

Rehearsal Strategies: Feet Bone

Essentially Ellington 2009-10

At the Jazz at Lincoln Center Band Director Academy this past summer in New York City, Steve Massey conducted a session entitled **A Concept-Based Jazz Curriculum** that focused on core concepts for a high school jazz ensemble and an approach to building a curriculum around those concepts. Professor Ronald Carter with the help of Rodney Whitaker (and a little input from me) also led a session on the **Selection and Preparation of Big Band Repertoire** that focused on “specific criteria for selecting appropriate big band literature to teach specific music concepts.” Wynton Marsalis in his comments at this year’s *Essentially Ellington* High School Jazz Band Competition & Festival (*EE*) cited several specific concepts that directors should be focusing on with their ensembles. The point being made by all of these educators is that *we don’t teach repertoire; we use repertoire to teach concepts*. To address this, the repertoire for this year’s *EE* program was selected to address specific concepts.

One of the concepts that Wynton really focused on at *EE* this year was the shuffle feel in jazz. Specifically, his concern was that bands do not understand the difference between a rock shuffle and the shuffle as it is heard in jazz music. Duke Ellington’s “Feet Bone” was selected to address this concern. This chart not only allows for the ensemble to work on the shuffle feel, but is also a great vehicle to work on improvisation - and it’s just plain fun to play.

Shuffle Articulation

The first thing to keep in mind when starting to work on the shuffle feel is that it is still a triplet-based swing feel. Get the bodies moving to the pulse and singing the triplet subdivision. Have everyone tap his or her heel to the pulse while repeating the following example:

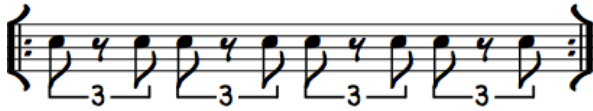


Typically in swing music, we consider the first eighth note to be the length of these first two eighth note triplets tied and the second eighth note is the length of the third eighth

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note triplet. In the shuffle feel, the *articulation* is what sometimes changes. This is especially true in the rhythm section. A good approximation of the sound is to think of the eighth notes as illustrated below:



To specify this sound, arrangers often write the figures using a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note (*see piano example below*); however, the *sound* is like the triplet figure written above. Everyone in the ensemble should work on this articulation whether his or her part requires it or not. This will ensure that that band is feeling the groove together. Drummer and educator Alvin Atkinson uses a great mnemonic device to help students work on the shuffle feel. He has students move together to the chant “*Stomp the Stallion*”.



With the left foot slightly in front of the body and the weight primarily on the back foot, the students simulate riding a horse while repeating the chant with the downbeats occurring on the right foot. The resulting sound and feel are a good approximation of the shuffle. Other directors have used chants like “Chew Tobacco, Chew Tobacco”; the point is to find a way to *audiate* the sound so that the students can replicate it.

Rhythm Section

The rhythm section must get comfortable with this feel first because it is the only section playing for the entirety of the chart. The piano actually sets up the groove for the rest of the ensemble. It’s not so important that this part be read and played exactly as written; what is important is that the groove be established in those first 4 bars:

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The image shows a musical score for Piano. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of common time (C). It is marked "Solo" and contains a series of chords. The bottom staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, marked "Piano" and "f loco". It contains a walking bass line. A "C7" chord symbol is placed above the final measure of the solo section.

The written bass and drum parts reflect how the rhythm section responded to Duke's set-up; however, your bassist and drummer may respond differently. It does not have to be played exactly as written. The bass should still create a good connected walking line but for the shuffle feel there can be a little more "dance" to the line. Bassist Rodney Whitaker sometimes establishes this by putting a little emphasis on beats 2 and 4. This does not have to be done consistently but doing so occasionally gives articulation to the bass line and helps the groove. Also, the bass can sometimes play the shuffle feel as well (remember, everyone in the ensemble must be able to "*Stomp the Stallion.*") Measures 2 and 3 of the following example should have the shuffle articulation:

The image shows a musical score for Bass. It is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of common time (C). The score consists of a single line of music with a walking bass line.

The drummer is the one member of the ensemble who is most consistently dealing with the shuffle. Couple that with the fact that many of our young drummers start off playing rock 'n roll before ever getting into jazz. The shuffle feel in rock music will be different from the shuffle feel in jazz. This is because of where the shuffle articulation is played on the drum kit. It is important to remember that *jazz music is not a "beat"*, and young drummers often learn to play by learning beats. In rock music the shuffle articulation is often played in the right foot and right hand (bass drum and ride cymbal or hi-hat). The left hand and foot are most often playing the backbeat (beats 2 and 4). Sometimes the left hand will do more (perhaps even the shuffle articulation) but even then the heavy backbeat is still present. This creates a heavy, drum-oriented sound rather than a sound that is balanced predominantly with the ride cymbal. Though it is important for the drummer to have control of the shuffle articulation in any limb, in much of swing music the shuffle articulation is created by the left hand (snare) with the right foot continuing to feather the bass drum to the pulse and the right hand playing the typical ride

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pattern (“*Dog, walk the dog walk the dog*”). The right hand may even sometimes play the shuffle but the primary difference is that the sound is not balanced with the drums being loudest. The shuffle that is played in the left hand must be very subtle; the drummer should find the place on the snare (often closer to the edge) that helps him create the subtlety. It also is not important for the backbeat to be very heavy in the left hand. There are times when you will want that sound and times when you will not. Control is crucial to creating a grooving swing feel with a shuffle articulation in the left hand.

