

Teaching Beginning Jazz Improvisation

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I. Philosophical Issues

- A. Can everybody really learn to improvise?
 - 1. Differences in ability levels
 - a) challenge those with superior aptitudes and more experience
 - b) encourage the efforts of others
 - (1) avoid letting one or two kids play all the solos
 - (a) reward those who put forth the effort with opportunities to solo
 - (b) include group improvisation activities (see I2 below)
 - 2. Get the students while they are young—middle and elementary school levels
 - a) students are less inhibited and fearful at a younger age
 - b) jazz phrasing concepts can be developed ahead of technical skills
 - c) basic theory & ear training opportunities: learning & hearing simple songs as scale degrees
 - d) jazz improvisation as an adventure
- B. Think long term when teaching improvisation
 - 1. Don't expect immediate results: adopt a "long term" mentality
 - a) think of your job as laying the groundwork or "pointing the students in the right direction"
 - (1) encourage students to work on their own and study privately if possible
 - b) encourage the creative act of improvising in a positive environment
 - (1) don't discourage students' efforts (see section III-J)
 - (2) try to demystify the process of improvisation (see section III-I, "right brain stuff"—this type of activity helps to bring students out of their shells)
 - (3) group improvisation activities (Collier and Berkman)
 - 2. Problems with overemphasis of competition/performance preparation
 - a) rehearsal time devoted exclusively to ensemble performance
 - b) directors writing out solos while discouraging experimentation
 - (1) instead, as a point of departure, have students aurally transcribe their own solos
 - (a) more educationally sound, but not an end--only a means (to vocabulary acquisition)
 - (2) encourage embellishment and paraphrase of aurally transcribed or written-out solos

II. Practical suggestions for common problems

- A. Director's inexperience with the idiom
 - 1. Attend workshops/clinics--as if a student – continue to learn
 - a) work on improvising yourself-- keep your horn up--strive to be a role model: you're a better teacher if you can improvise a little because you are more aware of the problems involved and can diagnose students' problems easier
 - b) the ability to provide authentic aural modeling is the best way to teach jazz
 - 2. Bring in clinicians (college students, more jazz-experienced teachers, etc.)

3. Develop a basic jazz record library: listen to the music and share it with your students, both formally and informally (including YouTube links)
- B. Time constraints
1. Incorporate improvisation concepts into the regular rehearsal time (see III)
 - a) as a “warm-up”
 - (1) Call/response activities on the blues progression, vamps, or just a groove
 - b) repertoire: To an extent, learning to improvise jazz is about learning jazz tunes—so emphasize charts from the jazz repertoire
 - (1) jazz classics (vs. TV themes and pop “top-40” tunes)
 - (2) arrangements of standards & jazz standards
 - (3) teach “head” charts aurally (or have students make them up)
 - (a) blues tunes and “rhythm” tunes
 - (b) vamp tunes
 - c) use your jazz band music to teach elements of melody and form:
 - (1) have all students learn melody to jazz band charts, preferably by ear
 - (2) write out the chorus form and, while a recording or rhythm section is playing, point to the chord changes as they change in tempo
 - (a) have students sing/play melody as you point to changes
 - (b) have students clap at the top of each chorus, or at the bridge, etc.
 2. Designate specific rehearsals for work on improvisation and listening
 - a) if this is not practical:
 - (1) make time available to coach those students who are genuinely interested (or those who have the solos--this is no different than coaching solo and ensemble performances)
 - (2) make materials available for students to work on their own (methods, play-alongs, iReal Pro tracks, etc.)
 - b) if rehearsal time can be allocated, see activities in section III below.

III. Activities for Teaching Jazz Improvisation Fundamentals

- A. Students must develop a concept (learned by listening and imitating)
1. Jazz is a language (“you are what you listen to”)
 - a) teachers should play jazz recordings for students at every opportunity
 - b) recommended jazz discographies are readily available: put them in students’ jazz band folders
 2. Teaching Listening Skills (Coker, Mathieu - plus IBA article “Listening to Jazz”-Washut)
- B. Encourage basic ear-training and the development of aural skills (vs. too much theory) - Note: see methods listed in resource section (Aebersold, Pickens, LaPorta & Azzara)
1. Matching pitch
 2. Playing by ear (familiar nursery rhymes, pop tunes on radio, etc.)
 3. Basic transposition to other keys (patterns, phrases, melodies, etc.)
 4. Sing/finger/play
 - a) try to sing/finger improvised phrases (vs. playing them on instruments), then play to check for accuracy
 5. Aural transcription (“lifting” licks, phrases, & solos from records)
- C. Emphasize time-feel and phrase-feel vs. theory only (Jerry Bergonzi clinic at UNI)
1. Work with a metronome (IBA article “Time Is the Bottom Line”-Washut)
 - a) internalizing beats two and four

