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Playing jazz piano is a journey filled with rhythm, emotion, and unique sound combinations. It's not as daunting as it may seem. If you've been wondering how to play piano for jazz, here are ten simple and practical tips to get you started. These tips will give you a solid footing and help to enhance your jazz piano skills. So, let's dive right in, shall we?

Listen to jazz music: The first step in learning how to play piano for jazz is to immerse yourself in jazz music. By regularly listening to jazz, you gain understanding of its unique rhythm, its signs of improvisation, and its rich harmonies. It's like learning a new language, the more you listen, the more fluent you become. Here are a few practical ways you can immerse yourself in the world of jazz: Listen to Jazz Radio Stations: There are numerous online jazz radio stations available for free. Tune in to these stations and let the sound of jazz fill your surroundings. Some popular jazz radio stations include WBGO, WWOZ, and Jazz24. Explore Jazz Albums: Get your hands on some classic jazz albums. Listen to legendary jazz pianists like Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk, and Oscar Peterson. Their music will give you insights into the diversity and depth of jazz piano. Attend Jazz Concerts: If possible, go to jazz concerts. Live performances offer a different experience altogether—you can see the musicians, observe their techniques, and feel the energy of jazz music in its purest form. Remember, the goal is not just to listen, but to absorb. Pay attention to the melodies, harmonies, the rhythm—how they intertwine to create the unique sound that is jazz. This will not only enrich your understanding of jazz music but also inspire you as you learn how to play piano for jazz. Learn the Blues Scale: Jazz has a lot of unique flavors, and one of the key flavors is the blues. The blues scale is a six-note scale. It's like your regular major scale, but with a few twists. The blues scale includes the 1st, flattened 3rd, 4th, flattened 5th, 5th, and flattened 7th degrees of a major scale. In the key of C, for instance, the blues scale would be C, Eb, F, Gb, G, and Bb. Sounds a bit complicated, right? But don't worry—with a bit of practice, you'll get the hang of it. Here are some ways to master the blues scale: Start Slow: When first starting out, play the scale slowly. This helps solidify the scale in your muscle memory. You can gradually increase the speed as you get comfortable. Use Both Hands: Practice the blues scale with both your right and left hand. This will help you develop coordination and dexterity, which are vital for jazz piano. Practice Regularly: Like anything worth doing, mastering the blues scale requires regular practice. Make it a part of your daily piano routine. When you play, the more familiar you become with the scale. Remember, the blues scale is not just for playing the blues—you can use it in a variety of jazz tunes. It provides a strong harmonic foundation for improvisation. So, if you're serious about learning how to play piano for jazz, give the blues scale the attention it deserves. Practice Swinging Rhythm: Once you've gotten the hang of the blues scale, the next step on your journey to learn how to play piano for jazz is mastering the swing rhythm. If blues scale is the soul of jazz, swing rhythm is its heartbeat. It's what makes your toes tap and your fingers snap when you hear a jazz tune. Swing rhythm is all about the eighth notes. In a regular rhythm, eighth notes are evenly spaced. But in swing rhythm, the first note is longer and the second one is shorter. This irregular rhythm gives jazz its unique groove and feel. Here are a few tips to help you master swing rhythm: Listen to Jazz Music: The best way to understand swing rhythm is to listen to a lot of jazz music. Notice how the rhythm swings and bounces? That's what you're aiming for. Use a Metronome: A metronome can be a great tool to help you get the swing rhythm right. Set the metronome to a slow tempo and practice playing eighth notes in a swing rhythm. Count Out Loud: Counting out loud as you play can help you keep the swing rhythm. Say "one and two and three and four" and so on, and make sure the "and" falls on the shorter, swung note. Swing rhythm might feel a bit strange when you first start out, especially if you're used to playing in a regular rhythm. But stick with it. With a bit of practice, you'll be swinging like a jazz pro in no time. Study Jazz Chords: Now that you're getting a feel for the swing rhythm, let's turn our attention to another key aspect of learning how to play piano for jazz: jazz chords. Jazz is known for its rich and colorful chords, and mastering these can really give your playing that authentic jazz sound. Jazz chords are often more complex than the basic major and minor chords you might be used to. They often include added notes like sevenths, ninths, and elevenths, and can be altered in various ways to create different sounds and moods. But don't let that intimidate you. Here's how you can approach them: Start with 7th Chords: Seventh chords are the backbone of jazz harmony. They are made up of a root, third, fifth, and seventh. There are three types of seventh chords: major, minor, and dominant, each with a different sound and function in a chord progression. Learn Jazz Chord Voicings: In jazz, you don't always play chords with the notes in their root position. Jazz pianists often rearrange the notes, or even leave some out, to create different voicings. These can help your chords sound more jazzy and less blocky. Practice Chord Progressions: Jazz music often uses specific chord progressions like the 2-5-1 progression, which we'll talk about later. Practice these progressions in different keys to get a feel for how jazz chords move and flow. Study Jazz Chords might sound like a big task, but remember, even the greatest jazz pianists started where