

ESSENTIALLY ELLINGTON

High School Jazz Band Program

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

DUKE ELLINGTON WAS A MASTER OF THE CONCERTO IN JAZZ MUSIC. HE WAS SUCH A MASTER THAT HE WROTE FOR SPECIFIC PLAYERS IN HIS ENSEMBLE, NOT JUST SPECIFIC INSTRUMENTS. HE DID NOT WRITE A CONCERTO FOR TRUMPET; INSTEAD HE WROTE A “CONCERTO FOR COOTIE”. HIS COMPOSITIONS WERE PERSONALIZED AND REFLECTED THE BEST CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MUSICIAN FOR WHOM HE WAS WRITING. **ECHOES OF HARLEM** IS A GREAT EXAMPLE THAT WAS WRITTEN TO FEATURE COOTIE WILLIAMS (IT WAS LATER REPLACED BY “CONCERTO FOR COOTIE”). COOTIE’S USE OF THE PLUNGER WITH A PIXIE MUTE GAVE HIM A UNIQUE SOUND AROUND WHICH ELLINGTON WOULD LEAN AND CRAFT HIS COMPOSITION. AS YOU APPROACH THIS MUSIC WITH YOUR ENSEMBLE, IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT THOUGH YOU ARE RECREATING AN ELLINGTON COMPOSITION AND ARRANGEMENT, YOU ARE ALSO FEATURING YOUR OWN GREAT SOLOIST WHO HAS AN INDIVIDUAL VOICE. YOU ARE NOT SIMPLY ASKING YOUR TRUMPETER TO BE COOTIE WILLIAMS, BUT YOU ARE ASKING HIM OR HER TO BE AN INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS STUDIED AND BEEN INFLUENCED BY COOTIE AND OTHER GREAT JAZZ MUSICIANS. IT WILL BE IMPORTANT FOR THAT STUDENT TO UNDERSTAND THE LANGUAGE THAT HE IS CREATING WITHIN BUT ALSO FIND HIS OWN EXPRESSION OF THAT LANGUAGE. AS ALWAYS, THE BEST WAY TO BEGIN IS THROUGH LISTENING.

Listening to the Soloist

BEGIN BY LISTENING TO THE ORIGINAL 1936 ELLINGTON RECORDING FEATURING COOTIE WILLIAMS. WHAT SHOULD STRIKE YOU IMMEDIATELY IS HOW COOTIE’S SOUND DIFFERS FROM THAT OF BUBBER MILEY (LISTEN TO EAST ST LOUIS TOODL-OO FOR REFERENCE). WILLIAMS’ SOUND IS MUCH “SWEETER” AND LESS RASPY THAN MILEY’S. WILLIAMS HAS A WARM LYRICAL, SINGING QUALITY TO HIS SOUND VERSUS A MORE PUNCHY, ARTICULATED SOUND. WILLIAMS’ USE OF THE PLUNGER IS USED MORE TO CREATE A SOFTER TYPE VOCAL ARTICULATION ALLOWING HIM TO BEND NOTES WHERE NECESSARY OR SOFTEN HIS ATTACK. MILEY’S USE IS OFTEN FOR EFFECT, THAT IS, GROWLS, CRIES, “WOPS”, ETC. THIS IS NOT TO SAY ONE SOUND IS BETTER THAN THE OTHER; IT IS SIMPLY TO OBSERVE THAT EACH SOUND IS UNIQUE

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TO THE MUSICIAN. IT WILL BE IMPORTANT FOR YOUR TRUMPETER TO FIGURE OUT HOW HE OR SHE WANTS TO “SING” THROUGH THE INSTRUMENT. LISTEN TO EXAMPLES SUCH AS THE 1951 ROY ELDRIDGE RECORDING AND YOU’LL NOTICE THAT HE CHOOSES NOT USE THE PLUNGER MUTE BUT STILL GETS A VERY PERSONAL MUTED SOUND. ALSO LISTEN TO HOW ELDRIDGE’S SOUND DIFFERS ON THE NOTE’S SUSTAIN OF HIS BEFORE HIS CUT OFF. HIS USE OF VIBRATO TO THERE REALLY PERSONALIZES HIS VOICE. THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT THERE IS NO ONE WAY TO CREATE A PERSONAL SOUND AND YOUR STUDENT MUST KEEP IN MIND THAT HE IS TRYING TO FIND HIS OWN VOICE.

ANOTHER DIFFERENCE THAT YOU WILL NOTICE IN THE RECORDINGS IS THE TEMPO. THE ORIGINAL RECORDING HAS A MORE LOPING TEMPO LIKE THE TROT OF A HORSE. BUT YOU’LL NOTICE THE TEMPO OF THE ROY ELDRIDGE RECORDING IS QUITE A BIT SLOWER, THUS ALLOWING FOR ELDRIDGE TO BE EXTREMELY BLUESY AND FLOAT OVER THE TIME, EVEN MORE SO THAN COOTIE. AGAIN, ONE STYLE IS NOT BETTER THAN THE OTHER, JUST DIFFERENT ALLOWING EACH MUSICIAN TO SING IN HIS OWN WAY. WE’LL COME BACK TO THE SOLOIST LATER ON.

