

Jazz: An American Solution to an American Dilemma

Adam Cole

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Abstract: The instruction of jazz in the public schools is the ideal tool with which to address the dilemma of traditional versus radical approaches to music education.

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The Difficulties of Teaching Music Today

Introduction

The challenge of educating the twenty-first century American child in the subject of music in the public schools has become a dilemma. Some insist that we must alter or dispose wholesale of pre-existing pedagogies in favor of new concepts. Others urge the preservation of the traditional conception of pedagogy, not wishing to dispose of that which has previously been of value in education.

Either path has its pitfalls. To create a new pedagogy by focusing solely on what appear to be the immediate interests of the children is to risk following a will-o-the-wisp down a trail that leads nowhere, because short-term fixes invariably fail when they are overtaken by the next round of new interests. Yet traditional approaches often appear no longer sufficient either to educate children or to build support among parents and administrators. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of music.

The struggle to reconcile the two worlds of music education is not simply a philosophical debate held in cloistered halls. The necessity of the argument is apparent when one sees the crisis that, mirroring the rising and falling of the economy, has dogged us in the United States over generations, sometimes improving and sometimes worsening, but never disappearing. It is now at a low point historically and may descend even further as Americans debate not only which arts to teach, but whether to teach them. We find, however, that the answer to the latter question depends heavily on the former.

Libby Larsen on music today

Contemporary composer Libby Larsen has a unique perspective on why, in her opinion, present-day music education is faltering. In an address to the National Association of Schools of Music (Larsen, 1997), Larsen discusses what she calls a second core of music education, one based on produced sound as opposed to acoustic sound. She points to the predominance of opportunities for children to hear produced sound as opposed to acoustic sound, and in doing so she implies that this trend is not merely a consequence of produced sound's availability and flexibility but a symptom of preference on the part of a younger generation. She wonders out loud why music teachers have not changed the focus of their curricula from music that is presented exclusively in an acoustic format to other, more contemporary means of production.

In a second address Larsen expresses other cautions. She relates the story of her eight-year old daughter's disenchantment with music as it was presented in school and her subsequent abandonment of the subject. Larsen blames this infuriating result on what she considers the stifling pedagogy of band-instruction. Larsen ponders the wisdom of a system that seems to systematically weed out many musical thinkers while favoring the few who are receptive to the predominant pedagogy. "It does seem odd to me that pre-school and lower school music education prepares children to receive and practice music globally in whatever form it may take. But middle and high school music education starts from the medieval units of rhythm and pitch as found in the central European monastic notational system and explores only very narrow rhythmic and harmonic aspects of these systems." (Larsen, 1999, Notation section, ¶ 6)

Larsen, despite her expertise as a contemporary composer, makes these observations from outside pedagogy and might be accused of having an incomplete understanding of the reasons behind it. Yet Randall Everett Allsup and Cathy Benedict, as music educators in the school-band tradition, take even deadlier aim at “band education’s methodological control, perceived lack of self-reflection or inquiry, its insecurity concerning program legitimacy, and the systematic fear that seems to permeate its history...” (Allsup & Benedict, 2008, p. 156). Speaking often from their own experience as educators and students, the authors fearlessly critique the current band methodology, claiming it creates a contrived hierarchy of values within the repertory and among ensembles. Even more damaging is the culture of fear which is “unexamined and out of balance within the band tradition” (Allsup & Benedict, 2008, p. 164). These descriptions go beyond Larsen’s warnings of boredom into a realm where a love of music is not merely diverted but perverted.

Past Reasons to Educate Children in Music

The tradition of band instruction evolved from the needs of a plethora of brass bands that existed across the United States at the end of the 19th century. These military bands, stripped of their primary purpose at the close of the Civil War, had to reinvent themselves in a time of peace. It should come as no surprise that there might at the very least be remnants of a militaristic strain within its pedagogy.

