

Jazz Ensemble Spring 2020
Supplement #5
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Comparing Performances: The Groove Merchant

This supplement will focus on multiple performances of the same exact arrangement. Previously we discussed comparison of different arrangements, or versions, of the same song, but this time all of the examples will be the exact same piece of music. This was touched on briefly in the last supplement (#4) with the fast and slow version of All of Me arranged by Billy Byers.

The piece used for this comparison is called “The Groove Merchant,” which was written by Jerome Richardson. He was the lead alto saxophonist for the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra that later became known as the Village Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. They have played weekly at the Village Vanguard for over 50 years – quite an impressive record of weekly gigs, of course ruined by the current Covid-19 situation. But enough about that! Richardson wrote the tune, and the bandleader Thad Jones arranged it. While it is a catchy tune, the real point of this piece is Thad’s arrangement. I have talked about Thad Jones many times and for good reason. There are few that will ever come close to arranging like he did. He is responsible for developing an entire way of writing for big band. Without him, the whole course of big band arranging could have gone differently.

The different performances of this piece will be one example that is the original recording, one from a high school band, one from a decent college ensemble, and two from the more modern version of the Village Vanguard Orchestra. It is important to keep in mind that all of these ensembles are reading exactly the same music. There is of course the original hand-written version that the band likely played in the 1960s, and then official published copies that the high school and college bands play. There are likely to be a few discrepancies but not enough to matter for this comparison.

Discussion about from before listening

The form of this tune harmonically is very close to a song called “Doxy” by Sonny Rollins. You can find that on YouTube as well. The overall arrangement has several sections that feature saxes, brass, solos, and ensemble. Using the original recording below, here are the time stamps for the major sections. Try to become familiar with these by listening to the track a few times. Try to make mental notes about what is happening and what it sounds like so you can compare these major events in the other versions.

0:00 – Intro (brass and piano)

0:15 – Saxes have melody in unison

0:44 – Brass melody with sax fills and backgrounds – then saxes finish melody

1:22 – Saxophone section soli over the harmony of the tune, brass occasionally fill in the holes

2:53 – Piano solo (this section is usually opened and repeated for multiple solos)

3:22 – Brass and then full ensemble shout

4:24 – Back to the brass melody with sax backgrounds (D.S.)

4:58 – Ending

1) The Groove Merchant – Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra “Central Park North” 1969

<https://youtu.be/IU-TsZ0XnRM>

First thing here is the brass intro is the top of the chart, and the piano solo is very short before the melody. Main things to listen for here are the groove and how every single part swings with the rhythm section. They aren’t playing loud, and the sections are balanced. You can always hear the lead soprano and lead trumpet. This is 100% the correct way to play a big band chart like this. All the accents pop out; the short notes are the same length consistently throughout the members of the band (like the HIT at 0:44 – also listen to the brass hits at 1:08). Things like the short figure at 2:22 have the same “attitude” throughout each member of the band. The time is the same. The vibe is the same. All this being said, the pitch is great too! Listen for the

saxophone melody at 0:15, the pitch is great. Listen for 0:41, there is one beat of harmony. A mistake? We will check as we compare.

The saxophone soli is perfectly balanced. It is important that you can always hear the melody in the soprano sax. The trick here is that you can also hear each of the five saxes if you really try hard. Making sure the melody stands out while also preserving the sound and importance of each of the saxophone and their harmony note is not easy, and usually comes when the section plays together for some time and can actively learn how one another plays. After a while, sections can sight-read soli's and blend just fine.

For the sake of this comparison, I won't discuss the solo section. Often the section after the sax soli will be "opened up," or repeated for many soloists. You will hear this in the live versions.

The brass soli at 3:22 is a great example of how to play quarter notes different lengths. There are a lot of "short, long" downbeats next to each other. At first the trumpets and trombones are independent of one another, and when the saxes join the band comes together as a whole. After the soli the piece takes a D.S. back to material we have heard before, and the ending is only a few seconds. Listen to the lead trumpet player at 5:01 have a little trouble placing the pitches. It ain't easy!

