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by Jerry Tolson

Jazz Style and Articulation

How to Get Your Band or Choir to Swing

Abstract: The interpretation of jazz style is crucial to the element of swing in any jazz ensemble performance. Today, many charts for both large and small instrumental and vocal jazz ensembles are well marked with articulations and expression markings. However, in some cases, there is nothing to guide the musician. This article addresses some common jazz articulations and style situations and provides a set of guidelines to help instructors and students decide how to treat notes and rhythms in swing style. Use of these concepts can help an ensemble sound more authentic and can help students better understand jazz articulations and styles.

“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing,” said Irving Mills and Duke Ellington in 1932. It’s still true today, and you can help your ensemble learn to do it better.

Keywords: articulation, education, ensemble, jazz, pedagogy, rhythm, swing

In some ways, the concept of swing is the Holy Grail of jazz.¹ It is the foundation of all jazz performances. Even if the piece is not specifically in the traditional swing style, the sense of propulsive rhythmic feel or “groove” created by the musical interaction between the performers is still referred to as the swing factor.² Indeed, Mark Gridley uses this concept as one of the definitions of swing in his jazz history and styles textbook.³ As a performance technique, *swing* has been called “the most debated word in jazz.”⁴ The *Jazz in America* glossary defines it as “when an individual player or ensemble performs in such a rhythmically coordinated way as to command a visceral response from the listener (to cause feet to tap and heads to nod); an irresistible gravitational buoyancy that defies mere verbal definition.”⁵ When jazz performer Cootie

Williams was asked to define it, he joked, “Define it? I’d rather tackle Einstein’s theory!”⁶ Scholar Jeff Pressing defined it more academically as a phenomenon of carefully aligned concurrent rhythmic patterns characterized by a subdivision structure relative to a perception of recurring pulses, which is to say that it is a matter of how the beat is played and subdivided.⁷

The interpretation of jazz style is crucial to the element of swing in any jazz ensemble performance. Today, many written arrangements for both large and small jazz ensembles are clearly marked with articulations and expression markings. However, in some cases, there is nothing to guide the instructor or student. This article addresses some of the articulation and style situations commonly found in jazz music. These situations can be

generalized into a set of guidelines that can be used to guide decisions regarding the treatment of notes and rhythms in the swing style of the jazz idiom. Armed with this set of general guidelines, your ensemble will find it easier to sound more stylistically accurate and authentic. The ultimate goal of this article is to provide useful tips for helping your students understand jazz articulation and style.

Jazz encompasses many styles—from Dixieland to big band swing to bebop and fusion. Anecdotal evidence from adjudicators and directors indicates that by far, the most challenging element for both instrumentalists and vocalists to interpret is the swing style common to both big band swing and bebop. Much of today's printed jazz music is based on performance practices established in the big band and bebop eras of the 1930s and 1940s. In the swing styles of jazz, what you see on the page is only an approximation of what actually sounds when the music is performed. It should be noted that jazz, from its inception, has always been a performer's and an arranger's music rather than a composer's music. Thus, interpretations of style have varied from individual to individual and from band to band throughout the course of the history of the music. This makes generalizations about stylistic performance even more challenging.

The repertoire of present-day instrumental school jazz ensembles often consists of vintage charts from the libraries of the Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Woody Herman, and Stan Kenton bands as well as originals by a host of talented young composers and arrangers. While school vocal jazz ensembles have not been around for quite as long, the repertoire for these groups is populated with great arrangements of jazz classics—songs from great vocal groups, such as the trio Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross; The Manhattan Transfer; the Hi-Los; and New York Voices—as well as originals by talented writers in this genre. Attempts have been made to codify the style and articulation used by most players. These codification efforts have been undertaken to make the music more accessible to students and younger

performers. Much progress has been made in the standardization of jazz markings and articulations in published jazz material by the Music Publishers Association and organizations such as the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), the International Association for Jazz Education (now disbanded), and the Jazz Education Network.⁸ Still, it must be remembered that because jazz has its roots in the aural traditions of African American culture, the printed page merely approximates the ultimate sound. What happens in the actual performance is far more crucial than what is on the printed page. The most efficient way to become familiar with jazz articulation is to listen to recordings of the music being played by master soloists and ensembles and to emulate what they do as closely as possible. Most students in today's world no longer have ready access to hearing this music live or on the radio, but through modern digital technology and the Internet, access to vintage performances is rapidly increasing. Listening, therefore, is crucial to successfully and authentically playing jazz in the swing style. Please refer to the jazz discography sidebar for a representative listening list of artists, bands, and vocal groups.