Rationales for the pedagogical direction of Choral/ general and instrumental music are, if anything, less straightforward from an aesthetic point of view. William Woolbridge, one of the founders of the seminal Boston School Music Movement of the 1930’s, cited the philosophy of Plato and Martin Luther, expressing his belief that “arts symbolized the good and were essential to developing a moral person” (see Jorgensen, 1996, p. 2). More than 100 years later, there are many defenders, some might say apologists, of the idea that music points to universal values which could benefit all humanity if understood and respected. Neither example of this viewpoint refers specifically to aesthetic appreciation, or to the elements of music itself, each of which might make up the core of an actual music curriculum.

Jorgensen and Regelski’s Restatement of the Problem

Estelle Jorgensen attempts to reconcile the current challenge for music to include more viewpoints and yet still remain relevant to a specific population. She explains that the arts deserve a place in general education, but only if they are “relevant to the public’s experience, and a part of political, familial, religious, business, athletic, social and cultural life” (Jorgensen, 1996, p. 6). In other words, Jorgensen is seeking a way of teaching music that is not insulated, isolated, or self-absorbed, all of which are charges levied by the aforementioned critics.

How can music education survive with such a demand, to be relevant to *all other* aspects of our life and yet to provide a reasonably rigorous, even *useful* knowledge base? Thomas Regelski (2009) highlights the problem, stating that music education is marginalized both in the music world and the education world. Expressing similar sentiments to Jorgensen’s, he claims that music education’s marginal existence in the two worlds to which it should be central stems from its failure to make a “tangible and positive contribution to the musically well-lived life of all students” (Regelski, 2009, p. 70).

Regelski's solution is for there to be an emphasis on "what the student is *able to do* better or newly as a result of instruction" (Regelski, 2009, p. 71). He reminds us that music for most people is *used* rather than contemplated. It has a function in their lives which, as Jorgensen insists, must be relevant to their experience. The current preference for produced sound highlighted by Larsen is an example of this: produced sound is produced for a *reason*. It is designed to be listened to in environments other than a concert hall: cars, restaurants, headphones. The produced sound is thus ideal to accompany our driving, our jogging, to our need to be surrounded by familiar comforts in acoustically inconvenient settings.

Regelski does not dwell specifically with the production of sound, but with how it is generated in any circumstance in order to generate tangible results for the people who are creating and or experiencing it. Regelski insists that music education will remain irrelevant unless it can focus on pragmatic results, with the needs of the students as the guiding principle.

Goble on the Function of Music

How do we determine these needs? Why is it not sufficient to trust in the "universal" tendencies of music to satisfy needs we may not know we have? Is it possible to define a more inclusive role for music that accounts for what has been done in the past as well as what is demanded in the present? J. Scott Goble attempts to clarify what music is and does across cultural and socioeconomic lines in a comprehensive analysis of the profession of music educator.

Goble defines music as a tool for restoring humankind to equilibrium in the face of regular disruptions to our worldview, helping us to make sense of our changing mental picture of ourselves, our social environment, or the larger political world. This specific yet inclusive role for music can account for the need of Romantic Era composers to generate musical artifacts whose existence set them apart and established their unique identities. Yet the study and discussion of musical artifacts like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, though central to the current pedagogy in many public schools, is an outdated strategy. Today's students are living in a world Beethoven could not have conceived, and they do not relate to this manner of music making and study in the way that their great-grandparents did (Goble, 2010). As Larsen, Jorgensen and Regelski have pointed out, their music making reconciles other needs and so manifests itself in ways not covered by traditional music educators.

Instead of relying upon this old model where music is an artifact to be studied for the universal truths it might reveal, Goble argues that music could and should be used to deepen students' understanding of how the vast array of different cultures come to terms with their reality. Rather than students being asked to appreciate artifacts from one region of the world, students can experience music as a vehicle for understanding the diversity of world-viewpoints among different cultures to which they currently belong and with which they come in frequent contact. A study of different types of music can establish tolerance for different viewpoints, can generate self-awareness on personal, social and environmental levels, and can create bridges through which people can interact with other cultures in a meaningful, necessary way.

