

keeping the Beat

How To Teach Classical Piano Students To Play With A Jazz Band

By Rhonda Ringering, NCTM

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In an ideal teaching situation, future jazz band pianists would listen to jazz from the cradle on. They would begin improvising and playing by ear while they also studied classical repertoire, theory and technique. In reality, most pre-college jazz band pianists are intermediate to advanced classical students who have had little or no introduction to jazz or improvisation. They join the band with technique “to burn” but with no understanding of basic jazz structures or chords, chart reading, comping,

swinging or improvisation. And while seeing a prize pupil enter the studio with a stack of jazz band charts in hand may strike fear in many classical instructors, jazz band playing should be encouraged, as it will only improve the students’ theory, ear training, rhythmic, ensemble and improvising skills.

As the student enters this new world of jazz, the instructor’s job is to teach skills in a way that ensures some level of immediate success and to encourage the student to further exploration and study. Understanding jazz theory and

style is essential to becoming a competent jazz player and is a process that can take years of study and practice. However, there are some skills that contribute to more immediate success for the jazz band pianist who has no background in jazz and has just a short amount of time to learn enough to begin playing charts: listening, understanding the pianist's role in the band, rhythm, comping and soloing.

Listening

Teaching a pianist to play jazz should begin by teaching the ears to hear jazz. If possible, have the student's band director provide recordings of all the tunes the pianist will play. Listen to each tune several times with the student and then listen while visually reading the chart; write in solo sections and ensemble passages; mark any time or tempo changes. With a more advanced student, introduce some basic concept of form (AABA, blues and so forth) and mark repetitions in harmony or form.

If recordings of the student's charts are not available, introduce students to jazz by listening to a mixture of historical and current bands, such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Stan Kenton for historical bands; and GRP All Star Big Band, Dallas Jazz Orchestra and Bob Minzer Big Band for more current groups. A more complete list can be found in Scott Reeve's chapter "Whom to Listen To" in *Creative Jazz Improvisation*.¹

Have the student listen to each track several times. Listen for the parts played by the horns, the parts played by drums and bass and then consider the role of the pianist. Ask how much the pianist actually plays. Most solo classical players will be surprised to

realize just how little the piano plays in most charts.

The Role of the Jazz Band Pianist

Classical piano students are used to being soloists or perhaps performing with one other player. Most have no understanding of how the piano complements the jazz band texture and will have a tendency to play too many notes. Jeff Jarvis writes, "The pianist's role is to support the ensemble by emphasizing chord changes and punctuating rhythms."² Kurt Ellenberger, in his article "From Chart to Reality: The Editorial Role of the Pianist in a Big Band" writes, "It is not about how many notes can be played; it is really about complementing the group through the appropriate style of playing. In short, a big band pianist must learn to be content with, for the most part, a supporting role."³

The concept that "less is more" helps make the transition into reading big band piano parts more comfortable for most beginning jazz band pianists. According to Ellenberger, most of these parts fall into one of four categories: a) chord symbols with rhythmic notation, b) chord symbols without rhythmic notation, c) fully notated parts, and d) improvised solos.⁴

Because many beginning jazz band pianists cannot easily navigate chord charts instructors are advised to pencil in voicings in whole notes. Even fully notated parts can be too difficult for beginners, and the pianist must be trained to thin the texture. Jarvis recommends building "simple 3- or 4-note chords, referred to as chord fragments" with the left hand around middle C.⁵ If this is too advanced for the pianist, two-handed voicings are recommended. Keep the chords

around or above middle C and have the left hand play the third and the seventh, and the right hand play the fifth and a "color" note (9th, 11th and so forth). Drop the root; the bass will play that note. Through time and practice, the student eventually learns to recognize and execute chords without the instructor's assistance.

In his article, "Starting a Jazz Combo at a Small High School," Kent Murdick writes, "Don't start by teaching them theory; get them playing."⁶ This is particularly good advice for instructors trained in the classical style. Much classical training revolves around teaching theoretical concepts and symbols, and it is difficult to remember that jazz is just as much an aural tradition as a theoretical one. Once students experience some success playing a few charts, begin teaching them to recognize and voice chords themselves.

