Do you find that high school jazz band and jazz choir students can execute difficult charts convincingly, but stumble when it comes time to improvise? Developing skill and proficiency at improvisation takes years of practice and study. There are two things that can bring improvisers to their knees. One is tempo, and the other rate of harmonic change. Unless you have Pete Christlieb or Wynton Marsalis in your band, it’s best to avoid very fast charts. Rate of harmonic change, on the other hand, can be easier to deal with.

If you have a chart you’re in love with but is beyond the abilities of your soloists, here are a few suggestions from Susie Jones, former Oregon MEA Jazz Chair:

Change the solo section

Instead of having your soloists play over the entire solo, set up an easy harmonic vamp. A II-V (e.g., Gm7-C7 in the key of F) will be easy for them to negotiate. Or, in an AABA song form, you might consider having your students improvise over only the A section. A tune like Killer Joe\* is easy if the bridge is left out.

Help your students find the underlying scale

If the tune is predominantly diatonic, then they can generalize the harmony and sound good using only one scale. For instance, if the chord sequence is Gm7, Cm7, F7, B-flatMaj7, they will sound convincing using just a B-flat major scale. If you do nothing else, help them to find the correct scale. I’ve witnessed countless performances where the soloist improvised a B flat blues when the tune was in F, or worse. When left to their own devices, students don’t always come up with the best set of notes (scale) to use. You don’t have to be a harmonic genius to guide them. Helping them realize what key they’re in goes a long way.

Listen to the changes

Spend time in class having the rhythm-section play the solo section of the tune while the soloists listen and watch the chord changes. You can help them see and hear the major harmonic goals. Make sure they can hear what is happening at the bridge. Let them know if there are unusual phrase lengths (e.g., 10-measure phrases). Spending time listening to the solo section will help your soloists and give the rhythm-section players a chance to hear each other and work together.

Consider having your soloists trade 4s or 8s

This alteration allows soloists some breathing room and lets them stop and think before they play. They play or sing better when they have a chance to work out their ideas a few moments in advance.

Adapted from “Improvising in the Large Ensemble” by Susie Jones, originally published in Fall 2005-2006 Oregon Music Educator