



Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
from The Art of Improvisation, Sightreading Jazz, and More!
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**Article 31:
High-Definition Jazz**

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High-Definition Jazz

by Bob Taylor – ©2007 Visual Jazz Publications

We're getting spoiled these days ...

It used to be that a certain amount of noise (and sometimes a lot of it) was the norm for our audio and visual experiences, in the “analog world.” For example, here are some of the technology items we used to rely on that are now pretty much obsolete (except for nostalgia ...)

- Vinyl records
- Cassette tapes
- Rabbit-ear antennas
- TV and radio dials
- 16-color computer monitors

In our digital age, we now have the crystal-clear sights and sounds of CDs, DVDs, HDTV, iPods, satellite radio, and more. But the clarity we demand from our recorded sights and sounds is often lacking in our jazz performance, especially when it comes to learning jazz in the public schools.

Blurry Jazz

I give a number of clinics each year with high school, junior high and middle school jazz ensembles. One of the recurring themes (or problems) is what I call “jazz blur” – a lack of focus in the sounds being played.

▶ What is blurry jazz?

Students these days are very familiar with digital concepts: jpeg images, mp3 files, plasma pictures, etc. So, when I hear “out-of-focus” music in their ensemble, I ask them whether they’d rather see a blurred jpeg image or a hi-res photo; or, whether they’d rather listen to a car radio that’s between stations, or their favorite MP3’s.

The answers are obvious – everyone likes precision. *However* ... students don’t usually realize (or even believe) that they can approach “digital” clarity in their performance. That is, until they actually do it – and then you see the jaws drop and the eyes light up with the results. Suddenly, putting up with blurry jazz is not an option any more.

► What are the three main areas of precision to focus on?

So, how do we bring a jazz ensemble into focus? There are three main areas to concentrate on:

- Rhythmic precision
- Pitch precision
- Dynamic precision

Part 1: Rhythmic Precision

OK, I’m in the junior high band room, listening to the jazz band run through the swing tune they are preparing for the upcoming state music festival. Hmm ... a bit rhythmically blurry, it seems.

So here are a few of the things we start to work on in the session ...

- 1) *We start feeling the basic triplet subdivisions.* To do this, we take the tune down-tempo so we can identify where the triplets are and how they fit precisely with the music.
- 2) *We experience the beauty of quarter-notes.* Instead of just tossing quarter-notes and quarter-rests aside as “easy stuff,” we instead live and breathe the triplets inside of them. It’s amazing how even this simple technique clears up the blur, when students buy into the concept. This is especially true for rests – when students truly experience triplets inside rests, the music’s never the same again! Entrances and timings, for example, dramatically improve.
- 3) *We clean up the articulations.* Some articulations are actually written incorrectly in the chart, and others are missing. (For a list of swing articulation guidelines, see the Sightreading Jazz method ...) We get everyone on the same wave-length with shorts and longs, which uncovers 3 basic problems: a) short notes in slower tempos usually need to be played a bit *longer* (fatter); b) short notes in faster tempos need to be played a bit *shorter* (tongue-stops for brass); and c) long notes in latin styles need to be full, not broken.

- 4) We *clear up the optical illusions*. For example, swing dotted-quarter values are not all the same: downbeat dotted-quarter values get 5 triplets; offbeat dotted quarter-values get 4 triplets. When students discover and master this concept, swing phrases lock in even tighter – more focus, less blur.
- 5) We *spend time on time*. In other words, we drill on independent time-keeping, with a few simple exercises:
 - Play 1 or 2 selected beats in a measure, repeating the bar, eyes closed, no tapping or audible cues (strengthens subdivisions during silence)
 - Playing side-by side dotted quarters in swing (5 vs. 4 triplets)

The Rhythmic Grid

Another concept that proves highly valuable with student groups is the *rhythmic grid*, where students think of each note as belonging on a “grid” or intersection of time. For example, the triplet grid of swing arranges the attack and length of every note (and every silence) into a 12/8 subdivision of 4/4.

When students understand exactly where the notes belong, they will feel more confident about putting them there. They will also do a better job of self-correction and even help each other fix rhythmic problems. The result is more enjoyable jazz, with a much higher definition in rhythmic clarity.

Part 2: Pitch Precision

If rhythmic precision is the “horizontal adjustment,” then pitch precision can be thought of as the “vertical hold” (some of us remember that term from the old analog TV sets). There are four important elements of lining up pitches precisely:

- *Tune*: We all know about tuning up before rehearsing, but the responsibility for getting in tune needs to rest with the student first, and director second. And don’t forget the importance of tuning the bass and guitar in the ensemble – we tend to hear them as “hidden” beneath the horn section, so when they are out of tune it affects everyone else.
- *Hear*: Students need to accurately hear the pitches they are playing – *before* playing them. Hearing the wrong pitch is all too common, and it means there’s little chance of actually playing that pitch in tune.
- *Sing*: Especially for horns, but also useful for guitar and bass, the technique of mentally singing the pitches as they are played does wonders for pitch precision.
- *Adjust*: After tuning, hearing, and “singing,” minor adjustments will sometimes need to be made. But more often these should focus on better hearing and singing, rather than constant re-tuning of the instrument.

The result is chords that line up vertically into clear and well-defined harmonies, and melodic lines with integrity.

Part 3: Dynamic Precision

The final remaining frontier in high-definition jazz is *dynamic precision*. Here are three elements of dynamic precision to focus on:

- *Section balance* - From top to bottom within a section, each part should be heard well. For horn sections, make sure the lead part stands out a bit, and make sure that horns are leveled and pointed for the best sound in front of the ensemble. Carefully check the rhythm section balance so each player is at the right level when they play together.
- *Horns vs. rhythm section balance* – In full ensemble passages, make sure no one section or instrument sticks out, and that the volume for the horns balances the volume for the entire rhythm section.
- *Ensemble volume level* – Work on many ranges and shades of dynamics, from very loud to very soft, all with the proper balance among instruments. Also, work on ensemble silence (see “Eliminating Clutter” below ...)

Eliminating Clutter

One of the cool things about digital sound is ... digital silence. No hiss, no crackles, just pure silence to contrast with the pure sound of the music. In ensembles, we can get a lot closer to that pure silence by getting clean cutoffs, and precise rhythms, and by avoiding needless notes from the rhythm section, especially in softer passages. There is much “good silence” trapped inside our music, and it needs to be set free – to set boundaries on phrases and add the ultimate contrasts in what we are playing.

Conclusion

As you think about the three types of precision discussed in this article – rhythmic, pitch, and dynamic – you’ll realize that these are the 3 dimensions of visual jazz: rhythm= length (X), pitch= height (Y), and dynamics = depth (Z). These dimensions hold great power in jazz improvisation, as well.

When you achieve 3-dimensional precision in your ensemble, it’s truly something you can see as well as hear!