

## Taking the Mystique Out of (teaching) Jazz Improvisation

As a college student about to enter a teaching credential program, I had so many questions about teaching, ensemble direction, conducting, educational philosophies, discipline, and many other music education related topics. There was one particular pedagogical question that loomed like a dark shadow over my quest to become a music educator. How does one teach and learn the art of jazz improvisation?

After three and a half decades of teaching, I am still in search of the definitive answer to this question. However, the shadow is lifting, and light is beginning to emerge through conversations with colleagues, attendance at conference workshops, implementing suggestions from jazz festivals critiques, and exploring the multitude of articles on the subject. Through these various resources, I have come to realize that jazz improvisation is accessible to everyone, and that improvisation can indeed be taught and learned.

In order for a student to excel as a jazz soloist, they must possess two major qualities. First, a student must have the desire and motivation to succeed, and second, the determination to overcome the fear of improvising. When asked what the most important individual quality a student must possess in order to improvise successfully, jazz pianist and author Mark Levine states, “The first quality has to be the desire more than anything else. Of course you have to have talent, but without the desire, they’re never going to get anywhere.” (Galisatus, 2005). Fear can prevent the musician from performing at optimal levels due to nervousness and the lack of an adequate level of comfort with which to perform. Jazz educator, Frederick Berry offers a summary, “One of the first problems that you have with students is their reluctance to want to be singled out. Nobody wants to get up and do something that they are uncomfortable with.” (Galisatus, 2005).

Instilling the desire and motivation to succeed, and providing the tools to overcome the fear of improvising are tools we, as music educators can provide for our students, but what are the best ways to accomplish these tasks? The development of the skills necessary for jazz improvisation requires time and effort. The development of aural and critical listening skills, mastering instrumental and/or vocal technique, immersion into the jazz community, and knowledge of theory and harmony are the means with which successful jazz improvisation can be obtained.

### *Aural and Listening Skills*

The philosophy of Swiss educational reformer, Johann Pestalozzi (1894) advocated a learning through doing approach to education. This philosophy involved learning through involvement of the senses and intellect by imitation of the teacher prior to reading or writing. Aural learning through imitation is an effective way for the introduction and retention of musical phrases as it pertains to jazz improvisation.

A common thread among jazz educators as a key factor in becoming a skilled improviser is the development of aural perception, which includes listening to jazz, imitation of the styles of the jazz masters, and to a degree, aural and/or written transcription of improvised solos. Jazz educator and author, Christopher Azzara (1999) equates the process of learning jazz improvisation to that of a foreign language through the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Azzara emphasizes listening to improvised music, learning a repertoire by ear, understanding harmonic progression, and taking risks necessary to improvise. The parallels of jazz improvisation and language are illustrated by jazz educator, Pat Harbison (2004), who states that the best way to teach and learn to improvise is the way we have learned our language. Among the principles highlighted by Harbison is cultural immersion, with direct exposure to people using the language to communicate. Listening and observation, where the sound and nuance of the language can be absorbed, and imitation, where the teacher becomes the model are additional techniques employed in Harbison’s teaching.

Listening to jazz both on recordings, and in live performance is perhaps one of the most important activities

a student can do. The inspiration provided by hearing one of your “heroes” perform in person is a unique experience that only live performance can bring. Trumpet great, Allen Smith (1926-2011) describes one of his first live jazz experiences:

“I would be right up in front of the bandstand listening. I was up there in front with my mouth half open, I guess, looking at all these masters thinking, one of these days I’m going to be up there.” (Galisatus, 2005)

Professional saxophonist and woodwind artist, Mary Fetting adds:

“I was hugely into Sonny Stitt, and I think a big part of it is he was much like Charlie Parker, but he was alive and I got to see him. A picture’s worth a thousand words when getting to see people live. My advice to students is, number one, listen, and ideally go to live concerts as much as possible just to fill their heads.” (Galisatus, 2005).

