



**Jazz Articles** by Bob Taylor  
from *The Art of Improvisation, Sightreading Jazz, and More!*  
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**Article 25:  
From Classical to  
Jazz**

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## From Classical to Jazz – Making the Transition

by Bob Taylor – ©2006 Visual Jazz Publications

Why do some classical players jump into jazz and run with it, while others struggle to find their bearings?

Classical training is a great place to start in music – a strong foundation of sound, technique, and reading benefits musicians for a lifetime. When adding jazz skills to that foundation, the *listening experience* is essential in making the leap – the more complete the listening experience, the better the transition will be in the long run.

But there is also plenty that a classically trained musician can do in the short-term, while investing in listening. This article focuses on the challenges and solutions for classically trained musicians making the

### The Challenges

Here are the typical challenges that classical players face when they first get into jazz playing:

- Breaking the stereotypes about jazz
- Learning to swing
- Finding the balance between structure & freedom in improvisation
- Reversing the color
- Learning jazz expression
- Listening!

If you are teaching jazz techniques to classically oriented players, or if you're a classically trained musician learning to play jazz, be aware of these challenges so you can overcome them and speed up progress.

► How do we make the transition for classical to jazz?

## Overcoming Jazz Stereotypes

Jazz and classical music are actually more closely related than most people think. Below is a quick comparison taken from *The Art of Improvisation* that highlights similarities and differences.

There are some very interesting parallels in the histories of classical and jazz musics. Understanding these parallels can enrich your improv skills, help you play the right styles for the right tunes, and help you appreciate music of great jazz improvisers. *This is a strong hint for the importance of studying jazz history.* Here are the historical parallels between classical music and jazz, with dates and representative composers and artists listed:

Classical Era	Jazz Era
Baroque -----1600-1750 (Bach, Handel)	Dixieland -----1900-1930 (Armstrong, Morton)
Classical -----1700-1820 (Haydn, Mozart)	Swing/Big Band 1930-1950 (Ellington, Goodman)
Romantic -----1820-1900 (Beethoven, Wagner)	Bebop -----1945-1960 (Parker, Gillespie)
Impressionist --1890-1920 (Debussy, Ravel)	Cool ----- 1955-1965 (Davis, Brubeck)
Expressionist ----1920- (Schoenberg, Webern)	Avant-Garde ----1965- (Coleman, Coltrane)

And here are some similarities and differences between classical music and jazz improvisation:

Similarities	Differences
1) Basic form and structure of compositions	1) Literal rhythms in classical, swing rhythms in jazz
2) Melodic and rhythmic development	2) Improvised solos in jazz pieces
3) Use of expression	3) More freedom for the jazz performer to alter the original melody
4) Major and minor keys and scales	4) Different combinations of instruments used in classical vs. jazz
5) Chord progressions	
6) Solos and accompaniment	

► What challenges do classical players face in learning swing style?

## Learning to Swing

I remember when I made the transition into swing – it was a strange and disorienting experience for me. (I began the transition fairly late in life, when I was a freshman in college.) I’ve written quite a bit about the world of swing phrasing (see articles xxx) ... In this article I’ll focus on a few items that are particularly challenging for classical musicians making the switch.

*Seeing double but thinking triple.* Swing music is written with traditional duple rhythms (quarters and eighths), but it has an underlying framework of triplets.

*Accenting downbeats or offbeats.* Classical music is geared towards downbeat accents – all quarter-note beats are accented, especially 1 and 3. In jazz,

*Laying back on the time.* The classical mentality is usually “don’t be late” – but swing style is sometimes purposely “late” (at least laid back). Learning how to lay back effectively in swing is an important skill (see xxx article).

## Structure and Freedom in Improvisation

Good classical training can be an advantage in learning improvisation. This training helps in learning jazz scales and arpeggios, harmonic theory, and ear training and intervals. Exposure to form and development in classical music is also very helpful in learning tunes and improvising over them. Chord symbols pose a new adventure in learning for classical musicians, but it’s certainly a doable task.

One important challenge for classical players who improvise is getting a balance between structure and freedom. Classical playing is highly structured – you read the notes and add some personal interpretations where appropriate, but it’s largely a matter of following the written music. Jazz introduces improvisation, which initially may sound like there are no rules – no white lines on the road, no budget to balance, no deadlines to meet ... you get the picture.

Therefore, many classical players will immediately gravitate towards jazz patterns and licks for the “safety” factor. For example, I taught an improvisation student not long ago who is a very gifted classical player. He understood what I was teaching but was reluctant to “let go” and start seeing melodic shapes. He felt more comfortable in memorizing jazz patterns and trying to turn them into solos.

## Color “Reversal”

Classical music by nature emphasizes the 1, 3, and 5 (resting tones) of the scale, as well as beats 1 and 3 in the measure (in 4/4 time). Jazz basically turns this process inside out, at least for the improviser – the color tones (2, 4, 6, and 7) are emphasized, as well as the color rhythm spots (beats 2 and 4, and all the offbeats).

Getting the classical student to reverse these points of emphasis can take time – it’s amazing how ingrained the tendencies can be to emphasize the traditional notes and beats. (Come to think of it, that’s true for a lot of jazz musicians as well, who habitually emphasize roots and downbeats ...) Being able to switch the emphasis points makes all the color difference in jazz solos.

## Using Jazz Expression

Here are those familiar “classical” rules for performers:

- Keep your notes even – don’t lose the pitch.
- Keep your vibrato pure.
- Get a full sound – don’t muffle it.
- Use the correct fingerings and positions for your instrument.

And sure enough, jazz turns these rules upside down:

- Bend some pitches.
- Make your vibrato more unpredictable.
- Use half-sounds on occasion.
- Try alternate fingerings to alter the pitch.

For classical vocalists and wind players, learning “jazz vibrato” can be a challenge. Some classical musicians use “auto-vibrato” – every note longer than an eighth-note gets vibrato. Also, the vibrato is full and regular, just like a wave. Jazz vibrato is a lot more variable by nature. Sometimes you give long notes no vibrato; sometimes the vibrato goes right at the end – and sometimes it just happens in unusual places. Vibrato can also be a prelude to bending or sliding pitches in a melody.

## Conclusion

To make the transition – or teach the transition – from classical to jazz, emphasize *listening to jazz*, swing concepts, structure vs. freedom, color reversal, and jazz expression. May your transitions be rewarding!