Jazz in the Context of Music Education

Jazz as an Answer

Depending on one's perspective in light of these game-changing thoughts about music in public education, one might argue that we are either in grave danger of losing music education completely, or that we would be better off losing it. I would suggest however that pessimism and cynicism is uncalled for. We as Americans are perhaps better equipped than anyone to meet the challenges of the world precisely because we are in possession of a musical tool which, if studied and utilized, will serve to answer the charges brought by Larsen, Jorgensen and Regelski, as well as answer the demands of Goble's curricular goals.

The tool is jazz, valued greatly around the world, though paradoxically perhaps least appreciated by Americans. Seen by many musicians and academics as a once-popular but now esoteric music, it contains within it the seeds of diversity and the power to bridge cultures, not only by dint of its content but by the circumstances of its birth and the manner in which it continues to be played.

The Origins of Jazz

For the purposes of this discussion, we will refer to "America" as the collective culture that has evolved separate from the Native or "Indian" tribes living in the same geographical area. There are many kinds of aboriginal music which were present in what came to become the United States, and which remain today. Yet these indigenous musics have never been incorporated into the mainstream of American life. Jazz on the other hand is an amalgam created by the realities of United States history and which, having been born, transformed the nation that birthed it. By the definition of a complete identification with the current "American Culture," many argue that jazz is America's first truly original contribution to the world of music.

Prior to the dispersion of blues and ragtime music, America borrowed nearly all of her musical ideas from Europe, both for the purposes of worship and entertainment. As jazz emerged and developed, going through its different periods at lightning speed, it influenced everything it touched, from the techniques used to generate "serious" compositions of composers like Dvorak and Gunther Schuller, to the manner of expression used in popular and folk music. Today the influence of jazz is so pervasive in the music we hear that we fail to attribute its contributions properly, or even to notice them. We turn our backs upon jazz like headstrong teenagers, convinced we knew everything there was to know long before our parents taught it to us.

No one can with any certainty point to a "birthplace of jazz." It came out of the soil of the many urban centers of the United States at the turn of the 19th century. But its evolution and dispersion is best documented in New Orleans, perhaps the most cosmopolitan of all American cities in the late 19th century. In the all-too-brief flowering of civil rights following the Civil War, New Orleans served as a true mess of races, religions and creeds, interacting with one another socially, sexually, and artistically in ways that scandalized the rest of the country. Before the tragic end of Reconstruction could replace this freedom with the constricting nightmare of Jim Crow, the seeds of jazz had been planted. Ironically it was that same curtailing of civil rights which acted as a hothouse to those seeds, forcing them to go in the only direction left to them.

Jazz emerged from three separate sources: Ragtime, a style of playing which loosened traditional rhythms prevalent in European Classical music; the Baptist Churches in New Orleans, whose congregational meetings provided an energy and distinct rhythm to the presentation of the service that was absorbed by many attending musicians; and the blues, a secular music propagated by itinerant singers on the subject of worldly virtues and vices. These sources, largely confined to the lower-class African-American world, were brought into direct conflict with the more refined almost-White world of the upper-class Creole when the Reconstruction came to its abrupt end.

The landmark Supreme Court decision known as *Plessy v. Ferguson* established the notion of “separate but equal” facilities for Blacks and Whites, opening the door to militant segregation reinforced by legal and illegal means. The case made it necessary to establish what “Black” meant, and for 19th Century Americans, what it meant was that one drop of “Black Blood” made one “Black.” This standard forced the formerly aristocratic mixed races to abandon their pretense at social equality with Whites.

Suddenly mostly-White Creole bands which had played at White social functions with impunity were now considered Black, and were forced to retreat to their “separate but equal” facilities with their very-Black brethren. While this must have seemed a tragic blow to those musicians bumped down the social ladder, it had one powerful beneficial effect: it brought almost-White musicians in direct contact with the radically different music of the Black world, integrating rather than segregating it! (Ward & Burns, 2000)

Now Creole musicians had to come to terms with the spirit and virtuosity of the trumpet player Buddy Bolden, whose radical style of phrasing was far more popular than their stiff European offerings. In order to compete and make a living, these musicians had to quickly learn a new way to play. Musicians like Jelly Roll Morton, who hardly considered himself Black, became masters of this integrated style and played it in the bordellos which the “truly White” frequented when they came to New Orleans. Others like Sidney Bechet popularized the style and extended compositional forms on the evolving medium of recorded sound (Williams, 1983).

