

Aspects of Jazz Style and Interpretation



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The field of jazz style and interpretation is vast. Since no single article can deal with its magnitude, what we present here are merely insights into its different aspects, in the hope of guiding pedagogues, students and performers who want to embark upon jazz studies. According to Devroop and Devroop (2006), one of the core deficiencies within the ambit of jazz study in South Africa lies in pedagogy and music education. In spite of the diversity of jazz curricula available nationally, far too little attention is given to jazz music education. The primary focus of this article is therefore on the novice jazz educator, although it must be added that several of the issues addressed here apply to the intermediate as well as to the advanced player/pedagogue.

As far back as the seventh century, the scholar and music theorist Isidore of Seville stated that it was impossible to notate music. While many of us take notated music for granted, the issue of notation is in fact still a problem for both composer and interpreter today. Middleton (1990:104-6) adds that musicology and to an extent European-based musical practices suffer from what he terms "notational centricity", namely a process that has been somewhat slanted by the characteristics of notation.

Although the standard system of western notation has taken some 800 years to evolve into its current form, it is still arguably inadequate to capture and reflect accurately the intentions of a composer. Contemporary composers have even expanded the use of notational symbols to include graphics and computer-generated images in order to meet their interpretive expectations. In the realm of western art music, the areas of interpretation and performance practice have undergone changes over the years, which serves to confirm that the written manuscript is, to some extent at

least, merely a guide. Or rather, as some contemporary composers (the likes of Gerhard Braun, Erhard Karkoschka and Konrad Lechner) have put it, 'music notation is the desperate effort of a composer to pen his thoughts with the bare essential tools' (Braun 1991).

The notion of limitation is extended to John Cage's indeterminacy in notation as a compositional method, which brought the will of the composer into question. Cage's 4'33" questions the concepts of unwanted sound (noise) and silence, where he also 'frames' the musical performance in time and space. His notion challenges basic assumptions that we have about music and notation, and 'a great deal of it gives rise to confusion or outrage among listeners who are unfamiliar with its philosophical bases' (Dobrian 1992). This lack of ability to present music accurately in written form becomes more pronounced and problematic in the notation of jazz, which embraces effects not common in western art music. Some of these anomalies will be addressed later.

A further problem arising from *teaching* jazz performance and interpretation is related to *time*, or perhaps one should say *time-keeping*. Jazz performance and interpretation require great attention to *time* in relation to a fairly strict metrical beat. The majority of the jazz repertoire is performed over a constant beat, implying that a strict tempo is observed for *most* of the performance. *Rubato* playing as encountered in western art music is not a normal characteristic of jazz performance, except in cases where a ballad (i.e. a slow, sentimental or romantic song) is performed freely, without the support of a rhythm section (usually consisting of double bass, drums and probably guitar). The tendency of 'western art music' players to 'drive' phrases on, is anathema in jazz. What is required in the latter is a more relaxed, 'laid back' approach, with most notes falling on or slightly behind the beat – except when very fast tempos are deployed. The manner in which notes and accents are placed against the *regular beat* is of extreme importance and has great bearing on the outcome of the performance.

In the evaluation of a performance, our *first concern* is with the aspect of time. Jazz musicians are often heard discussing a player's ability to 'swing'¹ – whether the performer has 'good time' (Gridley 1988:xx). It is one's sense of time and *swing* that is central to conveying one's musical ideas within a performance.

Compounding the issue of jazz interpretation is the manner in which the notation of the music manifests itself. Perhaps for the sake of expediency – in a rather superficial way – the notation is such that it relies a lot on the experience, talent and musical insight of performers to achieve an acceptable result. The notated manuscript presents a skeleton of the composition, to be used as the basis for the construction of the musical work. Such 'skeletons' are not uncommon in music history. During earlier periods such as the Baroque (1600-1750), composers were noted for their lack of interpretational, articulation and phrasing indications. These elements were often left to the discretion of the performer, who then interpreted the work according to the conventions and stylistic tendencies of the time.

Using the above-mentioned issues as the basis for stylistic interpretation, what follows are notes and examples that attempt to guide the non-jazz musician in interpreting this music genre within the most important styles.

Jazz fundamentals

Given that *time* is one of the key areas that give rise to interpretation problems, we shall now focus on this aspect. Probably the most familiar style in jazz is that known as *swing* style. Most of the music recorded in this style by Big or Stage Bands dates from the late 1930s and forms part of our present-day musical experience.

Swing style

- 1 The primary aspect of this style that needs to be thoroughly understood is the division of the quarter note beat into 3. A *triplet* feel in regard to the beat is important. Successive 8th notes are played 'long-short' as follows:



It may help you to get the right 'feel' if you think of the well-known tune *In the Mood* (Glenn Miller):



The writing of continuous triplets is time consuming, therefore jazz players write 8th notes with the indication *swing* style or make use of *tenuto* marks as follows:



N.B. The use of dotted 8th and 16th note groups (as indicated below), commonly used to indicate a *swing* like feel, is incorrect and should be avoided!

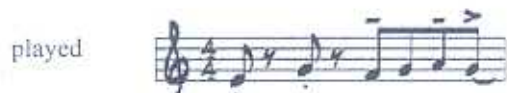


Should the writer desire equal 8th notes to be played, the latter will be indicated on the score as *even* (meaning even or equal 8th notes).

