has spent a great deal of time as a performer in both the horn section and the rhythm section of many professional and college bands, I can attest to the different approach to the written page in these two sections. The rhythm player normally has a great deal of freedom, while the horn player does not. For the rhythm player, many parts are basically just leadsheets, with some of the rhythmic figures notated, which give the player considerable interpretive leeway. Instinctively, the rhythm player begins to realize that the part is not to be taken literally; it requires significant personal input, within certain stylistic and musical guidelines, of course. This is possible because there is only one bassist, one pianist, and one drummer in the band. They can interpret at will, without descending into complete anarchy.

For the horn player, this amount of interpretive freedom is simply not possible. This is in large part due to the numerical reality of being one voice in a four- or five-member section within a larger horn section numbering fourteen or more. If each player were making the kinds of interpretive decisions that are routinely made by the rhythm section, the resulting confusion would certainly be unworkable. As a result, horn players tend to look at the music in a very literal sense, as they should. There is some leeway here as well, but it is severely limited. A trumpet player may take few pitches or a phrase up (or down) an octave, or a trombone player may rest during a unison line in order to save strength for an upcoming passage. However exciting or pragmatic these changes may be, they are

fairly benign from an arranging point of view. They do not significantly alter the arrangement. They keep the arranger's intent largely intact and they maintain the unity of the horns' harmonic and rhythmic activity.

A horn player (or non-pianist) leading an ensemble will quite naturally bring his or her background to the leadership of the ensemble. Thus, when the classical pianist in the high school big band is having trouble with the written part, the horn player's natural response is to insist that the student learn the part exactly as written in the score. This is unfortunate, for a variety of reasons which will now be discussed.

In order to deal with this fully, I would like to first discuss the role of the pianist in a big band, which is vastly different from that in a small group. First of all, the pianist is generally much less active than in any other setting. The reason for this is that there is a great deal of rhythmic and harmonic activity present in the horn sections and in the drums, and hence a pianist who plays his or her own figures will most often be interfering with the overall rhythmic integrity of the group. Thus, the task for the big band pianist is quite difficult. The pianist needs to be mature enough to show real constraint, and also needs to be intimately familiar with the horn parts. Given this reality, I believe that arrangers have often been at a loss when writing piano parts. This is likely due to the fact that composers or arrangers are unsure of their target pianist—will it be played by Jim McNeely? Or an accomplished classical pianist who doesn't know what 'C7' means? Or a violinist from the 8th grade who has some piano experience and has been drafted into the jazz band? The disparities may be enormous.

The pianist must listen carefully to the horns (almost memorizing their figures), and must then determine where a short pianistic figure (chord or melodic line) can be inserted which will complement the overall texture, as opposed to interfering with it. This is no easy task. The best way to learn is to listen to the great big band pianists—Count Basie or Duke Ellington, for example—and to emulate them. Unless it is a full-fledged piano solo or feature, these great pianists barely play at all. Their playing largely consists of short figures—both harmonic and melodic—which are interspersed with the horn figures in the most tasteful, elegant, and really almost minimalist manner. To use an old adage, **less is more** when it comes to big band piano. It is not about how many notes you can play; it is really about finding the appropriate places in which to play to truly complement the group. In short, the pianist is not the "star" of the big band and must learn to be content with a smaller role than generally assigned in a smaller group.

Problems in Big Band Piano Notation

In terms of notation, big band piano parts generally fall into one of these categories:

1. chord symbols with rhythmic notation,
2. chord symbols without rhythmic notation,
3. fully notated parts (including written solos, horn reinforcements, quasi-improvised "fills," and rhythm section solis),
4. improvised solos.¹

1) Chord symbols with rhythmic notation

In this style of notation, chord symbols are featured above a percussion-style rhythmic notation. The pianist is given the rhythmic notation without any chord voicings. The rhythms shown are normally used in one (or more) of the following ways:

- a) they are identical to those that the horns are playing,
- b) they are used to provide accent to certain pitches in the horn section's phrases, or
- c) they are rhythm section "hits."