Students with a good classical theory background can make a quick transition to reading chord changes. Explain the differences between classical and jazz notation, then show the student how the chords are simply major, minor, diminished or augmented with chord extensions. Using either the student's jazz band music or a simple chart such as *C Jam Blues* by Duke Ellington or *Bag's Groove* by Milt Jackson, play chords in root position so students can see the intervals on the piano. Once they know what belongs in each chord, discuss voicings and how to navigate from one chord to the next.

Rhythm

Many beginning jazz band pianists have never worked with or in an ensemble, and keeping their places in the chart can be very challenging. If a

recording of the student's chart is available, play the recording and have the student listen and count off each measure while watching the score. It is imperative the student understands that in music, particularly in jazz, it is more important to play the wrong note at the right time than the right note at the wrong time. Next, have the student play the written-in chord voicings with the recording. Keep it simple and play whole note chords; this helps the student keep her place in the score. When this has been mastered, have the student learn a basic swing pattern.

The feel of swing cannot be verbally communicated. Like so much in jazz, understanding swing (the primary rhythmic idea that a beginning jazz band pianist will probably face) involves a lot of listening to recordings. Explain that swing is not intellectual, it is movement, and encourage students to listen to and move to swing recordings so the feel is integrated into the large muscles of the body—not just conceptualized in the mind. This is a long-term learning technique. An immediate tool is to write out several basic swing rhythms and help the student learn them. Here are two basic patterns to get them started:

Begin with one rhythm at a time. Clap it for the student and have her clap it back. Explain the importance of feeling the second and fourth beat of the measure, then clap on two and four while the student claps the rhythm. Choose one chord in the jazz chart and have the student then play the chord in this rhythm with the metronome set for the second and fourth beat of the measure. This will train the student to play a solid swing rhythm while feeling the off-beats that are so important to this style of playing.

As students progress and need more

experience playing different rhythms, a good training source is Jamey Aebersold's *Play-A-Long* jazz books. Each book comes with a CD and the "stereo separation technique" is ideal for beginning jazz pianists: the left channel includes just bass and drums, and the right channel contains the piano and drums. The pianist can listen to the piano part and then play his own rendition with just bass and drums. In addition to providing more practice playing jazz chords, the experience of playing with a rhythm section is invaluable to helping a beginning jazz player learn to stay in time.

Comping

"Comping" is a jazz term that is used to describe improvised chordal accompaniment and has been compared to the basso continuo playing that is so much a part of baroque playing. Just like basso continuo, jazz band pianists take chords and improvise around the other instruments' parts to fill out the sound of the ensemble. In sections of the piece where the ensemble is playing, the jazz pianist simply "fills holes" in the sound. In sections where another instrument is soloing, the pianist's role becomes much more important. Pianists must work with the rest of the rhythm section to provide support for the soloist while making certain they do not interfere with the solo line. Due to the melodic ability of the piano and the ability to play in any register, the pianist must be careful to voice around the range of the solo instrument and to not play too much. The piano is also much more exposed during solo sections and must be as grounded in the pulse as the drums and bass.

Beginning jazz band pianists can

really begin to understand the roles of the rest of the rhythm section in solo passages. To prepare the pianist to comp, go back to the recordings and listen to solo sections to hear the bass lines, the drum parts and the guitar. Explain that the entire rhythm section works as an integrated unit to support the soloist and that communication between players is essential.

More experienced players can begin to experiment with improvising around the soloist. In the words of Chick Corea, "A good basic intent for comping is to make the soloist sound good; to enhance his lines and expression. To 'orchestrate' his melodies."⁷ Pianists can learn to take a phrase from the soloist or to improvise a response to the soloist, all the while making good use of space and enhancing, rather than overpowering the solo line.

The first thing to teach the student is to listen—to the soloist, to the band, to the rhythm section. Everything the pianist plays must fit into the whole without detracting from it. Most students will try to hit every chord change and fill every "hole," and they must be reminded that silence can frequently be as effective as notes. Look through the jazz band charts and identify the important chords. Make certain the student is comfortable playing these chords. Sing or play a melodic line and have the student "comp" along. As the student becomes comfortable with this, ask for a lot of piano support, then very little piano. This encourages the student to listen and to adjust.

