RIME Research and Issues in Music Education

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**Volume 2, No. 1** **September 2004**

# CANONS IN HARMONY, OR CANONS IN CONFLICT: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY OF JAZZ IMPROVIZATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of jazz improvisation is one of the most significant aspects of jazz studies in higher education. Regardless of their instruments, emphases, or abilities, all students enrolled in jazz programs are required to negotiate some course of study in this most fundamental aspect of jazz performance. Studies on jazz education have frequently looked at curricular structures and pedagogical methods in order to catalogue and document these processes, as well as to suggest improvement. But such studies rarely ask the question of *why* certain pedagogical methods and curricula are favored over others, or are structured the way they are; these are concepts that are generally taken for granted. In this essay, I argue that the questions of why jazz educators have constructed such methods have much to do with the cultural environments in which they and their students operate, environments that are specific historical constructions of musical and education practices. My central thesis is that jazz education draws upon distinct canons of musical study, those of the jazz community and of the academic institution, and that the tensions between these two systems impart a profound influence on the construction and application of teaching strategies. In advancing this argument, I wish to provide jazz educators with a conceptual framework with which to contextualize and evaluate commonly-held practices in the teaching of jazz and, perhaps more importantly, to re-envision the academic study of jazz as an extension of the traditions of jazz performance, rather than as an isolated pedagogical system.[i]

Culturally grounded studies of academic musical institutions are fairly unusual, but are not unheard of. Foremost among these is the work of ethnomusicologist

Henry Kingsbury, whose research focused upon the cultural system that develops within the context of a large conservatory. Kingsbury's research, a relative rarity in ethnomusicology given it's focus upon the Western musical tradition, has gone a long way towards establishing certain aspects of social and cultural behavior within the environment of institutionalized musical learning. His study is particularly effective in its discussion of the nature of talent and musicality as a major social and cultural force within the conservatory cultural system, a theme that will resonate forcefully in this study. Another important work in this area was produced by Bruno Nettl, whose research, while not grounded specifically in participant-observation based fieldwork, outlines some of the main cultural and societal themes emerging from the institution of higher musical learning. His work is particularly effective at depicting the different social forces at work within the music department, especially with regard to the interplay between different groups within it (i.e., performers, musicologists, composers, administrators, theorists).[ii] In jazz education, however, such analyses of the learning environment in jazz are uncommon. In the following pages, I will engage in a discussion of how jazz education, particularly the learning of improvisational performance skills, can be understood within the context of various cultural traditions.

## CURRICULAR STRUCTURES IN JAZZ IMPROVISATION

In order to understand how the teaching of improvisation is typically structured, it might be useful for us to begin at the end of the sequence, to examine what are the ultimate goals of such a curriculum. While specific requirements for students in improvisation courses can be very different, some level of competence in performance is expected to be met, but what this specifically requires students to demonstrate can be quite varied. One educator remarked in a class session that students should be able to improvise in a fashion "appropriate to the style." What exactly this meant was, after speaking with several students in the class, somewhat unclear. One interpretation was that students should be able to demonstrate the harmonic concepts presented in class, while others saw a statement such as this as implying a deeper level of musical understanding.

The most common curricular sequences in jazz improvisation last two or four terms, although variations do occur. Prerequisites for coursework in improvisation generally imply some level of theoretical understanding and instrumental ability before students are allowed to enroll, but again, these requirements display a great deal of variance. During my tenure as a graduate student at the University of North Texas, for example, undergraduate students generally completed a two-semester sequence of jazz theory and ear training during their freshman year before being allowed to take the basic improvisation course, which would seem to be a reflection of an orientation towards the mastery of basic theoretical understanding as a foundation for further study.[iii] At Indiana University, by contrast, theoretical structures are viewed as a concept that is gained through improvisational study itself. As longtime jazz educator and IU jazz director David Baker points out that, as long as students can play a major scale in all keys (which, presumably, almost any student at the collegiate level should be able to do), "I can teach them the rest."[iv]

In course sequences consisting of two terms of instruction, individual classes are usually divided into “beginning improvisation,” or more commonly, “introduction to improvisation” (or sometimes, simply “improvisation”). Such courses are designed to introduce students to basic concepts of the improvisational language, as well as basic theoretical concepts and their application to jazz performance. The musical material for such courses is usually drawn from the mainstream jazz repertory, namely, bebop, which provides the basis of much of the jazz language. In the second term, usually designated as “advanced improvisation,” students move on to more sophisticated types of improvisational concepts. Additionally, materials are often drawn from more contemporary repertories, and employing concepts developed by post-bop musicians such as John Coltrane, Woody Shaw, and David Liebman, as well as sometimes delving into fusion and free jazz styles.

