

## An Introduction to Jazz

### Grade 8 | Lesson Plan 2: Musical Elements

*Adapted from Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum*

#### TOPICS:

1. Basic Elements of Music and Terms
2. Elements of Jazz

#### SESSION OBJECTIVES

The student will:

1. Gain a fundamental understanding of basic musical elements
  - a. Note
  - b. Melody
  - c. Chord
  - d. Accompaniment
2. Gain a fundamental understanding of the musical elements found in jazz, including:
  - a. Improvisation
  - b. Syncopation
  - c. jazz sounds
  - d. rhythm
  - e. harmony

#### MATERIALS

1. Computer with internet connection
2. Speaker system

*Note: This lesson plan includes prompts to play selections from a variety of jazz recordings. Many of the suggested recordings can be found on the Instrumental History of Jazz, which is available as a YouTube playlist, as well as a variety of streaming and/or download outlets including iTunes, Apple Music and Spotify.*

#### INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES:

The instructor will:

1. Explain basic musical elements
2. Discuss basics elements of jazz
3. Play *Wrappin' It Up* and/or *One O'Clock Jump*, pointing out various elements of jazz

#### STUDENT ACTIVITIES:

The students will:

1. participate in a class discussion regarding basic elements of music
2. participate in a class discussion regarding the basic elements of jazz
3. compare improvisation with regular conversation
4. actively attempt and experience syncopation
5. listen to various jazz saxophonists to compare and contrast their individual sounds (tone)

## I. Basic Musical Elements

### A. Note

1. A note is a single pitch of music, e.g., if you strike a single key on the piano, that is one note.
2. Notes can be high (right side of the piano keyboard), low (left side of the piano keyboard), or in the "midrange" (middle of the piano keyboard).
3. Notes can be played on any instrument or sung by the human voice.

### B. Melody

1. A melody is a group of notes played or sung in succession, e.g., when a song is played or sung, the melody you hear is simply a group of notes one after the other.
2. The particular order of notes, as well as the length of each note (i.e., whether it is short, sustains for a long time, or somewhere in between), are what make each melody different and recognizable.
3. When you sing a song aloud, or imagine it in your mind, you are most likely singing or imagining the song's melody.

### C. Chord

1. A chord is two or more different notes produced at the same time.
2. Most instruments (e.g., saxophone, trumpet, trombone, human voice) can only play one note at a time and, therefore, can't play chords; these are referred to as single-note instruments.
3. Instruments that can play chords are piano (just strike more than one key simultaneously) and guitar (just strum across more than one string).
4. Two or more musicians playing single-note instruments can produce a chord together if they each play a different note at the same time; when they do this, they are producing harmony (singers in choirs do this all the time).
5. Chord = Harmony (they are synonymous)
6. Chords help depict the music's emotional content.
  - a. Depending on the particular notes that are played (simultaneously), chords can portray every conceivable emotion, e.g., happy, sad, exciting, mysterious, angry, and many more – even those nuances of emotion for which there are no words (that's why we have music in the first place: to express emotions that are beyond wording).
  - b. Even changing just one note in a chord (say, from the notes C-E-G to the notes C-Eb-G) can change the emotion depicted by the chord drastically.
7. Most chords used in jazz are comprised of 3 to 6 notes.
8. Whereas different notes played in succession are called a melody, different chords played in succession are called a chord progression; in jazz (as well as most popular music), melodies are accompanied by a chord progression (a series of chords).

### D. Accompaniment

1. Whereas the melody of a song (the most distinguishable part of a song) is what's sung or played "up front," all the music in the background is called the accompaniment.
2. The accompaniment consists of all the chords the pianist and/or guitarist play as well as everything else being played behind the melody (what the bassist plays, what the drummer plays, etc.).

## II. Improvisation

### A. Basic Definition

Simply put, improvisation means doing, saying, playing, or singing something extemporaneously, that is, not planned ahead of time.

### **B. Jazz Improvisation is Similar to Conversation**

Jazz improvisation can be considered “musical conversation”

### **C. Learning to Improvise**

Jazz musicians learn how to improvise in a way that is similar to how kids learn how to talk.

