

The ARTICULATE Jazz Musician

Mastering the Language of Jazz

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UNIT 3 It Don't Mean a Thing—Basic Swing Conception

GOALS

This unit is focused on beginning to discover, learn, and understand the rhythmic concept of swing eighth notes. In addition, to discover and understand the legato nature of eighth note lines in jazz.

STUDY

Swing it!

Swinging simply refers to the concept of playing the downbeat (or on-beat) eighth notes longer than the offbeat eighth notes, which gives the music a “lilting” sound. Traditionally in jazz, even though the eighth notes should be played unevenly, they are notated (written) as equal eighth notes.

The length of the notes in relation to each other varies at different tempos. At slower speeds, the notes are more uneven. At higher speeds or tempos, the notes become more similar in length. At a medium tempo, it is best to think of two eighth notes being played as an eighth note triplet where the first two notes are tied together.



It's All “Smooth” Jazz

Many young musicians think of jazz as heavily accented music with lots of attack. It is just the opposite. Jazz is mostly a very legato (connected) musical style. Any space in the eighth note lines of a swing arrangement or “chart” will negatively impact the proper style of the music. It is this space that creates a very corny-sounding “ricky-ticky” effect or sound frequently heard in inexperienced ensembles.

Often in concert band instruction for wind instruments, we talk about a TA syllable to help understand articulation. In jazz, we will have more success using the DA (pronounced “DAH”) syllable.

EXPLORE

1) What is the difference in tongue placement between the syllables TA and DA?

A: For most people, TA naturally creates a tongue placement immediately behind the upper teeth. DA typically occurs with the placement of the tongue on the roof of the mouth (further back). Ask the students to experiment with the different syllables and tongue placement.

2) Why does this use of the DA syllable make a difference in the sound that is produced?

A: It encourages musicians to play with a more connected, legato approach and avoid lots of tongue or harsh attacks that are not characteristic of the jazz style.

Key Concept

In swing music, the downbeat eighth note is always longer in duration than the offbeat eighth note. This is the case even if a phrase starts on the offbeat.

Key Concept

Space in an eighth note line is the enemy of swing!

Teaching Suggestions

It will be helpful for students to hear how swing is affected by tempo.

At a slow tempo, two eighth notes would be played similar to dotted-eighth sixteenth notes. At extremely fast tempos, two eighth notes should almost sound equal in length or even eighths. Take time to demonstrate this to them or play audio examples of slow swing and fast swing. Explain the concept of "swinging harder." When students hear this phrase from you or a clinician, it simply means the downbeat needs to be played longer.

Avoid the temptation to have your students accent every downbeat or every offbeat. Neither is correct and will add to the "ricky-ticky" sound that jazz players strive to avoid. Accents are an important part of the jazz language and we will discuss the proper use of them in future units.

In regards to playing in a connected fashion, direct the wind players to first swing the eighth note example in this unit without any tonguing at all. After students get a feel for the swing concept, then you can introduce the DA articulation back into the example. Review and help them understand that even when they tongue it is possible (and necessary) to play a line without space. Similarly, rhythm section players should properly sustain notes so that space does not break up the phrases.

PLAY

In this short music example, be sure to swing the eighth notes and play the articulations exactly as written. Remember, even though you will use a DA tongue in the phrases, there should be no space between notes.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, featuring eighth notes with slurs and accents. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth notes with slurs and accents, starting on G4 and moving through various intervals. The second staff continues the melody, ending with a double bar line. The notation is clear and precise, emphasizing the swing feel and articulation.

UNIT 4 The Jazz Articulation Rule—DA and AH syllables

GOALS

Students discover and work to memorize the Jazz Articulation Rule so they have a clear understanding of this important aspect of jazz articulation. Students can review and practice with the most common jazz syllables, DA and AH, and understand the difference between these two syllables.

STUDY

The Rule

When it comes to jazz articulation, it all boils down to one simple rule:

Always slur from the offbeat eighth note to the downbeat eighth note.

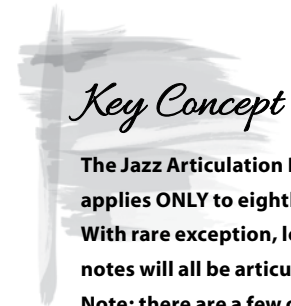
That's it—one rule. If you can remember this, you are already well on your way to becoming an articulate jazz musician!