Types b) and c) are inherently less rhythmically active than type a). Thus, the latter two pose less of a technical or interpretive problem—in short, they are necessarily simpler. The first type poses some significant problems.


The rhythms notated in the Example 1a) from **61st and Rich' It** by Thad Jones, are of the first variety. They are identical to the rhythms in the horn section, but the tempo is slow enough to allow for almost all of them to be played without undue difficulty.²

Example 1a): Mm. 1-8 from **61st and Rich' It** by Thad Jones

Chart: 

Play: 

Chart: 

Play: 

The first problem (for an average high school or college band) is, of course, that the chord voicings are not shown, the assumption being that the band director would be able to supply something suitable. Is it really appropriate to try to play every rhythm? From both a technical and a musical viewpoint, the answer must be a resounding ‘no.’

Playing everything as written would result in an unnecessary duplication of the horn figures, creating an effect that is just too dense and too busy.

We must then assume that the pianist has the *option* of playing *some* of these rhythmic figures while using his or her own voicings, and omitting others. How are these decisions made? Well, I would suggest listening to the phrasings and articulations of the horns, and then choosing rhythms which help punctuate or emphasize their phrases.³

Example 1b from **Don’t Git Sassy** by Thad Jones is extremely detailed in terms of both chords and rhythms, some of which are only a sixteenth note in length. This type of chart is difficult because it does not differentiate between structural harmonies and embellishments (neighbor chords, passing chords, etc.)⁴ A professional will quickly see through all of the elaborate ornamentation to the basic structure of a piece, and thus be able to play with considerable freedom; however, less experienced participants will be unable to make this leap. The piece will seem to many to be an anomaly rather than a variation on a common form (as this piece is), and the improvisational freedom will be difficult to obtain.

Example 1b) Mm. 1-8 from **Don't Git Sassy** by Thad Jones

Chart: 

Play: 

Chart: 

Play: 

What then, is the form and structure of this piece? It is a very simple eight-measure form (with a few variations) which is closely related to the blues. This is not immediately apparent because of the myriad (and brilliant) embellishing chords found surrounding the simple structure at the heart of the piece.⁵ The sheer number and complexity of these harmonic embellishments make it necessary for the pianist to make some editorial decisions. Jones' chart provides us with a great deal of information, but his intent is likely more to show us when *not* to play, so as not to interfere with the integrity of the horn parts. Musically then, it makes no sense to try and play what is on the page.

From a technical point of view, the written part is also suspect and problematic. We could certainly voice all of the chords as written, but they would be exceedingly difficult to play in a fluent and idiomatic manner.

There is also another matter to consider here—namely *form*. It is essential for the rhythm section (as well as the horns) to have a basic understanding of the piece's form. An understanding of this type allows the rhythm section to play more freely within the context of a big band (i.e. incorporating desirable elements of small group improvisation while at the same time clearly marking all of the composed elements in the big band score).

Example 1c) shows the simple blues-based structure at the heart of this form. This is made apparent once the myriad embellishing chords have been removed.

Example 1c) Mm. 17-24 from **Don't Git Sassy** by Thad Jones

Chart: 

Play: 

Chart: 

Play: 

As before, the detailed rhythms and chords in these measures are just too much for the pianist to try to play. The piano part as written in example 1c) is easy to play, purposeful (it accentuates the form), and musically unobtrusive (it does not interfere with the horn figures).

2) Chord Symbols without Rhythmic Notation

When chord symbols are encountered without rhythmic notation, it means one of two things:

1. There is an improvised horn solo and the pianist is to provide improvised chordal accompaniment, or
2. The horns are playing harmonized or unison figures and the arranger is leaving it to the pianist to determine where (if anywhere) to play.

In the first instance, the pianist's task is not easy, but it is obvious—basically, he or she must work out voicings for all of the chords and improvise rhythms. Example 2a) from **Mambo de Memo** by Matt Harris features notation of this type. The pianist's function here is essentially the same as in a small group in which the rhythm section interacts more vigorously with the soloist. The pianist must instantly change posture and assume the role of a more active participant than earlier in the piece.

