

Checklist for Beginning through Intermediate jazz students

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One of the most challenging things for young students as they strive to study jazz, is where to begin and what to practice. Often I hear either 'what do I do, where do I begin' or 'there is so much I just don't know where to start'. I have found it most helpful to provide these students a checklist of what needs to be covered. This helps the student and teacher to plan how and what to practice and, even more importantly, how to budget practice time.

The following are areas which any student must address if they are to improve their skills within the jazz idiom. I will list basic areas with specific tasks followed by a suggested practice schedule.

I. LISTENING TO JAZZ MASTERS AND SIGNIFICANT RECORDINGS

I cannot imagine any student wishing to be involved in a creative activity not immersing themselves in examples. An art student seeks out examples by master artists such as Di Vinci, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Picasso or Dali. Writers will read the works of Shakespear, Dickens, Poe, Wilde or Hemingway. The young classical musician will most certainly listen to Hayden, Mozart, Beethoven, Debussy and much more. Unfortunately, many aspiring jazz students don't seem to surround themselves with the examples that will help open their minds and more importantly their ears. Too often the young jazz student is attracted to recordings which, while popular, don't challenge or enlighten them musically. It is up to their teachers and other role models to provide them with the appropriate recordings. Attached is a very brief list of ten small groups and three big band CDs which are considered milestone recordings, feature jazz masters, easily available and ones which are assessable for the novice listener. There is no excuse in the time of CD and MP3 players not to listen, and listen a lot.

II. SCALE AND CHORD STUDY

It is vitally important to have a strong grounding in the fundamentals of music. Knowledge of scales and chords is essential for any musician but especially the jazz musician. The jazz player, regardless of level, will be asked as improvisers to be both the performer and composer, and to do so instantaneously. It is not enough to know the various scales and chords but to be able to play and use them without hesitation, without really thinking.

The following are just the basic scales and chords.

- A. Scales - one octave (to both the root and ninth) and full range of the instrument
 1. Chromatic
 2. Major
 3. Dominant (Mixloydian)
 4. Minor (Dorian)
 5. Diminished (half step/whole step - for the more advanced)
 6. BeBop (dominant - for the more advanced)
- B. Chords
 1. Triads (major, minor, diminished, augmented)
 2. Sevenths (major, dominant, minor, diminished)
 3. Ninths (major, dominant, minor)

III. EAR TRAINING

Ear training can take many forms and is the area where most students experience the greatest frustration. Most are impatient, especially if it does not develop easily. Patience, setting goals, going slowly and repetition are the keys to success.

Areas to address are:

- A. Match pitch
 - 1. Be able to sing back a pitch played on a keyboard.
 - 2. Be able to sing back a pitch played by your instrument.
- B. Sing melodies
 - 1. Be able to sing recognizable melodies (Happy Birthday, Star Spangled Banner, etc.) accurately.
 - 2. Be able to sing songs (the melodies) that you are working on in band or privately.
- C. Intervals
 - 1. Be able to recognize intervals from a keyboard and on your own instrument.
 - 2. Be able to sing intervals.
- D. Scales
 - 1. Be able to recognize/distinguish chromatic, major, dominant and minor scales when played on a keyboard or instrument.
 - 2. Be able to sing chromatic, major, dominant and minor scales.
- E. Triads and Seventh chords
 - 1. Be able to recognize/distinguish major, minor, diminished and augmented triads.
 - 2. Be able to recognize/distinguish major, dominant and minor seventh chords.
 - 3. Be able to sing major, minor, diminished and augmented triads.
 - 4. Be able to sing major, dominant and minor seventh chords.
- F. Form
 - 1. Be able to recognize a blues.
 - 2. Be able to hear the beginning and ending of phrases.
 - 3. Be able to find the number of measures in a song and begin to label sections.
 - 4. Recognize traditional song forms (AABA, ABAC, AAB, etc)
- G. Transcribing.
 - Transcribing melodies and solos will sharpen aural and rhythmic skills. Writing out the solos will provide opportunities to improve understanding of notation. Select material to transcribe from recordings you are listening to. Play along with the jazz greats. That is how they learned!

