

Playing *Swing* Music

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1. Preamble

The following information is intended to serve as a reference.

In addition to being able to play an instrument in tune, there are two skills that are essential to good performance: reading and listening.

First, playing Swing music requires reading to follow the arranger's instructions; i.e., the notation for phrasing, dynamics, articulation, and appropriate expression. Performing music without regard for its notation is similar to reading a book without punctuation. The notation guides musicians to facilitate accurate communication from the composer/arranger, via musicians, to the listener.

Second, professional musicians are often heard to say that "*a musician's most important tools are her/his ears*", meaning that effective listening to the rest of the band is essential for achieving the accuracy and consistency required in an ensemble. Listening to each other - while following the arranger's notation instructions to achieve consistent and identical phrasing, dynamics, and articulation - is of paramount importance.

The information which follows may be useful in describing how notation should be interpreted and the main elements in how Swing music should be played.

2. Defining the Big Band or Swing Band

Swing music is a sub-genre or particular style of Jazz. Swing uses a strong rhythm section of double bass and drums as the anchor for a lead section of brass instruments such as trumpets and trombones, woodwinds including saxophones and clarinets, and sometimes stringed instruments such as violin and guitar, medium to fast tempos, and a "lilting" swing time rhythm. The *Jazz in America* glossary defines Swing as: *"...when an individual player or ensemble performs in such a rhythmically coordinated way as to command a visceral response from the listener (to cause feet to tap and heads to nod); an irresistible gravitational buoyancy that defies mere verbal definition"*.

Swing Bands are versatile and capable of many other types of music; e.g., waltzes, polkas, latin, rock, funk, classical, Ska, Rockabilly, etc. Electro-swing is a new genre fusing swing (original, or remixes of classics) with hip hop and house techniques.


Swing Band instrumentation may include a large variety of instruments so that "Big Band" cannot be narrowly defined. How big is Big.....? Typically, modern Big Bands consist of 13 to 17 instruments including: 4 or 5 woodwinds; 3 or 4 trumpets; 3 or 4 trombones (including a bass trombone); and 3 or 4 rhythm instruments (usually keyboard, bass, drums, guitar and occasionally cowbells, congas, tambourines, etc.). One of the most common configurations is 5 saxes, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, and 4 rhythm, abbreviated to "5444", respectively.

Some players may be required to play second or even third instruments so that it is not unusual to find soprano saxophones, bass saxophones, flugel horns, flutes, clarinets, bass clarinets, tubas, and extra percussion instrument parts in a Big Band chart. Some famous big bands (Ellington, Miller, Shaw, Kenton, Herman) have included strings, mellophoniums, French horns, bassoons, oboes, etc. In addition, many Swing bands have vocalists.

Music played by big bands is highly "arranged"; i.e., prepared in advance and notated on sheet music. The music is traditionally called "charts". Improvised solos are played only when called for by the arranger in the chart.

3. Articulation

Articulation is to music what enunciation is to speech. To achieve a professional sound quality, a band must practice consistent and accurate articulation, since articulation has to become automatic before it will begin to sound natural.

Articulation notation can be complicated, ambiguous and confusing, since notation markings can differ in meaning from those found in orchestral music. A further complication is the lack of agreement among jazz band literature creators – composers and arrangers - on a standardized system for notation and articulation; e.g., older swing music was sometimes written with a dotted 8th note followed by a 16th combination  while the more modern equivalent is simply beamed 8th notes with correct interpretation by the performers assumed (if “swing” is not intended, there will be a note of instruction on the music that says “*straight 8ths*” or “*even 8ths*”). The result can be inconsistency of understanding among those who create and play Swing music.

The following articulation notation descriptions are intended to clarify jazz band literature. As noted previously, there is no way that a writer can indicate on the music exactly how she or he wants a passage or a particular note played; however, the intention is to suggest the desired effect as accurately as possible by the use of standard markings (which can be placed above or below the note, depending on note’s stem direction) as follows:

There are four primary articulation markings:

The **legato/tenuto** and the **accent**, which are used only on long or full value notes,

- and -

the **staccato** and the **marcato**, which are used only on notes with duration of one beat or less which are to be played for less than their full written duration value.

