

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 aptitude and more experience
 - b. encourage the efforts of others
 - 1. avoid letting one or two kids play all the solos
 - c. reward those who put forth the effort with opportunities to solo
 - 2. Get the students while they are young-jr. high
 - a. students are less inhibited at a younger age
 - b. jazz phrasing concepts can be developed ahead of technical skills
- B. Think long term when teaching improvisation
 - 1. Don't always 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 private study
 - 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)
 - 2. Problems with overemphasis of competition/performance preparation
 - a. rehearsal time devoted only 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
 - 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 a student
 - 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 modelling is the best way to teach jazz
 - 2. Bring in clinicians (college students, etc.)
 - 3. Develop a basic jazz record library: listen to the music and share it with your students, both formally and informally (*Double-Time Jazz Catalogue*)
- B. Time constraints
 - 1. Incorporate improvisation concepts into the regular rehearsal time (see III)
 - a. As a "Warm-up"
 - 1. call-response, etc. (refer to Ellis: "Warming up to the Blues")
 - 2. John Rinaldo method (refer to attached description)
 - 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 (refer to list of Lance Strickland arrangements)
 - 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
 - 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, 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 records for students at every opportunity
 - b. refer to the basic discography
 2. Demonstration: How To Teach Listening Skills (see "Listening To Jazz" article and refer to the listening guide)
- B. Encourage basic ear-training and the development of aural skills (vs. too much theory) Note: see methods listed below (Rinaldo, Pickens, LaPorta, et al.)
 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, and solos off of records)
- C. Emphasize time-feel and phrase-feel vs. theory (Bergonzi)
 1. work with a metronome (see attached article "Time Is The Bottom Line")
 - a. internalizing beats two and four
 - b. subdividing
 - c. legato triplet feel ("doo-dul-ah")
 2. call-response method
 1. using only one pitch, two pitches, etc
 2. using a scale (tonality)-use basic chord-scales: major, mixolydian, and dorian
 3. play along with records (not play-along records)
- D. Playing off of melody (See article "Melody: The Lost Art?")
 1. embellishing/paraphrasing of nursery rhymes and any tunes learned by ear
 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 vehicle for teaching improvisation concepts
 1. Horizontal vs. Vertical (in-the-key vs. in-the-chord)
 - a. horizontal: ingrain tonality of blanket scale
 1. call-response using minor pent./blues scales (plus added 2nd & 6th scale degrees)
 - b. vertical: guide tones, chordal articulation
 - c. combination
 - d. Aebersold procedure: Practice learning the (blues) progression by playing along with a play-along track using this order: chordal roots, 1-2-3, 1-2-3-4-5, 1-3-5-7, and chord-scales
 - e. emphasize time-phrase feel and simplicity (i.e., hearing what your playing)
- 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
 - 1. find "blanket" scales (horizontal: key areas vs. individual chords)
- c. find harmonic lines (guide tones, more vertical)
 - 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 (tensions) of the chord (2-4-6 or 9-11-13, depending on your point of view)
 - 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.
- H. Jazz as communication: aspects of coherence and pacing
 - 1. storytelling and speech as analogies to improvising solos (see "Jazz & the Art of Storytelling")
 - 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; pause/pacing
 - b. coherence: keep to the point (w/o a lot of digressions) by limiting the material used
 - c. Demonstration: M.L. King's "I Had A Dream" speech
- I. Right brain stuff (see The Listening Book)
 - 1. improvising from pictures, images, feelings, graphs, etc.
 - 2. group interaction improvisation
 - 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.)
- 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. You're only a half-step away from a 'right' note."
 - 2. "Hey, there are only 12 notes."
 - 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. Miles Davis made an art out 'mistakes'."
 - 4. "You've got to be able to walk before you can run!"

IV. Resources

- A. Jamey Aebersold, "Anyone Can Improvise" (video tape)
- B. John Rinaldo, Jazz Beginnings (method for jazz band)
- C. Willie Pickens, Ear-Training Tips
- D. Jerry Coker, Listening to Jazz
- E. W.A. Mathieu, The Listening Book
- F. Willie Thomas, Jazz Anyone?