Ensemble

FOCUS YOUR STUDENTS’ ATTENTION NOW TO THE ENSEMBLE. THE BEAUTY OF ELLINGTON’S WRITING IS IN HOW HE BALANCES THE SOLOIST TO THE ENSEMBLE, NEVER DISTRACTING THE ATTENTION AWAY FROM THE SOLOIST. NOTICE THE BALANCE OF THE SAXOPHONES (THEN THE BRASS) TO THE SOLOIST AT LETTER C. THE SOLOIST MUST BE HEARD CLEARLY OVER THE BACKGROUND CHORDS. ALSO, THE BALANCE OF THE CHORDS THEMSELVES WITHIN THE SECTION IS CRUCIAL. KEEP THIS IN MIND ALSO WHEN THE ENSEMBLE TAKES THE MELODY. AT LETTER D, FOR EXAMPLE, THE SAXOPHONES TAKE THE MELODY. GENERALLY WE WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT EVERYONE IN THE SECTION BALANCES TO THE LEAD PLAYER. HOWEVER, IN THIS CASE, NOTICE THAT THE LEAD ALTO AND THE BARITONE ARE DOUBLED AND THE SOUND OF THOSE TWO INSTRUMENTS AS ONE IS WHAT DUKE IS TRYING TO CREATE. BE SURE THAT THE ALTO AND BARI MATCH ARTICULATION, PHRASING, FEEL, ETC. AND THAT THE REST OF THE SECTION BALANCES TO THAT.

THE ARTICULATION IS GOING TO BE KEY IN MAKING SURE THE FEEL RETAINS A BOUNCE AND SWINGS. A PERFECT EXAMPLE IS AT LETTER C. YOU’LL NOTICE THAT THE SAXOPHONE PART IS WRITTEN WITH TENUTO MARKINGS. OFTEN WE SEE TENUTO AND INTERPRET THEM TO MEAN LEGATO. HOWEVER,

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THESE MARKINGS ARE ONLY AN INDICATION OF NOTE LENGTH, NOT ATTACK. THERE SHOULD STILL BE EMPHASIS GIVEN TO THE UPBEATS, THOUGH NOT WITH A HEAVY TONGUE. FURTHER, THOUGH THE NOTES ARE MARKED LONG, THERE SHOULD STILL BE A LITTLE DAYLIGHT AFTER THE FIRST QUARTER NOTE. SING THE PHRASE AS ARTICULATED BELOW:



written:  *articulated:* 

THE SAME WILL BE TRUE OF THE BRASS ARTICULATIONS. THE LONG NOTES STILL NEED TO BE ARTICULATED TO SWING.

NOW TURN YOUR ATTENTIONS TO THE ARTICULATIONS AT LETTER F. YOU'LL NOTICE ON THE RECORDING THAT THE SOUND OF THE SAXOPHONES IS PURPOSEFULLY DIFFERENT FROM THE SOUND AT LETTER D. THE SAXOPHONES PLAY THE MELODY WITH A PRETTY SMOOTH ARTICULATION AT LETTERS D AND E, BUT TO CONTRAST THAT SOUND THEY USE MORE TONGUE AT LETTER F TO GET MORE PUNCH. THIS SLIGHT DIFFERENCE IN ARTICULATION MAKES A HUGE DIFFERENCE IN MUSICAL EFFECT. WITH WHATEVER ARTICULATIONS YOU CHOOSE TO EMPLOY, BE SURE THAT THEY ARE UNIFORM AND PURPOSEFUL.

Rhythm Section

THE RHYTHM SECTION'S GROOVE SETS THE MOOD FOR THE TRUMPET SOLOIST TO FLOAT OVER. THE SOUND OF THE PIANO/BASS OSTINATO IS LIKE A GENTLE TROT. IT SHOULD NOT BE HEAVY AND SHOULD REFLECT THE SWING FEEL THROUGHOUT. THOUGH IT IS WRITTEN AS A DOTTED 8th NOTE FOLLOWED BY A 16th, IT SHOULD BE INTERPRETED AS TRIPLETS AS BELOW:

written:  *interpreted:* 

AT WHATEVER TEMPO YOU CHOOSE TO PLAY THIS PIECE, BE SURE THAT EVERYONE IS SINGING SUBDIVIDED TRIPLETS SO THAT THE QUARTER NOTE PULSE LOCKS. THE GUITARIST PLAYING A FREDDIE GREEN-LIKE

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QUARTER NOTE FEEL WILL BE THE METRONOME FOR THE SECTION. EVERYONE SHOULD LOCK TO HIS OR HER BEAT. A SLIGHT EMPHASIS ON BEATS 2 AND 4 WILL HELP THIS SECTION TO GROOVE A LITTLE BETTER, BUT DON'T OVER DO IT. BY THE TIME THE DRUMS ENTER THE GROOVE SHOULD SHIFT TO A NATURAL WALKING FOUR FEEL WITHOUT THE EMPHASIS ON BEATS 2 AND 4 FROM THE GUITAR, EVEN WHEN THE BASS PLAYS THE SHUFFLE PATTERN AGAIN (4TH MEASURE OF LETTER C). THERE IS NO NEED TO EVER BE TOO BUSY IN THIS CHART. INSTEAD, BE SURE THE FOCUS IS ON LAYING DOWN A SOLID GROOVE, FOUR ON THE FLOOR, TIGHT HI-HAT AND LOCKING WITH THE BASS AND GUITAR.