1. Young jazz musicians learning how to improvise listen to other jazz musicians improvise and try to imitate them; kids (even babies) learn how to talk by listening to others talk and trying to imitate them.
2. Jazz musicians play their instruments a lot; kids learning how to talk, talk a lot.
3. To play better, jazz musicians study instrumental technique (the physical mechanics of playing an instrument) and music theory (how notes and chords fit together); to speak better, kids study pronunciation and grammar.

### **D. "Hearing" Notes in Your Mind**

1. When jazz musicians improvise, they are playing the notes that they “hear” (imagine) in their mind.
2. They “hear” these notes just a split second before they play them (just like when you are talking, you “hear” the words in your head just a split second before you say them, that is, you are thinking the words in your mind immediately before you speak them.
3. This process happens so fast and so naturally that it seems simultaneous, but in actuality, the thought occurs a microsecond before the action.

## **III. Syncopation**

### **A. Basic Definition of Syncopation**

Jazz musicians like to emphasize the notes that they play on the “upbeats;” that is, if you’re tapping your foot along with the beat of the music, jazz musicians tend to emphasize the notes that occur when your foot is in the air. This is syncopation: accenting upbeats.

### **B. A Simple Example of Syncopation – Try tapping your foot to a steady beat and say:**

1. “oom” every time your foot hits the floor and “pah” every time your foot is in the air (oom-pah oom-pah oom-pah oom-pah...).
2. now, keeping your foot tapping steady, just say the “pahs” when your foot is in the air ( pah - pah - pah - pah - pah...) – this is syncopation.

### **C. Syncopation is Natural for the Jazz Musician**

Syncopation might seem tricky at first, but to the jazz musician it’s as natural as a speaker raising his/her voice to make a point.

### **D. No Syncopation = Boring**

Without syncopation (all accents on the downbeats), jazz would be boring and, well, wouldn’t be jazz.

### **E. When to Syncopate**

Jazz musicians don’t syncopate ALL the time (if they did it would be monotonous). Instead, jazz music involves both syncopated and non-syncopated notes – just which ones to syncopate is up to the player and, once they get good enough, they do this intuitively (that is, without having to think about it; just like fluctuating your voice when talking so you don’t talk in a monotone).

## IV. Jazz Sounds

### A. Jazz Instruments

Although jazz can be played on any instrument (including the human voice), the most common instruments on which jazz is played are saxophone, trumpet, trombone, piano, bass, drums, and guitar.

### B. Particular Sound

The particular sound each jazz musician makes on his/her instrument is as important as the instrument itself.

1. Jazz musicians strive to have their own, personal sound (tone) on their instrument. For instance, every saxophone will still sound like a saxophone no matter who's playing it but every saxophonist will sound different from every other saxophonist (at least slightly). Often you have to listen to jazz a long time to be able to hear the differences, but when you do, it's awesome.
2. The sound can be raspy, edgy, rough, smooth, pretty, soulful, warm, dark, light, harsh, or any one of dozens of other descriptions including combinations of descriptions and an infinite number of nuances – just like the human voice (notice how no two human voices sound exactly the same). Like singers do with their voices, jazz musicians strive to reproduce on their instruments the sound they “hear” (imagine) in their minds.
3. Jazz sounds are hard to describe in words (the descriptors listed above hardly do a good job) – so the only way to really know jazz sounds is to listen to jazz!
4. Listen to recordings by different saxophonists such as **Charlie Parker** (e.g., *Ko-Ko*), **John Coltrane** (e.g., *Giant Steps*), **Sonny Rollins** (e.g., *Saint Thomas*), and **Paul Desmond** (e.g., *Take Five*). Can you tell a difference between them?

## V. Rhythm

### A. The Beat

Most styles of jazz keep a steady beat, that is, if you're tapping your foot along to the beat of the music, it stays constant, not slowing down or speeding up.

### B. Tempo

Tempo is the speed of the beat; jazz tunes can be played at any tempo from extremely slow (ballads) to extremely fast (“burning”).

### C. Swing

Swing is important to jazz and, like so many words in the English language, has several definitions (context determines how the word is being used).

