

# Introducing Jazz Improvisation

Students who practice and perform notated literature may be intimidated by the idea of improvising jazz or spontaneously creating any form of music on their instrument. However, when they understand a few basic principles and are willing to experiment without prematurely judging the results, students with a good ear and technique can learn to improvise jazz.

**J**azz, in the broadest sense, is the improvised variation of a melody based on a previously established harmonic and rhythmic framework. The performance of both the melody and the improvised variations is guided by stylistic considerations involving melody and its articulation, harmony, rhythm, texture, and form. Jazz musicians, like classical composers, use a melodic and harmonic vocabulary consisting of scales, arpeggios, and other patterns stylistically appropriate to their idiom. As a musical style, jazz has a number of important distinctions that separate it from traditional musical forms: an emphasis on improvisatory performance elements, a melodic tendency toward the blues and related scale forms, swing rhythm, and an aural as opposed to written form of transmission.

**T**O INTRODUCE JAZZ TO YOUR BAND students, teach them to interpret chord symbols and play melodies with chordal accompaniment in a way that is appropriate to the style. This presumes they read music well and may involve learning chord voicings (usually consisting of

four to six notes) that typically accompany the notated melody of a jazz composition. Once students master a basic chord vocabulary and have a more complete understanding of the rhythmic expression of a "lead sheet" (a melody with its accompanying chords), they are ready for improvisation.

Improvisation can be as simple as changing a few notes of the notated melody but more often involves creating a melody that is quite different from the original one. You can use the image of theme-and-variations to explain this: the theme is the melody and the variations are the improvised choruses (usually referred to as the "solo" or "solo choruses"). When a jazz standard is used as the vehicle for improvisation, the harmonic framework remains unchanged for the most part.

Improvised solos may consist of short melodic fragments or motives, scale fragments, sequences, or long melodic passages, but there is always a definable relationship between the solo and the chords that accompany it. Therefore, guide your beginning jazz students to explore chord/scale relationships; also help them as they figure out which scale to use with a particular chord or chord

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

**Guide your  
beginning jazz  
students to explore  
chord/scale  
relationships.**

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

## Blues Basics

### A Blues Scale, key of C



### A Basic Blues Progression

I C7 | F7 | C7 | C7 | F7 | F7 | |  
I C7 | C7 | G7 | F7 | C7 | (G7) |



progression. While it is the ear and the musical intuition of the improviser that ultimately determine the choice of melodic materials, students who are familiar with chords, chord progressions, and chord/scale relationships have an advantage in learning and understanding jazz.

After teaching a basic understanding of chords and scales, introduce your band students to the blues scale, which is one of the best elements of jazz for a young improviser to begin with. I have often seen students play incipient jazz a few weeks after mastering it. If your students are comfortable at a keyboard, they can experiment with the scale (in a style rhythmically consistent with the blues or jazz) in the right hand, while realizing the chords of the blues progression in the left. See the Blues Basics sidebar for the progression in one of its basic forms.

WHILE THE SUBTLETY OF RHYTHM and rhythmic expression in jazz is wide ranging, a principal rhythmic element of jazz is *swing*. The eighth-note pair in classical music divides the beat into two equal halves, but the eighth-note pair

in swing rhythm is felt more like a variation on the quarter-note/eighth-note triplet combination (see the Swing Rhythm sidebar for an illustration).

One rehearsal technique to help establish the rhythmic "feel" of jazz is to practice with the metronome sounding on beats two and four of a 4/4 swing tune. This establishes the "backbeat," an essential element of swing rhythm. Along with swing rhythm, *syncopation* is a significant component of jazz. It is applied in both melodies and chordal accompaniments. In its earliest stage, we see syncopated rhythm in the rags of Scott Joplin, where the pianist's left hand produces a steady eighth-note rhythmic pattern (often as a bass note and a chord), while the right hand frequently emphasizes the upbeat at the level of the sixteenth note.

UNLIKE THE TRADITION OF CLASSICAL music, in which the music is transmitted mainly in written form, jazz is transmitted mainly through an aural tradition by recordings and a direct experience of the music. Accordingly, listening and imitating (as opposed to reading music) are the principal means

by which the music is grasped.

Accurately notating rhythms and articulations jazz musicians bring to their performances is virtually impossible, and of course improvisation implies that the music is not written down. Though a classical musician may listen to a recording to hear how an artist interprets a particular work, the music is usually not learned from the recording. In jazz, however, that is how you learn the music as well as the performance style.

Helping students play jazz isn't easy, but if you teach them to explore scales and chords, particular rhythms, and great recordings, you'll be helping to develop their creativity and confidence in their ability to improvise. You'll also help them meet Music Content Standard 3: "Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments." ■

By Bob Hinz, a Ph.D. student in music performance at New York University.

## Teaching Ideas

▲ Teach an appropriate scale, mode, or pattern for each chord in a particular progression or tune. Certain sounds may be beyond the students' aural recognition at first; so give them some basics from which to choose when they are improvising. For example, for Dim7, the D scale in the Dorian mode (the C major scale played from D to D) would be a good choice, while the F scale in the Lydian mode (the C major scale played from F to F) would work for Fmaj7.

▲ To develop students' ears and their aural facility on their instrument, have them try these techniques:

- play a short phrase and sing it back
- sing a short phrase and play it back
- transcribe improvised solos from recordings

## Swing Rhythm

