

2013 KMEA Presentation: Jazz Ensemble Techniques for Middle School Bands

This session will explore some of the expressive techniques involved in interpreting jazz ensemble music, and is intended as an introduction for middle school educators. Although the music in concert bands and jazz ensembles look similar, they are interpreted in significantly different ways, and this can be confusing for young musicians. Topics will include: 'D' verses 'T' tonguing, when to use triplet feel, off-beat slurring, indications for cut-offs, use of vibrato, handling long notes and dynamics in phrasing, concepts for breathing, ghosting, and accenting top notes in the line.

“Mastery of style is the ability to employ the appropriate technique at the appropriate tempo.” - Professor Buddy Baker, Trombonist and Master Teacher, University of Northern Colorado

I am the ‘jazz’ guy at a small private college. I work with young adults that generally haven’t had any private instruction and their only training has been as members of middle school band and high school jazz ensemble. Consequently they are missing some key information. In my opinion, if band students would encounter any of these exercises in middle school rehearsals and warm-ups, they might be comfortably employing them by the time of their high school graduation, and be stylistically more flexible.

The trick is in finding a way to teach these techniques to middle school musicians without taking any extra time away from band rehearsals, especially when establishing a separate jazz ensemble is normally not a consideration due to time constraints and lack of personnel. All of the following exercises can be incorporated into warm-up routines.

If we listen to a modern recording of the Washington Post March by the United States Army Band, we hear a greater emphasis on the back-beats (2 and 4), than is heard in the recording done by John Phillip Sousa. Sousa’s tempo is also slightly faster and the music tends rush forward in the second strain. It also uses the march ‘lilt’ with an even emphasis on all four beats. The modern version has more rhythmic snap and stability, and places more emphasis on the accented two and four written into the composition. This is a key feature in swing, a steady tempo, rhythmic vigor, and an emphasis on 2 and 4 in common time. If we listen to the version by the studio group Fat Tuesday, we can clearly here the emphasis on the back-beats as the early jazz musicians would have been so fond of doing. It is my feeling that these back-beat accents can help stabilize a tempo and give march music a dance-like character it lacks with an emphasis on strong beats 1 & 3. All are good recordings and performances, the major differences between these interpretations is almost entirely technique and tempo.

Listening to Bob Crosby and His Bobcats performs this march (Decca) provides an interesting case in point. They take the slower tempo much as the Army Band does, but then after the introduction switch to a double time and add the back-beat on the snare, playing Dixieland, or polyphonic New Orleans style jazz over all three strains, before opening the music up for solos, and incorporating use of the big four switching back-beat to create propulsion behind the soloist. The original melody is also changed significantly through syncopation. It swings hard. So, why is it that high school and college students can’t perform swing music? It’s a lack of techniques.

Here are a few of the techniques that are difficult for my college freshmen to perform.

1. Liberating the feet from 1 and 3. Tapping with both feet (alternating R and L) and counting off a swing beat, by emphasizing beats 2 and 4 (back-beat), and the concept of ‘Big’ Four, the syncopation of beat four every other bar. (Ideally I’d like to get them playing without tapping feet.)

2. 'D' verses 'T' tongue, and the execution of successive upbeats.
Doo-dit-dit not Tah-tah-tah.
3. Legato articulation on the up-beats when performing scale passages.
Dah-Dee-yah, dee-yah, ...etc. They tend to stop the air flow between articulations.
4. Tongue releases with the silent 'T' (dot), or giving long notes full value by playing into the rests. What I mean is that we should cut off the sound exactly on the rest with the tongue. This makes the release of the sound rhythmic as well as the initial beginning of the note which is usually the emphasis in their playing.
5. Keeping time through rests longer than one beat and not losing the beat when notes are tied over the bar line. They tend to get lost when notes are tied over a bar line, especially when the note tied into is a division of the beat.
6. Understanding the implied triplet-feel in swing, and when not to use it, and switching from duple to triple divisions of the beats, and mastering hemiola. At medium and fast tempi the eighth note flow is even, not triplet feel.
7. Playing without vibrato if they are already using it, or playing with vibrato if they have never used it.
8. Demonstrate scale knowledge of Major, Melodic Minor Ascending, and Dominant Bebop, and be able to incorporate the blues scale off the second over specific chord changes in the blues.
9. Maintaining or increasing the volume through notes longer than a quarter note, the end of the phrases. Invariably they will decrescendo on long notes.
10. Breathing any time they encounter a rest, instead of thinking in terms of phrases.
11. Playing true fortissimo and pianissimo, especially the rhythm section players.
12. Counting in a swing tempo convincingly. "One-snap-Two-snap, a One-Two(snap)-Three-Four(snap).