

SPECIFIC FEATURES OF TEACHING JAZZ IN THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SPECIFICUL PREDĂRII IMPROVIZAȚIEI JAZZISTICE ÎN CADRUL UNUI SISTEM DE ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNT MUZICAL SUPERIOR

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This article covers some specific features of teaching jazz improvisation in the system of higher education. In the course of jazz teaching we can find out several groups of students divided from the standpoint of being gifted for playing jazz. Having some different groups of students, the author offers various ways of working with them. The author comes to the conclusion that jazz improvisation is not for everyone in spite of one's willingness for hard work. The teacher must bear this in his mind, trying to find an individual approach to every student.

Keywords: jazz, teaching, students, improvisation, higher education

Prezentul articol abordează unele caracteristici specifice ale predării improvizației jazzistice în cadrul unui sistem de învățământ muzical superior. În procesul de predare a jazz-ului pot fi stabilite diferite grupuri de studenți, pornind de la capacitățile individuale ale lor pentru interpretarea muzicii de jazz. Ca o generalizare a experienței autorului, modurile diferite de lucru pentru fiecare categorie de studenți sunt oferite. Autorul trage concluzia că improvizația jazzistică necesită un talent special, abilitatea de a lucra intensiv având un rol secundar. Profesorul trebuie să aibă acest lucru în considerație, încercând să găsească un mod individual de a lucra cu fiecare student.

Cuvinte-cheie: jazz, predare, studenți, improvizație, învățământ superior

Training jazz improvisation has never been an easy task for both the teacher and the student. And it's not important where exactly the process takes place: in a music school, in a music college or in an institution. The teacher himself must be a jazz musician, or in other words – be able to improvise. This is a must for anyone who wants to teach jazz. No compromises will work the specificity of jazz calls

for the teacher's personal involvement in the process. Various articulations, some performing devices, and, finally, swing – all these points require a performing teacher just some verbal explanations will not be enough. Based on the history of jazz, playing “by ear” was the main way of learning many jazz performing subtleties, that's why personal participation in the training is a must for any teacher.

Working with students in a higher music institution has its own particularities. First of all, it goes without saying that anyone entering the university must be able to play their chosen instrument on a professional level. As a rule, entering students already finished a special music school, or just a music school and a musical college, that's why this requirement appears very logical. But it doesn't mean anything for the improvisation itself, and a musician who is able to play his instrument pretty well, at the same time, might not be able to improvise at all, if a musician can play his instrument pretty well, it doesn't follow that he can improvise. Sometimes it might seem a big psychological problem when a performing musician is not able to play even a few notes. For such situations the teacher must possess mildness and the ability to persuade. He should be able to explain to a student that just being able to play differs greatly from being able to «speak» on the chosen instrument. If the student has already spent many years learning to play his instrument, but he has just started learning to «speak» on it, this process will take him a lot of time too.

From the standpoint of the ability to improvise, we can divide our students into several categories. The first category is a group of students who have never had anything to do with jazz before, and never tried to improvise. The second group includes students who try to improvise but realize they are not succeeding. And the students of the third group are those who have some experience and knowledge in this area, in other words, they improvise after a fashion. These three situations differ greatly, and the teacher must treat them differently. And the result may look differently too! For working with students who have never had anything to do with jazz before, motivation is a thing of great importance. It's very important to find out the real reason for learning jazz, and this should be done as soon as possible, literally from the first minutes of acquaintance. Jerry Coker wrote in his book *How to Practice Jazz*, “Your motivations for embarking on the study of jazz are extremely important, with regard to your potential success” [1, p. 1]. From their answers it will be clear, even in general terms, what the real reason for making such a decision was.

As a rule, the first group of students is the most «thankless» from the standpoint of the final result. They are not able to reach the level of real improvisation; all they can do is to transcribe some improvisations of the famous jazz musicians, thereby getting familiar with the main principles of jazz improvisation. The reason for this is very simple – they don't have a serious motivation for learning jazz. As a rule, there is some kind of curiosity and a willingness to try something new that is definitely not enough, and facing too much work students usually get discouraged. But even in such a situation there is some real benefit there. In spite of the fact that such students are unlikely to ever improvise themselves, we prepare some very high-grade listeners, who will be able to appreciate somebody else playing and understand what is really going on in the course of a spontaneous jazz performance.