you are now. Take it one chord at a time, and before you know it, you'll be playing those rich, colorful jazz chords like a pro. Master the 2-5-1 Progression: After getting a grip on jazz chords, it's time to level up your skills on how to play piano for jazz by mastering the 2-5-1 progression. This progression is the most common chord sequence in jazz, and you'll find it in countless jazz standards. But what does 2-5-1 mean? It's actually quite simple. If you take any major scale, the 2nd, 5th, and 1st notes of that scale form the 2-5-1 progression. In the key of C Major, for example, the 2nd note is D, the 5th note is G, and the 1st note is C. So, a 2-5-1 progression in C Major would be Dm7 - G7 - Cmaj7. Why is this progression so popular? It's all about tension and resolution. The 2-5 part creates a feeling of tension, and the 1 chord resolves that tension, creating a satisfying sense of homecoming. Here are some tips to master it: Practice in All 12 Keys: To really get this progression under your fingers, practice it in all 12 major keys. This will not only help you understand the progression better but also improve your general keyboard skills. Use Different Voicings: Just like with jazz chords, try using different voicings for the chords in the 2-5-1 progression. This will make your playing sound more sophisticated and jazzy. Play Along with Jazz Standards: Many jazz standards feature the 2-5-1 progression. Playing along with these songs can help you hear how the progression sounds in context and improve your ability to play it smoothly. If you want to know how to play piano for jazz, mastering the 2-5-1 progression is a must. It's a simple sequence, but it's also incredibly versatile and forms the foundation for much of jazz harmony. So, get your hands on a new key, choose a new key, and start practicing. Plus, you'll be able to join in jam sessions and show your knowledge. So, what are you waiting for? Dive into the world of jazz chords and start developing your practice with a Metronome. You want to know a secret about how to play piano for jazz with impeccable timing? It's simple—practice with a metronome! A metronome is a device that helps keep a steady tempo while you're playing. It might seem somewhat mechanical, but it's a fantastic tool to help you keep time, especially when you're just starting out. So why is practicing with a metronome so important in jazz piano? Let's break it down: Consistent Tempo: Jazz is all about rhythm and timing. A metronome helps you maintain a consistent tempo, which is vital when you're playing jazz piano. Without it, you might unknowingly speed up or slow down, disrupting the flow of the music. Improves Timing: Practicing with a metronome can help you develop a strong sense of timing. This is important not just for solo playing, but also when you're playing with other musicians. It helps you all stay in sync. Develops Discipline: It takes discipline to stick with the metronome's tempo, especially when you're itching to speed up. This discipline can help improve your overall piano playing skills. When you first start practicing with a metronome, set it to a slow tempo. This allows you to focus on playing the notes accurately. As you get more comfortable, gradually increase the tempo. Remember, the goal isn't to play fast—it's to play well. And don't worry, practicing with a metronome won't make your playing sound robotic. Instead, it will give you a solid rhythmic foundation that you can then use to inject your own personality and style into your playing. So, if you want to know how to play piano for jazz with rock-solid timing, get a metronome, and start practicing! Play with Other Musicians: Now that you've got some jazz piano basics under your belt, it's time to take your skills to the next level. And there's no better way to do that than by playing with other musicians. After all, jazz is a collaborative art form, and playing with others can give you a fresh perspective on how to play piano for jazz. So why should you start jamming with other musicians? Here are three good reasons: Improves Listening Skills: Playing with others isn't just about showcasing your own skills. It's also about listening and responding to what the other musicians are doing. This can help you develop your ear and improve your ability to improvise. Provides Feedback: When you play with other musicians, they can give you valuable feedback on your playing. They can help you see what you've overlooked, like a certain chord that's not quite right, or a rhythm pattern that could use a little tweaking. Boosts Confidence: Playing in a group can be a real confidence booster. It can be nerve-wracking at first, but once you get the hang of it, you'll find that playing with others can be a lot of fun and very rewarding. Start by finding local musicians who are also into jazz. You can look for jam sessions in your area or even start your own. Don't worry if you're not a jazz virtuoso yet—most musicians are happy to play with beginners and can often provide helpful tips and advice. So go ahead, grab your sheet music, sit down at the piano, and start making music with others. It's one of the best ways to learn how to play piano for jazz and it's a whole lot of fun too! If you're eager to improve your jazz piano skills and want to take your playing to the next level, check out the workshop 'How to Get Better at What You Do - Go from Good to Great!' by Debbie Knox-Hewson. This workshop will provide you with valuable insights and techniques to enhance your overall musicianship, helping you become a more confident and skilled jazz pianist. Instructor Jonny May Skill Level Beginner Intermediate Learning Focus Music Style Get free weekly lessons, practice tips, and downloadable resources to your inbox! There is nothing quite like the sound of jazz piano—the colorful chords, playful melodies, bluesy inflections, and a swinging comp. There may be some of the reasons why we were drawn to