



# ***Making the Transition from Classical-Only to Jazz-Inclusive Playing***

article by Michael Smolens ©2021

The question of how people who have only studied classical piano transition to playing jazz has been asked to me for many decades. Certainly, listening to iconic jazz recordings, going to concerts, reading, and getting familiar with the root sources of jazz as well — blues, West African music, American & Western European folk music — are all going to help orient you to jazz. Also, let's not forget the huge contribution of non-resolving extended harmony to jazz, first pioneered by Erik Satie (his 1st Sarabande in 1887) and later developed by Debussy and Ravel.

More important than any of those suggestions is to find a teacher who's fluent in both jazz AND classical piano (hopefully a composer, as well). Jazz is a style that's substantially different from classical, and like any language, you're going to need careful instruction. Granted, there will always be a very small number of pianists who can pick up any style (including jazz) just by listening and play it convincingly. But for most of us this is wishful thinking.

There are all kinds of aspects of your classical training that are going to come in very handy for playing jazz — a clear legato sound, strong dynamics, good voicing, efficient pedaling, and quick note reading (though reading chord symbols is a whole different skill set). Those skills all need to be sincerely acknowledged by any jazz teacher. Nearly every world-class jazz pianist has had serious classical training (Robert Glasper is one of the few contemporary artists who didn't). Unfortunately, some jazz-only teachers tend to adopt a rather purist approach when working with classically trained students — *“Don't go back to your classical pieces, it will just confuse you,”* or *“You've always got to swing!”* or *“Never play in the bass register when you're playing in a group,”* or *“You can't trust any fake book, so only play pieces you have personally transcribed.”*

Who says that you can't continue developing as a player by studying jazz and classical side-by-side? After all, there are many significant jazz artists who have recorded classical repertoire concurrently with their jazz projects, such as pianists Keith Jarrett (Shostakovich, Handel) and Uri Caine (Beethoven, Mozart) and both trumpeter Wynton & saxophonist Branford Marsalis. Drawing parallels between Baroque and jazz with respect to both phrasing and ensemble roles makes good sense to me. So does encouraging students to improvise on their classical pieces *in the style of each piece!* (Many major classical composers were also awesome improvisors).

I guarantee you that a sharp teacher will be able to spot weaknesses and blind spots that were probably already in your classical playing, but didn't get a lot of attention because the pieces you studied didn't reveal them. Getting the right jazz teacher will save you LOTS of time and frustration.