Descriptions with Examples:



Legato (tenuto mark) - a small horizontal line above or below the note head (as shown at left) or an arc over several notes indicating that single notes, which normally would be detached slightly from the note immediately following, should be allowed to sound smoothly for their full written value, without separation, and with a very light tongue re-attack on each note. In transitioning from note to note, there should be no intervening silence; however, legato does not proscribe re-articulation. If the use of the tenuto is required over more than a few notes the composer may place the word *tenuto* in the score rather than marking every note. The only way to differentiate a legato marked note from an unmarked one is with a slight increase in volume so that the listener can hear the difference

Tenuto can mean either to hold the note in question for its full length (or longer) with slight *rubato* (Rubato = playing with expressive and rhythmic freedom) or it can mean play the note slightly louder. In other words, the tenuto mark is sometimes interpreted as an articulation mark and sometimes as a dynamic mark. When it appears in conjunction with an accent mark, it is an indication of articulation. When it appears by itself, its meaning must be determined by its musical context.



Accent - is played as a “TOOO” note and indicated by a sideways “V” above or below the note head (as shown at left). When a note is tongued, it causes natural emphasis; i.e., an accent, of that note. The accented note is not played louder than surrounding unaccented notes, because it is constrained by the indicated volume in the music; however, it is heavily tongued and played like a rifle shot that fades rapidly while being (normally) played for full value. An accent may be used on notes of any duration. An accent should not be combined with a staccato because that is a contradiction; a marcato should be used instead.



Staccato – is indicated with a small dot above or below the note head. The note is shortened by replacing 1/2 of its time value with a period of silence and it should receive no accent. The sound should be ended with a tongue stop.

A horizontal tenuto line plus a dot indicates **mezzo staccato**, which means these staccato notes are to be held for a longer time than with standard staccato notes, but none of the notes are attached to the next. A single 'quotation mark' or 'wedge' indicates **staccatissimo**, which means extremely separated and distinct. It is common to strengthen the shorter note in the belief that staccato is used to make a note rhythmically 'stronger' when staccato is actually intended to make it 'weaker'.



Marcato – is played as a “TUT” note and the note is to be given heavy added emphasis. It is usually of longer duration than staccato; i.e., approximately two-thirds of a beat, which is variable depending on tempo, and it is separated from adjoining notes.

A common arranger error to look out for is the use of marcato where an accent should have been used; e.g., on the first of a set of tied notes, or a marcato over a legato (which is a contradiction).

Combinations of articulation markings may be found in jazz band literature as well; e.g.:



The **marcato** (cap) over the **staccato** means that the note is to be short with a strong accent. This could also be written as an 8th note with a marcato (cap). The intent here is to reduce the duration normally given to a “capped” note.

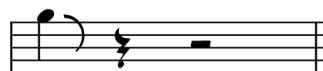


An accent with the legato mark distinguishes it from a short quarter note commonly found in swing passages. It could be written also as a quarter note with an accent because in order to define the note as being short, just the cap would suffice.

3.1 Special Notation Markings

Explanations of these markings cannot describe *exactly* how each of these will be played; they can take on different characteristics as required by style, tempo, and interpretation.

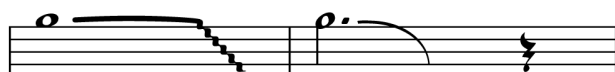
3.11 Drop



The drop or short drop is one of the most common special markings found in jazz band literature today and is usually found on notes of one beat or less.

Playing the drop involves establishing the pitch and forcing the pitch down in a glissando as much as an octave, usually within one beat or less. For reeds this is done chromatically with notes slurred and/or with the lips; trombones use the lip and the slide; and the trumpets use the lip and sometimes half-valves or “flying fingers”. Volume is maintained for the duration of the drop or fall. The drop or short drop is occasionally used at the end of a sustained pitch.