Within a couple of decades, all-White bands would be taking the jazz-style on the road to a hungry public. Meanwhile, seminal figures like Louis Armstrong emerged from the Black world to further innovate and push the envelope. Armstrong’s life is perhaps the best illustration of the extent to which jazz infiltrated culture in the 20th century. His lifespan extends from the turn of the 19th century to the art-rock-era of the 1970’s, and he passed through all levels of society, musical and otherwise, during his meteoric rise and sustained career. He was raised in a lower-class world of color, helped to survive and thrive by a Jewish family, and established as an ambassador of American culture abroad (Ward & Burns, 2000).

The development of jazz into a wildly popular art-form in the 30’s and 40’s was followed by the Bebop Era of the 1950’s, a general descent into virtuosic exploration for a more discerning audience. This trend continued, bringing jazz into the Avant Garde where it intersected with the classical world. By the 70’s jazz artists, having failed to migrate to the vast arenas of rock and roll, were forced to retreat into a specialized existence dictated by the markets. Today jazz has experienced a revival, but not chiefly as a form of entertainment.

Jazz Today

Although jazz retains a dedicated audience in America, it has not recovered the kind of manic popularity it once enjoyed. The reasons for this can be explained in terms of the same kinds of criticisms to music pedagogy we have already examined: Jazz music once served as a vehicle for social interaction, specifically dance. As social dance declined as the chief medium of interest for young people in this country, the need for the music went along with it (Hodier, 1962). After the decline of the Big Band, the only people who needed the music were those who desired to contemplate its artifacts in the manner of European Classical music, cultivating appreciation for its recording artists and even more for its recordings, some of which like *Kind of Blue* and *Time Out* gained an iconic existence.

Yet as Goble has pointed out, this paradigm of music appreciation belongs to the Romantic Era wherein self-expression is the chief aim of music (Goble, 2010). Such a paradigm was, in a practical sense, in its last throes by the end of the 70's with the advent of an increasingly hyperstimulated population whose listening habits now placed music in a more utilitarian light.

The revival of jazz therefore has not been in its performances, but in its pedagogical study. Having been accepted as canon by the world of academia, jazz is no longer a subject in conservatories whose study may result in expulsion of its students. Some music institutions or segments of established music schools are now dedicated to the education of jazz musicians, theorists and composers, a development all the more ironic given the vastly diminished career options of these experts upon graduation. Yet I contend that this irony is only half the story, and the least interesting half. In fact, the study of jazz should be of vital interest to us as music educators not in the university, but in the public schools.

Jazz as an Ideal Teaching Tool

Jazz puts European elements of discrete rhythm and pitch into the service of non-European modes of communication. The Africans who were forcibly transported to the United States brought different conceptions of music with them. Music, especially drumming, was a means of communication, though not always of a linguistic kind. White masters, recognizing the function of this music, forbade their slaves to play it. The suppressed desire to communicate through music made its way into the church service and the blues, and the rhythms were incorporated into Ragtime (Tirro, 1977).

These notions of music as a means of communication have not left jazz. The primary goal of jazz musicians is to entertain *by communicating with one another*. Where Western European music provides a scripted dialogue with which musicians may communicate, jazz only provides the subject matter. Drummers and bass players collaborate to create a given feel and tempo which can sometimes change during a performance. Solo instruments such as the saxophone and trumpet tell a musical story over this foundation, sometimes using an artifact in the manner of a Western-European musician (known as a "tune" or a "standard") to launch their improvisation, other times expounding ad lib. Pianists, guitarists and mallet-players support the story by generating a unique harmonic support for what they are hearing in the moment, and often contribute their own solo passages. It must be stressed that in the highest levels of jazz performance, these activities are happening in real time where the contributions

of each musician can radically alter what the others will say and do in the course of the piece. This is unscripted, concurrent conversation (Berliner, 1994).

