

Kansas City Rag by Scott

Grade 4 Saxophone

Background to the piece

When approaching a new piece with a pupil, it is a great idea to encourage some wider active listening and to discuss what you think the important 'ingredients' of the style are. In this case, I am drawn to the syncopated rhythms, steady pulse, lively and playful melodies and contrasting dynamics.

Structure and characterisation

Ragtime often has a number of sections with different melodies within the same piece. Kansas City Rag has two sections so listen to the ABRSM recording with your pupils and map out the structure. The introduction is very helpful in setting the mood and inviting the saxophone to join in the fun! The structure of a piece is very useful in creating interest and characterisation. Discuss the two sections with your pupils and try to add images, colours, characters or even a story line to create contrast. I particularly enjoy the dramatic flourish in bar 28 and the rousing finish!

Syncopated rhythm

The characterful lilt to the music comes from the syncopation which happens in almost every bar. This can be tricky to read so your pupil may find it easier to learn the rhythm aurally. There are two main rhythmic patterns throughout so point this out and try adding words to the patterns and use call and response on one note only. The syncopation in the saxophone part and the steady march like piano part means the texture is often polyrhythmic so identify and enjoy the moments when both parts come together in rhythmic unison.

Chromatic melodies

Whilst the key is C major, the use of chromaticism is used to embellish the basic phrase and this is what makes the melodies so attractive and fun to play. The chromatic scale requirement on the grade 4 syllabus covers the same range as almost all of the piece so worth learning this at the same time. This could be an opportunity to introduce the F# alternative fingering.

Plotting where to breathe

Choosing where to breathe can be tricky but this arrangement has included helpful suggestions. Point these out to your pupils and suggest that the markings are like punctuation in a sentence. In this piece, some breaths will need to be taken quickly so develop exercises where a quick breath is taken and the note is held for ten seconds, then repeat several times. Then practice taking longer, fuller breaths as you might do for the opening phrase and holding the notes for as long as you can.

Articulation

In this arrangement, there are no specific markings such as slurs or *staccato* but there is still much to consider. To give the melody a sense of playfulness, I would suggest that the articulation should be light and clear. The start or attack of each note needs attention, and it is worth experimenting with different syllables such as *ta* or *ti*. Away from the saxophone, try singing a rhythm using one of the syllables. Then back on the saxophone, tongue the same rhythm on one note paying attention to the position of your tongue when you were singing.

You could also consider the lengths of the notes. As the tempo is steady, there are options here to lift quavers both on the downbeat or in the mid-bar syncopation. Ask your pupils to try out different options. Put forward the idea that articulation is the speech of the music so whatever you do, it should feel natural. Encourage consistency within each section, then do something different in the next section for contrast.

Dynamics

Dynamics are so important in informing the mood and adding interest to repeated melodies. This piece uses a large range of dynamics from *mezzo piano* to *fortissimo*. Challenge pupils to play long notes or scales at all dynamics or demonstrate this yourself and ask your pupil to guess what dynamic you were aiming for. You could also copy each other playing at different dynamic levels in call and response exercise taking turns to lead. It can be tricky to differentiate between *mezzo forte* and *mezzo piano* and to still play with character in the softer sections. When repeating the melody at *mezzo piano* you could imagine you are whispering something exciting to someone across the room so that the energy does not dip.

Kansas City Rag is such fun to play. It is written in lovely singing register for the saxophone with very few low notes or palm key notes and will provide a virtuosic and memorable end to a concert.