

Mike Vax Music Productions

TEACHING JAZZ PERFORMANCE AND IMPROVISATION CONCEPTS THROUGH THE USE OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

DESCRIPTION: Knowledge of jazz history as it relates to accomplishment in lead, section work and improvisation, is a key element to student success in jazz. Teaching from within a chronological order in the development of jazz music proves to be an excellent and enjoyable way to impart understanding about jazz performance.

I have always felt that any musician, who wants to perform up to their full potential, must understand where the music came from and how it has evolved over the years. In the case of jazz music, too many young people think it started with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, or even more extreme - John Coltrane. These musicians were extremely important in the evolution of jazz, but of course they came out of the prior 50 years of musical development before them. We have to go back to before the turn of the century and the early part of the 1900's to find the roots with which to build our musical structure. Then we must learn to play stylistically correct for each different era of jazz development.

EARLY JAZZ IN ITS SIMPLEST FORMS

BASICS:

1. Vocal Tradition: spirituals, work songs and hollers from the days of working as slaves. (These came from African roots.) Church services of the white slave owners.
2. Rhythmic Tradition: patterns also retained from African roots.
3. Military Band Music: a main influence with regard to instrumentation, form, feel, rhythms and presentation.

MUSICAL TRAITS:

1. Improvisation based mainly on the melody, never straying too far from it.
2. Rhythmic content had much to do with a march feel.
3. Trumpet clarinet and trombone each fulfilling their own duties, much as in a marching band.

JAZZ FROM THE "ROARING 20'S" (ALSO KNOWN AS THE "JAZZ AGE")

BASICS:

1. Jazz became the real "pop" music of this era.
2. Mainly played for dancing - rhythms moved away from the march feel and more towards what we now call two beat or traditional jazz.
3. Some bands start adding more pieces - beginnings of the big band idea.

MUSICAL TRAITS:

1. Arrangements starting to be used, rather than just playing by ear.
2. Improvisation is less important than the total arrangement for many of the most popular bands.
3. Solos use a lot of rhythmic variety and not too much of a flowing line. Stabs and punches are prevalent.
4. Much improvisation is based on triads and simple chords, outlying the melody.
5. Some bands, like Louis Armstrong Hot 5 and Hot 7 are breaking new ground by using the chord changes to base improvisation on, instead of just the melody. This is a real break through in the development of jazz improvisation.

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THE BIG BAND OR "SWING" ERA

BASICS:

1. Most bands play for dancing.
2. The big band format is in place: reeds, trombones, trumpets and rhythm section.
3. Sometimes strings are used with the more successful bands.
4. Vocalists and vocal groups are used with many bands.
5. There are more than 300 full time bands in the United States; most are working on the road or in hotels and ballrooms.

MUSICAL TRAITS:

1. Arrangements are used almost entirely.
2. Improvised solos are kept to a minimum, usually only 8 or 16 bars, at most one full chorus.
3. Rhythm section keeps very steady beat for dancers.
4. "Jazz" is not brought out too much. The music is really the "pop" music of its time.
5. There are "hot" bands that play closer to what we know now as big band jazz, and there are "sweet" bands that play music very much for dancing in a much more sedate style, with lots of vibrato.
6. There are some small group players who are starting to stretch out from the "Dixieland" roots that smaller groups had used previously.

THE ADVENT OF BE-BOP

BASICS:

1. Played as an escape from the boredom of playing the arrangements of big bands night after night.
2. Started in "jam sessions" after the regular jobs were over at night.
3. Became very cerebral music - more for the intellect of the musicians, rather than to entertain an audience. (This is what eventually drove the audiences away.)

MUSICAL TRAITS:

1. Many fast tempos with technical virtuosity being shown by playing running 8th note patterns.
2. Chord changes and structures become much more involved.
3. Improvisation definitely based on the chord changes and not the melody.
4. "Quotes" from other tunes become popular with the musicians as a means of joviality and for entertaining each other (and the "hipper" people in the audience).
5. Many tunes are written based on the chord changes of earlier popular "standard" tunes.
6. The rhythm section is freed up to be more creative and not just time keepers.

Mike Vax is an International Artist for the Warburton Company and has performed workshops in over 3000 high schools, colleges and universities over the past 48 years. He has performed with the Stan Kenton Orchestra, the Glenn Miller Orchestra, the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra, the Harry James Orchestra, the US Navy Show Band, and many jazz greats, including Art Pepper, Al Grey, Freddy Hubbard, John Handy, Don Ellis, Don Jacoby, Louie Bellson, Joe Williams, Anita O'Day, Barbara McNair, the Four Freshmen, the Beverly Hills Unlisted Jazz Band, and the Dukes of Dixieland in New Orleans. He has appeared as guest lead trumpet and soloist with symphony pops orchestras around the United States, as well as the All-American Collegiate Orchestra at Disneyworld.

As a recording musician, he has performed on more than 75 albums, including 20 under his own name.

Currently he is leading his own groups: The Stan Kenton Legacy Orchestra, The Mike Vax Big Band, TRPTS (Trumpets), the Great American Jazz Band, The Vax-Romm Combo, and the Mike Vax Quartet, Quintet and Sextet.

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