In a four-semester course sequence, the first two courses are usually designated as “introduction to improvisation” or “improvisation,” while the final two courses are generally labeled “advanced improvisation.” The pacing of such a sequence is, understandably, slower than in a two-term sequence. This allows more attention to be devoted to the mastery of fairly detailed concepts within the improvisational language, as well as concepts tied to specific types of repertories. In relation to a two-semester sequence, the frequency of evaluation is greater; that is to say, students are evaluated more often in relation to the amount of material covered. Additionally, the examination of repertory becomes an important organizing principle within each course, with techniques specific to certain types of compositions becoming an important consideration. In advanced courses within such a sequence, the third semester courses generally deal with more advanced types of harmonic schemes, including post-bop structures (see above) and other non-functional types of harmonies. Often in the fourth semester, material is drawn from contemporary sources, or from the repertory of a specific player or group of players.[v]

The most common unifying force with curricular systems is repertory, in which compositions are categorized according to their relative complexity, and presented in a graded sequence. Within such an orientation, the most frequent manifestation of such an approach is that which is based upon a hierarchy of relative harmonic difficulty, with harmonically simpler pieces being placed at the beginning of the instructional sequence. In many cases, such compositions take the form of 1) blues-based tunes,[vi] or 2) modal tunes.[vii] These types of harmonic structures, it is argued, provide an easier vehicle for students to improvise, as they only require a single scalar structure for long periods of time, and thus students do not have to be concerned about “making the changes” as long as they adhere to this single mode. Even in the blues, despite the fact that the harmonic structure does change over the course of a single chorus, the “blues scale” provides students with a convenient method of negotiating the chord progression, while the difficulty factor is minimized. From this starting point, students then move on to more harmonically challenging tunes, such as those based upon simple diatonic cadential patterns. Compositions such as Ellington’s “Satin Doll” and Sonny Rollins’s “Pent Up House” are examples of the repertory at this stage of the curriculum. In each of these pieces, the harmonic structures generally revolve around a single key center, or perhaps two key centers

for relatively long periods. In any case, the harmonic challenges presented are kept to a minimum.

In the later stages of a repertoire-based sequence, students are introduced to pieces that present greater challenges in terms of harmonic/scalar structures, with tonalities based on melodic/harmonic minor scales and their related modes, highlighting the use of harmonic extensions and alterations. Such structures represent the "upper end" of the standard bebop foundation of the improvisational language. A song such as "Beautiful Love" or "What is this Thing Called Love" provides a typical harmonic vehicle. In addition to more complex harmonic structures, repertoire in the advanced improvisation course(s) also introduces students to pieces that represent non-functional harmonic structures, as well as pieces that demonstrate a faster harmonic rhythm. Standard compositions such as pieces based on "I Got Rhythm,"[viii] or "Have You Met Miss Jones," which feature a bridge that modulates between three keys, as well as more contemporary pieces such as Coltrane's "Giant Steps" or "Countdown," are intended to introduce students to harmonic schemes in which the ability to switch between key centers quickly is an important skill.[ix] Many of the songs used in the later stages are those that are considered to be measuring sticks for improvisational proficiency both within and without the academy ("Giant Steps," Parker's "Confirmation," and Benny Golson's "Stablemates" are frequent examples).

A scheme of curricular organization in which repertories are gradated by way of perceived level of difficulty reflects the ways in which many educators view the essential nature of jazz improvisation, that relative complexity is first and foremost determined by harmonic constructions. This concept is fraught with problems from the very beginning, as it demands that educators make an initial value judgment about which concepts they feel are most likely to be grasped by beginning students of improvisation, indeed, what is the simplest vehicle for learning. Critics argue that such an emphasis on harmony de-emphasizes more esoteric, intangible aspects of jazz performance in favor of technical harmonic competence and lessening the amount of individual creativity in jazz performance. As jazz historian James Lincoln Collier argues:

> With students all over the United States being taught more or less the same harmonic principles, it is hardly surprising that their solos tend to sound much the same. It is important for us to understand that many of the most influential jazz players developed their own personal harmonic schemes, very frequently because they had little training in theory and were forced to find it their own way...The effect has been to a degree disguised by academically trained analysts, who are usually able to explain odd notes by the rooting them in an extension of a more basic chord...In my view, this is not the way these players saw it.[x]

To a certain extent this is probably true. Students who master the rather basic harmonic concepts explained in teaching modal pieces, for example, rarely display the kind of melodic sensitivity exhibited by experienced musicians, even though they are

playing all of the “correct” notes. Such pieces may in fact present different types of difficulties, ones that do not necessarily correspond to graded instruction based primarily upon the relative complexity of harmonic schemes.

Within the context of academic study (not limited in this sense to music), graded sequences of related courses are the norm in the structuring of educational activities and are often taken for granted on the part of jazz faculty. But where and when did such curricular models in jazz develop? One of the first widely-recognized curricular models in jazz was that of Dr. M. E. “Gene” Hall at North Texas State College (now UNT), whose master’s thesis entitled “The Development of a Curriculum for the Teaching of Dance Music at a College Level” is often cited as the basis for the jazz studies curriculum,[xi] though his thesis says very little about improvisation; although it is included as part of the field of study, specific courses devoted to improvisational techniques are lacking. Another major codifying thrust in the establishment of a curriculum for jazz came with the doctoral dissertation of Walter Barr. Regarding the structuring of improvisation, Barr writes “the general objective for the improvisation experience should be the performance and understanding of jazz styles and improvisational theories, with an emphasis on small ensemble performance.”[xii] He further lists four general competencies, distilled from questionnaires completed by a sampling of post-secondary jazz educators, in which they ranked certain thematic areas:

> Specific competencies related of the improvisation category [of the jazz curriculum], reflecting the concerns of populations surveyed, were ranked in the following order:
>
> 1. Sight-read and improvise with chord symbols.
>
> 2. Demonstrate solo improvisation skills in all jazz styles.
>
> 3. Accurately name and describe current improvisational theories and techniques.
>
> 4. Demonstrate common improvisational patterns and clichés.

