

ESSENTIALLY ELLINGTON

High School Jazz Band Program

REHEARSAL STRATEGIES – *Bonga* BY REGINALD THOMAS, PROFESSOR OF JAZZ PIANO MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, EAST LANSING, MI

DUKE ELLINGTON STROVE TO KEEP HIS MUSIC FRESH A (AND HIS BAND TOGETHER) THROUGH SOME HARD ECONOMIC TIMES FOR BIG BANDS. IN THE 1960'S RECORDINGS OF BIG BANDS WERE BECOMING FEWER, MAKING TOURING EVEN MORE VITAL TO A BAND'S SURVIVAL. SO, WHEN DUKE'S CONTRACT WITH COLUMBIA RECORDS EXPIRED, HE SIGNED WITH SINATRA'S REPRISÉ LABEL AS AN ARTIST AND AN A&R REPRESENTATIVE. THOUGH, THE ASSOCIATION ONLY LASTED A FEW YEARS, THIS DID ALLOW DUKE TO EXPERIMENT WITH SOME DIFFERENT CONCEPTS. ONE OF THE RECORDINGS FROM THIS PERIOD THAT DID RECEIVE SOME ACCLAIM IS AFRO-BOSSA. THIS RECORDING CONTAINS A FEW *Essentially Ellington* FAVORITES SUCH AS PURPLE GAZELLE, PYRAMID, AND NOW, **BONGA**. AFRO-BOSSA DOES NOT PRETEND TO BE A RECORDING OF BOSSA NOVA MUSIC. IT INSTEAD EMBRACES THE RICHNESS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC (I.E. THE BLUES) AND THE DRIVING RHYTHM THAT PROPELS THE MUSIC OF THE LATIN AMERICAS. THOUGH **BONGA** IS NOT HEAVILY SCORED, THE UNDERLYING GROOVE OF THE RHYTHM SECTION GENERATES AN EXCITEMENT FROM BEGINNING TO END. AS WITH ALL APPROACHES TO REHEARSING THIS MUSIC, BEGIN BY LISTENING AND ASKING LEADING QUESTIONS OF YOUR STUDENTS TO BRING THIS (AND ANY OTHER CONCEPTS THAT YOU WILL STRESS) TO THEIR ATTENTION. LISTEN NOT ONLY TO **BONGA** BUT ALSO TO THE ENTIRE RECORDING OF AFRO-BOSSA. FOR OUR PURPOSES, LET'S START BY LISTENING TO THE RHYTHM SECTION.

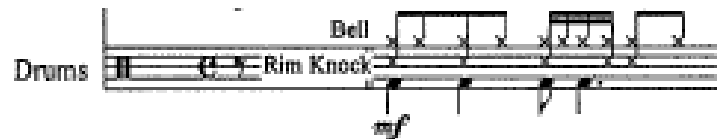
RHYTHM SECTION

WHEN LISTENING TO **BONGA** YOU (AND YOUR STUDENTS) WILL NOTICE CONSISTENT, DRIVING BASS LINE AND THE DRIVING QUARTER NOTE CROSS-STICK. WHEN YOUNG STUDENTS PLAY THERE IS OFTEN A HURRY TO MOVE ON TO SOMETHING ELSE. "I'VE PLAYED THIS PART LONG ENOUGH; I SHOULD DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT," THEY OFTEN THINK. HOWEVER, HAVE THEM TAKE NOTE OF HOW LONG THE BASS AND DRUMS STICK TO ONE CONSISTENT PATTERN. THIS IS EXTREMELY CRUCIAL TO ALL MUSIC THAT IS REFERRED TO AS NON-DEVELOPMENTAL OR STATIC. THE ENERGY IS CREATED THROUGH LAYERED RHYTHMS

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THAT FIT TOGETHER TO CREATE A GROOVE. CHECK OUT RECORDINGS OF BRAZILIAN OR AFRO-CUBAN MUSIC AND YOU WILL NOTICE THE SAME THING. NEXT, TAKE NOTE OF THE BELL PATTERN ON THE CYMBAL. THE RHYTHM IS WRITTEN SIMPLY AS EIGHTH NOTES AND SIXTEENTH NOTES:



LISTEN CAREFULLY TO THE ARTICULATION OF THE RHYTHM. THAT IS WHERE THE FEEL IS CREATED:



THOUGH ON THIS RECORDING THE BASSIST AND DRUMMER ARE PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING THIS GROOVE, OTHER PERCUSSIONISTS OR EVEN GUITARISTS ARE NOT EXCLUDED FROM PARTICIPATING. THE KEY WILL BE FOR ALL PLAYERS TO FIND A PART OF THE GROOVE AND STICK WITH IT. THE PIANIST, ON THE OTHER HAND, SHOULD TAKE CUES FROM DUKE AND ANSWER OR DIALOGUE WITH THE OTHER SECTIONS OR MELODY. THE PIANO PART DOES NOT HAVE TO BE TREATED LITERALLY; INSTEAD COMP WHERE IT FEELS NATURAL IN ORDER TO DIALOGUE WITH THE ENSEMBLE. THE PIANIST MUST BE CAREFUL NOT TO OVERPLAY BECAUSE THERE IS DIALOGUE ALREADY WRITTEN INTO THE ENSEMBLE.