Likewise, singing is very effective for the internalization of the swing feel and style. If the rhythm cannot be verbalized using syllables that approximate the desired articulation, the performance will never be truly authentic. The history of jazz has long documented the symbiotic relationship of the voice and instruments in jazz. Louis Armstrong's singing is a direct extension of how and what he plays on his horn and vice versa. Listen to the example of him singing and playing on "Hotter than That" (from the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, volume 1). A combination of long and short syllables, such as *doo, dab, day, ba, da, va, dabt, dow, and dit*, are some of the staples of the vocal vocabulary that helped him create the appropriate articulations. These syllables, known as scat syllables, can help students verbalize rhythmic figures that they can then transfer to their instruments. Even

Select Discography of Jazz Recording for Students

- Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, vols. 1–3 (Sony, 1987).
- Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, *Town Hall, New York City, June 22, 1945* (Uptown UPCD 27.51, 2005).
- The Genius of Charlie Parker* (Savoy MG 12014, 1992). A multiple-CD set also titled *The Genius of Charlie Parker* was released in 2005.
- Charlie Parker, *Yardbird in Lotus Land* (Spotlite [E] SPJ 123, 1945).
- Charlie Parker, *The Complete Savoy Studio Sessions* (Savoy SJL 5500, 1944).
- The Quintet, *Jazz at Massey Hall* (Debut DEB 124, 1953).
- Sonny Stitt, *Sonny Side Up*, with Dizzy Gillespie and Sonny Rollins (Verve MGV-8262, 1958).
- Sonny Stitt, *The Champ* (Muse MR 5023, 1974).
- Art Blakey, *Night at Birdland*, vol. 1 (Blue Note 32146, 1954).
- Ken Burns Jazz, *Definitive Count Basie* (Verve 549090, 2000).
- Count Basie, *Basie Straight Ahead* (Verve 822, 1967).
- Ken Burns Jazz, *Definitive Art Blakey* (Verve 549089, 2000).
- Ken Burns Jazz, *Definitive Duke Ellington* (Legacy 61444, 2000).
- Woody Herman, *Woody's Gold Star* (Concord 4330, 1987).
- Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, *Central Park North* (Blue Note 76852, 1969).
- The Complete Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong on Verve* (Verve, [1956] 1997).
- Ella Fitzgerald, *The Best of the Songbooks* (UMG, 1993).
- Ella and Basie!* (Verve, 1963).
- Manhattan Transfer, *Bop Doo-Wopp* (Atlantic, 1983).
- Manhattan Transfer, *Vocalese* (Atlantic, 1985).
- Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, *Everybody's Boppin'* (Sony, 1959).
- The Real Group, *Jazz: Live* (Gazell Records AB, 1996).
- The Real Group, *Unreal!* (Town Crier Recordings, 1995).
- New York Voices, *New York Voices* (GRP, 1989).

for singers and nonwind instrumentalists, the verbalization of such syllables will enhance the swing factor of a performer's technique. For singers, this is true when performing lyrics or scatting. To be sure, there are as many different scat syllables used by jazz artists as there are jazz performers. Comparison listening to scat solos by Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Sarah Vaughan will demonstrate the wide variety of scat syllables that jazz performers use. Although the previously mentioned syllables are not the only ones used to indicate jazz articulations, they have been selected to offer a basic set of syllables that will provide accuracy and consistency for your students. These syllables are typically used in the following manner:

- *Doo* is used for long sounds that occur on downbeats. The articulation symbol used is (-).
- *Day* or *dab* is used for accented long sounds on either downbeats or upbeats (>).
- *Va, da, or ba* is typically used on unaccented upbeats (no symbol is used).
- *Dabt* is used for accented short sounds, whether downbeats or upbeats (^).
- *Dit* is used for unaccented short notes (.)
- *Dn* is used for notes that are ghosted or swallowed. These notes are often designated by an *X* on the staff in place of the notehead or a notehead in parentheses.
- *Dow* is used for notes that are followed by a fall—a descending glissando to an undefined ending pitch (\).
- *Doo-dle-da* is used to articulate eighth-note triplets.

Keep in mind that the articulation symbols are not always used in the sheet music. Also note that accented short notes use a different syllable than unaccented short notes and are, as a result, played slightly longer, or as one would say in the jazz vernacular, “fat” or “phat.” The notes are still short, but they have more weight and length.