Example 2a): Mm. 121-128 from **Mambo de Memo** by Matt Harris (*chordal accompaniment or "comping"*)


Chart: 

Play: 

In the second instance, the pianist's task is much more difficult. Example 2b) from **Rhoda Map** by Thad Jones requires more restraint than anything else. Many inexperienced players simply play too much, which detracts from the overall effect of the ensemble. (Pianists are especially egregious in this regard, but by no means are they the only performers in the ensemble who are guilty of overplaying.) Note that the rhythms in the horns are not shown in this example, Jones merely says "comp." It would be a mistake to simply "comp" freely in this section as it would conflict with the horns, and make the texture much too frantic and busy.

Example 2b): Mm. 9-13 from **Rhoda Map** by Thad Jones

Chart: 

Play: 

How do we determine what is appropriate in this regard? The best advice for the student is to listen to the source recording (if available). If no recording is available, obtain stylistically similar recordings (Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, Maynard Ferguson, etc.) and listen intently to what the pianists play, when they play it, why they play it (i.e. what is the context, what else is going on at the time?). Listen also for register and textural variances. In most cases, you will be surprised to hear how little playing is done by the pianist. Furthermore, knowledge of the horn parts is the best guide. When this is combined with sound musical judgment, the resulting performance is sure to be tasteful and idiomatic.

These are not easy tasks. The pianist is required not only to improvise voicings and rhythms, but also to compose his part around the figures played by the ensemble. Beyond the obvious technical skills needed, this also requires subtlety, taste, and considerable memorization.

3) Fully Notated Solos (and other parts)


Fully notated parts (solo or otherwise) may at first seem the least open to editorial interpretation. The part may be an actual solo (with or without rhythm section), a reinforcement of horn figures (for coloristic purposes), a rhythm section soli, or some combination of the above. As they are completely written out, it is logical to assume that every note be played as written. However, my experience has been otherwise.

I. Easy

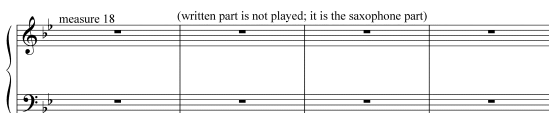
Even when the parts are not difficult, one might still choose to leave them out. In Example 3a) from **A Hole Lot 'A Blues** by Jim Martin,⁶ the written parts are very easy, so why not play them? The part in question is doubled by all of the saxophones, so the pitches were not needed. When I performed this piece with the composer, I left them out because I felt as if the percussive quality of the piano was detracting from the sound of the saxophones. With a professional band, the saxophones do not need pitch or rhythm cues of this sort; however, with a high school or college band, these cues may be of assistance. So, context is very important, but musical need is really the final arbiter, not the score.⁷

Example 3a): Mm. 18-31 from **A Hole Lot 'A Blues** by Jim Martin

Chart:



Play:



The image shows two musical staves for piano. The top staff, labeled 'Chart', shows measures 18, 19, 20, and 21. The bottom staff, labeled 'Play', shows the same measures but with a note above measure 18 stating '(written part is not played; it is the saxophone part)'. The piano part in both staves consists of simple chords and rests.

Notice how much of the written part has been left out. Also, notice the change of octaves in the part played—this helps it to cut through the ensemble and provides a timbral shimmer it would otherwise not have. These are decisions made by the pianist and are not antithetical to the arranger’s intentions. In fact, arrangers expect pianists and rhythm section players in general to treat the parts as guides, not gospel truth.

II. Moderate

In Example 3b) from **Don’t Git Sassy** by Thad Jones, we find a composed solo for two hands that is not doubled in any of the horn parts—in other words, it really is a “solo” (as Jones states in the part). It is a statement of the melody in the piano, and is thematically important because it is the first statement of the melody of the piece. Thus, we can assume that it is to be played as written.