3.12 Fall



The fall or long fall is a downward glissando with diminuendo. It generally requires that the points at which the fall begins and ends be understood or clearly marked.

The pitch is normally held for half of the note value and the fall begins and continues through the second half of the note value. The example shows two ways in which long falls may commonly be written. The first is for very long falls, and the second is used more frequently for long falls of shorter duration.

3.13 A drop into a note, or a “plop”.



is a quick slide into pitch from above before sounding the note. At the beginning of this drop, there should be no actual pitch established. Usually the drop into a note will begin one-half beat before the written note unless otherwise indicated. A doit mark (3.14 below) in reverse may be used to indicate a plop.

3.14 Doit



The doit (pronounced “dough-eat” or “doy-eet”) is the opposite of the drop or fall. Sound the note, then gliss upwards from one to five steps, usually $\frac{1}{2}$ valve for

brass. Unless marked otherwise, the duration of the doit will be determined by the shape and length of the mark. For longer doits, establish the pitch and hold for the first half of the note value, and begin an upward bend at the beginning of the second half of the note value and continue to end of note value as in the long fall, softening as the tone rises.

3.15 Bends

3.151 The standard bend.



This is played by establishing the pitch, lipping the pitch down one-half step, and returning to the written pitch within the time value of the written note.

3.152 The bend into a note



Also called a Scoop. It can be short or long. This is played by beginning the attack just before the written time of the beginning of the note and begins with the pitch one-half step lower than the written pitch. →**NB**: Occasionally, the standard bend marking will be used when what is actually intended is a bend into a note.

3.16 Squeeze



The effect of the squeeze is achieved by the use of half-valves for the trumpets, use of the slide for slide trombones, and legato chromatics with no pitch definition for the reed players. There is no definite pitch established at the beginning of the squeeze when written as shown.

3.17 Rip



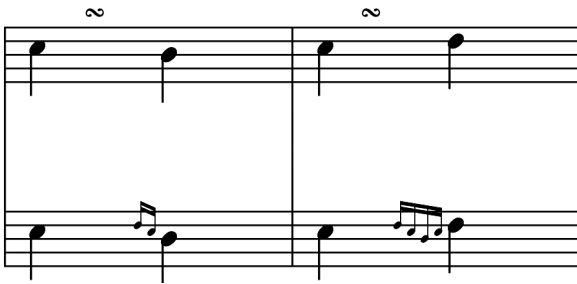
Rip – a long glissando (see 3.18) up to a note which may be accented or marcato.

3.18 Glissando (Gliss)



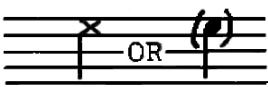
The glissando is a continuous, unbroken glide from one note to the next that includes the pitches between. It can be ascending or descending. No individual notes are heard in a “gliss”.

3.19 Turns



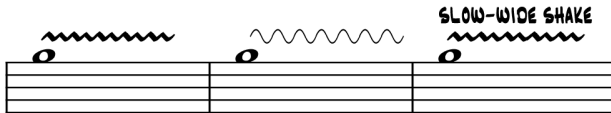
The turn in jazz band literature is played as shown in the examples at left.

3.20 Ghost Note



A swallowed sound; pitch may be implied.

3.21 Shake



For brass players, the shake is a lip trill (no valves) between the written pitch and the next highest overtone on the instrument.

For reed players, the shake is a trill between the written pitch and a minor third higher unless otherwise marked. The regular shake as written in the first measure of the example, is a fast, unmeasured trill. When a slow wide shake is desired, it will be written as in the second or third measures of the example, and is not limited to the minor third or even a fifth. The letters "tr" may be used instead of the wavy line:

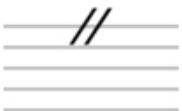


3.22 The Flip



The Flip – Sound the note, raise the pitch, then drop into the following note (done with the lip on brass instruments).

