

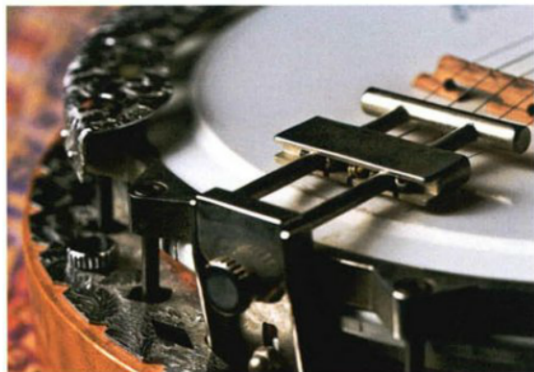
workshop



GENERAL MUSIC

Strumming on the Old Banjo

The banjo, a four- or five-stringed instrument with a circular resonator, was brought to America by West African slaves and found its way into idioms like country, folk, and bluegrass. Although it has not typically been featured in general music classrooms, its lively, ringing sound and significant cultural associations can



be used to great effect in this setting, according to Kenneth H. Smith, assistant professor of music education at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Smith—who, incidentally, has roots in West Virginia, a focal point for traditional banjo music—took up the instrument as a graduate student in Illinois. Not long after that, he introduced it to the classroom when he began teaching a methods course for music education majors. “At first I used it to accompany in the class, but each time I brought out the

instrument several students expressed an interest in playing. We were able to acquire some beginner instruments, and I’ve incorporated banjo in classes and workshops since then,” he says.

In preparation for incorporating the banjo in a general music setting, a teacher should obviously have a banjo, and a decent model of the most common type, the five-string, can be had for as little as \$200. A teacher should also get a handle on the two basic approaches to the banjo, the Scruggs (or fingerpicking) style, and the frailing (or strumming) style. For this purpose, Smith recommends *Teach Yourself to Play Banjo* by Janet Davis. “This is the best resource I’ve come across so far for beginning banjoists,” he says. “The book takes very small, incremental steps to learning to play songs on the banjo.”

Because a banjo is tuned to an open-G chord, allowing most beginners to quickly learn simple songs, the instrument is ripe for teaching students technique in the general music classroom. In most schools, however, it would be impractical to actually teach a group of students to play banjo, since providing instruments for all of them could be prohibitively expensive. However, a teacher can use the instrument to demonstrate a variety of musical concepts. For example, it can be used to enliven aural and rhythmic training, more customarily taught with piano and voice.

But perhaps the best use for banjo in a general music setting is to teach the music with which it’s most closely associat-

ed. For instance, it will be much more exciting for students to hear a bluegrass number played live in class than on a recording. And in teaching folk and old-timey songs, leading the class with an accompaniment on the banjo rather than the piano will lend authenticity to the proceedings while captivating the students’ attention. To sum up, as Smith sees it, the banjo can forge a special connection with general music students on account of “its unique timbre and the mystique that it has.”—Adam Perlmutter



BRASS AND WOODWINDS

Keys to Better Saxophone Articulation

As soon as a saxophone student has grasped the fundamentals of how to play his or her instrument, a teacher should begin to introduce more advanced techniques, such as how to achieve basic types of articulation. We spoke to Richard Bresowar, band director at Dutchtown Middle School in Geismar, Louisiana, to get some tips on how to start students off on the right foot.

According to Bresowar, working on articulation has to start near the very beginning of a student’s instruction on the saxophone. “For me,” he says, “the order of teaching is to first work on legato tonguing, followed by separated tonguing, slurring, and combinations of the above. I start by teaching repeated legato quarter notes, stressing a continuous air flow and the importance of using the tongue to interrupt that flow.”

Getting the student to use the tongue



in the correct way, with a “tu” or “du” attack on the reed, is imperative to developing good articulation skills. Students who use their diaphragms to start and stop notes will have difficulty starting notes cleanly and accurately. Teachers can use a variety of different tricks for getting the tongue to move correctly, such as attempting to imitate the action of a water valve by stopping and starting the flow of air in short bursts.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of teaching any type of articulation is helping students to tongue efficiently. Bresowar says there is no perfect method for this, but that “the thing to remember is—since you can’t look inside their mouths to see what’s going on easily, and everyone is a little different in what will work for them—you have to listen to what they’re sounding like. I assume that if the sound and articulation are correct, then we are okay.”

Since the ear plays such a vital role in learning proper articulation, a student’s ability to listen and imitate the sounds demonstrated by the teacher is essential. “If a student is not getting it right,” Bresowar says, “then I have the student listen and try to imitate the sound of the correct articulation. Kids are pretty good at getting the sound to match a model, if they have a good model to match.”

Once students have managed to form a general understanding of what each articulation sounds like, they need to prac-

tice it in order to perfect it. One of Bresowar’s favorite methods uses the Ed Sueta Rhythm Vocabulary Charts (available at edsueta.com), together with verbal instructions of what articulations to employ for each line: “The Sueta books are good rhythm practice and also contribute to good articulation and tone production if you watch for that.”

Given a little time and practice, any student can learn the basics of playing with good articulation, as long as what the teacher is looking for is clearly understood. Be clear, be patient, and use good listening examples, and you will have no problems bringing out the best in your students’ sound. —Chad Criswell



GUITAR AND KEYBOARD

Keeping Time + Making Space = Comping

Comping (short for accompanying) is a term used to describe the harmonic and rhythmic approach that a jazz pianist (or guitarist) takes when supporting a melody or solo. Like any element in jazz, comping is improvisatory in nature. But there tends to be a lesser degree of improvisation in comping than in soloing, making the former a safer place for students who are new to the idea of spontaneous composition to begin exploring it.

Without words, it’s difficult to have a conversation; similarly, a jazz improviser must be acquainted with the appropriate vocabulary in order to make meaningful music. For comping, this vocabulary includes some basic harmonies. Geoffrey J. Haydon, keyboard studies coordinator at Georgia State University, says, “Students should be familiar with the ii7–V7–Imaj7 progression and be able to realize it with a basic three-note voicing, done in either the right or left hand, in every key. The three-note voicing should be one that always contains the third and seventh along

with a third note that can be a fifth, ninth, or 13th. Most chords in jazz tunes are ii7 or V7 or Imaj7 chords; therefore, knowing this progression gives you a good foundation for working out the voicings used for comping a jazz tune.”

In comping, rhythm is of equal importance to harmony and it is critical to have a feel for the rudimentary pulses found in jazz before using them as the basis of improvisation. “Rhythmically speaking, voicings are most often played on the offbeat using swing eighth notes, but they are sometimes played on the beat; usually they are short in duration,” Haydon says. One good comping exercise is to plug jazz ii–V–I progressions into an established rhythmic pattern like the Latin clave.

Once a student has a grasp on the basics of comping, it’s time to put the approach to use. With a simple setting like a looping ii–V–I (see Figure 1), a teacher or more advanced students can solo while others take turns adding harmonic support. This is where improvisation comes into play: The player who is comping will make rhythmic choices based on what the soloist is playing. “A good accompanying pianist reacts to the soloist when comping, filling holes when appropriate and giving support where needed,” Haydon explains, adding that listening to strong players comp is essential when learning to do so yourself.

A final, key element to improvising



Figure 1. The ii–V–I progression is the most common structure in comping. Here are some basic voicings that include roots, thirds, and sevenths.