In the implementation of the Jazz Studies curriculum, it is strongly suggested that the described competencies serve in the listed order as instructional guidelines and should be assessed as ending competencies upon successful completion of such a course in improvisation.[xiii]

Barr’s guidelines for the design of improvisation courses are significant for two reasons. First, as extrapolations of existing practice (at least as revealed through his survey), they reflect an overriding orientation within jazz education towards harmonic structures as the most important factors in improvisational study within the academic context.[xiv] Secondly, Barr’s dissertation has long been regarded as something as a “model” for the jazz curriculum in itself, greatly influencing the curricular standards subsequently set forth by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), the

main accrediting body for higher musical education in the United States. Thus, Barr's research simultaneously describes common practices in improvisation in jazz education, and at the same time presents those practices as a standard for emulation. [xv] Noticeably absent are the kinds of concepts relating to the exercise of more individualized, aesthetic concepts, although, few educators would agree that the concepts of individuality and creativity are not important in the learning of improvisation; many in fact recognize these as central concepts, even if they are not explicitly included as a component of curriculum. How, then, do such concepts manifest themselves within the teaching of improvisation courses? This question will move our discussion from the area of larger-scale curricular planning to the more context-specific realm of pedagogy.

## THE PEDAGOGY OF IMPROVISATION

If curriculum represents the large-scale organization of topical issues within the teaching of jazz improvisation, pedagogy deals with the specific methods that educators use to convey that material to their students on a day-to-day basis. The basic goal of all pedagogical methods is the same, namely to bring students through a defined curricular structure or sequence, at the end of which a student or group of students should be able to demonstrate certain pre-determined skills. Although specific pedagogical approaches are varied, there are certainly overriding themes that determine how pedagogical methods are developed and applied. Perhaps the most common feature in the institutionalized pedagogy of improvisation is the emphasis on *pitch*. Put another way, pitch structures, such as scales, chords, and the relationships between the two, are stressed above other factors. As a general musical principle, pitch relates fundamentally to both melody and harmony, and thus, improvisational pedagogy is, in most instances, concerned with the construction and understanding of such elements. One jazz educator indicated that the basic principle behind his teaching is one that deals with "manipulating the pitch."[xvi]

We can observe two main pedagogical thrusts in the teaching of jazz improvisation. These can be termed as "theoretically-based" approaches to pedagogy, and "practice-based" approach.[xvii] In theoretically based approaches, for example, musical material is presented as it relates to harmonic/structural components of the repertory. Analysis of chord progressions and the application of chord/scale structures are perhaps the most frequently observed examples of such an orientation. In a practice-based orientation, meanwhile, materials are derived from existing musical sources (i.e., recorded and/or transcribed solos) and are intended to be learned and applied to improvisational performance. Pedagogical strategies that involve the use of patterns, clichés, or "licks" are an important example of this approach. The continuum between these two orientations represents something of an intellectual chicken-and-egg dilemma: does theory give rise to improvisational practice, or does practice determine what will be regarded as theory? Most educators recognize that, in fact, both of these viewpoints are correct, and are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, at certain times in the pedagogical process, one or the other approach clearly dictates the presentation of material.

In a theoretically based pedagogical system, students use theory (in the academic-disciplinary sense) as an essential building block of the improvisational language. The demonstration of fluency in the harmonic structures of a certain repertory is often a final objective of improvisation courses. This takes on several forms. Obviously, students should be able to demonstrate at least a basic ability to improvise a solo on a certain piece, for example, and be able to "make the changes," that is, to play the correct notes for the chord at any given moment. Additionally, students are often required to demonstrate an understanding of certain harmonic devices and structures, such as cadences or "ii-Vs," showing that they know not only how to articulate a certain harmonic sound, but also how to successfully move from one to the other. Such considerations are, however, as I stated before, the end game of this process, and are usually the culmination of a process of familiarization with the structural language of a certain piece. Such pedagogical strategies emphasize a systematic approach to learning just how jazz harmony works, and how melodic constructs relate to harmonic ones. This is often classified as "chord/scale" theory, in which each chord in a composition has a related scale, which can then be used as a vehicle for improvised melodies. One might argue that any melodic or harmonic structure in the context of western music can be represented as either scalar or chordal in some way. The critical distinction here, however, is the emphasis on scales and chords as generative devices for improvisational performance. In this context, knowledge of scalar and/or chordal structures serves as a basis for musical creations.