Soloing

This skill takes a lifetime to master and is one of the most frightening aspects of jazz band playing for the classical pianist. While it is helpful for

advanced jazz players to hear that they can play “whatever they want” in a solo section, beginning jazz players facing 16 bars of nothing but chord changes need more direction to play effectively.

In the beginning of their training, jazz band pianists may need to have piano instructors write in solos for them in their first few charts. This may appear to impede creativity, but it is impossible to be creative in a language one has not yet learned to speak. Remember the goal is to get the student playing well from the start to encourage a long-term interest in learning jazz. While writing in solos for students, keep them simple, use chord tones and employ motifs. This will be a template for the student to use to begin creating her own solos. Once the student can execute the instructor’s solos, have her try building her own solos in other charts using chord tones and short motifs. Unless the student is particularly gifted at improvisation, have her write in her own solos until confidence increases to the point that she can play them “off the cuff.”

When the student is ready to begin working with more material, have her try new ideas by using the melody as a basis for improvisation. Norman Meehan writes, “Some of the most beautiful and memorable performances in jazz use the tune as a template for improvisation.”⁸ Students can quote the melody verbatim, focusing on changing the tone, paraphrase the melody or use just parts of it in new and interesting ways. Will Campbell suggests that more advanced improvisers write in their target notes (the 3rd, 7th or 9th) of the important chords of each measure, then practice connecting these notes.⁹ Other jazz instructors

suggest using the blues scale for improvisation or modes, but these techniques are frequently too difficult for beginning improvisers.

One of the biggest challenges the beginning jazz band pianist faces is the psychological barrier to improvising in a new idiom. Begin by having the student improvise in the studio, using the chord changes provided in the jazz band charts. Sit down and improvise with the student by providing a chordal accompaniment to the student’s melodic line. When improvising for the first time, many piano students forget to keep steady time. Playing a walking bass line or stride pattern will help the student improvise without dropping or adding beats.

Learning the language of jazz piano is like learning any other language and can take years to master. The skills learned through jazz playing only enhance the abilities of the classical pianist by giving a better understanding of chords and form and solidifying rhythm. Learning to improvise frees the classical pianist to compose and to play from memory with less fear. In all but the rarest of circumstances, professional pianists are required to be able to read and play by ear, to interpret classical music and to improvise. Learning to be a jazz band pianist makes young players better-trained musicians and stronger players.

Piano instructors possess the skills to make the transition to and training of jazz band pianists accessible and rewarding. By regularly listening to recordings and being systematically trained in accessible skills, students can experience success and be encouraged to continue to explore and grow as players. ♪

NOTES

1. Scott D. Reeves, “Whom to Listen To,” *Creative Jazz Improvisation* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall/Pearson Education, 2000), 12–19.
2. Jeff Jarvis, “Coaching the Rhythm Section,” *The Jazz Educator’s Handbook* (Kendor Music, Inc, 2002), 118–141.
3. Kurt Ellenberger, “Chart to Reality: The Editorial Role of the Pianist in a Big Band,” *Jazz Education Journal* (October 2005), www.iaje.org/article.asp?ArticleID=237
4. Ibid.
5. Jarvis, “Coaching the Rhythm Section.”
6. Kent Murdick, “Starting a Jazz Combo at a Small High,” *Jazz Education Journal* (May 2003), www.iaje.org/article.asp?ArticleID=135.
7. Chick Corea, “My Musician Hat,” *Music Teacher Magazine* 7, no. 3 (2003), www.musicteacher.com/miscellaneous (accessed August 19, 2006; site now discontinued).
8. Norman Meehan, “Using Melody as the Basis for Improvisation,” *Jazz Education Journal* (August 2004), <http://www.iaje.org/article.asp?ArticleID=188>.
9. Will Campbell, “Creating a Harmonic Roadmap for the Maturing Improviser: Limiting Melodic Options,” *Jazz Education Journal* (October 2005), <http://www.iaje.org/article.asp?ArticleID=241>.

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