

An Introduction to Jazz

Grade 8 | Lesson Plan 3: Roles of the Instruments

Adapted from Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum

TOPICS:

1. The Role of Each Instrument in Jazz
2. The Role of Each Person in a Democratic Society

SESSION OBJECTIVES

The student will:

1. Gain a fundamental understanding of the function of each instrument in jazz, including:
 - a. horns (e.g., trumpet, saxophone, trombone)
 - b. piano
 - c. bass
 - d. drums
 - e. guitar
2. Gain a fundamental understanding of jazz as a metaphor for democracy

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. discuss the basic function of each instrument in jazz
 - a. horn (e.g., trumpet, saxophone, trombone)
 - b. piano
 - c. bass
 - d. drums
 - e. guitar
 - d. accompaniment
2. discuss the roles of people in a democratic society using jazz as a metaphor
 - a. individual freedom
 - b. responsibility to the group
 - c. leadership
3. play various jazz recordings

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

The students will:

1. participate in a class discussion on the roles of the various instruments most often used in jazz
2. participate in a class discussion regarding jazz as a metaphor for democracy
3. listen to jazz recordings

I. Each Instrument's Responsibility

A. Horns

1. The saxophone, trumpet, and trombone (as well as any other single-note instrument, including the human voice) are responsible for playing melodies, both written (e.g., the head) and improvised (their individual solos).
2. If there is more than one horn player in a combo setting, the horn players usually play the head in unison, that is, they play the melody together (they play the same notes at the exact same time). Sometimes, they play the head (or a portion of the head) in harmony, that is, they each play different notes that harmonize with each other (i.e., they play different notes that sound good with each other at the exact same time). The players decide when to play in unison and when to play in harmony.

B. The Rhythm Section

The piano, bass, and drums comprise the rhythm section; their primary role is to accompany and provide support for the horn players as well as each other; they may also improvise solos.

1. The pianist's primary job is to play chords (the music that accompanies the melodies) in a lively, rhythmic fashion.
 - a. this is called comping.
 - b. notice how the word comes from the words "accompany" and "complement."
 - c. the pianist also improvises melodically; when doing this, he/she improvises a melody by playing single notes in the right hand while comping the chords in the left hand (pretty cool!).
2. The bassist's primary job is to play the roots of the chords and "lay down a great groove;" the bass is the foundation, the bottom, the pulse, the "glue" that keeps everyone together.
3. The drummer's primary job is to keep the beat steady and complement what the soloists (improvisers) are playing; by introducing rhythmic accents and laying down a great groove with the bassist, the drummer adds excitement to the performance.

C. Guitar

The guitarist is versatile – he/she can be like a horn player (that is, playing single note melodies), or like a pianist, that is, comping chords (when comping chords, the guitarist is considered a member of the rhythm section).

II. Jazz – A Perfect Democracy

A. Democracy

Democracy is a government in which power and responsibility are vested in the people and exercised by them; according to Abraham Lincoln, democracy is a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

B. Democracy and Freedom

Although the terms democracy and freedom are often used interchangeably, they are not the same; democracy is individual freedom but with responsibility to the group.

1. In a democratic society, individuals have the freedom to do whatever they wish as long as it doesn't interfere with anyone else.
2. In a perfect democratic society, what the individuals happen to freely choose to do enhances the whole group.
3. If all people freely chose to work hard, not commit crime, be fair, and not discriminate, we would have a perfect democratic society.
 - a. unfortunately, not all people think this way.
 - b. things like greed, people wanting power, and racism get in the way.

C. A Jazz Combo as a Society

A jazz combo is an example of a perfect democracy.

1. Each player has the freedom to play whatever he/she wants.
 - a. but, at the same time, each player wants to play something that will not only please himself/herself, but make the whole group sound better as well, enhancing the overall sound.
 - b. jazz musicians work together on this, supporting each other while not compromising their own artistic individuality.
2. The best jazz bandleaders (e.g., Miles Davis) want their fellow musicians (AKA sidemen) to express themselves the way they want and not just do the bandleader's "bidding."
 - a. in jazz, the best bandleaders encourage their sidemen to think and play however they wish, knowing that the entire group, in turn, will get more ideas and be inspired to play better individually and collectively; the leader and the sidemen work through each song as a team, learning from, complementing, and enhancing each other as they go along.
 - b. this is the same for the rhythm section and soloist – the rhythm section players want to support, complement, excite, spur on, interact with, and enhance the soloist; the soloist, in turn, wants to interact with, inspire, and be inspired by the rhythm section.
3. Jazz musicians realize that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.
 - a. each individual part is enhanced by the group, i.e., each individual player gets better and comes up with more musical ideas because of the others in the group.
 - b. together the musicians can do so much more than they could ever do individually.
 - c. they need each other to accomplish their individual and collective goals.
 - d. if everyone in the band were the same, the music would probably be boring (there wouldn't be much give and take, learning from one another, or enjoyment).
 - e. in a jazz group, it doesn't matter what color you are or what your ethnicity is; what matters is who you are inside and how you play.

D. Listen

Remember that a jazz ensemble functions like democracy in action. Each participant has the freedom to express themselves while also remaining respectful of the group. Listen to any recording by Miles Davis, like *So What* or *All Blues*, for an example of democracy at work.

E. Imagine

Just imagine how it would be if our society worked like a jazz group...