Students in improvisation courses are exposed to a wide variety of scalar systems, and ways of conceptualizing of and applying scale structures in their solos, which become increasingly more complex and unusual (in relation to the diatonic scale) as the course progresses. For example, in the early stages, students usually are limited to three main scale structures, all based on the diatonic scale structure: major scales (usually built from the root, but also from the fourth – Lydian – mode), minor scales, usually the Dorian mode, and the Mixolydian mode, used over dominant seventh chords. In later studies, students are introduced to scale structures derived from modes of the harmonic and melodic minor scales, which are able to capture harmonic alterations and extensions common to the language of bebop. Educators also employ a number of different methods of increasing student familiarity and the ability to apply various scale systems to improvisational performance.

A related device in theoretically based improvisational pedagogies involves the detailed exploration of harmonic structures in a given piece. In many improvisation courses, for example, students are required to play through a particular chord progression by both arpeggiating chords at performance tempo, as well as playing the related scales. In one of my improvisation courses as a graduate student at UNT, a mastery of such techniques was actually required to advance to the next level of the curriculum. Students were given a piece that had been studied within that term, and had to play the chordal structure in this manner with an Aebersold play-along recording,[xviii] similar to the ways in which students had to play the scalar structure (see above). For many students (myself included), this was a nerve-wracking experience, but to be sure, afterwards I could "make the changes" with a great deal of fluency. This brings us to an important question: what is this intent of such a

pedagogical orientation, and what are teachers really trying to accomplish here? Frequently my fellow students, and later my student research informants (and even some teachers) openly questioned the relevance of this type of approach to learning jazz performance skills, questioning whether "real" jazz musicians would play such exercises in performance. Perhaps they wouldn't, but in the final analysis, such questions are, to pardon the pun, academic. Exercises of this type are more or less intended to ingrain the concepts of harmonic structure and related scalar material so deeply that it becomes almost second nature.

If the pedagogical orientations described above treat improvised solos as resulting from theoretical constructs, practice-based orientations might be described as approaching the relationship between these areas from an opposite perspective. In the latter case, the language of improvisation is gleaned from pre-existing sources, particularly recordings of major jazz soloists. Specifically, such improvisational instruction is concerned with "vocabulary." This is a concept used frequently by jazz musicians to refer to specific musical patterns that are prevalent in the repertory of improvised jazz music, as Paul Berliner implies in describing how musicians have historically engaged in similar processes:

> Just as children learn to speak by imitating older competent speakers, so young musicians learn to speak jazz by imitating seasoned improvisers. In part, this involves acquiring a complex vocabulary of conventional phrases and phrase components, which improvisers draw upon in formulating the melody of a jazz solo.[xix]

Jazz educators employ similar linguistic terminology in describing the building blocks of the jazz "language." Both "vocabulary" and "language" are terms that are frequently used in instructional contexts, and also as parts of titles of improvisation method books.[xx]

One manifestation of this type of orientation centers on the practice and mastery of short melodic motifs, variously referred to as clichés, licks, phrases, or patterns. In developing pedagogical strategies based on these types of structures, educators hope to accomplish three basic tasks. First, patterns provide students with a ready supply of ideas for improvised solos. As David Baker explains, students are able to acquire an "encyclopedic knowledge" of the jazz language that they may then apply to actual performance situations:

> [Students acquire] a repository of ideas; if the ideas don't come they always have something that sounds good. That's what we [jazz players as a whole] do when we play. Nobody can create at the highest level, and I tell people the great players are the ones who have the highest level of bull---- material, because if their bull---- material is better than everybody else's 'A' material, how can you be a bad player?[xxi]

Secondly, patterns provide models for students to build their own musical vocabulary, to understand the ways in which jazz musicians have historically

constructed melodic units. In one improvisational styles course I took as an undergraduate, for example, student were required not only to learn patterns from major jazz musicians, but also to write their own in the style of a particular player, to construct patterns that sounded like they might have been created by Louis Armstrong or Charlie Parker. In this way, students are not only taught to absorb and assimilate patterns, but through this type of study can also connect them historically to the jazz tradition. Third, students can use patterns as exercises to achieve fluency in various harmonic situations, by taking a specific pattern, for example, and transposing it into various keys and interpolating it into different situations. The ability to transpose clichés and patterns to all keys, even those that are rarely used in actual performance, is considered to be a hallmark in separating beginning players from more advanced ones. In such a case, the actual application of these patterns in various keys centers, while useful in performance, also fulfills the goal of achieving fluency in different key centers.[xxii]

Two major generative approaches to improvisational patterns can be delineated. First, there are those patterns that are extrapolated directly from recorded solos, and are presented pedagogically as such. In segments of a particular course in which certain styles, genres, or individual musicians are being studied, such an approach can be quite valuable. For example, students may be given a sheet of Charlie Parker phrases to learn as part of an instructional unit on bebop pieces, or John Coltrane licks when studying his compositions as improvisational vehicles. In this sense, the use of patterns marks a clear attempt to link pedagogy with the historical traditions of jazz improvisation. Jazz musicians have for years used extrapolated bits of other musicians' solos, incorporating them into their own improvisational vocabulary. The second generative approach to improvisational patterns highlights a more structural orientation, portraying patterns as musical/technical constructs, in a sense, abstractions of common melodic practices. In this sense, patterns are often represented numerically, with numbers referring to scale/chord tones. The distinction between these two generative approaches is admittedly a subtle one. Certain structural patterns may indeed be actual figures in a recorded solo. Similarly, most, if not all, repertoire-derived licks may also be represented structurally. The music of John Coltrane provides many examples; Coltrane's "Giant Steps" solo contains many examples of what are often referred to as "digital" patterns, and are often portrayed as both "Coltrane licks" and as melodic abstractions. The key here is the manner in which this type of musical information is encapsulated and presented within a pedagogical context. Such figures are presented and conceptualized in different ways depending upon the specific needs of the pedagogical situation or method.