In swing style, the eighth note is the traditional underlying subdivision. Although tempo somewhat affects the treatment of these eighth notes, the

FIGURE 1

Swing Eighth Note Patterns



FIGURE 2

Swing Eighth Articulation Pattern

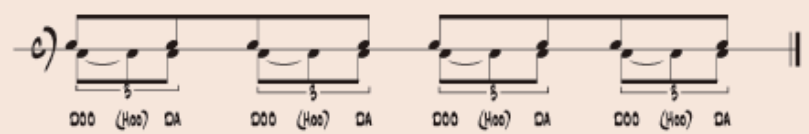


FIGURE 3

Scale Articulation Pattern—Slow to medium tempo



overriding principle is that “all eighth notes are not created equal.” Remembering this so-called Jazz Bill of Rights is effective in performing the music more authentically.⁹ Through the use of accents and an underlying subdivision that, depending on the tempo, lies somewhere between the triplet feel of 12/8 time and the exact even subdivision of rock music, the jazz performer can create that ever-elusive swing groove. Also crucial to the groove is the importance of swinging the rests as well as the notes. A performance where the notes are swung but the rests are not swung is just as inadequate as one where the notes are not swung.

The swing feel in moderate to slower tempos is characterized by an underlying subdivision of the eighth notes into triplets as shown in Figure 1. You will often see this indication at the beginning of a chart or in the conductor's score

to indicate that the eighth notes should be swung. Any or all of the rhythms in Figure 1 may be used to indicate swing eighth notes.

Practicing eighth notes with the middle syllable of the triplet silently articulated, but not verbalized, will help develop your students' style (Figure 2). Keep in mind that both instrumentalists and vocalists can utilize this exercise as well as all of the other articulation guidelines.

It is equally important that the student think of the upbeat notes resolving to the downbeat. Using a legato articulation with slightly more emphasis on the upbeat will connect the upbeat to the next downbeat and will increase the authenticity of the swing feel. This concept can be verbalized as “*doo Da-doo, Da-doo*” (Figure 3). One caveat to this technique is that as the tempo gets faster, there is less emphasis on

the upbeat, and the upbeat eighth notes are often slurred into the next downbeat (Figure 4). Once the quarter note reaches M.M. = 180+, the eighth notes are performed evenly, and the swing feel is created by slurring three or more notes together and accenting selected notes (Figure 5). Scales can be used as exercises to practice this feel.

Once students become comfortable with swing eighth notes, then interpreting jazz rhythms and applying the appropriate articulations will be easier. Consider the following guidelines when preparing your next jazz performance. Remember that because jazz is like a language, there are always exceptions to each guideline.

1. Unless specifically marked otherwise, any quarter note or eighth note followed by a rest is played or sung short.

Notice that the articulation ends with a “t” sound, which is achieved by stopping the tone with the tongue (Figure 6). While typically not used in classical performance technique, the tongue-stopped tone is standard in jazz.

Notice that some of the short notes in this example are accented and some are not. This will be addressed in Guideline 4.

Quarter notes or eighth notes followed by rests often occur in jazz in the middle and at the ends of phrases and lines. More clarity is achieved when these notes are played short. It is also easier to coordinate the precision of larger ensembles when these notes are played short.

If not followed by a rest, then quarter notes and eighth notes are usually played/sung long unless one of the following situations applies:

2. Quarter notes that occur on the downbeats of beats 1 or 3 are usually played/sung long.
3. Quarter notes that occur on the downbeats of beats 2 or 4 are usually played/sung short.

In the last measure of the example in Figure 7, the quarter note on beat 3 is played/sung short because it is followed by a rest (Guideline 1).

FIGURE 4

Scale Articulation Pattern—Medium tempo



FIGURE 5

Scale Articulation Pattern—Fast tempo



FIGURE 6

Short Note Articulations

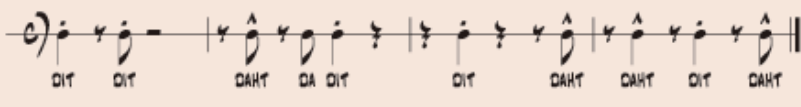
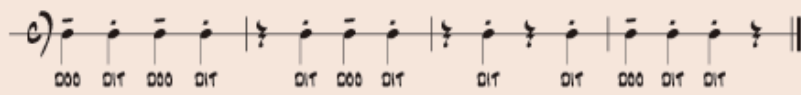