Finally, in cases where the music commences on a quaver upbeat that is preceded by quaver rest, the value of this (quaver) note should be interpreted in a triplet group upbeat instead of an even value and beats broken up by rests should still incorporate the triplet 'feel'.



- 2 Quarter notes falling *on* the beat are often played short – sometimes very short – as in:



- 3 The phrase consisting of an 8th, quarter and 8th note is very common –



this should be interpreted as



and perhaps notated more correctly as



The above phrase-grouping often occurs in the second half of the bar, as in



which should be interpreted as



and would be correctly notated as



4 Phrases often starting after a quarter note rest:



The length of the rest is varied according to the *tempo*. The note following the rest should *never* be late, but, if anything, rather early. At a brighter tempo, the 8th note rest would be much shorter, approximating a 16th note value.

5 Ties across the bar line or in the middle of the bar are often not regarded – therefore:



would be played



and



might be played as



and is more correctly written as



These rules apply generally in all time signatures ($\frac{4}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{2}{4}$).

Often students have difficulty in interpreting repeated 8th note strings at the same pitch in *swing* style, such as

(SWING)



the tendency is to interpret these as follows

(SWING)



whereas it should be played

(SWING)



Rephrasing

Most of the standards² or lead-sheets³, are written in the most basic terms. To make these pieces sound effective in jazz, it is necessary to rephrase (and re-harmonise) the melodies. This also provides an opportunity to consider our concepts of phrasing with regard to *improvisation*.

1 A forward 'thrust' (or rhythmic drive) is imparted by placing important notes *off* the beat, and often with an accent. Therefore



could become



In situations where the music is written in half or quarter notes *on* the beat



either anticipate or delay some important notes as follows:



Also acceptable would be the following:



2 A further example would be:



which can either be played as



or as



Triplet quarter notes can be effective in cases such as the following:



rephrased



In cases such as the following:



a triplet can be added to good effect as follows:



Occasionally a note can be held back while lengthening the preceding note (a technique often used by singers to give importance to a word), for example



would become:



Sometimes a note falling on the second beat (in $\frac{4}{4}$) is best left *on* the beat with an added accent, for example



rephrased becomes



In the jazz waltz, it is effective to anticipate the 3rd beat so that



becomes



NOTE: Tempo is a vital factor in rephrasing. At a slower tempo, simple *on the beat* phrases are often more tasteful. Caution! *don't overdo it!*

A key component in jazz performance is the aural aspect. The importance of listening to good jazz musicians (and bands) cannot be overstated. So, LISTEN, LISTEN, and LISTEN.

Shuffle style

This is an exaggerated form of the *swing* style in which the *rhythm section* (usually drums, piano, bass and guitar) stresses the triplet feel – often accenting the ‘off-beat’ at the same time. A recording that exemplifies such a style is *My Baby Just Cares For Me* performed by Nina Simone.



This ‘feel’ is carried over into the playing of the ‘front line’ (the non-rhythmic instruments making up the Combo or Big Band).

Latin American and Afro-Cuban style

Latin American musicians differentiate between a vast array of rhythms. Such rhythms are so extensive that they require separate (special) study. For the purpose of this article, we will concentrate on just the music that falls under what is loosely termed the Bossa Nova. This is a form of Samba, which has become a very important and popular vehicle for Latin jazz performance. This music is strongly duple in feel – sometimes march-like in character. The first known recorded examples by Charles Byrd featured the rhythm (played on percussion instruments and guitar, of course):



although the percussive elements (rhythms) become more and more complex in the work of top performers.

The *melodic* rhythms are played *square* – implying that the 8th notes are played 'even' as opposed to the *swing* style. As with jazz in general, many notes are placed 'off' the beat to give the music *drive*.

The phrase



is usually interpreted as:



Consecutive quarter notes notated 'off' the beat such as



are usually played *short*, as follows:



this *includes* notes tied over the barline! Once again, the *tempo* will be the key determinant in the overall affect.

Quarter notes *on* the beat are often played short (as in *swing* style):



interpreted as follows:



FUSION

This is a term used to denote a vast quantity of jazz-oriented music from roughly 1960 onwards. This particular style embodies elements of rock and Latin music and is more 'contemporary' in sonority, using electronic instruments such as synthesisers, digital keyboard and samplers. Although the style of phrasing varies, the melodic rhythm is *generally* 'square' (even 8th notes).

Conclusion

Any study in jazz is futile without adequate listening. Jazz history clearly reveals that the greatest musicians of our time listened eagerly to their peers and their recordings. Using these recordings as a basis, many players then and today still engage in transcribing and copying the solos of their masters. This method of learning helps to sharpen one's aural skills as well as to equip one with the basic vocabulary for the performance of this music.

What we have attempted in this article, the first in a series of articles planned by the authors, is to focus on those aspects that are probably unfamiliar, but vital to individuals starting out in jazz. It would benefit players and pedagogues alike if each of the elements discussed in this article are studied separately and thoroughly at first, prior to progressing to the next component. In order to get a better insight into these elements, it would be beneficial for the pedagogue/player to acquire repertoire (such as those pieces found in the Real or Fake books) that employ the elements discussed in this article. In the words of Ornette Coleman 'jazz is the only music in which the same note can be played night after night but different each time'.

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