Another pedagogical strategy based in the practice orientation involves the learning of melody. Although improvisational courses are explicitly about acquiring the skill needed for creating improvised solo, learning melodies is nonetheless positioned as a critical concept. Learning the melody of songs used in the improvisation curriculum serves a number of purposes. From a pragmatic viewpoint, knowledge of the melody of a given tune increases a student's potential employability. In many professional performance situations, knowledge of a song's melody is perhaps even more important than the ability to improvise at a high level. In terms of

improvisational pedagogy, however, it can play another role. Melody often is used as a sort of “anchor” for improvised solos. In this sense, knowledge of the melody provides a constant, if internalized, reference point for the soloist. This concept is manifested in two main ways. First, the melody provides an underpinning for the solo. Often students are instructed to keep the melody in mind when improvising, as a means of structural awareness: students know their place within a given form because an understanding of the melody provides them with a constant reference point. Secondly, a thorough knowledge of melody provides a sort of improvisational safe harbor for young improvisers, a constant source of material. Students who find navigating a particular set of chord changes particularly difficult, or are having difficulty thinking of their own melodic ideas, can always refer back to (by playing) portions of the melody at the appropriate point. Such a device, often referred to as quoting the melody, also is frequently employed as a dramatic or developmental device among jazz soloists, harking back to jazz’s earliest days. While younger musicians are often instructed to quote portions of melodies or solos as a way to find their way through the form, more experienced players, by contrast, develop quoting of melodies or solos into an art in and of itself.[xxiii] Charlie Parker, for example, was renowned for his seemingly superhuman ability to conjure up, on a split-second’s notice, quotations from melodies appropriate to certain members of the audience. Teaching students to quote solos, then, can address both introductory concepts of keeping one’s place, while at the same time opening up developmental possibilities.

Theory-based and practice-based orientations towards improvisational pedagogy may simply represent two different ways of understanding the same central musical language. What is important to keep in mind is not necessarily any meaningful, applicable distinction between theory and practice. It can perhaps be agreed that, at the deepest levels of musical understanding, the two concepts are one and the same, looking at the same musical content from two perspectives. What defines the distinction between such approaches within improvisational pedagogy is, rather, the ways in which they are framed within the instructional situation. Put another way, this is the method by which teachers and students talk about the fundamental structural aspects of improvisation, and in the pedagogical discourse, at least, the distinction between the two orientations is very real.[xxiv]

Musical analysis as utilized as a pedagogical strategy in jazz improvisation occupies a unique position in relation to the areas of theory and practice. Analysis is usually aligned, at least with respect to its institutional role, with the discipline of theory, entailing the identification, classification, and interpretation of musical structures. In this model, analysis identifies musical structures, and theory provides the rules that govern those structures. In this commonly accepted framework, theory and analysis in effect define each other; the language of analysis is theoretical. In improvisational pedagogy, meanwhile, the role of analysis is seen as being somewhat more practical, that is, at least in terms of direct application. Analyses of jazz solos in improvisation courses tend not to employ the same kind of theoretical language that might be found, for example, in a styles-and-analysis course. Such activities, by contrast, are generally regarded as a way of extrapolating musical ideas directly for performance, utilizing recordings for improvisational raw materials. Analysis, after all,

is ultimately what gives rise to discernable improvisational patterns. Even though such musical structures may not always be translated into theoretical representations (although they often are), their identification as discreet structures is, in itself, an analytical activity. Often in improvisation courses, students are also required to learn solos from written transcriptions (or sometimes aurally), either given to them by the instructor or completed by the students themselves. In this sense, both transcriptions and patterns are not represented primarily as theoretical or analytical units, but rather as possibilities for performance. Such an approach is regarded as a more organic method of learning musical styles.

Although jazz improvisation is often positioned as a quintessentially unwritten mode of musical performance,[xxv] written materials are sometimes used in pedagogical situations. Both theoretical concepts (i.e., chords/scales) and practice-based materials (patterns) are often represented in written forms. The use of written materials within improvisational pedagogy is somewhat controversial, with a number of critics of the field arguing that such practices destroy the historical identity of jazz.[xxvi] In such a context, written materials are seen to be ruining the essence of improvisation, contributing to the over-standardization of improvisational style and the degradation of aural skill.[xxvii] Yet, the role of written materials in the classroom is not clearly defined. Most improvisation courses will require some kind of textbook, which may or may not form the backbone of the instructional material. More often than not, however, textbooks are used simply as supplemental materials, providing practice exercises that supplement materials presented aurally in class. As David Baker explains, for example, although his students use a textbook, it does not generally enter into the classroom directly, saying “they’ve [students] got the damn book,” and students can therefore use it as they see fit.[xxviii] In other instances, students are given handouts demonstrating various theoretical concepts, or containing transcribed musical examples. Probably the most common use of written materials involves “lead sheets,” containing the melody and chord changes of a given tune. In this sense, chord changes serve as a type of prescriptive notation, indicating not an actual representation of sound, but rather what *should* be played. Thus notation, in various manifestations, serves both a descriptive role, by way of transcriptions of solos (or segments of solos), and a prescriptive one, manifested in the form of lead sheets, as well as abstracted musical exercises and patterns.

