

Teaching Your Ensemble to Swing: Learn from the Greats!

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Teaching the transferrable concepts of the swing style to jazz ensembles of any age and ability by using the music performed by the Count Basie and Duke Ellington Orchestras as a blueprint.

I. The Facts and Fiction of Swing Music

A. Facts

1. Triplets are at the heart of the swing style. Subdivision at the triplet level is essential
2. Style and tempo are different (although linked) things
3. Tempo is found in the bass line
4. Style is found in the drum set.
5. Tempo affects the approach to swing. Slow is metric while fast is based in how we articulate.

B. Fiction

1. Swing is more difficult than rock or Latin music...it is NOT!
2. "Laying Back" is about tempo...it is NOT!
3. Playing the music exactly as it is published is enough...it is NOT!
4. Tempo comes from the director...it does NOT!
5. All swing is created equal and performed the same...NOT true!

II. The "Royal" Lineage of Big Band Swing

A. The Count Basie Orchestra

1. The impact of the "All-American" rhythm section of the Basie Orchestra
 - Count Basie on Piano - Known for impeccable timing and delicate piano fills. He always chose the right place to put the right notes.
 - Walter Page on Bass - As steady a bass player that can be found. He was known for his amazing steady pulse and filling every beat with a full tone.
 - Freddie Green on Guitar - Wrote the book on section swing rhythm guitar style. His technique and style is concerning the gold standard on rhythm guitar comping.
 - "Papa" Jo Jones on Drums - Not the most flashy of drum set players, but his ability to focus on amazing cymbal usage is a big reason why early Count Basie Orchestra are so stylistic.
2. The quintessential ensemble sound
 - Setting up the band to allow for the "in and back" listening environment.

- Rhythm section players know their role in balance and function in the ensemble. Tempo is in the bass, style in the drum set cymbals, chord tones being played on every beat by guitar and piano filling all the gaps in the orchestration.
 - Saxophone Soli balance of “Alto One and friends” with all parts of the harmony being heard
3. Inclusion of flute in the jazz ensemble
 - Composers/Arrangers for the Count Basie Orchestra such as Sammy Nestico, Neal Hefti, and Frank Foster used flute quite often in their orchestrations.
 - Sometimes these parts are included in published versions of Basie tunes, but sometimes a quick transcription would be necessary.
 - These opportunities are amazing for flute players to join the jazz band, but also a great way to get your players to learn how to double
 4. Amazing staff composers and arrangers
 - Sammy Nestico
 - Neal Hefti
 - Frank Foster
- B. The Duke Ellington Orchestra
1. Jazz music can be complex and programmatic
 - The music of the Ellington Orchestra changed dramatically over the course of their career.
 - The comfort of success made Duke feel confident that he could write music of greater complexity.
 - He wanted his music to stand the test of time as musical compositions of depth and sophistication.
 - Commercial dance music played in small dance clubs made way for multi-movement and programmatic multi-cultural works in the forms of suites to be played in concert halls such as Carnegie Hall in New York City
 2. He featured his top players often
 - Duke Ellington’s Orchestra was filled with a fleet of phenomenal soloists. Therefore, Duke wrote and had others write a good number of features to allow those players to shine. These features are a great way to feature your top players while playing challenging music for the rest of the ensemble.
 - i. Johnny Hodges – Alto Saxophone
 - ii. Cootie Williams – Trumpet
 - iii. Jimmy Blanton – Bass
 - iv. Harry Carney – Baritone Saxophone

3. Every member of the ensemble matters
 - In Duke's band, every player was a master at their instrument and therefore his music was written knowing every part was in good hands
 - Part assignments didn't always follow "tradition"
 - 3rd and 4th brass parts are sometimes written higher than 1st and 2nd.
 - Not all parts are present in every tune.
 - Any part could be written to be a feature or have a solo
 - Guitar parts not always written (because Basie had the best guitarist)
 - Clarinet was a regular instrument and assigned to any of the saxophone parts. Used as a featured instrument regularly.
 4. Backgrounds are not "just" backgrounds
 - Solo backgrounds in the music of Duke Ellington are often unique and beautiful melodies
 - Sometimes backgrounds were repetitive, but not always. He also loved to introduce new melodic content in solo backgrounds
 - Often played in complete unison, so every player has to pull their weight and listen for balance and blend
 - Balancing to the soloist is key
- C. Younger Arrangements of Basie/Ellington Music
1. Since a majority of school ensembles will not be ready for the full versions of this music, finding a quality arrangement is key.
 2. There are a number of great arrangements of both Basie and Ellington charts available through a number of publishers.
 3. Listen and Score Study Before You Buy
 - Not all arrangements are created equal and not every arrangement will fit best for your ensemble. Be sure to listen through and look at a score before you decide to purchase.
 - State lists are a great resource
 - Included in the handout for this session is a list of arrangements of Basie and Ellington music for younger ensembles that have been played a number of times and work!