1. The two most common uses of the word “swing” in jazz are:
  - a. when everyone in the band is in sync, playing together and really grooving along with a nice buoyancy, they are said to be “swinging;” swing is integral to a good jazz performance (jazz great Duke Ellington said: “it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing” and wrote a famous jazz tune with that title).
  - b. swing is also a way of playing eighth notes (consecutive notes played on each down and up beat): swing means that while keeping the beat (foot tapping) steady, rather than each note being held for the exact same length of time, the notes falling on the downbeats are held twice as long as those falling on the upbeats, making a long-short, long-short, long-short, long-short pattern and giving the music a kind of lilt; when jazz is played this way, it is said to have a swing feel
2. Like so many things about jazz, swing is hard to describe in words, but when you hear it, you know it.
  - a. For an excellent example of jazz played with a swing feel, listen to Count Basie's *One O'Clock Jump* or *Jumpin' at the Woodside*

- b. For an example of jazz that doesn't swing (in the sense of the second definition above) but is still great jazz, listen to Weather Report's *Birdland* or Herbie Hancock's *Chameleon*
- c. Rather than having a swing feel, this style of jazz has a straight eighth note feel (i.e., the eighth notes are equal value in length, not having the long-short long-short lilt of the swing feel).

#### **D. The Swing Era**

Most jazz is played with a swing feel, in fact, since this way of playing dominated the style of jazz that was performed by the big bands in the 1930s and early 1940s, the period is often referred to as the "Swing Era." For an example of tunes from the Swing Era, listen to:

1. Count Basie's *One O'Clock Jump* and/or Fletcher Henderson's *Wrappin' it Up*, OR
2. Count Basie's *Jumpin' at the Woodside*, Duke Ellington's *Main Stem*, and/or Benny Goodman's *Sing Sing Sing*

## **VI. Form**

### **A. The Tune's Blueprint**

Form is the tune's blueprint, that is, "what gets played when."

1. All jazz musicians must know the form of a tune before they begin playing (otherwise they could "get lost" and not know where they are in the music).
2. While some forms in jazz are complex, most are easy and are standard, especially for combo playing (a combo is a small group consisting of 1 to 4 horn players plus piano, bass, and drums).

### **B. Basic Structure of a jazz tune for a combo:**

1. Most jazz tunes are built on a set of predetermined chords that accompanies the melody (each jazz tune has its own set of predetermined chords).
2. Playing through the set of chords one time is called a chorus (chorus is one of those terms in music that has several different meanings, depending on context. For instance, a chorus can be a group of singers (a choir); in musical theater, the chorus consists of those who sing and dance but don't have a speaking part; in rock and pop music, the chorus is the middle part, often the "hook" of the song (pop tunes most often proceed something like verse-verse-chorus-verse). But in jazz, a chorus is one time through the chords of a song).
3. Playing a jazz tune consists of playing several choruses, one right after the other, with something different occurring during each chorus:
  - a. During the first chorus, the written (composed) melody is played; this melody is called the head.
  - b. Then, on each subsequent chorus, each jazz musician in turn improvises a solo. The solo can last for one chorus, two choruses, three, four – as many as the soloist wants (within reason!). Toward the end of his/her last chorus of improvising, the soloist tapers down the intensity (like being at the end of a story) and nods to another player in the band, signaling him/her to begin his/her solo; this keeps happening until all the musicians in the band who want to take a solo have done so (not everyone has to take a solo). The audience usually applauds at the end of each solo, acknowledging not only that the soloist played well, but also that he/she improvised what was just played!
  - c. After the last musician finishes his/her solo, the band plays the head again – this is the last chorus. When finished, the audience applauds again and, if it was truly an outstanding performance, whistles and cheers as well (even in the most formal concert halls like Carnegie Hall or Lincoln Center in New York).
  - d. In a nutshell, the format of the performance of a jazz tune is: head for one chorus (the first chorus) - improvised solos for several choruses - head for one chorus (the last chorus)

4. A good analogy: Jazz is like a sandwich. The first chorus (head) is like the top piece of bread, the last chorus (head) is like the bottom piece of bread, but what goes in the middle is up for grabs and is the best, most important, and most fun part.

### **C. Arrangement**

For a big band (10 or more instruments), the structure is similar, but because there are so many players, more of the music must be written out ahead of time to keep everybody organized. In jazz, when portions of the music are composed ahead of time, it is called an arrangement