## THE TEACHING OF IMPROVISATION AND COMPETING DEFINITIONS OF MUSIC

How we teach music depends by necessity on how we define it. This may seem like a simple statement, but in reality it is fraught with difficulty. With respect to jazz education, the balancing act between the demands of the musical academy, which because of its size and strict schedule demands a certainly uniformity of instruction, and of more creative aspects of musical performance, is a difficult dilemma. The kinds of pedagogical and curricular orientations discussed previously are designed to negotiate between these two worlds, but success is not always guaranteed. The dynamics of how teachers define what to teach, and perhaps more importantly how to evaluate students performance is not easy, nor is it without

profound implications for the cultural environment of the music academy. Henry Kingsbury writes, in his ethnography of a prominent (and intentionally unnamed) conservatory, that the concept of *talent* lies at the heart of power relations in the music school. For Kingsbury, talent is at once a central feature of Western musical understanding, and almost impossible to define in specific terms. He relates the tale, for example, of a young voice student who fails her promotional jury because she is deemed to be "unmusical," when she had, only a year before, been lavished with praise by the faculty for her performance.[xxix] At the same time, I vividly recall a comment that one of my teachers gave me after a class performance, that I did not sound like "university jazz" (it was meant a compliment), which left me to wonder, if a university jazz musician is not supposed to sound like university jazz, what should they sound like? The implication is that there is more to jazz than what is in the curriculum. I certainly would not argue this point, as it is true of any field.

To explore this point further, I have included an excerpt from an interview I conducted with an undergraduate student in jazz from the Pittsburgh area during my field research. This student spoke candidly about his experiences in a university program that he entered directly out of high school. The relationship between the teaching of musical structure and the teaching of other, more aesthetically based ideas is very instructive, as he explained:

> They [the faculty] went more into the nuts and bolts of the thing, which was great – it was really what I needed. My experience there was nothing short of awesome.

He also states, however:

[that it] got too much away from the art form of jazz, and it got involved with the technical aspects of jazz. Both are important, but I think there has to be a balance between the two...there was kind of a hierarchy of musicians and attitudes of musicians . . . proficient playing versus someone with a concept.[xxx]

The "balance between the two" is not easy to achieve. One educator with whom I spoke conceded that jazz educators "stomp on their creativity" when teaching improvisation to young jazz students. Others are more pragmatic, or more idealistic. Whatever one's individual perspective, it is at the moment of evaluation, whether in the form of a recital, jury, improvisation class, or a passing comment in the hallway, that the tensions between what is taught and what is expected within the context of the larger jazz tradition come into conflict, and it is not surprising that these are the moments when tensions between students and faculty are at their peak, as our student informant points out again:

> There was a [student] that had a real different, unorthodox way of playing. To me, I felt like he was kind of on to something, a couple more years and he would have been real refined and real different. But he got burned out because they were pushing him to go somewhere else,[xxxi] and he wasn't there. If you're there and you expect to be brought and

> pushed somewhere musically, and you go along with it, it will work out. If you go there and you're trying to do something a little different, you're actually going against the grain of it. It gets to be too much to handle sometimes.[xxxii]

My student informant explained that he left the program a short time later.

Regardless of the specific approach used to teach improvisation, one must agree that the types of methods and frameworks that are developed say a great deal about how jazz educators define the process of improvisation within the context of institutional study. In this setting, the most important things that can be successfully incorporated into the classroom setting at those that fit the constraints of academic curricula in general. Materials that are taught must be readily quantifiable, rather than subjective. Instructional sequences must be able to be broken down and represented on a syllabus, courses within an instructional sequence must flow into each other, methods of evaluation and assessment must be designed so that they can be applied to a large group of students. The institutional pressures on teachers of jazz improvisation are many. And thus jazz education is in many ways an historical and cultural balancing act between competing traditions. While the demands of the academy are satisfied through a sense of structure and curricular/pedagogical regularity, the aesthetic demands of the jazz tradition for individuality and intuition also exert a powerful pull on educators and students who, after all, enter this arena because of a deep attraction to the music.

