

ESSENTIALLY ELLINGTON

High School Jazz Band Program

Rehearsal Strategies: Uptown Downbeat by Duke Ellington By Prof. Ronald Carter – Northern Illinois University

It is very obvious that the title itself makes you think of going uptown to feel the downbeat in the dance hall. **“Uptown Downbeat”** is a moderate tempo dance tune, but the Ellington Orchestra made sure the *swing feel* and the sound of the blues was in abundance. The most challenging aspect of this composition is to get the band to lay back, swing, groove and not let the tempo drag or push ahead. It is very important to feel the triplet pulse on each quarter note. Remember every quarter note has a triplet pulse inside of it.

Example:

 = 1- trip - let = do - od- lah

The stride piano feel is also very prevalent in the style of this 1930's dance tune. Everyone should work on dancing and feeling the triplet pulse while singing until the swing feel is internalized. Careful listening to the Ellington 1936 version and the 2013 Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (JLCO) version is very important. Notice that the JLCO is a little slower but works just as well because the feel is consistent. Students should listen as a section and also individually to both recordings as you sing the melody and countermelodies. The blues is very obvious because of the vocal inflections, vibrato, sub-tone and use of dynamics in both performances. Play what you hear and not what you see. Singing and playing along with the original recording will save a great deal of rehearsal time and open the ears to a more effective way to listen. Articulation and dynamics have to be exaggerated throughout the composition.

Listening to the Soloists:

This is an arrangement that can be a great vehicle for improvisation study for the entire ensemble. The form is 32 bar *AABA* form, which was very common during the swing era. The *A* section changes are based on the major *Db* sound to the subdominant four (*Gb*) to the relative minor (*Bb* minor). The bridge is based on the subdominant progressions (*Db*). The blues has to be present with all the inflections and attitude.

I encourage everyone to learn the transcribed solos of Barney Bigard on clarinet, Cootie Williams on trumpet and Johnny Hodges on soprano sax. Sing, and play along with the original recording until the style and feel is internalized. This is the starting point to learning the jazz language and how it is spoken. It is imperative that everyone get to the piano and learn the changes as well. The entire band should learn the melody and work on improvisation.

Ensemble:

The dynamics, style of phrasing and articulation is very important throughout the arrangement. The traditional swing style is much smoother, but is still not slurred, but use more breath accents, to change the direction of the phrase. Listening and singing along with the original recording is a quick fix to making sure the entire section agrees on the style of articulation and phrasing. Listen to the introduction and notice that both recording referenced play the dotted quarter notes in the introduction long and connected.

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The image shows a musical score for section A of 'Essentially Ellington'. The score is written for a jazz band and includes parts for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Baritone Sax, Trumpet 1, 2, and 3, and Trombone 1, 2, and 3. The key signature is two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is marked with dynamics such as *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *f* (forte). A box labeled 'A' is placed above the first measure of the Soprano part. The music features a unison melody line for the saxophones and a rhythmic accompaniment for the brass and rhythm sections.

Notice the brass hits are very important and have to be articulated short and exact. Remember, no two accents in a row are exactly the same, but the last note is more accented. Look at the pickup to section A in the brass section. This type of accent, used to move the phrase and give it a tap dance feel, happens throughout the chart and must be consistent.

Example: dit - Dot! OR dot - Daht! Du - dit - Dot!

Saxes should sing the unison melody line at section A until the phrase swings and is connected. Remember, no ghost notes unless it is be-bop articulations. Everyone take the opportunity to add dynamics where they logically are needed throughout the arrangement. The brass section at the bridge at section C should crescendo but not overpower the clarinet soloist. The same thing should happen with the sax section behind the muted trumpet solo. Follow the same rules as the brass section at section A.

The trombone section has a great opportunity to swing and be heard at section G. Listen, sing and play along with the original recording until the feel, balance, and style are internalized. The entire ensemble should crescendo at section I during the sax soli. Just remember to listen for the sax section and do not overpower their parts. Build until section K and immediately get softer to the end.

Rhythm Section:

The stride piano feel with the short notes throughout should be the style followed by the entire rhythm section. The bass notes should be spaced and a slight accent on 2 & 4. I encourage the rhythm section to do a great deal of listening to the original recording individually and with the entire section. Discuss how you want to approach the style as traditional or lean toward a more current style of performance.

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Remember this is a dance tune and your main job is to keep it simple and swang! Listen carefully to balance the ensemble and take dynamic control.

Remember, you do not have to play exactly what is written on the transcribed parts, but the intent to swing is important. Listening, singing and playing along with the original recording is important to develop your section's approach to the arrangement. Everyone work on feeling the triplet swing pulse as a section.