

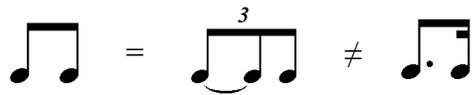
The Jazz Style: Learning to Speak with the Correct Musical Accent
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Musical styles are differentiated by elements such as tone quality, articulation, phrasing, and rhythmic interpretation. While all forms of music integrate melody, rhythm, and harmony, contrasting styles employ traits that allow the listener to immediately identify the genre at hand: Rock from Classical, Country from Hip Hop, etc. We can compare different musical styles to different accents within the English language. While the same basic grammar and vocabulary may be used from one region (or even country) to another, it is the accent that allows the listener to identify where the speaker may call their home. It is not difficult to determine the difference between a native of Massachusetts from a native of North Carolina, simply because of the manner in which words are pronounced and sentences are phrased. The jazz style is simply another form of speaking within musical language and is identified by subtle and overt qualities which form its “accent.” For young students first learning jazz conception, their performance may seem incorrect although they are playing right notes and right rhythms; it is the lack of the correct “accent” that inhibits their success. This article will address the fundamental traits of jazz conception and also dispel incorrect practices that are commonly taught and executed.

The Swing Feel

It has often been said that while jazz uses of the elements harmony, rhythm, and melody, it is primarily a rhythmic music. The most prominent trait of jazz is the use of the swing feel. While there are many elements that form the swing feel, the manner of playing eighth notes is the most central to this style. The simplest way to notate swing eighth notes is by thinking in terms of an eighth note triplet with the first two notes tied together. Eighth notes in the swing feel are often incorrectly notated as a dotted eighth and a sixteenth.

EXAMPLE 1



The latter notation implies that there is a sixteenth note subdivision of swung eighth notes, as opposed to the more correct triplet subdivision. Students typically have more difficulty with swung eighth notes than straight (or traditional) eighth notes due to one simple fact: straight eighth notes evenly divide the beat where swung eighth notes feel “lopsided,” causing them to be more difficult to count and feel. When a student is having difficulty playing consecutive eighth notes in the swing style, it is helpful to rewrite the measures at hand with triplets in place of eighth notes.

Pairing of Eighth Notes vs. Accent Placement

One of the most common misconceptions about the jazz style is that in the swing feel, all upbeats are phrased in groups of two with upbeats to downbeats. An incorrect example with the aforementioned characteristic would appear as follows:

EXAMPLE 6



The primary problem with grouping upbeats to downbeats is that a novice jazz musician will often put a space between the downbeats and the upbeats.

EXAMPLE 7

Will often sound like this:



This causes a symmetrical grouping (or phrasing) of eighth notes which is uncharacteristic of the jazz style. Instead of consistently grouping upbeats with downbeats, it is more stylistically correct to find places within the phrase to assign accents. Accents within the jazz style can be compared to tap dancing; the surprising and asymmetrical use of stressed beats in tap dancing was very influential on the traditional placement of accents in the jazz style. Conversely, a tap dancer who always places a stressed beat in the same place would seem amateurish and predictable. Where is the most stylistically appropriate place to use accents in a jazz phrase? It depends primarily on the shape of the phrase. On ascending eighth notes, accents are placed on upbeats, but not each one. A phrase that might be written like this:

EXAMPLE 8



Should be played like this:

EXAMPLE 9



A syncopated entrance should almost always receive a clear accent, and the accent on the E-flat is a way to re-energize the line. If this line were played with accents on each upbeat, it would sound rhythmically stiff, which would contradict the effort to play the line in a swing feel. On a line of eighth notes that descends, accenting each upbeat is much more common. A phrase that might be written like this:

EXAMPLE 10



Should be played like this:

EXAMPLE 11



The phrase mark over the line indicates that there should not be a break in the sound and that the accents should be somewhat subtle. The accents can be more exaggerated when there is chromaticism present:

EXAMPLE 12



When a musical line changes direction or shape, it is best to accent the high points of the line. A phrase like this would have the marked accents:

EXAMPLE 13



As mentioned above, we would always accent a syncopated entrance, then accent the peaks of the musical line: the G and the E-flat. It is equally important that there is no break in the line. A line that would include ascending and descending portion with peaks would be played as follows:

EXAMPLE 14



The F-sharp would be accented because it is a syncopated entrance, the G would be accented to keep the line energized (but not the B), the A-flat would be accented because it is a peak, and both the G-flat and the E would be accented because they are a part of a chromatic section.

Eliminating Unwanted Spaces

It is very important that when accenting notes within a moving line that the performer not place spaces before a note to be stressed; this is a common mistake by musicians new to the jazz style. As is mentioned above in the discussion of grouping upbeats to downbeats, spaces cause the line to not swing; the break in the line actually makes the eighth notes feel like they are traditional straight eighth notes. Example 14 would sound like this if the less experienced player put spaces before accented notes:

EXAMPLE 15



Often the younger jazz musician will feel that in order to highlight a note through an accent, a space before the note in question will help it to stand out more strongly. Teaching the student to hear that this space inhibits the swing feel is important and often takes a great amount of time to “de-program.”

Adding Needed Spaces

Sometimes correct jazz conception can seem like it sounds the opposite from what is written. The most common rhythm that confuses students is the following:

EXAMPLE 16



In classical music, the measure would be played as:

EXAMPLE 17



SHORT-LONG-SHORT-LONG

In jazz music, the measure would be played as:

EXAMPLE 18



LONG-SHORT-LONG-SHORT

The key to this practice is that in a vast majority of cases in the jazz style, syncopated quarter notes would be felt as if they had a marcato accent above them, sounding like the word “Daht.” This would also be the case in the following passage:

EXAMPLE 19



Even though the G-sharp is two tied eighth notes, they would still be played as a syncopated quarter note, therefore sounding like “Daht.” If we were to rewrite this example using rests, it would probably be easier for the student to execute.

EXAMPLE 20



Unfortunately for the student with limited jazz experience, this example would most likely be written as Example 19 rather than Example 20. It would be assumed that the performer would understand the idiomatically correct way to realize this measure.

Triplets and “Ghosting”

Triplets are one of the most common rhythms used in jazz music. This is largely due to the fact that the triplet subdivision occurs within eighth notes. The triplet is also often used to propel an eighth note line forward and can be heard in the playing of many influential jazz artists. When triplets have an ascending or descending shape, the novice

player will play each note with equal emphasis because this is the way that the figure appears. The more correct way of playing triplets in this shape within the jazz style is to de-emphasize the middle note of the triplet; this is commonly referred to as “ghosting.” Measures such as these are common shapes using the triplet in the jazz style:

EXAMPLE 21



If each note of the triplet is clearly articulated (or even emphasized equally), the phrase will have a “stiff” feel, uncharacteristic to the jazz style. By de-emphasizing the middle note of the triplet, the figure will have more of a swing feel. This is due to the fact that we are essentially playing them as swung eighth notes with the underlying triplet subdivision.

EXAMPLE 22



The parentheses around the middle note of the triplet implies “ghosting” and the other articulation markings are based on the performance practices listed above.

In order for students to assimilate the many aspects of the jazz “accent,” they need to be reminded of the techniques often. There is no substitute for frequent and detailed listening to the masters of jazz (Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, J. J. Johnson, Bud Powell, John Coltrane, etc.) to gain a deeper understanding of the jazz “sound.” Through a combination of appreciation of influential jazz artists and awareness of correct articulation and phrasing techniques, the student will eventually be able to speak with a new accent in their musical language.

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