Moments of evaluation are where these varied processes come to a climax, where the demands of different historical forces come into sharp relief. Students whose playing is criticized for being too technical complain that this is what they are taught. Those whose playing does not meet a certain standard for technical or stylistic appropriateness likewise see such evaluations as too rigid, disregarding the individualism long cherished as a marker of identity in jazz. We have seen that in evaluating student performers, at least two main forces are at work, one of which is under the control of jazz educators (the teaching of technique, for example), while the other largely is not (individual creativity). Institutional instruction, in its current common manifestations, can only accomplish so much, yet students are often judged within the totality of the jazz performance tradition, taking more experiential factors into account.[xxxiii] David Baker proposes a "sliding scale" for evaluative judgments, with evaluative criteria tied closely to the relative players involved with professional level performance being placed at one end, and certain evaluative criteria being removed as the level of the player gets progressively lower. Ultimately, there is a level that moves beyond material such as that presented within an improvisation curriculum:

> First of all, you decide 'what level is the student?' I write reviews a lot for magazines, if you asked me to evaluate a recording of Nathan Davis, a recording by James Moody, a recording by Dave Liebman, I begin to do this: I don't talk about 'can they swing,' I don't talk about their tone, I don't talk about how well they can run the changes . . . if they can't do

> that shit, they ain't got no business recording. So that's all given. Then I talk about their vision, how clearly they communicate to me what their vision is.

In evaluating advanced level students, those who should be more familiar with the basic- to intermediate-level elements of the jazz vocabulary, another set of evaluative criteria comes into play:

> If you ask me to do that with one of my advanced students, I might add one of those other things that was missing before, I might put in there 'changes,' particularly if it's a tune that is fairly complex, and the form is strange. Then that becomes one of the things I judge them on, how well they manage that, how well they manage to solve whatever the problem is.

For beginners, meanwhile, evaluative judgments are based more squarely on how well a particular student negotiates the chord changes on a tune, and how well they are able to incorporate the basic musical patterns they have been taught. At this level, one senses an increased emphasis on the correctness of playing, rather than aesthetic judgments:

> If it's a beginning group, then I'm probably going to judge them on how well they match up scales and chords . . . how quickly can they recall ideas.[xxxiv]

In practice, most jazz educators seem to employ such an approach. But even within this context, individual students and teachers frequently have very different ideas about what constitutes proficient improvisational performance, sometimes with creative ideas being stressed, sometimes technical ones. This is natural, as individual musicians will always bring their own experiences, attitudes, philosophies, and aesthetic values to the table. I do not mean to imply that every student or educator in a jazz program experiences these concepts in the same way. Some students certainly thrive in such an environment, while others suffer. That could be the case for any discipline. I would argue, however, that the complimentary demands of technical proficiency and creativity are not easily negotiated within the prevailing methodologies of improvisational pedagogy. Striking a balance between these two paradigms can be, in the experience of many students and teachers, a difficult task.

## CONCLUSION

The de-mythologizing and de-romanticizing of jazz improvisation by jazz educators is certainly a positive development in jazz studies. In demonstrating that the language of jazz is a complex structural entity, they have, in my view, shown jazz musicians historically as possessing a great deal of sophistication and skill with regards to the techniques of performance and musical creation, rather than being regarded as a musical "noble savages," possessing raw talent, but little in the way of musical intellect.[xxxv] Yet in debunking such stereotypes of jazz improvisers, educators may inadvertently send a message that playing jazz is mostly about

technique, and that individual ability or creativity does not factor into the equation. I do not believe that this is intentional, nor even that it is desired by those who do it. Institutional pressures, however, often force educators to make instructional choices that favor such concepts over what are, in curricular terms at least, less definable concepts. Creativity is more difficult to represent on a blackboard or in a handout than, say, a series of patterns or scales.

The favoring of some methods over others reflects the types of institutional pressures that have shaped jazz education during its history. Many educators I have interviewed seem somewhat resigned to the fact that some pressures force them to make specific choices regarding what they will teach and how it will be taught. For some teachers, this is an obstacle, damaging the nurturing of creativity. Other teachers are more pragmatic, positioning such instruction as only one element of a larger process, seeing such interplay between traditions as a "creative" tension itself. Nevertheless, jazz students seem to feel pressured to choose between the paths of individualism and creativity on the one hand, and technique and theoretical abstraction on the other. Some jazz educators may bristle at this suggestion, while others will undoubtedly see it as all too common, even in their own pedagogy. In my experience as a student, teacher, and observer of jazz education, I have found that such dichotomies are especially difficult to negotiate at all levels. All of us in the field, however, share a deep love and respect for this music, and it is my contention that a critical, self-reflective and constructive examination such as that I have attempted to present here will only bring educators and students closer to rich traditions of jazz performance, and will connect us with its historical legacy in a more profound manner.

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[i] Much of the primary field research for this project was conducted between 1999 and 2002 as part of my doctoral dissertation, involving observations at and interviews with numerous institutions and individuals involved in jazz education. A great deal of this research was carried out with the support of an Andrew Mellon Pre-Doctoral Fellowship in 2001-2002. Additionally, my own experiences as a jazz studies student at various academic institutions have been critical to shaping this project.

[ii] Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Nettl's work differs from Kingbury's in two significant ways. First, Nettl's "heartland music school" is a conglomeration of several large midwestern institutions, painting a portrait of a generalized music culture, rather than the specific conservatory environment of the former. Second, Nettl's music school is contained within the university, rather than existing as a separate institution. Despite the differing orientations, the two texts explore many of the same issues, and serve as effective complements to one another in the study of institutionalized musical learning.

[iii] Graduate students and advanced transfers were allowed to test out of this requirement.

[iv] David Baker, interview with the author, March 2000.

