

Rehearsal Strategies: *Prelude to a Kiss*

Many directors may shy away from *Prelude to a Kiss* for various reasons – *I don't really have a strong alto soloist; the parts are simple and don't feature my band well; we don't play ballads well; etc.* Before making a decision about the chart based on any of those reasons I suggest this – *listen to the Ellington Orchestra play this chart several times!* What you will find is that it is an absolutely beautiful arrangement of a beautiful tune. Use all of those reasons that you would avoid playing this chart as reasons *for* playing it instead – it will allow the ensemble to work on intonation, balance, blend and musical expression, serving as a magnifying glass under which they can see to clean up their section playing. This chart is also a great vehicle to feature a mature soloist – not just an alto soloist, but *any* mature soloist. And the dialogue between the soloist and accompanist makes for a great feature for *two* strong players. Rhythm sections always benefit from the requirements of establishing a groove and directing the motion of the arrangement on ballads. So, don't be fooled by the seeming simplicity of the ensemble parts; there is much to be gained from performing this chart and your band will have the opportunity to really show off its maturity and sophistication.

Listening

After you've familiarized yourself with this recording, start to get your students into it, but don't stop with only the reference recording provided to you. Seek out other great recordings as well. A couple of recordings that I will reference later are the Nancy Wilson recording from *But Beautiful* and the Jim Hall recording from *Alone Together*. Let the students listen first just for the pure enjoyment of the tracks. Johnny Hodges, Nancy Wilson and Jim Hall all do a great job of singing the tune and all members of the ensemble should know the melody to grasp how their individual parts fit. All should be aware of the form of the tune to understand mood and texture changes. Even though some sections are primarily whole and half notes, those parts are essential in creating the mood on top of which the soloist is playing. While listening to the Ellington recording students should be aware of how the moods transition and what that means for their section and the group as a whole. Listen for technical things as well – **balance, blend, dynamics, effects** and **articulation**. Finally, and of equal importance, listen for groove. Ballads should still dance and the rhythm section groove should still project that dance feel.

Rhythm Section

A ballad groove can be difficult for young (or even more experienced) rhythm sections. Because the tempo is so slow and it is usually a 2-feel rather than a 4-feel, it can be hard to keep the time consistent and make it “feel” danceable. Even listening to the recorded Ellington rhythm section, it can be hard to just know to make it *feel* like anything. To begin with, the drums must know what tools they have available to them; a pair of sticks alone won’t do the job.

A good pair of brushes is essential. I recommend **wire brushes** (as opposed to the newer nylon brushes) with the metal ring at the opposite end and rubber sleeves. I recommend these because each part of the brush, from the wire to the sleeve to the metal ring, is usable in creating sound. Also, the metal wires as opposed to the nylons create a better “*swish*” on the snare in my opinion. Speaking of the snare sound, it is imperative to have coated heads (instead of smooth) on the snare drum; without the coating your drummer will not be able to produce the “*swishing*” effect. Rather than trying to explain how to create the circular motions to produce the *swish* effect on the snare, it is easy to point your students to the internet to find examples of great brush players – Ed Thigpen, Jo Jones and Jeff Hamilton to name a few. By observing videos of these players students not only can hear the sound but can also see how it is being produced. Some points to keep in mind, still, are that the sound should be consistent and can display a slight subdivision.

As for the groove itself, the bass and drums (and guitar, if you are using one) are basically laying down a quarter note pulse with the bass/bass drum on beats 1 and 3, the hi-hat on beats 2 and 4 (guitar on all four beats) and the snare creating the *swish* in a circular pattern. Though this sounds simple enough, the challenge is in getting the proper balance, note lengths and groove. I suggest practicing at a slightly faster tempo at first and singing a *doo-dl-a* triplet subdivision. This will help the students hold the tempo together. You can also have the bass start by doubling each bass note to play on all four beats until the feel is comfortable, then drop beats 2 and 4 while trying to maintain the same feel.

Once the basic groove is established, next comes the task of contributing to the musical flow of the arrangement. Listen to the recording for simple things such as how the drummer helps the band to breathe in two bar phrases (ex. Letter A). Notice how he uses an open hi-hat splash (or a slight strike of the cymbal) on beat four of the second bar of the phrase to help indicate a breath. Pay attention to what happens in the transition from the second A section of the form leading into the bridge, particularly the second time through the form where there should be more of a climax. Though the bass and guitar pretty much stay at home (sticking to just the quarter note pulse), the drummer adds a lot of subtleties that allow the music to breathe.

