

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF EVERY PRACTICE SESSION!



The Mechanics Of Swing

By Gunnar Mossblad

The development of good jazz conception requires technical analysis of the style through mature listening and practicing over a number of years. There are as many different kinds of swing as there are jazz performers. The way a jazz artist swings is an integral part of his or her musical identity and; many other variables, including the style and tempo affect the way that swing is produced. There are however, fundamental techniques and performance practices that produce a swing style that needs to be assimilated in a player's vocabulary. These fundamental principles serve as a foundation for later development of a personal approach to jazz conception.

In the last few years I have had the good fortune to conduct many workshops at high schools and colleges across the country. This kind of artist residency offers me the opportunity to work closely with many enthusiastic and talented students. Many of these students have had little if any formal instruction in jazz, and do

not know the mechanics of swinging on their instrument let alone the performance practices of jazz. Even more advanced students who can play one or more transcriptions, sometimes have difficulty swinging when they improvise or do not know how to articulate in the jazz style. Having a limited amount of time with students in a master class setting or even a lesson encouraged me to develop a presentation of the basic mechanics of the swing style that would produce successful results quickly.

The following is an explanation of my presentation with the exercises that I use. When I work with a student I am concerned first with results and then the understanding of concepts.

In its most fundamental form the techniques of producing swing, or jazz, style can be broken down into three main areas, the natural pulse or metric feel of the music, the rhythm of the common denominator (the eighth note), and the articulation. All three areas

work together to produce a swing feel.

THE BASIC PULSE

The basic pulse or metric feel of jazz is different from classical music. In classical music the downbeats have an implied weight or slight accent to them. The natural pulse in jazz however, is on the upbeats. This fundamental but very subtle difference is vital to producing a swing feel. Even if the articulation and rhythm of the eighth notes are perfect, a student will not sound as if they are swinging if the basic metric feel of jazz is not happening.

The difference can be demonstrated by the way we verbally count each style. In classical music the metric feel is expressed by emphasizing the downbeats. We say 1 & 2 & 3 & 4, etc., where beats one and three are stronger than two and four. In jazz we express the time by saying & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4. Beats two and four are stronger than one and three, and the "ands" or upbeats are stronger than the downbeats.

DIVIDING THE EIGHTH NOTES

The second fundamental difference between jazz and classical is the way the beat is divided. In classical music the eighth notes are divided just as they are written, equally in the space of one beat. In the jazz style however, the beat is not divided equally. Although it is written as eighth notes, the eighth notes are played with a triplet feel. At a medium swing (half note=60), the downbeat has a value of approximately 2/3rds of the beat and the upbeat is valued at 1/3 of the beat. This effectively means that while the jazz style is usually written as straight eighth notes, it is played as a quarter note eighth note triplet (see Example 1) It should also be noted that as the tempo speeds up, the eighth note triplet rhythm becomes straighter or closer to two equal halves while the articulation and metric feel continue unchanged. At a fast swing (approximately half note=100 and faster) the eighth note values are almost equal. At the fastest tempos even the basic jazz articulation will change and the metric feel is the primary element that makes the music swing.

ARTICULATION

Although jazz articulations will vary depending on the musical phrase, the basic jazz articulation at a medium swing is articulating the upbeats and slurring

to the downbeats (see Example 2). Articulations are probably the most misunderstood aspect of the jazz style. I have worked with students that thought the basic jazz articulation was everything from articulating every note to slurring every note and many other variations. I believe this is because classical music specifies the exact articulations that the performer should follow (with the exception of some Baroque pieces). Jazz however, has little or no specific articulations indicated in professional charts and arrangements. Phrase marks are sometimes indicated, but a jazz performer is expected to know the accepted articulations in the jazz style, and apply them to a piece of music in a personal and creative way.

The specific pedagogical techniques for each instrument may be slightly different. For instance, in the case of trombone or bass the upbeats are fully articulated and the downbeats are articulated as legato as possible to create the effect of slurring to the downbeats. However, from this basic articulation, creative exceptions are made that personalize and better exemplify the musical expression of a given phrase.

PRACTICING FOR GOOD STYLE

It is of the utmost importance to practice with a metronome. Since jazz has a metric feel that is significantly different from classical music, it stands to reason that the way the metronome is used should be adjusted to best express the style and feel of swing. It is generally agreed that the best way to accomplish this is to have the metronome imitate the hi-hat of the drum set by beating or clicking on two and four of each measure. At first this may be difficult for the student to feel. In fact it may require some practice just to feel the 2 & 4 or the metronome, let alone count and play with the metronome. Snapping or clapping on 2 & 4 while listening to some traditional jazz recordings will help develop this feel. If the student has difficulty feeling the 2 & 4 of the metronome, I usually suggest just finding beat 1 (exactly half way between the clicks), and repeating it until becomes comfortable. Then saying a-1 (and-1) until the metronome starts to feel as if it is beating on a 2 & 4. Eventually, counting off the entire 2-bar sequence and begin playing (see Example 3).

In order to successfully execute the mechanical aspects of the jazz style, it is best to practice each element very slowly. Once the basic count-off and feel

Example 1 (basic jazz rhythm)

Written 

Played 

Example 2 (basic jazz articulation)



Example 3 (counting off in a jazz style)

Student says: 1 -- 2 -- 1 2 3 4
Metronome: click click click click PLAY
Beat in 4/4 time: 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4

of the metronome is established, it is usually best to take each of the three main elements and add them to an exercise one at a time. A very simple but affective exercise is described in Example 4. Select a comfortable scale that can be played in the middle range of your instrument. Start by playing the first two notes repeatedly with just the jazz rhythm, then after a groove is established, add the subtle jazz metric feel, and finally add the jazz articulation. After a good swing style is being produced, a few more notes should be added. Eventually the scale can be extended to the full range of the student's instrument as well as other scales.

COMMON MISTAKES

Selecting a comfortable scale and limiting the number of notes at first helps to limit mistakes. However, there are some common mistakes that are bound to occur when first learning jazz.

The most common mistake is not playing with the metronome accurately. The count off may be perfect, but the student jumps in early at the end of the count off, or the time, is simply turned around through rushing or dragging. This is very understandable considering a student has usually spent several (or more) years playing with the metronome on beats 1 & 3 or 1, 2, 3, & 4. Beats 2 & 4 are foreign to the student. This can only be fixed by listening and practicing as described above.

The second most common mistake is that the

student plays the jazz rhythm as a dotted eighth, sixteenth, or plays the downbeats short, making the line separated and disjunct (see Example 5). Both of these rhythmic mistakes may occur at the same time. The third common mistake is either reversing the articulations so that the downbeats are articulated and slurred to the upbeat or all the notes are articulated equally.

Once a basic understanding of the jazz style and conception is established, the student will have a good foundation to experiment and develop their own creative applications of the time feel, articulation, accents, and rhythm. But, that is a whole other article. §

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Example 4 (jazz conception exercise)

Play the swing rhythm Add the jazz metric accent add the basic jazz articulation

(cont. to play the basic jazz rhythm) (continue to play the jazz rhythm and metric feel)

expand the range

(continue to play the jazz rhythm, metric feel and articulation)

Example 5 (common mistakes)

a) Student plays a dotted eight-sixteenth figure



b) student cuts the downbeats short