2) The Groove Merchant – William Fremd **High School**, Thursday February 22, 2018 <https://youtu.be/MumkQ8EVKME>

Before I get into this, I must say that nothing in this paper is meant to make fun of or take away from the accomplishments of any of the bands I discuss. The simple fact is that high school bands exist for students to learn and there is nowhere near the amount of time or resources in most schools to provide students with adequate skills to perform pieces of this level like a professional band. Things I list here are similar to comments I would make as a judge during a jazz band festival. I will NOT talk about things they are doing properly, I will point out things that make it different from the original recording and things that can make it better. This will also be the most involved discussion of each piece.

0:18 – Listen to how the rhythms in the brass are not the same. Some people are entering slightly ahead of others, and it almost always corresponds with the "upbeats." When playing swing, the second 8th note of each beat is the one where we cannot explain exactly where it is supposed to go, and therefore when learning, everyone plays it in a different spot. This leads to sloppy phrasing. This will come up later.

0:23 – The band is not listening to the lead trumpet for the length and speed of the fall. Notice how everyone falls faster, and the lead trumpet is left out in the open towards the end of the fall, unsupported and unbalanced.

Sax unison melody is pretty good. You will notice intonation issues especially on the longer notes. Right before the brass come in the saxes have a few upbeats in a row, and they are very short and chopped off. It is important to make the upbeats as full as possible, or things start to sound cheap. The very last few notes of the unison phrase are difficult fingering wise, and of course the one thing they don't play correctly. PRACTICE. This would be easier if they didn't rush the fast notes of this phrase.

0:56 – The brass unison sounds good. The saxes are now having more intonation issues because they are voiced out. The thing to notice here is that the time and rhythmic feel of the brass section is completely different from the sax section. The saxes are rushed and choppy, while the brass are smoother and a bit more swinging.

1:13 – The short phrase here: "rest, 2, 3, 4+" is INCREDIBLY rushed. The phrase remains this way, usually when there is a full beat rest or quarter notes each one is ahead of where it should be. If you listen back to the original recording, the band learns how to "sit" into the quarters and make them groove really well. It's about maturity and trusting the tempo.

1:20 – The brass starts by rushing these upbeats, but by the end of the phrase they get better.

The sax soli is a bit unbalanced. You can hear one tenor saxophone playing just about as loud as the soprano. Try to really listen and see if you can hear it. There are a bit of wrong notes in the soli, but that's just because I know it really well. That's not necessarily something that would stand out. The saxes also cheap out on the fall that finishes off the soli, probably because

they are trying to sit down at the same time. The lesson here is don't stand up for sax soli's and if you do, finish the soli before you sit down.

4:17 – The brass soli once again feels pretty good. The brass are playing jazz time better than the rhythm section is. If I had to guess, I would say the director is a brass player, but I don't know. The trombones are a bit loud and unfocused; they could back off a hair just to improve the tone of the band and the balance.

4:44 – The saxes had about 30 seconds to listen to the brass and rhythm section, yet when they come in with their first two quarter notes they rush the heck out of it. This may seem like a tough critique, but anything like this will destroy the vibe. Once again if you listen back to the original, you NEVER feel like the time or tempo or feel is interrupted. This is because even with a few "mistakes," the pro band will never sacrifice time feel. It is ingrained in them like the English language and is why that track makes you feel so happy the whole time. It is also something very easy to fix. It is not technically hard for them to play two quarter notes, so just being aware of the time and practicing that will help. I guarantee if they listened back to recorded rehearsals the feel of this band would improve drastically.

When the full band shout starts, the density of the chords wins. Often times That Jones charts will sound like a pile of mush, because the voicings are so dense. This means the balance is key. Traditionally voicings would be maybe 4 notes, and the band would double these 2 or even 3 times. In Thad's music, the chords are made from at least 8 different pitches, and even more sometimes. This means the inner voices need to find their place volume wise, and intonation wise! It would be a terrible rehearsal for the band, but to really get this right would require slow and pinpointed tuning exercises for each chord of the shout section. A tiring experience but it would be worth it in the end.