study jazz piano. For other aspiring students, their journey began when they were arrested by a particular jazz pianist's sound—Red Garland, Bud Powell, Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk, Keith Jarrett... the list goes on. While these players are all unique, they each developed a highly-refined jazz piano style that has endured for decades. You may be drawn to the sound of a particular jazz pianist, but to truly understand the art of jazz piano, you need to go beyond the sound and explore the techniques and concepts that make it all work. Today's Quick Tip: The Beginner Jazz Piano Practice Guide, which we help you back a balanced practice routine that focuses on the simultaneous development of 5 key pillars of jazz piano proficiency including technique, harmony, scales, lead sheets and improv. The best thing about The Beginner Jazz Piano Practice Guide is that it works with the time you have, not with time you don't have. So whether you're able to practice 30 minutes per day or 2 hours per day, you too can develop a command of essential jazz piano skills to express yourself. Use the following links to navigate through this guide: Intro to The Beginner Jazz Piano Practice Guide Many piano students find the study jazz piano intimidating because of the vast amount of information involved. It's true that jazz pianists are brilliant—but then again, so are you! So no matter where you are in your jazz piano journey, you can celebrate the fact that you have made the commitment to discover your voice with this amazing form of musical expression we call jazz. Since there are so many jazz piano skills to learn, it's important that your practice guide is strategic and progressive. If you focus too narrowly, you're likely to struggle in actual playing situations. For example, many jazz piano students become stagnant with left-brained analysis of jazz harmony. As a result, they put off the right-brained work of improvisation because they want to "understand it first." That's like discouraging a baby's first words until they understand iambic pentameter. Jazz is a spoken language, and those who desire to become fluent must listen to it and speak it regularly. So it's important to include improvisation, and the other four pillars of today's guide, in every jazz piano practice session, but how? A Guide to Divide: Jazz Piano Practice for Beginners Naturally, you're probably thinking, "How can I practice all five jazz piano pillars every day? That sounds like five different practice sessions per day!" Well, in a sense, you're right. The point is that each pillar—technique, harmony, scales, lead sheets and improv—is too important to neglect. Therefore, you serve yourself best in taking baby steps toward each of them rather than "hitting snooze" on the pillars that seem more difficult. The key is to determine the total amount of time you have available for practice each day, and then divide that time into five mini-practice sessions of equal length. You might be surprised to learn that you can execute a well-balanced jazz piano practice routine in as little as 30 minutes per day. In fact, Christopher Tart, Lecturer in Jazz at Edinboro University, cites a study in his entitled "It's Not How Much It's How" published in Journal of Research in Music Education which found that piano students' length of practice time was not a significant factor in successful performance retention. "The quality of a musician's practice and the use of specific strategies play a bigger role in success than the amount of time spent practicing."—Christopher Tart, Lecturer in Jazz, Edith Cowan University The image below represents deliberate practice sessions ranging in length from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Each session can be divided into 5 equal mini-sessions to give specific attention to each of the 5 pillars. Determine the total amount of time you have available for practice each day. Then divide that time into five mini-practice-sessions of equal length. Now that you understand how to deliberately structure your jazz piano practice time using today's guide, let's examine each pillar in closer detail. Pillar 1: Technique The first pillar of concentration in today's beginner jazz piano practice guide is technique. What is musical technique? A musician's technique refers to their ability to efficiently control the anatomical mechanics needed to produce precisely desired sounds. Thus, a pianist's technique may be described as "weak" or "strong," "sloppy" or "clean," and so on. Piano technique is also related to dexterity—the skill or ease of using the hands. If you, as a pianist, are a driver, then your technique is your engine. "When you develop robust technical skills, you can close the gap between what you feel and what you're able to express through your instrument or voice."—Gerald Klinkstein, Educator, Author and Guitarist The exercises in this section function much like a daily "tune-up" for your jazz piano technique. In fact, by adding these exercises into your daily practice routine, you'll build the following jazz piano proficiencies: Diatonic 7th chord hand shapes for left hand Finger speed and strength for right hand 8th-note swing feel in right hand Let's look at the first exercise from today's lesson sheet. You can download the complete lesson sheet for this exercise above at 50 BPM, you are ready to move on to the next exercise. For example, repeat these exercises with both hands. After that, play the sequence with your right hand, then your left hand, and so on. Using the plan above, you will master the 60 chords in about 1 year. The following is a bonus exercise to perform if you can play the 7th chords in the right hand at 90-200 BPM. Did you notice that the left hand plays through every diatonic 7th chord of C major in this exercise? This is especially important because diatonic 7th chords are foundational to jazz harmony. 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