

# RECRUITING AND DEVELOPING YOUNG RHYTHM SECTIONS

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Finding rhythm section players can be a big challenge for vocal jazz directors. Helping them develop as musicians while contributing to the ensemble is even harder. This can be scary for those of us with little experience with these instruments, but it can take your ensemble to the next level and expand the musical possibilities you can explore.

## WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

- Piano, bass, and drums are pretty essential
- Guitar opens up lots of textural possibilities
- Horn players can play lines, fill, and solo
- Auxiliary percussion can be fun in various styles

If you have more than one player on a particular instrument, teach them to play auxiliary percussion. It can give them a way to be involved while the other player is up.

## ATTITUDE VS. ABILITY

I've been fortunate to have some talented players come through my program. But honestly, I'm happy if I have students who have a basic skill with their instrument. I would have a hard time teaching rhythm section players how to play their instruments, but I can teach them how to play jazz. I'm most interested in their fundamentals, willingness to learn, work ethic, desire to be a part of the team, and communication skills.

## WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Choir, band, orchestra. Make positive connections with these teachers and students early and often.
- Middle school. Make positive connections with these teachers and students early and often.
- Talk to your students; find out who's out there in the general student body that plays.
- Talent shows, school events, etc.
- Your second vocal jazz ensemble. If you are in a situation where you can have more than one ensemble, it's a really great way to help young players gain experience.

## RESOURCES

- Books, handouts and packets.
- Recordings. YouTube is amazing!
- People. What other players and teachers might be willing to help out?

## **LESSONS**

As much as possible, encourage private lessons. I know this can be a financial challenge for some students. Use every resource possible to help students with lessons: music booster funds, marching band stipends, ASB funds, and trades with other teachers.

## **LITERATURE CHOICES ARE A HUGE PART OF THE SUCCESS OF YOUR RHYTHM SECTION**

I can't stress enough how important your literature choices are to the success of your ensemble. It has to be fun to play! This has been the biggest factor in my ability to recruit rhythm players. If the music is fun to play, word travels fast. More and better players want to be involved.

Other literature considerations:

- Variety: expand your horizons, start with the basics (swing, ballads, etc.) and then branch out.
- Find recordings to teach style.
- Make sure your tunes are accessible to all your players. If you have a variety of ability levels within your rhythm section, look to add challenges for your more accomplished players. Solos often create more room to be creative.
- Ballads are a great vehicle for young players. A cappella ballads are nice, but your rhythm section is missing out. Accompanied ballads are a great way for young players to gain experience at a slower tempo. Playing ballads is an important part of their musical development as well. Don't make them sit out the ballads all the time.

## **SEPARATE BUT EQUAL**

Rehearsing singers and rhythm separately from time to time is crucial. They have different needs. There's nothing more boring for a rhythm section than waiting for singers learn their parts. Encourage all members of the ensemble—singers and players—to learn their parts outside of class. But some things can be taught more effectively when the singers and players are split up. If you can teach them to be functional while you work with the other contingent, you can split your time between them when necessary. Then you can be more productive when you do come together with the entire ensemble.

## **CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

- Set the same standards for players as singers (and make them high!). They will only go as high as the bar you set for them.
- Clearly communicate your goals and expectations to everybody. This goes for big goals (like connecting with each other and our audience) and small goals (like part accuracy by a certain date).
- Remember, we're all part of the same team, just with different roles. This includes the teacher.
- Involve the rhythm section in ensemble discussions. This includes lyrics, musical choices, and other "singer" concepts.

## **DO THE BEST YOU CAN IN TERMS OF EQUIPMENT**

Quality equipment can make a huge difference in the success of your rhythm section. Finances can be a limiting factor, but use your resources as best you can. Tune the piano, replace old drum heads, replace bass strings, and make sure your drumsticks and brushes are in good shape. Have some longer term goals, like replacing that crappy bass amp or investing in some better cymbals.

## **COMMUNICATING WITH PLAYERS**

Learn enough about the basics to be able to speak their language. I'm always asking Groove for Thought's players a question about how to approach something with one of my students. I have found the majority of the pro players I interact with are happy, even eager, to answer my questions. And remember, in many ways music is music. Everyone understands louder, softer, faster and slower. And don't be afraid to sing what you want them to play. They'll get it.

## **USE A METRONOME**

Yes, this is important enough to deserve its own sub-heading!

## **LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN!**

We preach this to our students, but it's pretty essential for us as well. You have to know what you want, and the only way to do this is to have a clear idea in your head. This comes from listening. A lot. Only then do you have a chance at being able to communicate what you want them to play.

## **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

Like many aspects of our ensembles, things are rarely stagnant. They're either getting better or they're getting worse. This can be true about our rhythm section situation as well. Success breeds success. As your players get better, have more fun, and feel more a part of the ensemble, more and better players will want to be involved. After many years of sharing players with our jazz band, my students identify themselves as the jazz choir rhythm section that also plays with the band. This is one of the things I'm most proud of. Is it a lot of work to recruit and develop young rhythm section players? Yes. Is it worth it? Absolutely. Speaking as a singer with limited proficiency on any instrument, this has become one of the most fun and rewarding parts of my job.



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