The ability to listen critically is a skill that can be developed through repetition, much like that of mastering instrumental technique. Repetitive listening leads to discovery and saturates the student with the sound and nuance of the jazz language. With each listening, something new rises to the surface and can open the door to further musical exploration. Juilliard graduate, Kyle Athayde described his listening during his high school years.

“I have the CD player going on in my room twenty-four hours a day. When I’m sleeping, I’m listening. Sometimes I’ll be listening at school, in the car, or on the way somewhere. Each day, including sleep time, maybe twelve hours” (Galisatus, 2005).

The ability to translate the music that is in the student’s ear to their instrument requires technical skills and proficiency on their instrument. Allen Smith stated, “There is no mystery as such except that if you can sing a song, then you should be able to transfer that same melody from your voice to your heart. And there is only one way to do that and that is to practice”. (Galisatus, 2005).

### *Instrumental/Vocal Technique*

The typical practice routine employed by many jazz musicians includes the development of technique through the study of scales, chords, melodic patterns, and etudes in both the classical and jazz genres. Practicing scales and chords is essential in developing finger technique and to acquire the aural sense of tonality. Scale and chord practice as it applies to jazz requires memorization in order to maximize benefit and usefulness when improvising.

Perhaps the most fundamental component of instrumental and vocal performance that supersedes all other aspects of technique is the production of sound and the quality of one’s tone. Allen Smith believed that it is the quality of sound produced that defines the individual musician and establishes one’s unique voice for musical expression. Like scales, and chords, sound development is dependent upon the quality and quantity of practice time.

A third aspect of instrumental and vocal technique is the development of articulation and phrasing as it pertains to jazz performance. Proper jazz phrasing and articulation is achieved through direct exposure to the jazz masters either through recordings or live performances. The sound and stylistic nuance of the jazz language can be absorbed and imitated through active listening to jazz of all types.

A fourth consideration in technical development is the establishing of a sense of time and rhythm. The ability to play with consistent time is among the crucial skills a student must grasp in order to improvise successfully. The feeling of motion that rhythm contributes to jazz through the use of syncopation and accentuation is one of the defining characteristics of the genre. Maintaining a keen awareness of rhythm and developing the ability to play rhythmically are key elements to the construction on an improvised solo.

An additional component in technical development is to acquire the ability to play with a sense of musicality and lyricism. Establishing fluency in the jazz language is greatly enhanced by acquiring a thorough knowledge of the jazz repertoire. Many educators and performers regard memorization of melodies, chord structures, and the various forms of jazz as a major area for development of improvisational skills.

Using the melody as a basis for improvisation is an effective technique for navigating an improvised solo. Mary Fettig explains:

“The melody is really what keeps me straight, because melody keeps the changes coming and I don’t hear it separately from the changes, but have the whole picture in my head when I am improvising”. (Galisatus, 2005).

### *Immersion into the Jazz Community*

Instrumental technique and listening skills are two key components to developing jazz improvisational proficiency. A third component for learning the jazz language is the total immersion into the jazz community. Like a student of world languages will assimilate into a particular culture in order to gain conversational fluency, a jazz musician must engage with the jazz community to acquire communication skills in the art of jazz improvisation. Interaction with musicians sharing the common interest of jazz is the one method that has been in practice since the inception of the art form. Mentorship and exposure to the individuals who have achieved a high level of proficiency in jazz improvisation provides the motivation and impetus with which to excel in jazz improvisation.

Many jazz musicians were exposed to the music at a young age and credit that early exposure as a factor for their current involvement in music. Mark Levine states, “That early exposure. The very first motivation, I grew up in a small town, and my mother took me to hear the first live music I had ever heard in my life when I was about seven years old. It was Perry Como, and I thought, wow, this is cool!” (Galisatus, 2005).

A jazz community can be established at your own school through the formation of combos and informal listening sessions. Establishing a culture of small group playing in your school is perhaps the best way to have students hone their improvisation skills. Set up a regular or periodic jam session in your band room where you and your students can explore new and standard jazz tunes. Make it open to every music student regardless of ability level and invite local professionals to come in and play along. If there is not an available rhythm section, use a backing track from Jamey Aebersold, iReal Pro, Band-in-a-Box, or any other appropriate source.

