

Interpretation of Jazz Band Literature

by
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Introduction

The jazz band of today is required to play many different styles of music from swing in varying tempos, through all forms of rock and funk. Many jazz band players, directors, and teachers have been exposed to the printed music page only from an orchestral point of view during their formal musical training. This is where the problem originates concerning the reading, interpretation, and stylizing of jazz band music because in some forms, the notation found on the page is not literally what is to be played. The notation as well as the markings for interpretation and articulation as found on the jazz band page are many times completely different in meaning from those found in orchestral music. This is complicated by the fact that publishers of jazz band literature have yet to come to a meeting of the minds concerning a standardized system for notation and articulation. It is imperative that jazz band players and directors become familiar with the various jazz band styles by listening to recordings of jazz bands. One of the most important things involved with playing jazz band music is to really develop an understanding of the music, and to know basically what it is supposed to sound like. Without this basic understanding, effective interpretation is nearly impossible, and is always frustrating. The following pages provide general guidelines and basic principles for the interpretation of jazz band notation, articulation, and style, and should make jazz band playing easier and more enjoyable. It is not my intention to have all jazz bands sound exactly alike, but rather to untangle the web of confusion surrounding jazz band literature.

Finally, the most important thing to remember is that the “music” is not that which is printed on the page, but rather the sound that comes from the band. What is on the page is to define the music. Don’t be a slave to the page. Get to know the music!

Articulation Markings

The following discussion of articulation markings relates to all forms and styles of jazz band literature. Unfortunately, writers, arrangers, and publishers have not standardized to one set of guidelines as far as articulation markings are concerned. This has resulted in a basic lack of understanding among many students and teachers alike. The following approach to articulation is simple and logical and should clarify jazz band literature greatly. It is important to remember that there is no way that a writer can write on the page exactly how he wants a passage or a particular note played. It is rather the idea of suggesting as accurately as possible the desired effect by the use of standard markings. The following definitions of standard markings will also serve as a guide to the player for making additional markings on the page that will make the music easier to read and more logical. In addition, for the band that has accepted any standardized articulation approach, there will be a much greater ease in switching parts from one player to another because markings will be consistent from one part to the next.

There are four primary articulation markings: the tenuto and the accent, which are to be used on long or full value notes, and the staccato and the marcato, which are to be used on short or less than full value notes.

Legato (tenuto mark)

Notice in example a-1 that all notes are marked legato. Each note should be played full value, without separation, and with a very light re-attack on each note. The legato marks over the half notes are actually unnecessary, seeing that the notes of this length should be held full value anyway. By using the word “legato” as well as the phrase mark over the phrase in example a-2, the legato marks over the notes are unnecessary.

Example a-1



Example a-2



Example a-3



Accent

Example a-3 keeps the same legato, swing feel as found in examples a-1 and a-2; however, accents are added to several notes that need emphasis. Notice that the accent marking combined with the legato mark over the quarter notes to insure that they will be played long, not short as they normally would be in a swing chart.

The first line of example a-4 demonstrates how detached quarter notes, (both legato and legato accented) are commonly written. In all three lines of the example below, the first measure notes

Example a-4



are legato and the second measure notes are legato accented. The third line below shows how sometimes the word “detached” written on the part will achieve the same effect. Notice how the staccato and marcato are not used in conjunction with the accent or legato marking.

Staccato and Marcato

Staccato and marcato (cap) should be found only on notes with a duration of one beat or less and generally suggest that the note is to be played less than its full written value. The staccato note should be given half the written value and should receive no added emphasis. The marcato on the other hand is to be given added emphasis, and in most writing, suggests slightly longer duration, approximately two-thirds of a beat which is variable depending on tempo. The second line of example a-5 shows literally how the first line should be interpreted: half value on staccato notes and increased duration and volume on marcato or capped notes.

As mentioned earlier, the marcato and staccato should be used only on notes with duration of one beat or less. Perhaps the most common

Example a-5

Musical notation for Example a-5. The top staff is a melody line in 4/4 time with a 'SWING' tempo marking. It features four measures with accents (^) over the notes. The bottom staff is a bass line with marcato markings (m) under the notes. The first measure has four eighth notes with marcato markings. The second measure has four eighth notes with marcato markings. The third measure has a quarter note with a marcato marking. The fourth measure has a quarter note with a marcato marking.

misuse is demonstrated in example a-6 where the marcato is used where there should have been an accent.

Infrequently Used Articulation Combinations

In this section we will discuss several infrequently used combinations of articulation markings. These markings are found more frequently in older charts and manuscripts, but have found their way into some of the more contemporary jazz band literature.