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The pianist roll here is not to just play chords but in many ways to dialogue with the soloist, filling in the holes with *either* chords, counter lines or effects (runs, arpeggios) in answer to what the soloist plays as in the following example taken from letter C:

Musical score for Soloist and Piano. The Soloist part is in 4/4 time and features a melodic line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. Above the staff are chord markings: D9#9, Bm11, E7, and A7(b9). The Piano part consists of two descending arpeggios in the right hand, starting on G4 and moving down to C3, with slurs and 's' markings. The left hand is mostly silent.

These descending arpeggios answer the soloist quite nicely since the trombones are handling the backing chords. At other times the pianist may choose to be more rhythmic in contrast to what the rest of the ensemble is doing. Take, for example, one measure before letter D and continuing:

Musical score for Soloist, Reeds, Trumpets, Bones, and Piano. The Soloist part is in 4/4 time and features a melodic line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. Above the staff is a circled letter 'D'. The Reeds part consists of a series of chords: Eb7, Eb7, F#7, Gb7. The Trumpets part consists of a series of chords: Eb7, Eb7, F#7, Gb7. The Bones part consists of a series of chords: Eb7, Eb7, F#7, Gb7. The Piano part consists of a series of chords: Eb7, Eb7, F#7, Gb7. The piano part is more rhythmic, with slurs and 's' markings.

The ensemble is playing tutti quarter notes to lead into the next section then returns to the chord backing by the trombones. Note that the piano is creating the rhythmic interest by answering the

ensemble and the bones. This is not to say that the pianist must learn this written part verbatim; the soloist won't be playing Johnny Hodges' part verbatim, so it wouldn't make sense to have the same comping behind him. The point is that though it is not necessary for the pianist to play chords, it is necessary for the pianist to compliment what is happening with the chart and the soloist.

Ensemble

The technical demands of the ensemble parts are not dependent upon virtuosity. There are no fast, difficult to finger passages in the chart at all. The demands here are centered on the *sound* of the ensemble – balance, blend, good intonation, phrasing and musicality. Preparing for these demands are more like preparing for a cross-country race as opposed to a fifty-yard dash; endurance of the chops is key. The trombones are playing sustained notes in the medium high range of the instrument. The reeds are faced with the challenge of balancing the sound of 2 clarinets, a tenor saxophone and a bass clarinet. All sections are trying to play with a persuasive sound while trying not to overpower the soloist.

To meet this endurance challenge, chops strength and breath control are crucial. **Long tones** should be a regular part of warm ups and individual practice routines. Long tone exercises that require crescendos are helpful for getting the air moving to support the sound. It is important for students to remember that it takes the same amount of air (or breath *support*) to play softly as it does to play loudly. Too often, sound suffers because students are trying to play soft and end up not supporting the sound. If balance becomes a problem, have the brass players point the bell into the music stand (or make use of mutes) but keep supporting the sound. Having good breath *control* will help them to sustain this sound throughout the phrases. The students need to be able to play 2-measure phrases without losing steam and be able to shape those phrases musically.

Next, students need to be aware of matching the sound of the section leader. This note only refers to tone but also articulation and even vibrato. A good legato tongue is needed and if any player in the section plays with a harsh attack, it is extremely noticeable. The section leader should determine the use of any effects (vibrato, scoops, accents, etc.). Sections of the arrangement should contrast in sound, so it is important for the students to be aware of the sound that preceded their entrance in order to contrast. For example, letter **A** has the trombones playing the background while letter **B** goes to a drastically different sound with the clarinets and muted trumpets. The third measure of letter **C** has the soloist leading the clarinets but is then contrasted by the tutti sound one measure before letter **D**. Letter **E** has a completely different sound than has been heard with the use of saxophone instead of clarinet; how will your reed players make a difference between the sound of clarinets versus saxophones?

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Though the parts seem simple, it is this type of attention to detail that shows the maturity level of your ensemble.

Featured Soloist

The role of the featured soloist is unlike that of a soloist blowing on the solo section of the tune. Every nuance of the arrangement is dependent on how the soloist shapes the melody. Improvisation here requires more than the ability to decipher chord changes. As vocalist Mardra Thomas describes improvisation, it is “with meaningful purpose to deviate musically from the melody.” Recall that I earlier mentioned seeking out great recordings including singers and other instrumentalists to reference. Let’s look at how some artists purposefully deviate from the melody.

