

# Holiday resource: Jazz thinking

**Jonathan James** is a freelance music educator and teacher trainer. He was head of performing arts and director of music at an FE college for six years, and runs a pre-conservatoire for classical and jazz musicians. His current PhD research is in bridging classical and jazz creativity at UK conservatoires.

by Jonathan James

## INTRODUCTION

Holidays can be a time to step away from the constraints of the curriculum and recharge the creative batteries. The prompts and ideas that follow are inspired by how improvising musicians think and create music. The processes derive from jazz pedagogy in particular, but are common to many styles, from classical through to world music. Jazz techniques are used as a pathway rather than a destination.

This resource is aimed at learners of around Grade 4 and above on any instrument, voice included, either working alone or together. No prior knowledge of jazz theory is required, nor is any proficiency or experience in improvisation expected. All that is really needed is curiosity and the openness to experiment.

The creative ideas outlined in this resource would therefore be ideal for students new to jazz, or perhaps pupils who haven't ventured much further than the blues or simple grooves. The aim is to provide some practical starting points that you can use to encourage playing and improvising during the holidays, as well as to give some wider listening suggestions around jazz.

The objectives are:

- to build confidence in listening and improvising skills.
- to join the dots between theory and practice in new ways.
- to open up new ways of thinking about musical composition.
- to introduce the uninitiated to the wonderful world of jazz.

Teachers wanting to explore the jazz approach to creativity in more detail could refer to the following tutor books:

- *The Jazz Piano Book* by Mark Levine (Sher Music, 1989)
- *Music Theory through Improvisation* by Edward Sarath (Routledge, 2010)
- *A Classical Approach to Jazz Piano* by Dominic Aldis (Hal Leonard, 1995)

## WHAT IS 'JAZZ THINKING'?

Musical creativity is an incredibly broad field spanning all styles and processes, from DJ-ing through to composing a symphony. Jazz is taken here as a helpful way into thinking about music, particularly for those learners who are reticent to improvise – which probably accounts for the majority of a Year 11 or Year 12 music class! Asking them to spin out a melody based on four notes may well result in mild panic, or chaos, or both.

"Jazz thinking", if we can conveniently call it that, has taken on an increasingly complex shape over the past 50 years, particularly after jazz as a musical discipline found its way on to degree courses and the conservatoire curriculum. Educators and researchers have now analysed a huge variety of components to jazz musicianship, from the psychology of improvisation through to its theoretical out-workings.

At one end, this has resulted in the fun 'play-along' approach exemplified by Jamie Aebersold and his backing tracks. At the other end are formidable works such as Paul Berliner's seminal book *Thinking in Jazz* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), which offers a comprehensive survey of the art of solo and collective improvisation in just under 900 pages.

# Jazz Resource File

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