IV. REPERTOIRE

While learning to play scales and chords is essential, it is rarely fun. It is like learning the alphabet and spelling words without reading a sentence or story. Learning tunes can be fun and will help the student to associate the need for learning the basics by actually applying that material. It is especially fun to play tunes that are on the recordings you are listening to. Attached is a very limited but useful list of basic tunes which most students can play. Professionals play them too. Most of these tunes can be found on Jamey Aebersold's Volume 54 - Maiden Voyage and Volume 70 - Killer Joe. Please see the next section for additional information. A more extensive repertoire list can be found in Aebersold's Volume 1.

V. MATERIALS

Never before have there been so many excellent educational materials available to students and teachers. I suggest beginning your jazz education library with the following books and play-along CDs. All of the following are available at www.jazzbooks.com.

- A. Jamey Aebersold play-alongs.
 - 1. Basic material and exercise volumes
 - Volume 1 - Jazz: How to Play & Improvise
 - Volume 2 - Nothin' But Blues
 - Volume 3 - The ii/V7/I Progression
 - Volume 24 - Getting It Together
 - 2. Jazz standard tunes - assessable yet challenging for the novice
 - Volume 54 - Maiden Voyage
 - Volume 70 - Killer Joe
- B. Jim Snidero Series
 - 1. Jazz Conception - 21 solo etudes with professional accompaniment
 - 1. Easy Jazz Conception - a more assessable version
- C. Jerry Coker
Excellent books on the process of improvisation, with insights and proven suggestions.
 - 1. Improvising Jazz
 - 2. How to Listen to Jazz
 - 3. The Jazz Idiom
 - 4. How to Practice Jazz
 - 5. Patterns for Jazz
- D. David Baker
 - 1. Improvising Jazz - a complete text for study
- E. Dan Haerle
 - 1. Jazz Piano Voicings - excellent resource for both the pianist and non-pianist
 - 2. Pocket Guide to Jazz Improvisation - convenient jazz handbook
 - 3. Scales for Improvisation
 - 4. Jazz Language
- F. Other books
 - 1. Charlie Parker Omni-Book
 - 2. Phil DeGreg - Jazz Keyboard Harmony
 - 3. Mike Tracy - Jazz Piano Voicings for the Non-Pianist
 - 4. Rufus Reid - The Evolving Bassist
 - 5. John Goldsby - Bass Notes
 - 6. Mark Levine
 - A. The Jazz Theory Book
 - B. The Jazz Piano Book

VI. PRACTICE SCHEDULE

It is essential that you practice, not just play, everyday. While playing in your school band is helpful, it is not the same as focused, personal practice time. Students repeatedly ask ‘how much time’ and ‘how do I spend my time’. Following are two suggested practice routines, one each for thirty, forty-five and sixty minutes. I find most students have a difficult time focusing their attention for more than a half hour, so I recommend practicing more frequently for shorter periods of time. It is not the amount of time that is important but what is accomplished. The key is practicing everyday and setting challenging but attainable goals. Don’t forget to use a metronome and tuner!

- A. Thirty Minute Practice Time
 - 1. 5 minute warm up - long tone and melodic playing which focuses on tone production
 - 2. 10 minute scale and chord practice
 - 3. 10 reading melodies and exercises
 - 4. 5 improvising or other challenging items
- B. Forty-five Minute Practice Time
 - 1. 5 minute warm up - long tone and melodic playing which focuses on tone production
 - 2. 10 minute scale and chord practice
 - 3. 10 reading melodies and exercises
 - 4. 10 improvising or other challenging items
 - 5. 10 transcribing or playing along with recordings
- C. Sixty Minute Practice Time
 - 1. 5 minute warm up - long tone and melodic playing which focuses on tone production
 - 2. 15 minute scale and chord practice
 - 3. 15 reading melodies and exercises
 - 4. 15 improvising or other challenging items
 - 5. 10 transcribing or playing along with recordings

It is perfectly fine to adjust the amount of time spent for a specific task like an audition or contest solo. The idea is to address a variety of areas daily. Strive to enjoy practicing!!

I hope that these suggestions will encourage you to consider how and what you practice. There are countless ways to accomplish any one task. The challenge is to fine the way(s) that most effectively gets you the knowledge and experience you seek. It has been my experience that focused practice with specific goals in mind will pay dividends. I want to encourage you to find what works best for you and to enjoy the journey.

Please feel free to visit my web site at www.michaeltracy.com. I frequently update my education page with helpful items and links to other useful sites. Let me know how you are doing and don’t be afraid to ask for advice.

SUGGESTED RECORDINGS

Big Bands:

Count Basie - Atomic Basie

Duke Ellington - Such Sweet Thunder

Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra - Consummation

Small Groups:

Miles Davis - Kind of Blue

with Miles Davis - trumpet, John Coltrane - tenor sax ,
Cannonball Adderley - alto sax, Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly - piano,
Paul Chambers - bass, Jimmy Cobb - drums

Herbie Hancock - Maiden Voyage

with Herbie Hancock - piano, Freddie Hubbard - trumpet,
George Coleman - tenor sax, Ron Carter - bass, Tony Williams - drums

Joe Henderson - Page One

with Joe Henderson - tenor sax, Kenny Dorham - trumpet,
McCoy Tyner - piano, Butch Warren - bass, Pete La Roca - drums

Wes Montgomery - Smokin' At The Half Note

with Wes Montgomery - guitar, Wynton Kelly - piano,
Paul Chambers - bass, Jimmy Cobb - drums

Charlie Parker/Dizzy Gillespie - Jazz At Massey Hall

with Charlie Parker - alto sax, Dizzy Gillespie - trumpet,
Bud Powell - piano, Charles Mignus - bass, Max Roach - drums

John Coltrane - Blue Trane

with John Coltrane - tenor sax, Lee Morgan - trumpet,
Curtis Fuller - trombone, Kenny Drew - piano,
Paul Chambers - bass, Philly Joe Jones - drums

Horace Silver - Song For My Father

with Horace Silver - piano, Carmell Jones - trumpet,
Joe Henderson - tenor sax, Teddy Smith - bass, Roger Humphries - drums

JJ Johnson - The Eminent Jay Jay Johnson

with JJ Johnson - trombone, Clifford Brown - trumpet,
Jimmy Heath - tenor sax, John Lewis - piano, Percy Heath - bass,
Kenny Clarke - drums

Clifford Brown/Max Roach

with Clifford Brown - trumpet, Max Roach - drums, Harold Land - tenor sax
Richie Powell - piano, George Morrow - bass

Sonny Rollins - Night At The Village Vanguard - Volume 1 & 2

with Sonny Rollins - tenor sax, Wilber Ware - bass, Elvin Jones - drums

SUGGESTED REPERTOIRE

Afternoon In Paris - John Lewis
Autumn Leaves - Johnny Mercer
Blue Bossa - Kenny Dorham
Blue Moon - Rogers & Hart
Cantaloupe Island - Herbie Hancock
Doxy - Sonny Rollins
Footprints - Wayne Shorter
The Girl From Ipanema - Antonio Carlos Jobim
I've Got Rhythm - George Gershwin
Impressions - John Coltrane
Killer Joe - Benny Golson
Ladybird - Tadd Dameron
Misty - Erroll Garner
Maiden Voyage - Herbie Hancock
Perdido - Juan Tizol
St. Thomas - Sonny Rollins
Satin Doll - Duke Ellington
So What - Miles Davis
Solar - Miles Davis
Song For My Father - Horace Silver
Sugar - Stanley Turrentine
Summertime - George Gershwin
Sweet Georgia Brown - Bernie/Pinkard/Casey
Take the 'A' Train - Duke Ellington
Tune Up - Miles Davis
Watermelon Man - Herbie Hancock
You Stepped Out Of A Dream - Brown/Kahn

Blues

All Blues - Miles Davis
C Jam Blues - Duke Ellington
Bags Groove - Milt Jackson
Blue Monk - Thelonious Monk
Blues By Five - Red Garland
Freddie Freeloader - Miles Davis
Mr. PC - John Coltrane
Now's The Time - Charlie Parker
Sonny's Blues - Sonny Rollins