5:14 – on the D.S. the brass and saxes are equally as distant from one another feel wise as they were the first time. On the CODA, at 5:48 the entire band (caused by the saxes again) speeds up like crazy because the 8th notes are now even and short. Just because the articulation changes doesn't mean you have to forget the tempo you are playing!

3) The Groove Merchant – Williams College Jazz Ensemble, April 2019

<https://youtu.be/Lf1jLaRAAgA>

During the intro, the lead trumpet player misses a few notes, see if you can hear the difference from the original recordings. You can hear the rhythm section better on this recording, but the bass is too loud. See if you can hear that as well.

The sax section unison is more in tune, yet there are still issues on the higher long notes. What I would say about this performance is that the notes are basically there, and the section could work on "crafting" the line a little more: scoops, dynamic shaping, articulation, things like that. At 0:26 the soprano plays a wrong note. This is obvious during the unison sections.

When the brass come in, the saxes are way too loud. This could be a recording issue and not come off that way in live performance. But I'm just going by the recording. In general the band is rushing any phrase that ends with an 8th note. At the end of the band shout before the sax soli the brass sound really balanced.

At 1:19 during the beginning of the sax soli the rhythm section pulls completely apart because the bass player starts rushing like crazy. If you go back and listen to the piece from the beginning, the rhythm section has a nice consistent feel. This stands out like crazy right at 1:19. As far as balance, you can barely hear the soprano and the section is dominated by alto 2 and baritone sax. Once again a recording issue, but see if you can hear it. *RANT ALERT* The other issue here is that the first tenor is playing the soprano part. This means that the normal tenor player (part 3) is now playing the lead part (part 1). When you do this and you don't move seats, the lead melody is now all the way on the end of the section instead of in the middle. That means for the baritone to hear the melody, they have to hear all the way across an entire section of saxophones. It is literally impossible to hear the soprano in that case. That's why the lead alto or soprano will always, ALWAYS sit in the middle of the section. This is why. Also, they stay like this for the whole chart, meaning the lead soprano is not in line with the lead trombone or lead trumpet, and this is probably why the balance of the sax section is off compared to the brass for the whole chart.

5:06 – Throughout the ensemble shout here the downbeats are better than the HS version. The trombone section wins best section here. The saxes still mess the balance up. In general the triplets are rushed, but the rest is pretty good.

At 6:15 they start rushing the downbeats, which stands out because they were doing a really good job until that point. This is what I was describing in the HS version about destroying the groove as soon as one note is put in the wrong place. Everything feels pretty relaxed, and then it develops a nervous “tight” feeling because the quarters begin to push. After that they settle back in.

The very last measure in the sax section is inconsistent articulation wise. The rhythm is “1+ 2+ 3e+ 4+” and all the “+’s” should be short. Their beat 4 is long. See if you can hear the one long note. If you feel like comparing to the original for this one note, you will hear they are all short.

4) The Groove Merchant – The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra: Thad Jones Legacy – 2000

<https://youtu.be/yd9dmuZxZw4>

Listening to this after the other couple recordings is shocking in that the tempo is faster and there is considerably more life, vibrancy and attitude. This recording is from 2000 and is the modern assembly of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, the Vanguard Orchestra. Besides the brighter tempo, listen to the held note at the end of the intro and the fall! It’s so simple, yet creates a completely different vibe from the other versions. The recording quality is also immaculate. Also listen to how the lead trumpet players notes are “fat” and authoritative. The final major difference here is that the drummer is different from the original. Mel Lewis played in the original recording, and the drummer here is John Riley, who is an incredible big band drummer yet completely different feel wise from Mel Lewis. After the intro, the piano solo is opened up a little and longer than the other versions.

1:24 – The unison melody of the saxes is perfectly in tune and balanced, and you can almost imagine the brightness of the soprano and alto is mellowed by the volume of the darker tenors and baritone. When you hear a section balanced like this it starts to bring these types of thoughts into my head. It’s almost like the better it is, the more you can describe about it.

