

## Practising Jazz

by Jakob

I'm not a great jazz musician. I just like jazz music and try to play it. Here I'd like to share my experience in practising jazz and suggest some useful materials. Partly the focus is on clarinet and saxophone but there are similar exercises for other instruments.

Some of the materials may be out of print but often can be found in music libraries or purchased online. I hope my recommendations are helpful. They are not intended as an advertisement for music publishers.

I'll be glad if others can benefit from my suggestions and we can share our ideas about jazz.

Classic jazz is based on improvisation over the harmonic structure of popular songs, usually twelve-bar blues and 16-bar or 32-bar songs. To play a tune well we must have the chords and related scales already "in our fingers". So before playing a new tune I run through some classical scale and chord exercises in the corresponding key. This gives me more security when I play the tune or try to improvise over its harmonies. With these exercises I sometimes use an electronic tuner to check intonation.

A good book with scale and chord studies for clarinet is "Upbeat Scales and Arpeggios" by Avrahm Galper (containing useful fingerings for Boehm clarinet). For saxophone I can recommend "Gammes et Arpèges" (scales and arpeggios) by Marcel Mule. Similar books are available for all instruments.

But that's not jazz, it's just classical scale study. So how can we actually practise jazz?

Much popular music is based on blues phrases and harmonies, so the Blues is a good starting point for jazz as well. A good book about the Blues in a jazz context is "The Blues Scales" by Dan Greenblatt. It deals with different types of scales and how to apply them in blues tunes and other songs. A CD is included.

For saxophone I can recommend "Playing through the Blues" by Fred Lipsius. It has blues tunes and solos in different keys and tempos with information about fingerings and articulation. It also has a good rhythm section on CD to play along with.

There's not much for clarinet and the best jazz exercises I know are quite old: "Anleitung zur Improvisation für Klarinette" by Werner Dies (in German). The first exercises are rather boring but there are some nice solos.

Most jazz is played in the context of a band. As we usually don't have one at home, a recorded rhythm section can serve as a substitute. There are two main publishers of such jazz play-along sets. The Jamey Aebersold series offers older recordings by good musicians, many of them famous jazzmen. The style is rather modern, and they give the feeling of playing with an authentic band. I especially recommend the Duke Ellington set. It has beautiful music and an excellent rhythm section including Kenny Barron on piano and Ron Carter on bass.

Hal Leonard is another publisher of play-along recordings in different styles. I believe they use overdubbing, but the musicians do a good job and the jazz tracks are swinging. I can recommend the Benny Goodman set (especially for clarinet players) and the Horace Silver set with catchy bluesy tunes.

There seems to be little material for practising traditional jazz. If you like playing that style look for these play-along sets: "Backup Trax: Traditional Jazz and Dixieland / Early Jazz and Hot Tunes" by Dix Bruce.

There are also computer programmes simulating a band. They offer a large number of tunes with adjustable keys and tempos. However, I'm not convinced of this kind of "computerized" rhythm in jazz. I used such a programme once and it sounded rather mechanical, lacking the swing and feeling that real players can express.

How can we use play-along tracks? To begin with, we chose a tune in a familiar key. The tempo should not be too fast and the harmonies not too complicated. It's easier to communicate with other players if we don't have to look at sheet music all the time, so I recommend learning the melody by heart. We should always start at a slow tempo, paying attention to rhythm, intonation and good sound. Having memorized the tune, we play it with the rhythm section. It's a pleasure to play a beautiful melody with a good band!

Then we take a look at the harmonies, play them as arpeggios and try to understand how they are related to each other. I recommend learning them by heart as well. Based on the harmonies we can develop our own solos. We can play variations of the original melody or completely new melodies over the tune's harmonic structure. In jazz it's often both.

We should start at a slow tempo, dividing the tune into parts of four or eight bars and try to find fitting phrases. This is a slow process at first and it takes a lot of listening to our own playing. We can write the good phrases down and there are also phrasebooks available for different instruments and styles. Eventually we put these phrases together and play a new melody over the tune's harmonies. We can practise and improve our solos with the recorded rhythm section. A good solo has interesting melody and rhythm and is not just a mixture of scales.

On the internet we find many solos by famous musicians for download. (As far as I know improvisations are not under copyright.) If we like a recorded solo we can try to transcribe it but it takes a good musical ear and training and it is often tricky with older recordings. Luckily many professional players share their transcriptions on the Net. We only have to enter the name of the interpreter and the title in a search engine ("ben webster cottontail solo transcription") and then we have a good chance to find the right transcription.

Trying to play these classic solos can be a sobering experience at first. It's not easy to play with the sound and feeling of the Old Masters! But it's definitely inspiring and gives us many ideas for our own solos.

I hope you found some of my suggestions about practising jazz useful. I'll be happy to hear about your comments!

Keep swinging!

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