The students of the second group, without doubt, are far closer to “real” jazz, they have some initial understanding of the process, their attempts to improvise showed the importance of having certain skills and knowledge. It's much easier to work with them, and there is a good chance to get closer to real jazz improvisation. But for such students there is a big problem – fear, they are really frightened of live, spontaneous playing, and, this can be a real, insurmountable hurdle during the period of their growing. As a rule, in such a situation these students prefer to write down their own improvisations, learning them by heart for live performances. But, strictly speaking, this is not jazz from the standpoint of spontaneity where every new performance of a certain theme should be given a new improvisation, and this new improvisation should be the reaction of the moment. But in spite of this, even writing one's own improvisations is far closer towards real live jazz playing, letting such students take part in performances and creating the illusion of playing jazz.

And, finally, we have the third group of students who can really play. Saying «play» I don't always

mean the professional level of playing, it is quite natural for these students to do something wrong, or not know how to play and what to play. Hal Crook in his book *How to Improvise* says, “Due to the intricate nature of improvisation, many players take what he calls the “Ready, Fire, Aim” approach to soloing. Essentially this is when you close your eyes, open your ears, blow your horn and hope for the best” [2, p. 11]. But they have no fear to play live, they are not afraid to improvise, even if they don't know the stuff well. On the contrary, they derive joy and real pleasure from the spontaneity of playing live. This is a very special feeling, and if it is there, this musician will play real jazz, will improvise. In this case the student will practice himself, he is not afraid of work, all the teacher has to do is to show him a direction and correct his studying process.

For justice's sake, we should mention some problems of working with such students. As a rule, they don't like to play notes, but prefer playing by ear. This is absolutely necessary during some periods of growing, and the teacher must have patience and perseverance in persuading students of the importance of such work. In particular, writing one's own improvisations is a must for such students, but not as the final goal. It has to be one of the ways of developing one's unique style. Working with some written jazz compositions is very important for plunging into one's creative lab, as it is not every student who is able to transcribe the jazz improvisations he likes precisely.

At this point it is very important to accentuate and explain one notion about performing jazz which is very often taken wrong. Playing jazz compositions from music sheets is not jazz, this is a kind of imitation of this process. Real jazz conveys your own thoughts and feelings expressed by means of the chosen instrument. Improvisation is a monologue of a musician intended to share his, I am pointing this out, his own thoughts and feelings with his audience. That is why a jazz musician, working at his jazz composition, prepares his own version of it and makes his own improvisation for it. And it must sound differently every time he plays, since the musician himself and the circumstances around him are always different (if we can use such a philosophical approach). Even if you play your own improvisation as it is written down, it is already not an improvisation in the full sense of the word, and such an approach will not be understood by your colleagues. We can clearly perceive the correct attitude in famous jazz musicians by analyzing their records. Very often there are several takes of the same compositions, but with different improvisations. In case of some really interesting ones, they all are included on the released CD as different compositions. This is real jazz, and hence the importance of the ability to improvise. Without this skill, this will not be jazz, no matter how much one would like to name it so. That's why the importance of improvisation cannot be overestimated.

The real problem for mastering the art of improvisation is that the final result can be obtained differently, and this can disorient students a lot. As an example, we can give the following comparison – one can reach the top of the mountain by following different, sometimes opposite, ways. We have exactly the same situation with improvisation: some people play “themselves”, in such a situation they don't need anything, we can talk about mastering the style. Here we can recommend to get as close as possible to the best jazz records by means of analyzing and transcribing. Some students try to improvise, but they cannot do it properly. David Liebman in his book *Self-Portrait of a Jazz-Artist* says, “For the majority of these students, most often intellectual understanding will precede the intuitive” [3, p. 108]. There are a lot of various books on this problem, covering any aspect of jazz improvisation (scales, harmony, form, rhythm, phrasing, composition and so on). The teacher's help would be very important here; he should choose the right task and the way to work at it. And for those who do not improvise at all we can recommend various books about jazz, video and audio records expanding the range of vision and cultivating taste. It goes without saying that all these recommendations can be used whenever the teacher deems them necessary for resolving certain pedagogical and creative tasks.

Bibliographic references

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2. CROOK, H. *How To Improvise*. Advance Music, 1991.
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