ENSEMBLE

ELLINGTON OFTEN MADE USE OF WHAT WE CALL THE “PEP” SECTION. THIS IS A SMALL CROSS - SECTION OF HORNS, USUALLY TRIO (OFTEN BRASS, BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY), WHO PLAYS A MELODIC SECTION OR SOLI TOGETHER. HE WOULD OFTEN USE THIS SECTION LIKE A TRIO SECTION IN A MARCH TO SET UP THE CLIMAX OF THE ARRANGEMENT, AS IN “FLAMING SWORD”, FOR EXAMPLE. HERE, THOUGH, ELLINGTON USES THE PEP SECTION (MADE UP OF 2 TRUMPETS AND A TROMBONE) TO CARRY THE MELODY WHILE THE SAXOPHONES PLAY A UNISON OSTINATO LINE FOLLOWED BY CHORDS THAT DIALOGUE WITH THAT MELODY. THE EFFECT THAT IS ACHIEVED WHEN BALANCED PROPERLY IS THREE DISTINCT PARTS (PEP, UNISON AND CHORDS) CREATED BY RELATIVELY FEW INSTRUMENTS. THE ARTICULATION, PHRASING AND STYLE OF THE

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PEP SECTION SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED BY THE LEAD PLAYER (IN THIS CASE, TRUMPET 4) AND THE OTHER TWO PLAYERS MATCH AND BALANCE TO HIM. THOUGH THIS IS A SIMPLE WHOLE-NOTE/HALF-NOTE MELODY, IT MUST STILL HAVE ENERGY. BE SURE THAT YOUR STUDENTS LISTEN TO THE RECORDINGS TO HEAR PROPER EXAMPLES AND THEN TRY TO CREATE THAT EXCITEMENT WITHOUT THE MUTES. THEN, HAVE THEM ADD THE MUTES TO HELP CREATE THE EFFECT.

THE REEDS HAVE THE TASK OF CREATING TWO PARTS AT LETTER A, THE OSTINATO AND THE CHORDAL ANSWER TO THE MELODY. BALANCE AND APPROACH TO SOUND WILL BE CRUCIAL IN MAKING EACH PART SOUND DISTINCTIVE. LISTEN CLOSELY TO THE ELLINGTON RECORDING TO HEAR THE BALANCE AS THE SECTION PLAYS THE TRIPLET PART OF THE OSTINATO WHILE A SOLO SAXOPHONE PLAYS THE 16TH NOTE ANSWER. ALSO, LISTEN FOR THE DIFFERENCE IN SOUND ON THE CHORDAL ANSWER IN THE 4TH MEASURE OF THE PHRASE. NOTICE THE USE OF VIBRATO, THE FULL SOUND AND THE LAID BACK EFFECT, GIVING THE CHORDAL ANSWER A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SOUND.

THOUGH LETTER D APPEARS VERY SIMPLE, THERE ARE AGAIN SEVERAL LAYERS TO THE SOUND AND THESE SIMPLE THINGS ARE QUITE IMPORTANT AND POWERFUL. DUKE IS MASTERFUL AT WRITING DIALOGUE INTO HIS MUSIC. THE FIRST OBVIOUS DIALOGUE HERE IS BETWEEN THE SAXOPHONES' CHORD ANSWERED BY THE SOLO TROMBONE NOTE. THE SAXOPHONES SHOULD PLAY THE CHORD WITH A LOT OF FRONT TO THE SOUND, I.E. NICE STRONG ATTACK WITHOUT PLAYING THE SUSTAINED SOUND VERY LOUD. THE TROMBONE SOUND IS THEN A FULL "WAH" SOUND IN DEEP CONTRAST TO THE SAXOPHONES. CONSIDER CREATING SOME TYPE OF MOVEMENT ON THE SUSTAINED NOTE FOR EVEN MORE INTENSITY AS IN THE EXAMPLE BELOW:

The image shows a musical score for four saxophone parts: Alto Sax 1, Alto Sax 2, Tenor Sax, and Baritone Sax. The music is in 4/4 time. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The first measure of each staff contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a half note. The second measure contains a half note. The third measure contains a half note. The fourth measure contains a half note. Dynamics include *sfz* (sforzando) and accents (^) are used throughout the score.

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WHAT MIGHT NOT BE AS OBVIOUS IS THAT THE BRASS IMPROVISATIONS *also* DIALOGUE WITH THE SAXOPHONES' CHORD, *not* WITH THE CLARINET SOLO. THE CLARINET HAS THE FREEDOM TO PLAY OVER THE TOP OF EVERYTHING ELSE. WHEN REHEARSING THIS SECTION, TRY IT FIRST WITHOUT THE CLARINET SOLO SO THAT THE PLAYERS CAN GET USE TO MAKE THE DIALOGUE HAPPEN THEN GO BACK AND ADD THE SOLO ON TOP. AGAIN, THESE ARE ALL SIMPLE PARTS, BUT IF THEY ARE BALANCED PROPERLY AND GROOVE WITH THE RHYTHM SECTION, THE MUSIC COMES TO LIFE.