- b) subdividing
 - c) legato triplet feel (“doo-dul-ah”)
- 2. Call-response method
 - a) using only one pitch, two pitches, etc.
 - b) using basic “blanket” scales (blues & pentatonic) and/or chord-scales (major, dorian, etc.)
- 3. Play along with real recordings (not just play-along records)
- D. Don’t Forget the Melody! (early jazz musicians were primarily embellishers: the tune’s melody preceded the chord progression as a point of departure for improvisation)
 - 1. Embellishing/paraphrasing & transposition of nursery rhymes and any tunes we’ve learned by ear (Aebersold)
 - 2. Thinking (internally hearing) of the melody while improvising helps the student not lose his/her place in the tune
 - 3. Melodic embellishment is especially effective for developing a lyrical solo ballad concept
- E. Demonstration: The blues as a time-tested vehicle for teaching basic jazz improvisation concepts
 - 1. Horizontal vs. Vertical (in-the-key vs. in-the-chord)
 - a) horizontal: ingrain tonality of blanket scale
 - (1) call/response activities using minor pentatonic & major/minor blues scales
 - b) vertical: guide tones, harmonic lines, harmonic outlines, & chordal arpeggiation
 - c) a combination of the above
 - 2. Digital pattern procedure (Aebersold): Practice learning the blues progression with a play-along track, using this order: chordal roots, 1-2-3, 1-2-3-4-5, 1-3-5-7, and basic chord-scales
 - 3. Emphasize time-phrase feel and simplicity (i.e., hearing what you’re playing: sing a phrase, then play it back to check if you’re actually hearing what your fingers are doing – see IIIB4 above)
- F. Harmonic analysis of improvisation sections of jazz band charts
 - 1. For chord progressions used for improvisation sections in jazz band charts:
 - a) analyze chord progressions and their relationship to the key (tonic)
 - b) consolidate all key areas (ii-Vs, ii-V-Is, iii-vi-ii-Vs, etc.)
 - (1) find “blanket” scales (horizontal: key areas vs. individual chords)
 - c) find harmonic lines (vertical: guide tones, arpeggiation, harmonic outlines (Ligon)
 - (1) use guide tones (chordal 3rds & 7ths) as goal tones
 - d) Aebersold procedure (listed above: III-E-3)
 - e) encourage playing progressions at the piano (2-,3-,4-note voicings)
- G. Consonance-Dissonance Spectrum: the chromatic scale (see III-J-1&2)
 - 1. Of the 12 chromatic tones:
 - a) 4 function as basic chord tones at any given time (1-3-5-7)
 - b) 3 function as scale tones or extensions (color tones) of the chord (2-4-6 or 9-11-13, depending on whether they are accentedagogically or act as passing tones)
 - c) 5 (chromatic) notes remain: they function best as non-harmonic or decorative tones, and reside only a 1/2 step away from consonant tones (tension tones)
- H. Jazz as communication: aspects of coherence and pacing
 - 1. Storytelling and speech as analogies to improvising solos (“Jazz & the Art of Storytelling”-Washut)
 - a) listen to great orators and speakers-how do they maintain your interest? Listen for aspects of phrase structure/relationships, use of range, dynamics and inflections and pause/pacing (M.L. King’s “I Had A Dream” speech as an analogy)
 - b) coherence: keep to the point (w/o a lot of digression) by limiting the material you use
- I. Right brain stuff (Mathieu)
 - 1. Improvising from pictures, images (desert, ocean, factory, etc.), feelings, graphs, etc.

2. Group interaction-improvisation (Collier & Berkman): jazz originated as collectively improvised music – some students are more comfortable in this context than with solo improvisation
 - a) this activity teaches listening skills (listen to hear when the piece ends – stop playing when you think it should end)
 - b) divide the band into separate groups, each with different roles and/or instructions
3. Improvise with restrictions imposed
 - a) use anything in the room but your instrument
 - b) use your instrument but only unconventionally (e.g., w/o the mouthpiece, etc.)
 - c) use only these three pitches, or only this rhythmic cell, or this specific scale
 - d) play as softly as possible – listen to the sound in between pitches played (Mathieu)
 - e) steady pulse or rubato (perhaps both at the same time if divided into groups)
 - f) *Journey to Nowhere* (band divided up into 3 groups improvising over a time-line, all based on a picture)
- J. Encouraging words for those students who are afraid to improvise:
 1. “Don’t be afraid to play a “wrong” note--remember, there are no bad notes, just bad resolutions.
 2. “Hey, there are only 12 notes. You’re only a half-step away from a “right” note.”
 3. “If you play a mistake, play it with conviction...like you meant to play it. Then play it again so the listener thinks you meant to play it. Turn a grain of sand into a pearl. Miles Davis made an art out of so called “mistakes”
 4. “You’ve got to be able to walk before you can run! Do your homework and then JUST PLAY.”
 5. “Now wasn’t that FUN?” (Dr. Paul Tenney’s analogy of jazz improvisation as an adventure)

IV. Resources

- A. Jamey Aebersold, “Anyone Can Improvise” (see accompanying pamphlet to the video)
- B. Chris Azzara, Developing Musicianship Through Improvisation
- C. Shelley Berg, Chop Monster
- D. Willie Thomas, Jazz Anyone?
- E. Willie Pickens, Ear-Training Tips
- F. Jerry Coker, Listening to Jazz
- G. W.A. Mathieu, The Listening Book
- H. Bert Ligon, Connecting Chords With Linear Harmony
- I. Robert Washut, “Jazz & the Art of Storytelling” – Jazz Educators Journal 27 (1), 25-26
- J. David Berkman, Conceptual Scores for Large Ensembles (unpublished)
- K. Graham Collier, Interaction