I like to steer students toward vocalists so that they understand that they are singing through their instruments. Singers can teach us how to understand and convey the content of the song. Knowing that the lyric begins “If you hear a song in blue, like a flower crying for the dew” at least reminds the soloist that the element of blues (lyricism and phrasing) must still be present. There are different ways of expressing that bluesy lyricism and one of the best singers at conveying that is Nancy Wilson. Her phrasing alone expresses a lyrical quality that we can learn from. One of the techniques she uses is called **back phrasing**. This is where the singer (or soloist) intentionally starts the phrase later than where it is notated to give a more speech-like quality to the musical line. Note the example of the original melody and Nancy’s interpretation of that melody:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major, 4/4 time. The top staff is labeled "ORIGINAL MELODY" and contains the lyrics: "If you hear a song in blue like a flower crying for the dew". The bottom staff is labeled "NANCY WILSON" and contains the lyrics: "If you hear a song in blue (oo) like a flower crying for the dew". The notation for Nancy Wilson's version shows a significant delay in starting the phrase "like a flower crying" compared to the original melody, illustrating the technique of back phrasing. The original melody starts on the first beat of the second measure, while Nancy's version starts on the third beat of the second measure.

This is an approximation of Nancy’s rhythm because it is extremely difficult to notate. This effect, though, allows the soloist to phrase the melody in the same amount of time while condensing it to be more rhythmic and speech like. Some singers, like Dinah Washington, actually like to phrase *forward* instead, but the effect is the same in terms of expression. Though freedom of expression in phrasing is important, the soloist still needs to be aware of what is happening around him in order to make sense with everyone else (for example, the third measure of letter C where the soloist is lead of the reed

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section). The point here is that phrasing is as much a part of improvisation as is note choice and this is what will sell your performance.

Learning (even if not performing) the Johnny Hodges treatment of this melody will give your soloist more lyrical insight as well. Some of the approaches you will notice that he takes are in knowing when to embellish the melody. For example, at letter **A**, the first statement of the melody, he stays pretty true to the original melodic line. The expression, therefore, is achieved by *how* he plays that line – which notes he hangs on to, what he does with his sound, etc. When the melody is stated again at letter **B** he starts to take more liberties, purposefully deviating from the first statement and playing fills between sections. Again, knowing the lyrics will give you a sense of how Hodges plays with them in his lines. For example, on the bridge when the lyric states “*though its just a simple melody*” he recreates a melodic line that is anything but simple, and when it continues “*with nothing fancy, nothing much*”, he treats the melody with a simple, bluesy quality. Though he is dealing with the chord changes and voice leading, we don’t hear the music that way; we simply hear his musical expression. This is what you want to leave the listener with – a musical statement.

As stated earlier, this does not have to be an alto feature. Any instrumentalist you may choose to feature can sing this melody. Guitarist Jim Hall gives another example of just that. Duke Ellington plays a wonderful introduction to set up the tune. A guitarist could play introduction the by a making use of *chord melody* playing approaches. Listen to what Jim Hall does at the beginning and end of this recording for examples of chord melody. He also varies his sound throughout by making use of single line melodies and octaves as well. Any instrument will have techniques that are uniquely applicable to that instrument that can vary the sound and create expression – saxophones like to bend pitches, trumpets sometimes half-valve, etc. Let your students find ways to let their voices sing through the instrument. Even in finding their voices though, make sure that your soloist is rehearsing with the rhythm section *as well as* on his own. It is important to remember that this is still a group effort.

Finally, something that is not used on the Ellington recording but can still be very effective is the **cadenza**. Adding a cadenza (or short, unaccompanied solo passage near the end) can allow your soloist to add an epilogue to the story the ensemble has been creating. The arrangement is set up perfectly for it with a fermata three measures from the end. Though it is unaccompanied, there are still some general guidelines to keep in mind. First, it is only an epilogue and should not go on for too long. Remember that this is the reason composers started writing cadenzas for soloist and not letting them improvise; soloists were playing too long and losing the continuity of the piece. Keep it short and sweet. Next, it is not imperative to rehash the melody in the cadenza; the tune has been played through a couple of times

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purposefully stating and embellishing throughout. The cadenza doesn't need to do that again. Instead the soloist should find a way to add a final thought related to the melody without rehashing it. Finally, the soloist should pay attention to the harmony. The chord on which the cadenza is played is the V chord and serves the purpose of resolving to I. The melodic line should still serve that function at some point (even if the soloist deviates some) to bring the ensemble back in; the group will be listening for the pickup to the last two bars to know when to enter. If you do choose to insert a cadenza be sure not to have the soloist play too long over the final chord; you don't want to be redundant.

Putting It All Together

Now that you've worked on individual parts and section parts, make sure everyone's ears are open when you put it together. Even though this is a solo feature, it still takes a cohesive group to make it all happen in real time. A mature ensemble will all be aware of the phrasing of the melody, the balance required to prominently feature the soloist, the musical shaping of the chart direction and the groove that we want everyone dancing to. Finally, just as you had the students listen first for the pure enjoyment of the recording, you want them to listen for that same enjoyment of their own musical statement. Get lost in the enjoyment of this beautiful tune! We hope you find these suggestions helpful and hope to see you in New York!

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