Horns

Once the rhythm section has found its groove, the horns are ready to dive in. As already stated, everyone in the ensemble should be aware of the shuffle articulation whether playing it or not. The trombones are the first section to enter and the feel of the melody must lock into the rhythm section’s feel even though the rhythm of the melody doesn’t necessarily involve that constant eighth note shuffle. The subdivision is the same even though much of the rhythm contains repeated quarter notes:



To bring out the triplet subdivision, it is helpful to sing a ghosted eighth note triplet in the back of the throat (i.e. “*Dot-un, dot-un, dot-un*”) after each quarter note to get an articulation that grooves with the shuffle. This is true for each quarter note except where marked long:



The same will be true for the quarter notes in the saxophone line at letter **C** and the trumpet line at letter **E**. Find syllables to audiate the sound, sing them together as sections and then play the sound created by those syllables. This is all done to get the parts to *dance* or *jump* like the Kansas City style riff charts. The parts are not difficult or too technically demanding; so, the time should be invested totally to feel. Find recordings of bands in the Kansas City riff style to listen to for that *jump* feel. Make sure everyone

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stays involved physically with the time/fcel. As Ron Carter would say, “Get a thrill in the heel!”

The technical demands that are present have less to do with facility or chops as they do to balance, blend and sound. All section players much match articulation and balance/blend with the lead players; there is no hiding in this music. Sections that can be potentially troubling are passages like letter F:

The image shows a musical score for rehearsal strategy 'F'. It features five staves: Alto, Clarinet (Cl.), and four Trumpets (Tpts. 1, 2, 3, 4). The Alto staff has a whole rest. The Clarinet staff has a whole note chord with a crescendo and a dynamic marking of *mp*. The four Trumpet staves each have a whole note chord with a crescendo and a dynamic marking of *mp*. Each trumpet staff is marked with '1/2 open'. The music is in 4/4 time and the key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score ends with a fermata and a dynamic marking of *ff*.

Pitch when playing with the plunger (especially with it half open) can be a problem. Add in the challenge of blending the sound and balancing to a clarinet lead and this simple phrase can be quite demanding. Rehearse this section first without the mutes to hear the sound of the chords. Work first on balance and blend. Next, sing the desired effect with the crescendo and the fall at the end. Once a concept of sound is established in everyone’s ear, then play it with the mutes. Make sure that everyone matches the sound that was sung and agreed upon as the desired effect.

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Make It Your Own

There's not a lot to worry about with parts; the chart is pretty repetitive. However, this doesn't mean that the chart can't be fun. Part of that fun will be what your band does to personalize the music for your ensemble. Solos can be inserted in many places to feature any instrument in the ensemble. Logical places to insert solos would be before letter A, letter C, and letter E. Still, find a way to individualize it for your ensemble. Other things that will show your band's personality will be the treatment of section parts. Each wind section gets a statement of melody. What your lead players do for the section to follow with regard to dynamics, articulation, phrasing and etc. will create a sound that shows cohesiveness as a unit and be unique to your ensemble. Whatever is done should still be within the style of the music being played, but there is room for individual interpretation. One example may be the trumpet melody at letter E.

The image displays a musical score for four 1/2 Plunger parts. Each part is marked with a dynamic of *mf* (mezzo-forte). The score is organized into two systems of four staves each. The first system shows the initial four staves, and the second system shows the continuation of the parts. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests, illustrating the rhythmic patterns described in the text.

Duke was very crafty in writing a line that shortens rhythmically by one note in each succeeding phrase. How will your trumpets treat that phrase dynamically? What will they do with the articulation?

Finally, your band's personality will be determined by the overall musical statement made from beginning to end of the chart. How will your players manage the momentum of the chart? How patient is the rhythm section in letting things develop, and

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how do they help guide the momentum? How will you orchestrate momentum with the solos that you insert? These are questions that only you and your ensemble can answer, but here are some things to keep in mind. In the Kansas City tradition excitement is built by creating a dancing groove that builds to a climax. As the section riffs are layered, the intensity continues to build. Still, there has to be a delicate balance of intensity and patience so as not to peak too soon. The Basic Orchestra was among the best at setting the stage for that ultimate climax. It is important for your ensemble to do the same.

The rhythm section has the chore of maintaining the groove and intensity throughout, while allowing the chart to build and develop. This is sometimes misunderstood. In trying to let each solo build, young rhythm sections may create a rollercoaster effect by starting each solo soft with no interaction and then building the dynamic and activity. This can be effective sometimes but can also become redundant. Instead have your rhythm players think of creating a separate space for each solo – changing ride cymbals, changing comping, anything that creates a different texture according to the sound of the solo instrument. Next, you should orchestrate the chart in such a way that when melodic sections come in, the music has simply developed through the use of solos. No two bands will do this exactly the same. The drums are vital to helping make the transition from section to section and this is where the patience is required to keep from peaking too soon. Use the Ellington Orchestra recording (and other examples of riff charts) to notice how the rhythm section dialogues and helps build the momentum throughout the performance.

These tips are meant to give you some ideas for approaching the chart but are in no way meant to be absolute. Remember the music will be what you and your ensemble make of it. Please have fun with it - and enjoy the process as much as the end result.

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