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**Article 13:
Teaching Students
to Swing, Part 2**

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Teaching Students to Swing, Part 2

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In the Part 1 Article, we looked at some of the basic challenges involved in learning the swing style. In this article, we'll take a more in-depth look at the specific problems that students face as they start reading and playing swing music.

These problems can also be described as *bad habits*. And because good habits can be developed as easily as bad ones, it's important to establish the good ones now, so your band can reap the benefits as you go. Besides, bad habits over time can become very difficult to “unlearn.”

► What are the “enemies” of the swing style?

Five Un-Swinging Habits

Here are five natural tendencies of teachers and “young swingers” that work against a great swing feel in jazz bands.

- Rushing quarter-notes and quarter-rests
- Rushing the ends of phrases
- Slowing down on ties and dots
- Stiff downbeats
- Playing all dotted-quarter values the same

Let's explore each of these and talk about the solutions that will get you past them.

► Why do we rush?

1. Rushing Quarter-notes (and Quarter-Rests)

Have you ever noticed that consecutive quarter-notes tend to accelerate over time? (And the rushing happens for offbeat quarters as well as downbeats.) Why does that happen? Here are my two theories on the problem:

- “Easy = quick” ... If something is easy to do (like playing quarter-notes), you naturally just want to get it done – fast.
- “Triplets? What triplets?” ... We forget that quarter-notes are inherently equal to three triplets. Once students lock into 3 steady triplets for each quarter-note (or quarter-rest), the rushing stops and the enjoyment begins. Nervous silence is replaced by *musical* silence in staccato quarter-notes.

Here’s a test: 1) Count off a medium-slow tempo (about mm=100); 2) Have the students play consecutive quarter-notes (same pitch or use a scale) *with their eyes closed* (so they don’t pick up on visual cues from others). 3) Keep it going until the band is playing with real precision.

The key to getting this exercise to work is having all players (rhythm section included) thinking and feeling the triplet subdivisions together. Then the quarter-notes will lock in, which is the first step to getting *every other rhythm* in the music to lock in.

2. Rushing the Ends of Phrases

Rushing the end of swing phrases is a *huge epidemic* in many school bands. The director typically says, “Don’t rush!” – but the students are not always clear why the problem happens and where it’s happening.

Here’s the main reason for *why*: Once “the end is in sight – meaning that players can see daylight (rests) at the end of the phrase, there’s an instinctive urge to “get it over with.”

And here’s the *where* ... the last few notes of the phrase, *especially* if they are 2 swing eighth-notes. The downbeat eighth is supposed to get 2 triplets, but that often gets tossed aside in the rush to make it “home” to the end of the phrase.

Again, the key to keeping phrase ends from rushing is attaching to that firm triplet underpinning in the music, so notes stay glued to where they’re supposed to be.

3. Slowing Down on Ties and Dots

It's amazing how often this problem occurs and how subtle it is.

Here's the deal: A tie or a dot on the page means you play the value longer. That's simple. But psychologically, "longer" often ends up translating to "long" or "better not make it too quick" ... so these ties and dots effectively become speed bumps in the music.

For example, suppose the horns play a passage of 16 bars, with about 25 tied or dotted values. If one of these is slowed down just a bit, few people would notice; but the cumulative effect (especially if the rhythm section is "sympathetic" and slows down with the horns) can be huge. What was once a brisk (or correct) tempo eventually becomes lazy, and everyone wonders who's to blame.

Truth is, the blame can often be placed on many ties and dots that get elongated too much. For example, when you tie an offbeat eighth to a quarter, you're only adding 1 triplet to the value – but the tie on the page makes it look a lot longer than that!

4. Stiff Downbeats

What's a "Stiff Downbeat" anyway? (hmm ... a jazz magazine for corpses? ... <rim shot>) But seriously, folks ... there are two ways to make a downbeat eighth-note stiff (when it shouldn't be, of course):

1. Make it staccato.
2. Accent it incorrectly.

When young players make each downbeat eighth staccato in a passage of 8th-notes, the result is obviously square. But the more common problem is not playing blatantly staccato; it's playing *less than full value*. Downbeat eighths should be full-length and connected to the next note, as though a string were attached. Any break in the flow is a problem that needs fixing.

So why do downbeat eighths get short-changed in length? Probably because they are *not accented* – and playing them shorter is usually a misguided attempt to "un-accent" them.

And that brings us to the issue of accenting eighth-notes (see "Sightreading Jazz" for a comprehensive set of guidelines in swing accents and articulations). Here's an experiment to try with a young band:

* Play a Concert Bb Major scale up and down, with swing eighth-notes.

OK, you've done that (or seen that) a million times before. But now, pay close attention to the accents – chances are, the band will accent the offbeat 8ths going *up* the scale, but they will revert to downbeat accents when coming back *down* the scale. Maybe this is an attempt to “re-orient” after the bar line, but whatever the reason, players need to accent offbeat 8ths consistently. (There are exceptions – see Sightreading Jazz).

5. Playing All Dotted-Quarter Values the Same

Here's an explanation from Sightreading Jazz about how dotted-quarter values are *different* in length, depending on where they occur in the measure:

Dotted quarter-notes in swing are *not all the same value*, even when they are side-by-side.

Downbeat dotted quarter-notes get five triplets; *offbeat* dotted quarters get four triplets. Like eighth-notes, side-by-side dotted quarters vary in length. The quarter-note portion always gets three triplets; the dot (which represents an eighth-note) gets two if on the beat, or one if off the beat, just like a swing eighth-note. For example:



Example - Dividing dotted-quarter values into triplets

This subtle principle can really turn your swing phrasing around. So make sure your players know the differences with dotted quarters – and they make those differences clear when they play the music.

Conclusion

Attack these 5 Un-Swinging Habits in your jazz band and replaces them with the correct interpretations. It does take time to establish the new habits, but it's definitely worth the time and effort. You'll be amazed at how much better your music will swing, and how your students and your audiences will appreciate the difference!