FIGURE 7

Quarter Note Articulations

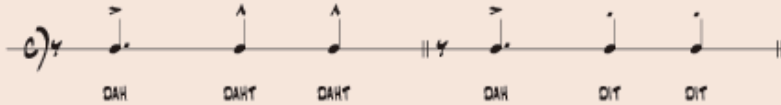
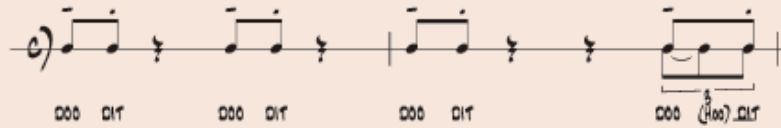


In many styles of music, including marches, beats 1 and 3 are the strong beats and are therefore emphasized more strongly. In jazz music, beats 2 and 4 are more strongly emphasized. This is where the eighth notes occur in the drummer’s ride cymbal pattern (Figure 8). The drummer usually creates a long sound on beats 1 and 3 with the ride cymbal. The hi-hat is always played on beats 2 and 4 in jazz.

Because of the strong impact of the hi-hat cymbals when they come together in a sort of “chick” sound on beats 2 and 4, quarter notes that occur on these beats

receive more attention. This action also simulates the beats where finger snaps would occur to keep time to the music. To better coordinate the ensemble articulations with the rhythm section sounds, short quarter notes on beats 2 and 4 are more effective. An exception to this rule is when there is a string of more than four quarter notes in a row. In this situation, all the quarter notes are typically played (sung) short and accented (Figure 9).

Likewise, there are certain rhythm combinations, such as the one shown in Figure 10, that call for both quarter notes to be played or sung short, even though

FIGURE 8**Ride Cymbal/Hi Hat Pattern****FIGURE 9****Articulation for Consecutive Quarter Notes****FIGURE 10****Johnny Carson Theme Rhythm****FIGURE 11****Eighth Note *doo-dit* Pattern**

one occurs on beat 3 and one on beat 4. I refer to this particular rhythm combination as the “Johnny Carson Theme” rule due to the prevalence of that rhythm in the theme song to his television show. It is also the primary rhythmic figure in composer Neal Hefti’s “Li’l Darlin’,” a standard big band chart recorded by Count Basie.

4. When the rhythmic pattern of two eighth notes followed by a rest starts on a downbeat, it is almost always articulated with the syllables *doo-dit*.

The two-eighth-note combination followed by rest is one of the staples of swing (Figure 11). As exemplified in Duke Ellington’s “C Jam Blues,” the syllables *doo-dit* provide the appropriate interpretation of this rhythm pattern. Should this pattern occur at the end of a phrase, the rhythm should be played (sung) as if it were a triplet with the middle note imagined mentally rather than be articulated. Using the articulation syllables *doo-boo-dit* will help this rhythm keep from rushing, which is a

FIGURE 12**Syncopation Pattern**

common malady, especially in young jazz groups.

5. A quarter note (or the equivalent thereof) that occurs on an upbeat between two eighth notes (or rests) is played/sung short.

The eighth-note/quarter-note/eighth-note syncopation pattern, as shown in Figure 12, is very common in jazz music. Usually the quarter note is performed short and is accented to take advantage of the syncopated rhythm. Figure 13 shows several ways that this syncopated rhythm is articulated. If followed by a rest, the figure should be articulated with the syllables *doo-dabt-dit* (Example 1). If the last note is tied to a longer note, the figure is articulated *doo-dabt-day* (Example 2). Even if the beginning of the figure is an eighth note rest, the figure is still articulated in this manner (Example 3). Example 4 shows how the figure would be articulated if the last note of the figure is not tied but is followed by another note.

When the upbeat quarter-note equivalent occurs as a part of a sequence of eighth notes and is tied across the bar line or the imaginary midpoint of the measure, it is played (sung) long, as seen in Figure 14.

6. Upbeat entrances after a rest, especially those that are a dotted-quarter-note length or longer, should be “anticipated with an accent” (AWA). However, even short notes that enter on the upbeat are AWA.

Entrances on the upbeat after a rest are particularly crucial to an authentic jazz style. Anticipating them with an accent keeps them from sounding late and provides the appropriate emphasis for the rhythm pattern (Figure 15).

FIGURE 13

Syncopation Pattern Articulations



FIGURE 14

Upbeat Tied Eighth Note Pattern



FIGURE 15

AWA Pattern

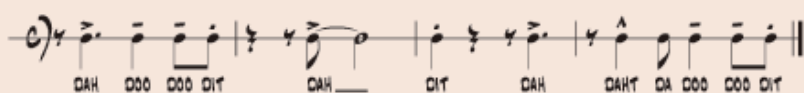


FIGURE 16

Consecutive Upbeat Quarter Notes



FIGURE 17

Ghosted Notes and Eighth Note Line Accents



7. A succession (three or more) of quarter notes (or equivalent) on consecutive upbeats is usually played/sung long and accented.