III. Teaching Transferrable Concepts Through Literature

- A. The teaching of concepts instead of just teaching the chart allows the ensemble to understand the similarities between music of this genre.
- B. Starting the year with concept building will allow you to teach more efficiently and effectively!
- C. There is no better music to teach concepts from than the masterworks of Basie and Ellington!

IV. Where To Find These Transferrable Concepts

- A. Rhythm Section Unity and Role
 - 1. Freddie Green “chunking” style on guitar
 - Listening Example (Basie) – *Hayburner* (Sammy Nestico)
 - 2. Piano interjections to melody/communication
 - Listening Example (Ellington) – *Flirtibird* (Duke Ellington)
- B. Ensemble Balance
 - 1. Hearing all of the chord tones in ensemble playing
 - Listening Example (Basie) – *Shiny Stocking* (Frank Foster)
 - 2. Backgrounds to soloist
 - Listening Example (Ellington) – *Sugar Hill Penthouse* (Duke Ellington)
- C. Not rushing repeating short quarter notes
 - 1. Laying back and “taking a step backwards”
 - Listening Example (Basie) – *Lil’ Darlin* (Neal Hefti)
 - Listening Example (Ellington) – *Come Sunday* (Ellington / arr. Hirsch)
- D. Running eighth note swing articulation
 - 1. Defining the articulation based on the line and not the written part.
 - Listening Example (Basie) – *Corner Pocket* (Freddie Green)
 - Listening Example (Ellington) – *Perdido* (Juan Tizol / arr. Ellington)
- E. Saxophone Soli Balance and Blend
 - 1. Hearing the lead alto above the rest of the section
 - Listening Example (Basie) – *Tall Cotton* (Sammy Nestico)
 - 2. Hearing all of the color tones in the inner parts
 - Listening Example (Ellington) – *In A Mellow Tone* (arr. Oliver Nelson)
- F. Use of Mutes
 - 1. Both Basie and Ellington used mutes extensively in their music to create both color and texture.
 - Listening Example (Basie) - *Queen Bee* (Sammy Nestico)
 - Listening Example (Ellington) – *Such Sweet Thunder* (Duke Ellington)

V. The History of the Art Form

- A. Relating
 - 1. A lot of students don’t understand the history behind this music and the artis that made it famous
 - 2. Many students are playing music from a culture far removed from their everyday life.
- B. Role Playing
 - 1. Do the students know the name of the player in the Basie/Ellington band that played their parts in the recording?
 - 2. Have the students listen to these artists as individuals and section players.

C. The Story

1. Especially in Ellington's music, relate the story being told to the cultural and historical events of the time.
2. This can actually get pretty deep and create a real bond with the music for the students.

VI. Listening is KEY!!!

A. Initial listening sessions

1. Unlike in the concert band classroom, listening prior to playing is essential
2. The students are not listening for notes and rhythms
3. They are actively listening for style and interpretation
4. Listening for rhythm section choices and options
5. Take time between concert preps to just read new music. Even if not for a concert...the more they read the faster they start to recognize patterns.

B. Relistening sessions

1. If playing an arrangement, have the students listen to both the arrangement and the original
2. Drum set players should listen to and practice the setups and fills in the recordings to understand their function.
3. Students playing solos should listen to and steal ideas from the recorded solos. Don't play the written or recorded solo, but take an idea or two

C. Expanded listening sessions

1. Encourage students to listen to more music by the composer/band.
2. Encourage students to find more music of that style.
3. Have students report back with what they listened to for all to share
4. Ask students to tell you their favorite player on their instrument and why they chose that player.
5. Daily classroom listening and/or listening logs can be a great tool.

For more resources including listening lists and specific literature suggestions, use the QR code below:

