

ARTICULATIONS:

How To Better Express Yourself

One of the special features of jazz music is the articulation that the various players use in expressing themselves through their music. Some players enjoy using the standard swing style articulation very common to the Swing and Bebop eras, others use little articulation relying on legato or slurred phrases, some use staccato in their playing to add interest or emphasize certain notes or phrases.

Most all players eventually arrive at a style of articulation that is suitable for expressing themselves. Young players often struggle with getting the various muscles to respond at the precise time the fingers touch the keys, be it saxophone, trumpet, piano, guitar or whatever. Think of articulation as proper enunciation. No one enjoys listening to a speaker or a musician who cannot properly or effectively get his message across because his mind is not coordinated with his voice, lips, fingers, breath, etc.

Some players seem to have a natural ability to articulate in the jazz idiom. These players usually have listened to records and have etched into their minds the common, most used styles of articulation of the MAJOR jazz musicians. In incorporating these past styles of articulation into his own concept of playing music, he often will borrow a little here, a little there, and some of his own, and in the end be able to play out of several bags, as it were.

One major stumbling block that may be turned into a stepping stone is the player's use of too much tonguing tat tat tat or tut tut tut. Note: For keyboard, bass, guitar, and others, "tonguing" in this article can mean Attack or Emphasis. When you play several tongued notes in a row (one right after the other), the effect is a choppy feel. The music of the past forty to fifty years has been leaning toward a more relaxed, legato, smooth sound and flow. When I hear a player play phrases with the tat tat or tut tut articulation, I immediately feel this person has not had a chance (or has not taken the time) to hear jazz music as it has been played over the past forty years by the major jazz players. He should be tonguing legato style - tah tah tah or tu tu tu. Jazz is still basically an aural art form and the chances for you to be a jazz player without listening to the music that has come before you are very slim. With all the records on the market today there is no excuse to not be aware of the various schools of articulation and the main exponents.

When a note is tongued it naturally emphasizes that tone. It makes it stand out from the notes preceding it and the notes following it. By practicing the following exercises, listening to jazz musicians on record and in live performance who play the same instrument that you do, experimenting with articulation in general and keeping an open mind, I feel you can improve your playing and in the process be happier with the music you are playing. Good articulation definitely improves communication between performer and listener!

All of these exercises should be played with a metronome. Begin slowly and gradually increase the tempo. Don't increase the tempo too rapidly. Make sure you are listening to yourself as you play. The articulation has to become AUTOMATIC before it will begin to sound natural. Don't rush or force the exercises. Eventually, make up your own exercises and move the accented notes around in the scale. Gradually broaden the scale to include two octaves and then move on to include your entire instrument's range! I feel it is a good idea to begin with a fairly heavy accent, then medium, then light. For those who haven't done this before, they need to hear what an accent sounds like, and by playing heavy at first the idea seems to come in focus quicker.

Several players who I really made significant contributions in the flow of jazz articulation are: Cannonball Adderley, Sonny Rollins, Phil Woods, Freddie Hubbard, Clifford Brown, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dave Liebman, Wes Montgomery, Herbie Hancock, Lee Morgan, Ron Carter, Art Farmer, Lee Konitz, Charlie Parker, Clark Terry, J.J. Johnson, Slide Hampton, Woody Shaw, Kenny Dorham, McCoy Tyner, Ornette Coleman, Horace Silver and Joe Henderson. The list goes on and on, but when I think of these players and others I haven't mentioned, one of the outstanding features is their articulation and how it relates to the jazz tradition. Try to get the sound, Sound, SOUND in your ear!! You learn more about articulation from listening to music than from reading about it or even verbalizing. Opening your ears is one of the key ingredients in becoming a jazz musician.

You want to get to the point where you can instantly accent (heavy, medium, light, staccato, legato, breath, throat, stab, jab, etc.) any note or group of notes anytime you choose without disrupting the FLOW and FEEL of your melodic lines.

MOST IMPORTANT: Don't get stuck practicing the G major scale or the chromatic scale. Use (practice) these articulation exercises over ALL scales and chords in ALL keys. Remember, we improvise in all keys, not just the easy ones. Don't we?

Tongue every other note on the up beats.

Tongue the 4th note.

1.  2. 

Chromatic — every other note on up beats.

3. 

Random tonguing

4. 

Random tonguing

5. 

Chordal exercises

6. 

A good order for practicing would look like this: Major, Dom. 7th, Minor (Dorian), Lydian dom., Lydian, Whole tone, Diminished, Dim. whole tone. Practice going from one scale right into the next like this:

Use any of the suggested articulations for the exercise below, or, change articulations every two bars.

7. 