3.23 Caesura



Indicates a brief, silent pause, during which time is not counted. In ensemble playing, time resumes when so indicated by the conductor or leader.

3.24 For the Brass



+ - indicates closed sound with plunger or hand over the bell
 o - indicates open

4. Phrasing

The efforts of arrangers and composers to make their intentions clear include the use of large sweeping 'slur-like' lines called 'phrase marks'. These phrases must be played in a single breath - the importance of this can be heard on professional recordings; e.g., the Glenn Miller Orchestra. Breathing in the middle of a phrase creates a rough, unpolished sound.



Slurs, which typically embrace a smaller number of notes, help to shape the musical line even within the broader phrasing marks and performers must be able to distinguish between them. On wind instruments, all the notes under the slur except for the first one are not tongued; i.e., the first note is tongued and breath flows continuously while the fingers move to complete the phrase. On keyboard instruments the notes are played legato (smoothly) and with a light touch. By removing the attack from the start of each note under the slur mark, except for the first note, the slur provides a contrast in strength, a dynamic variety, between the first and the later notes. If slurring is to be effective, or indeed a distinction made between different phrases, the performer must avoid playing un-slurred notes too smoothly.

Swing is among the more difficult styles to read and interpret because in many cases what is printed on the page is not literally what is supposed to be played - the nuances of the style are impossible to notate exactly.

There are two areas where the player is automatically supposed to play figures differently than what actually is written on the page. The first deals with the triplet feel of "swing 8th" notes. The second concerns the duration of notes, specifically long 8th notes, and short quarter notes.

4.1 Swing Eighth Notes

A key feature of Swing is its syncopated rhythm; i.e., the musical accent is shifted to the weak beat. In order to play connected 8th notes as Swing style, they are played like an 8th note triplet with the first two 8th notes of the triplet tied together; i.e., they are played like

actually written like  or  but they are

The two Swing 8th notes are not played equal in value, as they are written, but divided into three equal parts, with the first two tied together.

At a slow tempo, the "triplet feel" can be easily felt. As the tempo increases, however, it becomes increasingly more awkward to maintain it and the 8th notes tend to become more even. By the time the tempo reaches half note = 144, the 8th notes would be almost completely "straight".

Inexperienced players may try to maintain the triplet feel at all tempos but this is not correct when trying to maintain a Swing feel.


In Swing music, quarter notes (and quarter note equivalents) are played shorter than full value and are usually given 2/3 of a beat; i.e., slightly more that if they were marked staccato. At faster tempos, quarter notes will become proportionately shorter but they must not be played too short in order to avoid losing the Swing feel.

Connected 8th notes not followed by a rest are played long unless they are followed by a rest or articulation mark.

4.2 Exceptions to Swing 8th Notes

When playing a swing chart, beamed (connected) 8th notes are to be played with a swing or triplet feel, the extent being determined by the tempo as discussed earlier. The only exception to this occurs when connected 8th notes are written with staccato, legato, marcato, or accent marks over the notes. When this occurs, the eighth notes should be played as “even” or “straight” 8ths. This holds true even where the markings are mixed. Usually when even 8th note figures come up in a swing chart, the writer or arranger will include the instruction “even 8ths” or “straight 8ths” to avoid possible confusion.

4.3 Dotted Eighth and Sixteenth Notes on Swing Charts

When dotted 8th and 16th beamed note combinations  are written on swing charts, they are normally used to approximate the swing triplet feel. Unfortunately, this can lead to a literal interpretation resulting in a rigid, “choppy” feel. When the dotted 8th and 16th note combinations appear, they should be interpreted as swing 8th notes unless they are specifically marked “AS WRITTEN”.

