

**“Swinging Away”
(AKA “Teaching a Student to Swing”)**

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As a saxophone teacher of future music educators, I have an obligation to teach my students to be somewhat familiar with jazz playing, especially since there is a good chance that many of these students will themselves be teaching it someday. Most of these students have a genuine interest in jazz, but I do have those who are reluctant to learn it because they have never been exposed to it before. During their study, I try to expose them to at least the very basics of jazz, and most importantly, I attempt to instill in them a good sense of swing style. However, unless the student understands what makes a passage truly *swing*, this can be a very difficult task. This article will set forth some basic exercises to help the student understand what makes a passage swing using something they already know as the vehicle: major scales. (One thing this article will not do, however, is discuss improvisation or jazz theory!)

Since jazz is an aural art form best learned by imitation, our first course of action is to listen to some of the masters, and I inevitably begin the student with Count Basie. As we listen, we not only discuss and analyze the rhythmic aspect of the swing tunes but also the articulations used. We listen to Basie himself as well as the instrumentalists, regardless of whether they are a soloist or in a supporting role. We may even play along with some of these recordings at this point, trying to match the style exactly. (One excellent resource that I have found is the *Basie-Nestico Lead Sax Book* published by Kendor. This is a collection of the lead alto saxophone parts for the nine tunes recorded on “Basie-Straight Ahead.”)

Next, we will attempt to imitate the swing style we just heard without playing with a reference recording. The traditional explanation of swing is that written eighth notes are to be played “tripletty;” that is, the first eighth note is treated as the quarter note in a triplet pattern and the second as the last 1/3 of the beat, going for a “long-short” pattern of notes. While on the surface this makes sense and often works, it is limiting to have the student *always* play this rhythmic pattern while the music may dictate otherwise. Fast tempi, for example, call for much straighter rhythms than slow and medium tempi.

It is important to realize, however, that the true portrayal of swing is not necessarily in the rhythm, rather it is in the *articulation*. One can play tripletty eighth notes all day, and without the proper articulation these swing rhythms can still be quite square. However, a group of eighth notes played in an almost straight rhythm but with the proper articulation can swing *very* hard.

We fall back on one of the old standards for actually putting swing into practice: major scales. I play them in what I call “root-to-ninth” format (see example 1 below) as this allows for the basic chord tones (root, third, fifth, seventh, ninth) to be placed on the beat. We practice these patterns with a metronome giving steady quarter notes, and then will move the metronome to click on beats two and four, thereby imitating the “back-beat” feel of swing. We also use play-along recordings; Jamey Aebersold has a number of these available, and Volumes 24 (“Major and Minor”) and 21 (“Gettin’ It Together”) are excellent starting points.

Example 1 – “Root-to-9th” Scale Pattern



We practice this scale pattern slurred a few times, just trying to achieve the desired rhythmic properties of swing. However, as mentioned above, articulations are of the utmost importance in proper swing style and these idiomatic patterns must be introduced quickly. The first pattern we attempt is that of the up-beat articulation: all up-beats are articulated and lightly accented, and except for the very first and last ones, all downbeats are “ghosted” slightly:

Example 2 – Upbeat articulations



On first attempt, this invariably turns into the dreaded “dotted-eighth/sixteenth-note pattern,” one of the LEAST swinging patterns around. The long note of each pair becomes too long, delaying the upbeat. In addition, the downbeats (the notes slurred into) are often played staccato, further creating a “ricky-tick” style. To fix this, I will ask the student to play downbeats legato and to play the eighth notes as *straight* as possible; remarkably this often corrects the problem. The conscious effort to play this pattern NOT triply but with the proper legato and upbeat articulation often results in a much truer swing style!

Following a few rounds of this exercise, including practicing the pattern in all 12 keys and in different octaves (when practical), I will change the articulation in a number of ways. Below are just a couple of examples, the first of which is based on a three-note pattern while the second is freer in nature:

Example 3 – More articulation patterns



Obviously, in the context of any given jazz piece, the articulation patterns may vary considerably so the more creative you can get with this exercise, the better.

One final element to add to this exercise is the arpeggio from the root to the ninth. This will help aid in technique and familiarity with the chord structure, and, quite simply, will give the student more to think about while still attempting to swing. It also allows for style practice with leaps instead of strictly step-wise motion. As before, begin with the upbeat articulation pattern and go from there.

Example 4 – Scale exercise with arpeggio added:



It cannot be overstated how important listening is to true understanding of the style. Jazz has always been, and always will be, an aural art form best learned by imitation. And a small amount of listening will not suffice; consistent and ample listening must be done in collaboration with these exercises to accurately learn how to swing. However, by using major scales as a starting point for applying the aural skill with the performing skill, you are giving the student the opportunity to use something with which they are familiar and something with which they have confidence. These exercises can work with students at any levels, from middle school to college and beyond. It is never too early or too late to begin. Happy swinging!