

# Jazz Corner

by Dr. Michael Davison, University of Richmond

When looking back over the last 2,000 years, scholars will probably remember America for three things: The U.S. Constitution, baseball and jazz. There is not enough space available in this column to discuss the U. S. Constitution, but we can discuss jazz within the confines of baseball: a jazz performer must experience the subtleties of jazz in order to become a consummate player. If one does not transcribe jazz solos and perform jazz compositions, then it is like “playing baseball without getting on the field”. Where does one begin to learn the nuance of jazz performance? A student must first look at articulation. The best way to take this “look” is through transcribing solos from great jazz trumpeters, playing along with the solo and then using some of this newly acquired jazz language. The following is a short list of recommended listening for beginning jazz trumpeters. I have listed an artist, a composition and the genre(s) that each player represents.

Louis Armstrong - “Potato Head Blues” - early jazz

Miles Davis - “So What” - swing/cool/be bop/jazz-rock or jazz-fun

Chet Baker - “Autumn Leaves” - cool/swing

While listening and playing along with the above-mentioned players, try to capture the subtlety in each solo (i.e. vibrato/articulation) and try to hear the player’s sense of the beat. Is the performer playing in front of the beat, on the beat, or behind the beat? It is in these subtleties that you will grow as a jazz performer, since we are “only as good as our ears.” The great improviser has the following traits:

Command of the chord changes  
Appropriate sound

Command of rhythm/beat

Uses jazz vocabulary (licks)

Sufficient technique

Fits with style of specific genre (i.e. articulation)

Creates an original improvisation

Articulation is a subtlety that is seldom discussed in jazz performance texts, since it is very difficult to put into words. If a player does not have command of articulation nuance, his/her performance will not be acceptable. There are three basic techniques that will help a student perform with “correct” articulation. The first is often called “back tonguing” or “be bop tonguing”, and consists of tonguing notes in a non-classical manner. Perform an ascending major scale (or any other scale), and only articulate the following notes: 1,2,4,6,8 (notes 3,5 and 7 will be slurred). In a C-Major scale, the notes that are tongued are C, D, F, A & C. Play the scale legato and with “even” (non-swung) eighth notes. Every time you have scalar eighth notes in a jazz composition, perform the articulation in this manner, and avoid tonguing three notes in a row.

The second way to practice articulation is to use the “highest note in a line” technique. The best way to understand this is to imagine placing a transparent piece of paper over a jazz composition and with a marker, connect all the notes of a melodic line. Remove the paper and look at the contour of the line. A player should articulate the first note and only those notes that fall on the highest part of the line. Practice this technique to avoid over articulating the line. Articulation markings are often times not included by the editor or composer of jazz compositions. It is up to the player to find what works best for him/her to produce a line that is fluid and not over articulated. One only has to play trombone (or imagine a trombonist’s articulation) to develop a third technique: degrees of tonguing. A jazz performer needs an array of possible tonguing technique, from very soft to very loud. Practice holding a note and articulate using the following guide for your tongue: ha/la/da/ta/da/la/ha. You could even practice articulation using “la-dl” tonguing. Practice performing melodies and use different tonguing. You might find that in early jazz, a harder articulation is needed, whereas in be bop, a “la” tongue predominated. Again, talk to a trombonist and have them demonstrate their articulation, since they have to articulate every note.

I would hope that a player would get “on the playing field” while learning jazz. But before this can happen, articulation exercises are a good way to develop a player’s technique in their daily warm-ups. And just like baseball, proper daily attention to technical detail will make you a better player. Isolate articulation exercises, practice them every day and when you get out on the playing field, have fun . . . and don’t strike out!

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