Example a-6

Musical notation for Example a-6. The top staff is labeled 'WRONG' and shows a melody line with accents (^) over the notes. The bottom staff is labeled 'RIGHT' and shows the same melody line with accents (^) over the notes and a marcato marking (m) over the final note.

Example a-7 shows the marcato (cap) over the staccato. This simply means that the note is to be short, and hit very hard. This could also be written as an eighth note with a marcato as shown below. The intent here is to avoid the added duration normally given to a capped note.

Example a-7

Musical notation for Example a-7. The first staff shows a quarter note with a marcato marking (m) over it. The second staff shows an eighth note with a marcato marking (m) over it.

Example a-8 shows once again the accent with the legato to distinguish it from a short quarter note commonly found in swing passages.

This could be written also as a quarter with an accent because in order to define the note as being short, we would use just the cap.

Example a-8

Musical notation for Example a-8. The first staff shows a quarter note with a marcato marking (m) over it. The second staff shows a quarter note with an accent marking (^) over it.

Example a-9 shows a marcato over a legato mark and is a contradiction in markings. What is most commonly meant by this is that the note is to be held full value and is to be hit hard or played with emphasis as shown in the first measure on the second line. Another use for this is to suggest that the note be played long, yet detached from the following note with added emphases as in the second measure of the second line below.

Example a-9

Musical notation for Example a-9. The first staff shows a quarter note with a marcato marking (m) over it. The second staff shows a quarter note with a marcato marking (m) over it and a legato marking (>) over it. The third staff shows a quarter note with a marcato marking (m) over it and a legato marking (>) over it, followed by a quarter note with a marcato marking (m) over it.

Example a-10 shows the accent used with the staccato and is another contradiction in markings which should not be used. When it is used however, it usually means that the note is to be played short with added emphases. This note should be marked simply with a cap as shown below.

Example a-10

Musical notation for Example a-10. The first staff shows a quarter note with a marcato marking (m) over it. The second staff shows a quarter note with an accent marking (^) over it.

Remember that the definitions and applications of the articulation markings that we have discussed apply to all styles of jazz band

music. Although actual note values may fluctuate somewhat from style to style, the articulation markings stay essentially the same.

Note Values

At a very early age many of us get into the very bad habit of not holding notes out for their full value. It is even understood in some bands that a dotted half note for example will be held until the third beat rather than holding for its full value through the third beat and cutting it off at the beginning of beat four. Many writers and arrangers have gotten into the habit of adding an eighth note to a half note, for example, just so that the note will be given two full beats. This would not be necessary if we as players would just give notes their full value. Example b-1 shows on a time line where note values should ideally be cut off. We must understand that at each beat, at that precise time, a beat is beginning AND a beat is ending. For a whole note we know that it must be held out four beats, but we tend to cut it off as we say "four" rather than holding it through the fourth beat to the first beat of the following measure.

Example b-1

Here are some possible exceptions:

The time line above shows exact note values and as a rule should be adhered to when reading. As you become familiar with jazz band styles,

you will become aware of circumstances where note values need not be interpreted literally. Phrasing, interaction between parts, and the individual interpretation of the director will at times necessitate the change of note values. When changes of this kind are made, the new duration or cut-off should be marked in everyone's part! Usually all that is needed is to write in a dash and the beat number of the cut-off as shown in example b-2.

Example b-2

When in cut time counting in two, cut-offs should be marked as if counting in four on all parts marked. This standardizes cut-offs from part to part, and also minimizes awkward markings such as "off on 2 3/4" when what is actually meant is "off on 4 1/2".

Special Markings, Effects, And Embellishments

This section deals with defining and explaining the following special markings and effects:

Drops, Falls, Doits, Bends, Squeezes, Glissandos, Turns, Shakes.

Please keep in mind that although we can provide examples and explanations of these effects and markings, there is no way in which we can show exactly how each of these effects will be played because they all can take on different characteristics and variance depending on style, tempo, and personal preference. As mentioned in the introduction, familiarity with jazz band music through listening is the key to effective interpretation.

Drop

The drop or short drop is perhaps the most common special marking found in jazz band literature today and is usually found on notes of one beat or less. Playing the drop involves establishing the pitch and forcing the pitch down as much as an octave, usually within one beat or less. For

reeds this is done chromatically with notes slurred and/or with the lips, while the trombones use the lip and the slide, and the trumpets use the lip and sometimes half-valves or “flying fingers”. It is also important to maintain volume through the duration of the drop or fall. The drop is illustrated in example c-1.

Example c-1



Example c-2



The drop or short drop is occasionally used at the end of a sustained pitch and would be written as in example c-2. In this example, the drop begins on beat three.