Example 3b): Mm. 9-16 from **Don’t Git Sassy** by Thad Jones

Chart (play as written if possible):

Chord symbols for Example 3b):

- Measure 9: D7 A9 D9
- Measure 10: G7 D9 G9
- Measure 11: D7 G7(9) B7+
- Measure 12: E9 A9
- Measure 13: D7 A9 D9
- Measure 14: G7 D9 G9
- Measure 15: DM7 C9 B7(9)
- Measure 16: E9 A7 D7 D^b7

The problem here is not in the notes themselves. This passage is not difficult for the average pianist who has achieved a moderate level of technical proficiency. It becomes more difficult when we consider the articulations, which are entirely missing from the score. In order to affect a standard "long-short" jazz phrasing on the moving eighth-note figures, the pianist must use a finger legato along with some very nuanced pedaling in order to achieve this phrasing. The right hand part is not very tricky in this regard, as opposed to the left hand which would likely use fingerings of '1-4' moving to '2-5' in order to connect the two parts of b. 2, m. 10 (to say nothing of the movements in m. 11).⁸ I am quite sure that many readers who have programmed this piece will remember the disconnected and choppy phrasings emanating from the pianist in this piece.

The solution? I would suggest playing a single-note line in the right hand with only 3^{rds} and 7^{ths} in the left hand (most of the left hand part consists of only 3^{rds}/7^{ths} to begin with). The right hand part can then be reintroduced once the student has mastered the easier version. For young or inexperienced students, or for students with small hands, the large chords in the right hand may always present a problem because of the repeated octaves and sevenths in the outer pitches.⁹ The easier version retains all of the harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic information needed to introduce the theme, the compromise being made on volume and timbre.

III. Difficult

There are examples of more difficult passages, some of which are just piano parts, others of which are piano features. All but the most advanced students will have serious problems playing these written figures, especially with proper phrasing and articulation. These concerns are exacerbated when we consider the very fast tempos often played by jazz bands. Young students, students with smaller hands, and those without the necessary technique will strain to play these parts. It is thus best to pare them down to something manageable for both musical and technical reasons.

In Example 3c) from **Tangerine** by Victor Schertzinger, the arranger has written an extremely awkward passage. The chord in question falls on the second eighth-note of b. 4 in m. 19. The size of the chord is just too large for most hands, especially if one is to move smoothly to the next chord. In this instance, the arranger has written a piano reduction of the sax part without regard for pianistic technique.

Example 3c) Mm. 19-22 from **Tangerine** by Victor Schertzinger, arr. John Berry

The image shows a piano reduction of horn parts for measures 19-22 of 'Tangerine'. The score is in B-flat major and 4/4 time. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a bass line. The chords are: A^{b9} M9^{add}, A^bM9, D+7(#9), G+7(b9), CM9, Am7, Dm9, and G+7(#11). The bass line consists of quarter notes: B-flat, A-flat, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat.

There are a few obvious solutions:

- i) leave the part out, or
- ii) play the bottom note (F#) of the right hand chord in the left hand, in which case the bass clef part will be omitted.

Note that there are also chords placed in parentheses without rhythms. There is no indication on the score as to what these are. One would assume that they are voicings for comping, but, without knowledge of the horns' rhythm figures, the pianist could easily overplay. Once again, the pianist must determine what is important by listening to the horns.

This style of notation (piano reduction of the horn parts) can be very difficult, especially when chords move quickly in a syncopated manner. In order to play with idiomatic phrasing and articulation, one needs both exceptional finger technique and sophisticated pedal control. Even then, the variety of dynamics and articulations are such that even the most accomplished player (assuming a high school pianist with strong technique) will have considerable difficulty.

Example 3d) from **The Kid From Red Bank** by Neal Hefti, contains a challenging piano part.

Example 3d) Mm. 73-84 from **The Kid From Red Bank** by Neal Hefti

The image shows a piano reduction of horn parts for measures 73-84 of 'The Kid From Red Bank'. The score is in B-flat major and 4/4 time. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a bass line. The chords are: G7, C#dim, G7, G7+5, C, C7, F, Fm, C, G7, C7, F7, F#dim, C, F, C, and E#dim. The bass line consists of quarter notes: B-flat, A-flat, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat.