4.4 Latin

Latin music typically has clearly marked parts indicating what is required. Eighth notes are played evenly and quarter notes are given full value unless otherwise marked. Different forms of latin music may have subtle differences but playing what is written is normally sufficient. Occasionally, a latin chart will require a swing feel. This should be clearly marked, and should be approached as discussed in the section on swing. Listening to recordings to become acquainted with the subtleties and rhythmic differences among latin styles may be useful.

4.5 Rock and Funk

Most forms of rock and funk are based on a straight 8th or 16th note feel. There are, however, some forms which take on a triplet or Swing feel in the underlying 8th or 16th note patterns. These interpretations should be clearly marked. Articulation and note markings as discussed earlier are valid for all forms of rock and funk. Familiarity with different forms of rock and funk is useful to guide the proper interpretation of the music.

One of the most common problems with the interpretation of rock and funk styles is that the short notes are played too short. By giving the short notes just a little greater duration, the total effect of the music will be greatly improved.

5. Dynamics

To quote Benny Golson, a world famous professional musician/composer/arranger who has composed and arranged music for Count Basie, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Sammy Davis Jr., Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, Shirley Horn, Quincy Jones, Peggy Lee, Itzhak Perlman, Oscar Peterson, etc.: *“The most important aspect of this composition, other than playing the correct notes of course, is dynamics. Through dynamics we can paint a picture (a musical picture, that is) more effectively. Ignoring musical dynamics is comparable to an artist painting a picture all in red or blue. Dynamics dress up an arrangement and give it a personality of its own”*.

6. Expression

Many subtleties of swing/jazz cannot be notated adequately or accurately because prescriptive notation limits freedom of interpretation and Swing music typically includes considerable latitude for expression and interpretation - the music is not strictly what is printed, but rather the sound that comes from the band. Therefore, there must be consensus within the band on how a chart will be played. As Sammy Nestico, one of the top swing music arrangers of all time, wrote:

"Notation of music in itself can't capture sound, teach imagination, or express emotions".

The finer points of musical expression must stem from either the performers themselves or from a performance tradition acquired by listening to "live" or recorded professional performances.

7. Deportment

In Business, it is often said that an ounce of image is worth a pound of performance; i.e., a good haircut and an expensive suit may enhance career prospects more than ability and effort. That may be somewhat of an exaggeration; however, the visual aspects can affect an audience's entertainment experience and should be considered. Therefore, there are some non-musical aspects of performance (mostly common sense) that are worth discussing:

- Musicians should enter and take their seats in an orderly fashion without unnecessarily drawing attention to the process.
 - No conversations on the bandstand.
 - No food or drink on the bandstand.
 - Music should be organized and orderly.
 - All members should wear black socks.
 - Music lights should be angled so that the audience will not have to look at them.
 - Other than a brief tuning, no one should play except for the charts in the program.
 - During a break, ALL members should leave the bandstand.
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8. Miscellaneous Topics

8.1 Playing a "Lead" Part

The most influential Swing band part is the *First Trumpet*; when it is playing the melody, the first trumpet is the lead instrument which the rest of the band must follow. If the first trumpet is not playing melody, the first alto sax becomes the lead instrument. It follows that listening to these parts is crucial to accurate performance. Every player must also listen to the lead instrument in his/her section, in addition to the rhythm section, and follow it.

Playing a lead part means leading a section in regards to phrasing, articulation, dynamics, etc. The sound must be strong and consistent because in order for the section to follow the lead part, they have to be able to hear it. Playing a lead part is about 80% mental.....the right mind set is essential. A player with the lead part must be aggressive in his/her playing and take control without “overdoing” it.

8.2 Cue notes

Cue-notes are smaller-sized notes that are used in one part to show notes from another part (without playing them) to make it easier to (re)start after a long pause. They are also useful in case the designated instrument is absent or suddenly unable to play its part but they must not be played if the designated instrument is able to play its part.