When three or more quarter notes occur on successive upbeats, they are all played (sung) long and accented to prevent the sound from being too choppy and allowing the beat to rush (Figure 16).

8. In a line of eighth notes, accent the highest note and any wide-leap changes of direction. Ghost (swallow) the lowest note and notes that occur on the weakest upbeats (2 and 4).

The concept of ghosting, or swallowing, a note is achieved by using the syllable *dn* rather than *doo* and actually simulating swallowing rather than blowing during these notes. This results in a less defined tone for that note, making it more suggested than clearly articulated. Often this type of note is indicated in the music with an *X* rather than a notehead or parentheses around the chosen note. This technique is often heard in music of the bebop era. Listening to the music of Charlie Parker provides the ultimate guide for performing this articulation style authentically. A careful analysis will indicate this practice being used on long lines of eighth notes, as shown in Figure 17. Use of this practice can be heard on many Charlie Parker recordings. Listen to examples from the discography included as a sidebar in this article.

9. The eighth-note triplet rhythm is usually articulated by slurring the first two notes and tonguing the last one. The most commonly used articulation syllables are *doo-dle-da*.

Using this articulation will allow the performer to play or sing a line of successive triplets with speed and smoothness (Figure 18).

10. All notes of a quarter-note triplet should be played/sung long unless otherwise indicated. Sometimes they are accented, and sometimes they are not.

FIGURE 18

Eighth Note Triplets

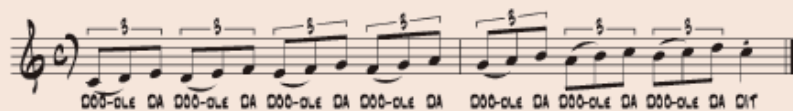


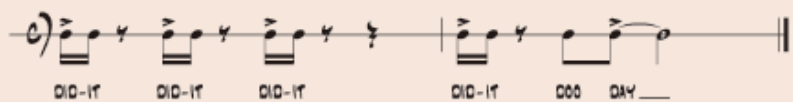
FIGURE 19

Quarter Note Triplets



FIGURE 20

Sixteenth Note Pattern



In jazz, the quarter-note triplet is known as the drag triplet. The purpose of this rhythm is to pull against the regular eighth-note pulse. A common error is to play the last note of this figure short, which changes the impact and causes the figure to rush. Imagining this rhythm as if it comprised six eighth-note triplets tied together in groups of two will make it easier to perform. This rhythm should not be confused with the dotted eighth-note–sixteenth-note tied to eighth-note–eighth-note rhythm shown in Figure 19.

11. Two sixteenth notes followed by a rest are articulated with the syllables *spit-it* or *did-it*. The first sixteenth is usually accented.

While this rhythm pattern does not occur as often, it is often challenging for students, who tend to play the sixteenths too slowly. Using this articulation will help solve that problem (Figure 20).

By following these guidelines, your instrumental or vocal jazz ensemble should be a swinging, hot-sounding jazz machine. To be sure, there are exceptions to these guidelines, just as there are exceptions to the guidelines for English language pronunciation. Even so, just as one learns a new language by listening to it spoken and mimicking the speaker, listening to and mimicking authentic jazz examples will provide the prime model

for your jazz ensemble to articulate better. The discography in this article will provide good examples for your students to listen to and emulate.

NOTES

1. Antonio J. Garcia, "Learning Swing Feel or How to Sculpt an Elephant," *International Trombone Association Journal* 34, no. 2 (April 2006), <http://www.garciamusic.com/educator/ita.journal/ita.journal.html>.
2. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swing_\(jazz_performance_style\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swing_(jazz_performance_style)) (accessed January 7, 2010).
3. Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, 10th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009), 8–11.
4. Bill Treadwell, *The Big Book of Swing* (New York: Cambridge House, 1946).
5. See <http://www.jazzinamerica.org/JazzResources/Resources> (accessed January 7, 2010).
6. Treadwell, *The Big Book of Swing*.
7. Jeff Pressing, "Black Atlantic Rhythm: Its Computational and Transcultural Foundations," *Music Perception* 19, no. 3 (2002): 288.
8. A copy of a chart of standard articulations can be found in J. Richard Dunscomb and Willie Hill Jr., *Jazz Pedagogy: The Jazz Educator's Handbook and Resource Guide* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music Publishing Co., 2002), 70.
9. *Ibid.*, 75.

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