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## Seven Strategies for INTERPRETING ARTICULATION IN YOUR BIG BAND

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It is jazz festival season! All across Oregon, thousands of high school music students compete in jazz festivals in order to demonstrate their hard work, get feedback from knowledgeable judges, and ultimately dig deeper into this music. I judge many of these festivals. Recently I heard twenty-eight bands at a regional festival in my area. All of the bands played well, but by and large the handful of truly great performances I heard all had one thing in common: a commercial approach to articulation.

Articulation is one of the most expressive elements in music. It is one of the main ways we communicate style and energy to our audience. Articulation places phrases in time, and provides energy to a line in commercial music—that is to say jazz, funk, rock, pop, Latin, etc.—we use what is known as commercial articulation or a commercial attack. This is what gives the music its zing, panache, and forward momentum. Simply put, commercial articulation is what makes a band sound tight.

Commercial articulation is very different than what we want to do in wind ensemble, orchestra, or even a jazz combo. Understanding how to interpret articulations is one of the most challenging aspects young bands face. Fortunately, there are some basic principles for interpreting commercial articulation that we can employ in virtually all jazz styles. I have compiled them into seven basic principles that will help us better understand how to get more music out of our bands.

### 1. Imitate What You Hear on the Recording

This is the cardinal rule of all jazz. The recording—not the parts or the score—dictates how the music is to be interpreted.

In my rehearsals, I play recordings constantly. These are usually short excerpts no more than ten or twenty seconds long. Each excerpt I play directs student attention to specific stylistic details in the music. Immediately after I play the recording, I ask my students to imitate what they hear. This creates a learning environment where all student performance is informed by a detailed study of iconic recordings. If you do not like the way your students play something, it is usually a sign that you need to direct their attention to the recording.

### 2. All Accents are Exaggerated

All accents must be exaggerated. I mean really exaggerated. This means that when a note has an accent, we don't kind of accent

it, WE HIT THAT NOTE HARD! For students not used to playing in a horn section, this attack can feel like we are overdoing it.

I like to think about this exaggerated articulation as similar to how a Shakespearian actor says their lines. The Shakespearian actor will spit out even the most tender of lines, overenunciating to the point where they may be spitting on audience members in the first row. If you ran into a person talking in a supermarket in the style of a Shakespearian actor, you might assume that person was unwell. But when you go see *Coriolanus*, or *The Tempest*, you would be disappointed if the actors were not enunciating in that way. It is the same when we play commercial music in a horn section. We are not playing the way we would play a solo, we are spitting the music out to the back of the hall.

### 3. The First Note in a Phrase Gets an Accent

Speaking of exaggerated accents, when we begin a phrase, we need to nail the heck out of the first note in the phrase. This accent places the beginning of the phrase in time, and propels it forward. Again, we want a hyper-aggressive, over-enunciated approach to the articulation.

Without this accent, you may notice that your horns aren't playing in the pocket, there are time problems, or the horn lines sound boring. How will you tell if the first note is accented enough? Refer to step one in this guide.

### 4. Anything Marked Short is Played SHORT

If you have a note marked with a rooftop accent or a staccato, it is to be played SHORT! Every note marked short should be hit very hard with a hyper-aggressive, over-enunciated attack. My number one critique of young bands is that they do not hit short notes hard enough and they do not play short notes short enough. The desired effect is one of general stabyness (????) coming from the horn section.

Now, I know some of you might be thinking of Earol Gardner's fantastic lead trumpet playing with the Mel Lewis Orchestra in the 1980s. Earol played very fat articulations that might not best be described as short. Like most of the guidelines here, there are exceptions. In regard to note length, I will say two things. (1) Playing notes marked short with a very short, very aggressive attack is a good first approach to playing this music. This will be effective on most tunes, particularly the music of Count Basie. (2) If you think the chart you are working on is an exception to this rule, be sure to consult the recording.