It’s Not on the Page – Teaching Jazz Articulation in the Big Band Rehearsal

Presented at the 2005 Illinois Music Educator’s Convention, Peoria, IL
January 28, 2005
8:00 – 9:15 am
CC 212-213

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This session will cover techniques used to tighten the jazz ensemble through a consistent approach to jazz articulation. Topics discussed will include historical precedents for jazz articulation, note lengths, releases, back accent articulation, ghost notes, points of accent in jazz lines, reasons for sketchy articulations in published arrangements, and the use of singing in the big band rehearsal. A published jazz arrangement (Bill Potts’ Big Swing Face) will be studied and demonstrated with a live saxophone section.

• **Introduction**
  
  o Most of what students need to do in jazz articulation is not marked on the page. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher to help the students understand. If you do not do this, your groups will not swing – it’s that simple!

• **Why teach jazz articulation?**
  
  o It strengthens time in the group – the coordination of tongue and fingers helps lock time
  o Intonation will improve – students will more easily find the center of the pitch
  o It makes lines swing – makes them sound stylistically correct
  o Gives students a basis for improvisation
  o Gives your rehearsals focus (rather than repetition in hopes that things will tighten up).
  
  o If your kids are listening to jazz constantly, then all of this is much easier. Without listening, there is no context!
• Why aren’t parts marked correctly?
  o Jazz is music that is aural in tradition, so there is more than one way to interpret lines. Different styles are celebrated
  o Publishers leave this to the director to interpret – you can bring your own ideas to your band, and “personalize” your sound
  o Normally you will see nothing marked or long slurs

• Types of jazz articulation
  o Back accent – tongue the offbeats and slur into the beats
  o Ghosting – mark an “x” over the note head or put in parentheses
  o Tongue stopping (Daht) – no marking
  o Doodle tongue – no marking

• Three basic “rules” for articulating jazz lines
  o Notes that are always articulated – first note of a phrase, last note of a phrase, and high points (especially those approached upward by leap

  **Example One**

  o Short notes (eighth notes, tent accent quarter notes) are tongue-stopped (“daht”) Why? This is the way that Louis Armstrong played quarter notes!

  **Example Two**

  o Eighth notes are played in a connected, legato style (unless specifically marked to be played “ricky-tick”)

• How to teach different types of articulation
  o First and foremost, have the students sing everything before they play it!
    ▪ Sing quarter notes as dah or “daht”
    ▪ Sing eighth notes “doo-dah-oo-daht”
  o Back accent
    ▪ When is this used? In groups of three eighth notes or more (or sixteenths, in rock or slower latin styles)
Use scales to teach the basics

- Sing (doo-doo, very legato, then doo-DAH-oo)

**Example 3.1, 3.2**

- At first, you can have the students put spaces before the articulated notes when playing, so you know they’re doing it right. Then, play it with legato style.

**Example 3.3**

- Different styles mean different amounts of accent, so practice with various amounts of accent, and with no accent.
- Tonguing triplets – two options
  - 1. Tongue the first note of each triplet
  - 2. Tongue the first and second note of each triplet (ala Clifford Brown)

**Example 4, 4.1**

- Ghost notes
  - Sometimes, lines will dictate that a note on the beat is accented. In these cases, the previous note is ghosted
  - Slur into ghost notes
  - Saxes don’t need to ghost as much as brass. They can help to fill in the sound if the brass are ghosting too much for technical reasons.

**Example 5**

- Tongue stop
  - Sing “daht” – the t at the end is the tongue stop
  - Students should understand that the end of the note is articulated. This really helps to lock time.
  - Lower instruments will need to play slightly shorter to make the note ending sound uniform – low sounds tend to ring more
  - You can play simple exercises to make students aware of uniform note lengths

**Example 6**
• The speed at which your students learn to articulate well is governed by two things:
  o Your persistence and consistency of expectations. Don’t let up!
  o Their listening habits – without this, they will have no sense of context

• The results:
  o A band that sounds better – improved swing, time, and pitch
  o A large pay raise (OK, maybe not)
  o Happy students who know that they sound good!

**Demonstration – sax soli from “Big Swing Face,” by Bill Potts (published by Sierra Music)**

**Questions?**

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Musical Examples - Jazz Articulation

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3.1 - Singing and playing the major scale - Step One

Example 3.2 - Singing and playing the major scale - Step Two

Example 3.3 - Playing the major scale with spaces

Example 4 - Articulating triplets

Example 4.1 - Articulating triplets - Clifford Brown Style

Example 5 - Ghost Notes

Example 6 - Practicing uniform note lengths using chord tones