Fall

The fall or long fall is done in the same manner as the short drop except that it generally requires that the points at which the fall begins and ends be understood or clearly marked. The general rule of thumb is that the pitch is held for half of the note value and the fall begins and continues through the second half of the note value. Example c-3 shows two ways in which long falls are usually written, the first of which being the easiest to understand for very long falls, and the second being used more frequently for long falls of shorter duration.

Example c-3



Example c-4 shows a drop into a note, or a “plop”. At the beginning of this drop, there should be no actual pitch established. Usually the drop

Example c-4



into a note will begin one-half beat before the written note unless otherwise marked.

Doit

The doit (pronounced “doyt”) is the opposite of the drop or fall. Unless specifically marked, the duration of the doit will be determined by the shape and length of the mark. For longer doits, establish the pitch and hold for the first half of the note value, and begin doit at the beginning of the second half of the note value and continue to end of note value as in the long fall.

Example c-5



Bends

Example c-6 shows the standard bend. This is played by establishing the pitch, lipping the pitch down one-half step, and returning to the written pitch within the time value of the written note.

The bend into a note as shown in example c-7 is played by beginning the attack just before the written time of the beginning of the note and begins with the pitch one-half step lower than the written pitch.

Example c-6



Example c-7

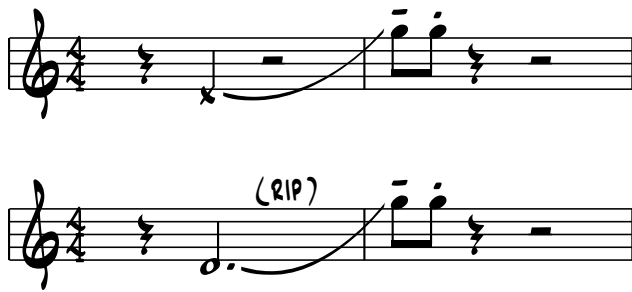


Occasionally, the standard bend marking will be used when actually what is desired is a bend into a note.

Squeeze

The effect of the squeeze is achieved by the use of half-valves for the trumpets, use of the slide for trombones, and legato chromatics with no pitch definition for the reed players. There is no actual pitch established at the beginning of the squeeze when written as in the first two measures of example c-8 below. The last two measures of the example show the squeeze going between two definite pitches. This is sometimes called a “rip” (see example c-8).

Example c-8



Glissando

The glissando is a fast, out of tempo, legato chromatic run from one established pitch to another. It can be ascending or descending and is written in several ways as shown in example c-9.

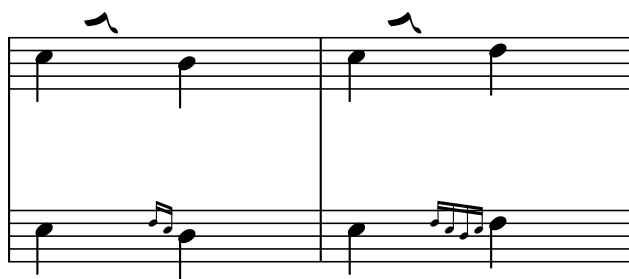
Example c-9



Turns

The turn in jazz band literature is played as shown in example c-10. These examples show a slight departure from standard orchestral interpretation.

Example c-10

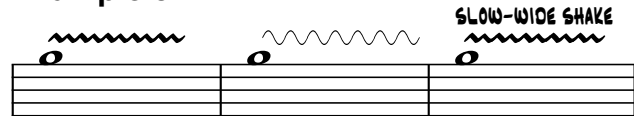


Shake

For brass players, the shake is a lip trill between the written pitch and the next highest overtone on the instrument. For reed players, the shake is a trill between the written pitch and a minor third higher unless otherwise marked. The

regular shake as written in the first measure of example c-11 is a fast, unmeasured trill. When a slow wide shake is desired, it will be written as in the second or third measures of the example, and is not limited to the minor third or even a fifth.

Example c-11



Swing

Swing is probably more difficult to read and interpret than any other style because of the simple fact that in many cases, what is printed on the page is not literally what is supposed to be played. There are two areas where the player is automatically supposed to play figures differently than what actually is written on the page. The first deals with triplet feel (swing eighth notes) and the second, with duration of notes, specifically long eighth notes, and short quarter notes. We will begin our discussion with the swing eighth notes.