What do the musicians “talk” about? We can speculate that the slaves who were congregated in churches as their only acceptable outlet had one very important grudge to communicate with God and with each other: they were not free. In every place, they were constrained from discussing their displacement, arguing the virtues of their right to liberty, and even from bemoaning the misery of the abysmal conditions under which they were forced to live, give birth, and die. The church offered spiritual solace with its promise of freedom after death, but the slave population ingeniously adapted this message into something utilitarian and subversive.

Thus Christian ideas could be transformed by context into something akin to secret codes. Consider the words to the spiritual “I Got Shoes”: “I got shoes, you got shoes, all God’s children got shoes. When I get to heaven, gonna put on my shoes, I’m gonna walk all over God’s heaven.” This spiritual, which on the one hand seems a perfectly acceptable expression of a better life in heaven, could also serve as a means for two slaves to discuss, right in front of their masters, the joys of an existence *in this life*, in which they would have the freedom to leave their positions and the power to go where they wanted.

This utilitarian function of music as a means of communicating great hope and deep sorrow between participants, and the love of freedom in that expression, was bequeathed to jazz as part of its birthright, and may account for its unique take on improvisation. Music was improvised frequently in Europe, most certainly during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, and most likely long before. But this was improvisation for the purpose of demonstrating a kind of self-mastery in the field of composition or performance. The concept of simultaneous improvisation, of improvisatory conversation, belongs to the drumming practices of the African nations from which the slaves were brought (Tirro, 1977).

Here jazz takes its place as an astounding achievement, for the concept of communication has now been combined with distinct notions of pitch and strict meter, and the constraints of form, tempo and subject matter has now been made porous by the freedom of improvisation. Suddenly we have a music that is no longer European nor African music, but American in the best sense of the word, a music which is defined by its propensity to innovate and communicate effectively across vast differences of culture.

Jazz in the Schools

The Benefits of Jazz

In jazz we have a partial solution to the dilemma posed by music pedagogy’s staunchest critics. It is a treasure which, in spite of our failure to own or recognize it, belongs to every American by dint of its profound influence on the music we have absorbed even in our discrete and segregated worlds. Rich corporate executives now may be found listening to rock and rap. Musicologists are obliged to teach Gershwin and Bernstein. And gospel music incorporates ever more sophisticated harmonic techniques developed by jazz musicians like Herbie Hancock and Bill Evans.

Jazz is a music which can be both studied and used. It is functional through its participatory nature, yet each performance can be archived as an artifact for study. A soloist’s

exact notes and articulation can become a subject of discussion for the furtherance of a musician's ability, yet no jazz musician will be seen as legitimate unless they eventually abandon strict imitation of their models and begin to improvise and communicate.

A study of the history of jazz will provide deep insights into several cultures' attempts to come to terms with their world, to integrate, assimilate and protest. Students have an opportunity to learn about other functions of music besides that of artifact, while in the process being able to relate that music to their own lives and histories. It is a music which dwells in a kind of paradoxical world, both exotic and familiar, both owned and entirely new.

Because jazz recordings are so integral to the study of the music, they take into account a preference for produced music to which Libby Larsen has called our attention. In fact, it would be quite easy and instructive to compare "live" recordings of jazz to "studio" recordings, both for a discussion of the different resultant products that are created, and of the slightly different processes needed to create fixed documents of improvisation. The comparison would be even more interesting when the recordings are heard alongside live performances.

Preparing Teachers to Teach Jazz

By and large, the population of music educators working today are not equipped to teach jazz. At best, jazz is currently taught as a kind of "moving artifact," treated either as pop music of a bygone era, or classical music played by experts for connoisseurs. This is a regrettable but understandable consequence of our current educational practices. Currently, only those who aspire to become jazz musicians tend to learn about jazz in any real depth, and if they go on to teach the music, they do so through private instruction. Meanwhile, aspiring music teachers will learn about the music passively by attending concerts or taking a survey course. Only a very few individuals ever gain both types of expertise, and even these few may lack a systematic means of educating young people in a music that seems defined as "too difficult for most people to play or understand."