The First Two Jazz Syllables

As mentioned in Unit 1, you will be using syllables to master the jazz language. The first is the syllable for an articulated note: DA. Notice how when you say "DA" the sound begins with the tongue and the "D" sound. The next syllable to learn is for slurred notes: the AH syllable. It's easy!

In the following exercise there are no articulation markings. So, how do you know what to articulate? Start by applying the jazz articulation rule to the eighth notes by articulating the offbeat eighth notes and slur to the downbeat eighth notes.

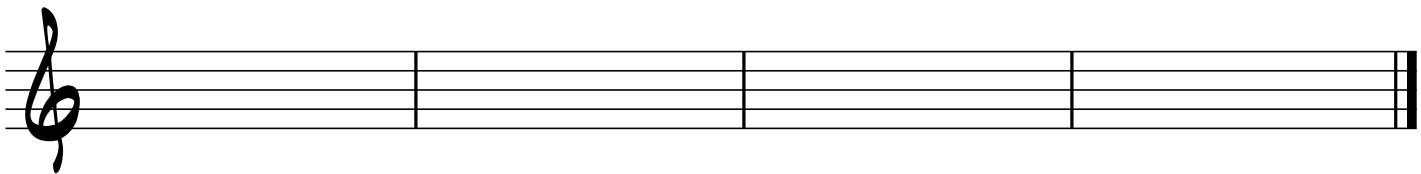
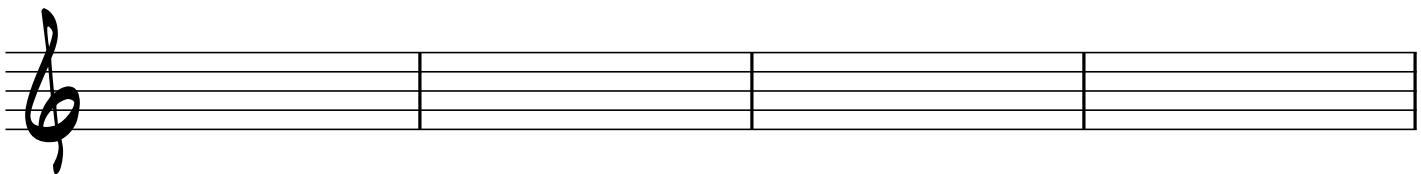
What is a phrase? A phrase is a grouping of consecutive melodic notes. Another explanation is any group of notes with silence on either end. An analogy to language text would be a sentence. Each phrase in this exercise starts with an articulated (DA) note. Also, in this exercise, any notes longer than an eighth note should all be articulated by using the DA syllable.



The Jazz Articulation Rule applies ONLY to eighth notes. With rare exception, longer notes will all be articulated. Note: there are a few other exceptions to the rule we'll discuss later.

EXPLORE

Compose (yes, write the notes!) eight measures of rhythm—use only eighth notes, half notes, and whole notes. Do not use any rests. And be able to say the jazz syllables for the rhythm you notate. Keep it simple by using only three or four pitches. You can write on the same line or space or vary the notes, your choice.



In the space provided below the notes, write in the proper jazz syllables for the exercise in this unit. When you have it correct, say the syllables for the entire exercise in a medium tempo with a metronome or someone keeping the beat.

PLAY

Play the Unit 4 Exercise, "Strollin'."

CD Use: For the Unit Exercises (Units 4–17) on the CD, each unit includes two tracks for each unit. A DEMO track with tenor sax, piano, bass, and drums. This track is provided so all students can listen, learn, and imitate the articulation, phrasing, and style of the professional musicians. The PLAY-ALONG track is minus the melody saxophone so that student can play along with the professional rhythm section.

Teaching Suggestions

The fastest way to teach your students proper jazz articulation is through the use of well-defined jazz articulation syllables. These syllables replicate the tonguing of wind players but should be mastered by all students, including the rhythm section, as they will be required to match the articulation on their own instruments.

Jazz articulation syllables connect the visual and aural skills of your students and will immediately improve their sight-reading. By "singing" the syllables of every piece before playing it, students are allowed to focus on style and articulation, making it much quicker to learn their music. Also, as you might guess, this is a fantastic rehearsal technique when you are worried about wearing out the chops of young brass players.