8.3 Vibrato

Artie Shaw wrote: “*Vibrato embellishes the otherwise dead tone of an instrument and makes it more pleasing to the ear by approximating the human voice.*”, which is why Swing music often calls for the use of vibrato. Some bandleaders (Guy Lombardo comes to mind) attempt to get the saxophone section to play with synchronised vibrato while Duke Ellington's concept was to write for individual musicians, instead of a collective of clones. While unison passages should not have much vibrato, elsewhere an individual vibrato may be employed. Normally, trumpets should use less vibrato and trombones should avoid it almost entirely; ensemble slide vibrato is an outdated style and so is an ensemble passage led by a trumpet with very heavy vibrato.

8.4 Ties

There are occasions when the duration of a note may not be easily notated. If the duration of a note is longer than a double whole note or when the addition of dots cannot provide the required duration, groups of notes can be linked by one or more ties. Tied notes are treated as a single unbroken note whose duration is given by the sum of the durations of the notes under the tie taken successively. This is illustrated in the example given below where a quarter note tied to an 8th note is equivalent to the dotted quarter note that follows. Note that the tie is always written so as to join the note heads of



two notes. The beginning and end of the tie are on the same horizontal level, and the tie is placed between the note heads (without touching them). Rests are never tied.

8.5 Note Values

It is easy to adopt the very bad habit of not playing notes for their correct value. It is normal practice in some bands that a dotted half note, for example, will be held until the third beat rather than holding it for its full value through the third beat and cutting it off at the beginning of beat four. Many writers and arrangers add an 8th note to a half note, for example, just so that the note will be given two full beats. This would not be necessary if players gave notes their full written value.

At the precise time that a beat is beginning, a beat is also ending. For a whole note, it must be held for four beats, but may tend to be cut off as we say “four” rather than holding it through the fourth beat to the first beat of the following measure.

Phrasing, interaction between parts, and the individual interpretation of the director may at times necessitate the change of note values. When changes of this kind are made, the new duration or cut-off should be marked in everyone's part.

8.6 Chords in Jazz

The performer is free, during ad lib sections, to indulge in melodic and harmonic extemporisation and for this reason jazz notation is not prescriptive - rather it is descriptive of general ideas that might arise from the shape of a melody or from a chord progression; therefore, competent improvisation requires understanding and facility in the use of chords.

In swing/jazz, the root of the triad is named with a capital letter, with the addition of 'm' meaning minor, '+ ' or 'aug' if the fifth is augmented and 'o' or 'dim' if it is diminished. The 3rd and 5th of the triad can be easily deduced so that it is only necessary to identify additional notes with small numbers. The major 7th is indicated with a capital "M", or by a small triangle. Flattened notes are often indicated with a minus sign.

For example, in Cmaj⁷ the major 7th has been added to the triad C, E and G, (i.e., B is added) while in C⁷ it is the minor 7th that has been added to the triad C, E and G (i.e., Bb is added).

8.7 The Rhythm Section

Keyboard/piano - This is part of the rhythm section (unless indicated otherwise on the chart). It should enhance the pulse of the band without ornamental arrhythmic tinklings that do not contribute to the beat. Some piano parts may consist of only chord symbols in which case the piano should create a backing that fits the style of the arrangement using suitable inversions of the chords, leaving bass notes to the bass player.

Bass – The parts are often a series of chords from which the bass player should create flowing lines rather than walking up and down the basic notes of the chord or playing just the root and fifth.

Guitar – Keep the volume down to avoid competing with the keyboard. Careful analysis of the great "name bands" will help in developing playing style.

Drums – Normal rhythm playing is referred to as "Time" and should be played in a style that suits the chart. Use of the bass drum should normally be minimal, since a thumping 4-to-the-bar bass drum beat belongs to a pre-Swing era. Drums should look out for the notation cues for accents, which are often played with the brass.

The Bottom Line.....

No matter what style of music a jazz band is playing, the players and the director must know what it is supposed to sound like. Listening to all kinds of music will result in a greater understanding and deeper appreciation of the many various styles. The preceding examples and explanations are no substitute for getting to know the music. The "music" is the sound - the notation on the page is only an approximate definition.