In this instance, tempo is the biggest issue. It is marked as $\text{♩}=280$. Any tempo even approaching this brisk speed will be impossible for players of limited technical skills. The difficulty of the left hand stride pattern is mitigated, somewhat, by the lack of right hand movement in measures 77-84, yet the challenge presented to an average pianist is enormous. There are several solutions (in order of increasing severity):¹⁰

- i) remove all octave doublings in the left hand (b. 1 and 3) in mm. 78-79, and/or
- ii) ignore the '*8[vb]*' directions in the left hand in mm. 81-84, and/or
- iii) move all of the notes on b. 1 and 3 up one or two octaves so that the left hand does not have to travel as far.

The first two of these solutions maintain some element of the stride pattern's excitement while the last does not. Another option would be for the pianist to play only b. 2 and 4, while the bassist plays b. 1 and 3. At this stage, however, the integrity of the stride pattern is totally destroyed and thus, it might be best not to program this piece until a more accomplished pianist is available.

In Summary

Most contemporary writers appear to be aware of these problems and are writing piano parts that are idiomatic. In time then, the issue will become largely moot, but we must remember that extant libraries in most schools were started in the '70s and '80s. They contain some of the greatest works ever written for big band, and it is highly unlikely that these will be revised to "correct" the piano part. I purposefully disparage the term 'correct' because the piano parts do not need "correction." There is nothing wrong with the parts as written *if* there is a seasoned professional on the receiving end, which is how they were conceived. The problem is that many of these charts are being performed today by high school and college bands. The directors of these groups need to understand that a literal reading of the score serves no greater good. Jazz is flexible enough to accommodate an enormous variety of different skill levels; not only does the music *allow* for an individualized reading based on technical concerns, it is probably at its most exciting and vibrant when its participants play within their means.

I believe that herein lies one of the real strengths of jazz. It allows for players at even the most basic levels of technical prowess to express themselves using the technique available to them. Of course, the level of expression will be severely limited by the technique available, but this should not bother us. Jazz accepts beginners on their own terms, capitalizing on their creative impulse, as opposed to their technical prowess.

As educators, we need to remember that we are introducing new generations to this music and its unique methodology. We should therefore not ask for nor imply a "classical" reading of jazz scores. That model is appropriate within its own style, but is inappropriate within a jazz setting.

Endnotes:

¹ Improvised solos, in general, have received more pedagogical coverage than any other issue in jazz; they are also beyond the scope of this article and are hence not discussed.

² Whether or not one *should* play every figure is another matter which is discussed throughout this article.

³ I have shown a possible interpretation underneath the examples, but these are certainly not in any way meant to be definitive—merely one option that I think complements the overall effect.

⁴ Thad Jones is, I think, one of the greatest and most inventive minds in the history of big band writing. His music is still very popular today, largely because of the blues and gospel inflections, the unabashedly "danceable" qualities in many of his works, and the eminently "swinging" nature of his compositions. Yet, there is another level at work here; he is the master of harmonic variation. In particular, his use of reharmonization and embellishing techniques is astounding in both variety and creativity. That which often seems stodgy and pretentiously academic in a lesser talent appears in seamless, spontaneous and unbelievably tuneful from Jones' pen. In a word, Thad Jones' library is truly a lexicon of jazz theory and harmony, as is the case with this piece.

⁵ I have seen many charts in which pianists have left hand-written directions in this regard (i.e. embellishing chords have been crossed out or placed in parentheses, leaving the relatively simple structures (blues, rhythm changes clearly visible and easily recognizable).

⁶ Jim Martin's music is available online at: www.pdfjazzmusic.com

⁷ I performed this piece with the composer and asked him directly about the piano part. His response is reflected in the interpretation given above.

⁸ This fingering is awkward and difficult to play with proper articulation.

⁹ Octave work can be difficult and has potential for injury. Pedagogically speaking, octave work is generally not introduced until a moderately advanced degree of technique has been achieved and until hand size is large enough to easily span the interval.

¹⁰ Of course, one could also lower the tempo, but it would need to be lowered considerably, in which case the piece is drastically compromised.