Providing a haven for aspiring jazz students to congregate and share their passion for the music will spread throughout the students in your entire program. Encourage your students to get together outside of school to listen to their favorite jazz recordings, or attend live jazz performances at a local club or jam session. There are opportunities for students to book their own dates at coffee houses, jazz clubs, libraries, and other functions. Los Angeles professional Tim McKay describes his experience as a high school student that helped him become a proficient improviser:

“The combo I play with would play gigs around the Bay Area-the group that I have been playing with for awhile is the “Bam Squad”, which is comprised of me and three rhythm section cats from my school. We have been playing together since the eighth grade. There is mainly Oak Town (weekly jazz workshop), which is a really great way, because that keeps your soloing chops up for sure. Those that I play with try to have jam sessions as frequently as possible. We get lots of social gigs” (Galisatus, 2005).

When asked about how he would improve the improvisation ability in his students, Curtis Gaesser, director of the nationally recognized Folsom High School jazz program states:

“I would have twenty combos. A big band is not always the vehicle for improvisation, and if you were doing a combo, it is all about the improv. If you had small quartets playing, I think the kids would grow and learn a lot more.” (Galisatus, 2005).

There are many opportunities for students to be inspired by their jazz “heroes”. Summer jazz camps are among the best vehicles for students to hone their skills. Many of these camps employ renowned jazz artists to serve on their faculties who not only take the time to help students, but often provided one-on one attention and mentorship for the participants. Summer jazz camps also offer opportunities for students to play with the masters, a sort of jazz “fantasy camp”, if you will.

Kyle Athayde talks about one of his camp experiences as a high school student:

“Chris Potter was the artistic director, so I got to work with him. The next year was Nicholas Payton, so I got a private lesson with him, then a master class, and he worked with our combo.” (Galisatus, 2005)

### *Knowledge of Theory and Harmony*

Knowledge of theory and harmony is also an essential element to the teaching and learning of jazz improvisation. Knowledge of scales and chords, in all keys, and in all inversions as well provide the basic tools for jazz improvisation. Scales, chords, and to an extent, patterns provide the alphabet with which an improviser can expand their jazz vocabulary. The study and practical application of theory is essential to gaining insight to the inner workings of jazz. The memorization of standard jazz melodies and their harmonic structures combined with a knowledge of harmony can assist the improviser to creatively experiment with various harmonic tools in order to expand the scope of their improvisations. Marc Levine describes the use of harmonic skill in the following manner:

“Harmelodic, if I may use an Ornette Coleman term. Harmelodic skill, in other words, the ability to hear harmony, understand it, and construct music with it” (Galisatus, 2005)

In conclusion, in order for us as jazz educators to instill the desire and motivation to succeed and to provide the tools to overcome the fear of improvising, it is imperative that a sense of confidence is instilled in our students. Confidence comes with the type of preparation described above and with the establishment of a nurturing environment in the classroom where experimentation and risk taking is encouraged. Teaching jazz improvisation begins with the level of expertise of the teacher and his or her ability to motivate students. Fred Berry describes one of his early teachers and why he credits him as being such a great influence in his development as an improviser:

“First of all, he was a great trumpet player. Number two, he had a way of teaching that was motivating and he would inspire you. I respected his unerring musicianship, his ability to teach and engage students.” (Galisatus, 2005)

Student Frank Silva credits his middle school teacher with inspiring him to reach his goals as a jazz improviser: “He had a way of teaching and was really amazing. He really knew his stuff about jazz and that kind of thing. He would tell us to figure out how we could become better players, and then make it happen.” (Galisatus, 2005)

It is up to each of us to discover what motivates our students, learn as much as we can about the subject of jazz improvisation, and put our discoveries into action. This will make jazz improvisation accessible to all of our students and help to unlock the mystery of how to teach jazz improvisation.

### References

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