When the brass come in at 1:50, you can audibly hear the saxes get softer to stay under the brass melody. The upbeat hits at 2:06 are very short, crisp and together.

2:18 – Saxes audibly decrescendo and start the soli soft. This is the first time we have heard that. The rhythm section follows suit to create a totally different vibe. Not only is this version faster, but it is way more creatively refined dynamically. Still balanced, you can hear each voice of the section but the soprano sits on top. At 2:40 they take the original notes of the solo and stretch them out. This is unlike the other versions we have heard so far.

The brass notes at 3:05 are descending, where in the original it ascended and then descended. Little changes make noticeable difference! They also treat the figure at 3:17 with a shake and higher voicing.

3:26 – the ending phrase is also stretched out in the saxes, and the long note has turned into a slow shake instead of a straight tone and fall.

3:28 – The brass figure here is used as a solo sendoff. Since the next section is open for solos, the band plays these 5 notes up and octave to start each solo. This is also not in the original recording.

As the piano solo starts, you can hear the pitch of the piano is not the same as the pitch in the saxes. One could say the saxes are “out of tune” but you would never consider them out of tune up till this point. That’s because they are in tune with them selves, and in tune with each other. It is much more important for the band to be in tune with themselves as a band than exactly with the piano. There is too much going on in a piece of music to be held to the pitch of a piano. We do use the piano to tune, because it is necessary to be in the same ballpark. But for a big band to be in tune, the pitch will almost always move away from the piano.

During the bass solo at 6:16 the trombones play the sendoff figure only. Orchestration!

7:05 – The thing to hear is how CLEAN this is, even at the faster tempo. If you get used to the other versions and then listen to this, it is ridiculous how correct and clean the lines and voicings sound. If you go back and listen to the HS version when I was taking about the harmonic mush, that is not happening here. This has to do with rhythmic placement, balance, and

intonation on a personal and band level. Trumpet unison is perfectly in tune. Towards the end of the shout, the band starts laying back a bit, yet the rhythm section stays solid and keeps going. This is very important for any rhythm section – no matter what the band is doing you have to maintain solid, consistent tempo! This is easier said than done.

5) The Groove Merchant – Live Performance 1968

<https://youtu.be/4ZLvqXFddu0>

I'm including this because this is what it's all about. There is an intro by Thad Jones himself so you can see and hear him talk. What an incredible personality. This is back when big band was fun beyond all else. The feel is incredible and the vibe of everyone on stage is clear. Right off the bat with the open piano solo out front they start messing with volume in the rhythm section. The other thing is that during the piano solo it slows down A LOT. It could even be a situation where it was counted off too fast and Thad slowed it down. We'll probably never know! The main thing to take away from this is how much fun everyone in the band is having even when they aren't playing. Once the band starts the tempo is actually back up and this is probably the most attacking accented version. The sax soli settles down and starts soft just like the modern version. 4:41 shows Jerome Richardson, who composed the melody. 4:51 the soprano plays a slightly different melody than what it ended up like. It could be a mistake or it could be something they changed. 5:18 they also stretch the end of the phrase out like on the modern recording. The interesting thing about this is that they didn't do that on the original recording that came out the year after this.

5:23 – This starts the playful bass solo. At Thad's direction, the bass takes over and he directs the dynamics of the walking line. Who would have thought a bass solo can be so entertaining! The rhythm section comes back just in time to accompany the brass shout. At 7:12-7:26 you can hear a trombone sticking out a lot.

Overall this version is organic and authentic. It isn't recorded or played as perfectly as the modern Vanguard version, but in a lot of ways it sounds like you would imagine it is intended to be. It's like looking at an actual oil painting vs. the same painting made on an iPad paint program. Both will look incredible, but there's something about the organic "real life" painting that speaks to you in a different way. Also, you can't discount the fact Thad Jones is there directing it in person. There's something to be said for what a personality can bring to a live situation, especially when it is the person that wrote the music there helping to bring it to life in real time.