IMPROVISATION

AS STATED EARLIER, THE LANGUAGE THAT ELLINGTON CONTINUES TO EXPLORE ON AFRO-BOSSA EMBRACES THE BLUES. THE FORM OF "BONGA" AT LETTER D IS SIMPLY A 24 BAR BLUES (A SLOWER HARMONIC RHYTHM) WHILE LETTER A IS THIS SAME LONG FORM BLUES WITH AN EXTENSION. THE CLARINET SOLO AND THE TRUMPET AND TROMBONE FILLS ARE DRENCHED IN THE BLUES. THIS DOES NOT MEAN SIMPLY PLAYING THE BLUES SCALE, BUT THE FEELING, PHRASING, ARTICULATION AND APPROACH TO TIME ARE ALL INFORMED BY THE BLUES. ONE WAY OF PRACTICING THIS MIGHT BE TO HAVE YOUR STUDENTS COME UP WITH SEVERAL SHORT BLUESY MELODIES (THROUGH TRANSCRIBING OR WRITING THEIR OWN). THESE SHOULD BE NO LONGER THAN TWO MEASURES IN LENGTH, SUCH AS THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLE:



NOW, HAVE THEM TRY PLAYING THAT IDEA STARTING AT DIFFERENT PLACES WITHIN THE MEASURE OR STRETCHING THE RHYTHM BUT STILL ENDING IN OR NEAR THE SAME PLACE:



THIS SIMPLE PRACTICE CAN HELP THE STUDENT BREAK AWAY FROM PLAYING EVERYTHING METERED AND HELP HIM MORE FREELY PLAY OVER THE TIME. NEXT, HAVE THEM START TO ADD INFLECTIONS (SCOOPS, BENDS, GROWLS, ETC.) TO CREATE EMOTION. REMEMBER THAT THE BLUES IS WHAT GIVES JAZZ MUSIC ITS HEART AND SOUL. BE CAREFUL, HOWEVER, NOT TO OVER DO IT!

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PERSONALIZATION

NOW THAT THE BASIC COMPONENTS ARE IN PLACE, IT'S TIME TO MAKE THIS CHART YOUR OWN. THIS COULD MEAN OPENING THE FORM FOR SOLOS, CREATING YOUR OWN INTRODUCTION OR FINDING A WAY TO FEATURE YOUR PERCUSSIONISTS. YOU KNOW THE STRENGTHS OF YOUR BAND, SO IT IS UP TO YOU TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WILL WORK FOR YOU. THE FORM OF THE ARRANGEMENT IS A SIMPLE HEAD-SOLO-HEAD FORMAT. SO, ACCOMMODATING SEVERAL SOLOISTS IS AN EASY WAY TO SHOW OFF YOUR PLAYERS. LETTER D TO LETTER G CAN BE REPEATED FOR MULTIPLE SOLOISTS. REMEMBER THAT THE BACKGROUNDS DON'T HAVE TO BE USED FOR EACH SOLOIST. IF YOU DO DECIDE TO OPEN IT UP, BE SURE TO PLAN FOR YOUR CLIMAX COMING OUT OF THE SOLOS; THE CHART STILL NEEDS TO HAVE DIRECTION.

ANYTHING DONE FOR AN INTRODUCTION SHOULD STILL FIT IN THE CHARACTER OF THE MUSIC AND SET UP THE MELODY. IF YOU HAVE A GREAT BASS PLAYER, FOR EXAMPLE, IT MAY WORK WELL TO SET THIS UP WITH A BASS SOLO THAT LEADS INTO THE BASS LINE OF THE TUNE. A PERCUSSION SECTION SOLI COULD ALSO WORK AS AN INTRODUCTION OR BEFORE THE LAST STATEMENT OF THE MELODY.

ANOTHER OPTION MAY BE FINDING A WAY TO FEATURE YOUR PEP SECTION. THERE COULD BE SOMETHING THAT THEY COULD COME UP WITH TO PLAY AS A SOLI. THIS COULD BE DONE AT THE TOP OF THE CHART OR IN THE MIDDLE BEFORE OR AFTER SOLOS. THE POINT IS THAT YOU AS AN ENSEMBLE HAVE FUN WITH THIS MUSIC AND FIND A WAY TO SHOW YOUR PERSONALITY THROUGH THE MUSIC. JUST REMEMBER IT IS IMPORTANT TO KEEP IT BLUESY AND DRIVE THE FEEL OF THE RHYTHM THROUGHOUT.

I HOPE THAT THESE SUGGESTIONS ARE HELPFUL AND I LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU IN NEW YORK!
GOOD LUCK!