Swing Eighth Notes

The top line of example d-1 demonstrates how eighth notes would be written on a swing chart. The bottom line puts the example in 12/8 time to demonstrate how the swing eighth notes would be literally written and actually played. Notice the tempo marking of quarter note = 80. At this slow tempo, the triplet feel can be easily felt. As the tempo increases however, it becomes increasingly more awkward to maintain the triplet feel, and the eighth notes tend to become more even. By the time the tempo reaches half note = 144, the eighth notes in this example would be almost completely straight. Some inexperienced players believe that the triplet feel must be maintained at all tempos, but this is not true. When trying to maintain a

Example d-1



strict triplet feel on eighth notes at faster tempos, the result will be an awkward and labored feel that doesn't swing. The accents found on the second line of the example are to be played very lightly, and generally should not be played at faster tempos. An awkward feel is the result of off beat accents being played at fast tempos.

Swing Note Values

The second main area in our discussion of swing involves actual lengths of eighth notes and quarter notes. The basic rule is that quarter note equivalents are to be played shorter than full value unless they are specifically marked long, and eighth notes are to be played long unless followed by a rest or specifically marked short. Short quarter notes are usually to be given two-thirds of a beat, or a bit more duration than if they were marked staccato. As the tempo increases, realize that the actual duration of the short quarter note will proportionately become less and less. Many players are playing these quarter notes too short which results in a very choppy, rigid, and un-swinging

feel. The top line of example d-2 shows a typical jazz band line written as it would be on a jazz band part. The bottom line puts the example in 12/8 time to demonstrate how these figures would be literally written and actually played. Notice that all quarter notes and quarter note equivalents are played short, all connected eighth notes not followed by a rest are played long, and that the last eighth note in the second measure (which is followed by a rest) is played short.

Each of the first three measures in example d-3 contains one eighth note which is followed by a rest. In these circumstances, the eighth notes are to be played as if they were short quarter notes (or quarter note equivalents). Even though eighth notes may be marked with a staccato as in the third measure, they must be given the duration of a short quarter note (roughly two-thirds of a beat), rather than that of a staccato eighth note (roughly one fourth of a beat). Be sure that there is no separation before the last eighth note in the third measure.

Example d-2

Example d-3

Example d-4



Exceptions to Swing Eighth Notes

When playing a swing chart, connected eighth notes are to be played with a swing or triplet feel, the extent being determined by the tempo as discussed earlier. The only exception to this is when connected eighth notes are written with staccato, legato, marcato, or accent marks over the notes. When this occurs, as shown in example d-4, the eighth notes should be played evenly or straight. This holds true even in the last measure of the example where the markings are mixed. Usually when even eighth note figures come up in a swing chart, the writer or arranger will write the words **EVEN EIGHTHS** over the figure to avoid possible confusion.

Dotted Eighth and Sixteenth Figures on Swing Charts

When dotted eighth and sixteenth figures are written on swing charts, they usually are used to approximate the swing triplet feel. Unfortunately, this leads to a literal interpretation resulting in a very rigid, choppy feel. When the dotted eighth and sixteenth figures appear, interpret them as swing eighth notes unless specifically marked “**AS WRITTEN**”.

Latin

The playing of latin music basically requires that you play what is on the page. The parts are usually marked clearly for articulation, phrasing, and interpretation. Although different forms of latin music have subtleties and basic rhythmic differences, the player can remain quite accurate by playing what is written. Eighth notes are played evenly and quarter notes are given full value unless otherwise marked. Occasionally, a latin chart will switch to a swing feel. This should be clearly marked, and should be approached as discussed in the section on swing. It is important to become familiar with latin styles by listening to recordings to become acquainted with the subtleties and rhythmic differences between latin styles.

Rock and Funk

Most forms of rock and funk are based on a straight eighth or sixteenth note feel. There are, however, some forms which take on a triplet or swing feel in the underlying eighth or sixteenth note patterns. These types of variances would be clearly marked on the part.

Articulation and note markings as discussed earlier hold true to all forms of rock and funk. Familiarity with different forms of rock and funk is of course necessary so that figures and notes can be interpreted characteristically, especially when articulation markings can not accurately describe what is to be played.

One of the most widespread problems with the interpretation of rock and funk styles is that the short notes are played too short. By giving the short notes just a little bit more duration, the total effect of the music will be greatly improved.

Conclusion

No matter what style of music that a jazz band is playing, the players and the director must know what it is supposed to sound like. Spend some time listening to all kinds of music so that you will come to a greater understanding and deeper appreciation of the various styles. The examples and explanations included in the preceding pages are intended to help you to understand the notation of jazz band styles. They are no substitute for getting to know the music. Remember that the “music” is the sound, and the notation on the page is just an approximate definition.

This clinic is provided courtesy of:

The United States Army Field Band
4214 Field Band Drive
Fort George G. Meade, MD 20755-5330

website: www.army.mil/fieldband