

Playing Piano in a Big Band

Thoughts by David Winkler

Playing in a big band can be an exhilarating experience. The massive sound of 5 saxes, 4-5 trumpets, 4-5 trombones plus rhythm section is like nothing else in the world of music.

For the pianist playing in such a band, it can be a mixed bag. All those horns can easily drown out the piano, even if it's miked, so when the whole band is blowing, the pianist can feel as if he is playing his little fingers off to no avail! So in some ways, it's not a completely satisfying feeling to play in such a group, compared to playing solo or in a smaller ensemble.

Added to this is the often difficult charts to deal with. Many charts are handwritten; others are done on a computer, but using "handwritten" fonts, which are still sometimes hard to read, particularly if the fonts are small. For many of the arrangements, the composers go all out with all kinds of very complex harmonies. How is a pianist to approach such a task in a meaningful way?

Here are some suggestions.

1. Do your homework, checking charts for unusual harmonies and rhythms, working out voicings, and marking any hard-to-read passages. Many rhythm charts are quite long, so taping pages can also be helpful.
2. Don't feel like you have to play everything on the page. Particularly when the full band is playing and chord changes are happening quickly, it's often best to just lay back and let the band take it. For all your efforts, you probably won't be heard anyway.
3. When the texture of the band is lighter, particularly on the solo choruses, find your place in the groove and provide some solid accompaniment.

4. If there's a guitar player in your band, there may be some places in the music, if not already sorted out by the arranger, that you have to work together so that you're not stepping on each other's toes musically.
5. Find the gaps in the phrases where you can throw in an occasional little light fill of some kind. It doesn't have to be much – just something to add some interest to the music.
6. Adjust your voicings to the need of the moment. When the volume level is louder, a good practice is to keep the left hand in the middle range and play some higher stuff (e.g., octaves or octaves + the 5th) in the right hand in order to get a really solid sound.
7. It's not cheating to listen to recordings! Often I have found an arrangement my band is doing posted on YouTube. It really helps to hear the overall piece, to study what another pianist has done with it, and even to play along as part of one's practice/preparation.

I would welcome your comments! Write me at david@davidwinkler.com.