This definition is inaccurate. Jazz, like any other music, is difficult to play well, but its inherent difficulties lie not in the skills of improvisation or even in listening, but in the lack of a clearly defined educational experience provided to children sufficiently early. At the elementary stage, good jazz instruction can consist of explaining to children the "rules" of the jazz ensemble, the roles of each player at a given time, the choices made as to the use of a form for improvisation, and so on. Meanwhile, the children can be taught to improvise freely and over forms using mallet instruments and their voices, to trust the sounds they produce, and to make intelligent choices about how to improve their skill. Such instruction would make the experience of listening to jazz an active educational experience rather than a passive one.

At the middle school level, students are often gaining sufficient mastery of their instruments to begin learning the musical vocabulary of jazz: chords, voicings, and "licks." Such instruction is already occurring for a fortunate few students, but it could be far more systematic and inclusive. The communication aspect of jazz, and the subjects of communication, must be imparted here. The danger at this stage is that jazz players impart the skills of the jazz musician without equally considering the deeper questions of listening, both to the ensemble and to the history of the music. Many performers working today, while possessed of enormous skill playing in the jazz idiom, seem not even to realize that they are more than virtuosos playing in

front of a backing band. Therefore, bringing in virtuosos for monthly workshops without ascertaining the depth of their understanding is not enough.

By the time students reach high-school, they should be able to demonstrate a minimum proficiency in the art of group improvisation, as well as a good understanding of jazz's influence on the music they prefer to hear and play. The point is not to create a nation of jazz musicians, but rather to use jazz as a means to teach all forms of music making, from the Classical string quartet to the garage rock band. Jazz is not a medal to be worn, but a shovel with which to dig.

Instigating such a program will require expert supervision on several levels. Obviously there must be some reconsideration of the extent to which jazz is discussed in teacher preparation programs. Everyone graduating from such a program should know as much about jazz as they currently know about Classical music. In other words, they need not be virtuosos, but they should have the ability to give future virtuosos the tools they need to move to the next level.

Those currently teaching within the public schools who have neither received any meaningful training in the teaching of jazz, nor had much substantial instruction in it as children, can be educated through workshops and professional development. For many of these educators, simply learning more about jazz will be an intimidating experience. Many are likely to protest the time involved in absorbing what to most of them is a "secondary" music. Furthermore, many musicians, even virtuosos, are terrified of improvisation, much less conversational improvisation. Supervisors will have to be sensitive to these fears and will have to devote sufficient time with which to gradually build up the skills in their current teachers.

Of course, most if not all of the supervisors will share the same sorts of prejudices and fears as the teachers under their supervision. They will also have to make an active effort, if not to educate themselves, then to know what the teachers need to know and to encourage them to acquire such a background. Everyone must be aware of the emotional component involved in such a shift, and supervisors must use appropriate supervisory techniques. A collaborative strategy might be best in the early stages, when the nascent knowledge of the supervisors is equivalent to that of the teachers. Later, as the supervisors gain in expertise, they may wish to use more directive informational techniques to ensure that newer or resistant teachers are doing what they can to enlarge their repertoire (Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2009).

The effort involved in this undertaking will not be in vain. Although many at first will describe it as an attempt at political correctness or a means of displacing a valued agenda for an inferior one, no one can be swayed by these charges. If we are to believe the critics of music education today, then something must change in our field. That something can be a recognition of the benefits of our own musical legacy and gifts it has to offer, or it can be the wholesale rejection of music education in the public schools by the children and their parents. In order to prevent such a result, we must listen to the voices of change and find solutions that answer their charges. The study of jazz is only one piece of this solution, but it is a vital and central piece and, however difficult it may be to incorporate it, we must begin now. To expect different results by doing the same things we have always done is not only folly, but a tragic waste of time.

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