Soloist

AS STATED EARLIER, THIS IS A CONCERTO FOR TRUMPET AND JAZZ BAND. THOUGH COOTIE WILLIAMS HAS BEEN TRANSCRIBED IN HIS ENTIRETY HERE, IT IS IMPORTANT TO KEEP IN MIND THAT MUCH OF WHAT HE PLAYED WAS IMPROVISED. AND THOUGH I DO RECOMMEND THAT YOUR TRUMPET SOLOIST LEARN THE COOTIE WILLIAMS SOLO FOR REFERENCE (STYLE, HARMONIC APPROACHES, ETC.), I ALSO RECOMMEND LEARNING THE BASIC THEME AND THEN IMPROVISING ON THAT THEME. IF YOU LISTEN TO THE ORIGINAL ELLINGTON RECORDING, THEN LISTEN TO THE 1945 OF COOTIE WILLIAMS' OWN RECORDING, YOU WILL NOTICE THAT HE PLAYS THE SAME BASIC OPENING THEME BUT EMBELLISHES IT DIFFERENTLY. REMEMBER THAT IMPROVISING DOES NOT HAVE TO MEAN PLAYING SOMETHING NEW ALL OF THE TIME. IT SIMPLY MEANS TO DEVIATE FROM THE ORIGINAL MELODY WITH MUSICAL PURPOSE. LISTEN, FOR EXAMPLE, TO THE JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER ORCHESTRA REHEARSAL OF THIS PIECE. YOU WILL NOTICE THAT WYNTON MARSALIS PLAYS THE THEME PRETTY MUCH AS WRITTEN BUT EMBELLISHES ATTACKS, FALLS, GROWLS AND OTHER INTERPRETIVE DEVICES. AS THE SOLOIST STARTS TO DIALOGUE AND INTERACT WITH THE OTHER SECTIONS OF THE BAND, THEN THERE IS MORE ROOM FOR FREER IMPROVISING. HARMONICALLY THERE IS NOT A LOT TO WORRY ABOUT. RELY HEAVILY ON BLUESY SOUNDS MAKING GOOD USE OF THE FLATTED 5TH. THE KEY WILL BE YOUR STYLISTIC APPROACH. THE SLOW TEMPO WILL ALLOW YOU TO SING LYRICALLY MUCH OF THE TIME WITHOUT HAVING TO SOUND METERED. I RECOMMEND NOT ONLY LISTENING TO TRUMPET SOLOISTS BUT ALSO TO BLUES SINGERS TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY CREATE MELODIC LINES. FOR EXAMPLE, BLUES SINGERS LIKE TO END PHRASES IN A DESCENDING MOTION. NOTICE HOW COOTIE WILLIAMS EMULATES THAT VOCAL QUALITY IN THIS PASSAGE FROM THE END OF THE CHART:

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NOTICE WHERE HE STARTS HIS IDEA AND WHERE HE ENDS. EVEN WHEN HE GOES TO THE HIGHER REGISTER, HE USES THAT DESCENDING MOTION TO CREATE THE BLUESY SOUND. CHECK OUT RECORDINGS OF GREAT BLUES SINGERS RANGING FROM BESSIE SMITH TO MUDDY WATERS AND YOU WILL HEAR THE SAME EFFECT.

Make It Your Own

FINALLY, IT IS TIME TO THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN APPROACH TO THIS CLASSIC. THE STRUCTURE OF THIS CHART IS VERY SHORT, FOLLOWING A COMMON SONATA FORM (EXPOSITION, DEVELOPMENT AND RECAPITULATION). CONSIDERING THE FORM, YOU MUST BE CAREFUL AS TO HOW YOU OPEN THIS UP SO THAT THE FLOW OF THE FORM IS STILL PRESENT. YOU MAY DECIDE TO OPEN IT UP AT THE BEGINNING BEFORE THE STATEMENT OF THE FIRST THEME OR POSSIBLY EXTENDING THINGS AT THE RECAPITULATION BEFORE THE FINAL CADENZA. IF YOU WANT TO OPEN IT UP IN THE MIDDLE, BE CONSCIOUS OF THE INTERACTION OF THE REEDS AND BRASS SO THAT WHATEVER IS DONE STILL MAKES SINCE TO THE OVERALL FLOW OF THE CHART. A GREAT CHOICE MAY ALSO BE TO HAVE YOUR SOLOIST PLAY AN EXTENDED CADENZA BEFORE THE FINAL BAND CADENCE. YOU KNOW YOUR STUDENTS AND YOUR BAND'S STRENGTHS. BE SURE TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THEM AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, HAVE FUN PLAYING THIS MUSIC!