[v] At UNT, for example, my fourth semester improvisation course dealt exclusively with the music of Wayne Shorter.

[vi] Compositions based on the standard 12-bar blues progression.

[vii] Modal compositions are those in which a single static harmonic structure provides the basis for an entire section, or in some cases, the whole composition itself. Such tunes are termed modal because they are predicated upon the idea that a single related scale or mode provides the basic improvisational structure. “So What” by Miles Davis is usually regarded as the archetypical piece in this genre.

[viii] “Rhythm changes” are sometimes placed at the end of the beginning sequence, as a sort of repertory-based “final exam.”

[ix] See, David Andrew Ake, “Being Jazz: Identities and Images.” Ph.D. dissertation (University of California at Los Angeles, 1998), 161-219, for an intriguing discussion of the canonization of Coltrane’s “Giant Steps” in jazz education.

[x] James Lincoln Collier, 1993. *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 155.

[xi] See Morris Eugene Hall, “The Development of a Curriculum for the Teaching of Dance Music at a College Level” (M.A. thesis, North Texas State College, 1944).

[xii] Walter Barr, “The Jazz Studies Curriculum” (Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 1974), 93.

[xiii] Barr, 93.

[xiv] It should be added that first among these competencies is the term “sight reading” and a reference to chord symbols, emphasizing the role of written materials in the improvisation curriculum.

[xv] This has been a common theme in research on improvisational pedagogy. See, Wayne Bowman, “Doctoral Research in Jazz Improvisation Pedagogy: An Overview.” *Council of Research on Music Education Bulletin* 96 (1988), 47-76.

[xvi] Mike Tomaro, interview with the author, September 2001.

[xvii] Similarly, Henry Martin, writing about the field of jazz theory, refers to “analytical” and “musician-based” approaches. See Henry Martin, “Jazz Theory: An Overview.” *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 8 (1996), 1-17.

[xviii] Jazz educator Jamey Aebersold has created something of a minor industry by producing and marketing an extensive series of “play-along” recordings. These recordings feature professional rhythm sections performing the chord changes on various songs, *sans* melody or solos, allowing musicians to practice their skills in a simulated performance setting. See Jamey Aebersold, *A New Approach to Jazz Improvisation* (New Albany, Indiana: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1973). This is the first in a series of instructional aids, with subsequent volumes produced frequently.

[xix] Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 95.

[xx] Dan Haerle, *The Jazz Language* (Miami: CPP/Belwin, 1980) and Mike Steinel *Building a Jazz Vocabulary*, (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corp, 1995) are two prominent examples of such texts.

[xxi] David Baker, interview with the author, March 2000.

[xxii] The use of patterns in jazz education is somewhat controversial, as many critics of the field have argued that players emerging from such instruction sound too “pattern oriented,” implying that while students may be able to demonstrate that they have learned these musical units, they have developed neither the skills to apply them in any meaningful way, to develop their own unique vocabulary, or to be able to depart from patterns they have learned. For some students, this is certainly true, but this critical bent ignores the fact that the learning bits and pieces of the improvisational language has always been at the heart of learning how to improvise.

[xxiii] See Krin Gabbard, “The Quoter and His Culture.” In *Jazz in Mind: Essays on the History and Meanings of Jazz*. Ed. Reginald T. Buckner and Steven Weiland. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.; Berliner, 103-104 and 129-130.

[xxiv] Some textbooks make this distinction explicit in their titles. See Richard Lawn and Jeffrey Hellmer, *Jazz: Theory and Practice* (Los Angeles: Alfred Publishing, 1996).

[xxv] All musical sound is unwritten, as written materials provide only a form of representation of that sound. The attribution of improvisation to an “unwritten” mode of transmission *vis-à-vis* western art music draws upon the discursive strategies concerning oral and written traditions, a debate in music scholarship that is far from settled. See Steven Feld, “Orality and Consciousness,” In *The Oral and the Literate in Music*, ed. by Tokumaru Yoshiihiko and Yamaguto Osamu (Tokyo: Academia Music, 1986), 18-28; Luke O Gillespie, “Literacy, Orality, and the Parry-Lord "Formula": Improvisation and the Afro-American Jazz Tradition.” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 22/2 (1991), 147-164.

[xxvi] Hal Galper’s official web site, “The Oral Tradition,” http://www.halgalper.com/13_arti/oraltradition.htm (accessed December 8, 2003).

[xxvii] Although many researchers in jazz education implicitly favor aural approaches

over written ones, few openly challenge the perceived hegemony of written materials in the study of jazz. See Keith Javors, “An Appraisal of Collegiate Jazz Performance Programs in the Teaching of Jazz Music” (Ed. D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 2001) for a notable exception in this regard.

[xxviii] David Baker, interview with the author, March 2000.

[xxix] Kingsbury, 64-67.

[xxx] Interview with the author, October 2000.

[xxxi] The implication is musical, not in literal terms of going to another school.

[xxxii] Interview with the author, October 2000.

[xxxiii] One of my improvisation instructors at UNT quipped that an “A” student would be one he would hire for his group (which he sometimes put into practice).

[xxxiv] David Baker, interview with the author, March 2000.

[xxxv] See Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 30.

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ISSN 1532-8090