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Rex Richardson

Rex Richardson has enjoyed a varied and successful career as a performer and educator, appearing as a soloist, chamber musician, jazz artist and clinician across North America, in East Asia, Europe and the Middle East. He is in his seventh year as a member of the acclaimed performing Yamaha group Rhythm & Brass, as a sextet with a reputation as one of the finest brass/percussion ensembles in North America. Rhythm & Brass has appeared on television and radio released five recordings, been featured performers at international conferences and competitions, and received accolades from such publications as the New York Times, Entertainment Weekly and DownBeat. In addition to his duties with Rhythm & Brass, Richardson has served as a member of the first cornet section and as a soloist with the Brass Band of Battle Creek; toured as a member of the late jazz legend Joe Henderson's Quintet in 1997-98; and toured Europe as a soloist with William Russo's Chicago Jazz Ensemble. He has also appeared as a guest artist with numerous orchestras and other ensembles throughout the world, including those of Osaka, Tokyo, Phoenix, Oregon, Rochester, Syracuse, Tucson, Grand Rapids (MI), as well as the US Navy Band and Orchestra in Washington, D.C. Recent solo engagements include performances of the Haydn Trumpet Concerto with the Omaha Symphony, Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 with the Louisiana Chamber Players, and Karel Husa's Concerto for Trumpet and Wind Orchestra with the Northwestern University Contemporary Music Ensemble (by special request of the Pulitzer-Prize winning composer). Richardson holds degrees in anthropology and music from Northwestern University and Louisiana State University. He has been appointed assistant professor of trumpet at Ithaca College in New York for the Spring 2002. He performs on various Yamaha trumpets, cornets and flugelhorns. For more information, or to contact Rex Richardson or Rhythm & Brass, please visit www.rextrumpet.com or www.rhythm-brass.com.

Has Jazz Become an Integral Part of a Musical Education?

By Rex Richardson

While the answer may seem obvious, the question of jazz's role in music education curricula remains open to debate. This issue arises whenever we musicians and educators are exposed to some conspicuous deficit in improvisational fluency, e.g. the otherwise excellent horn player who finds himself at a loss when trying to negotiate a thorny set of chord changes on the bandstand, or the otherwise impressive high school jazz band that does not offer even a single soloist whose "blowing" skills are as solid as her instrumental competence. As a professional trumpet player, I have a particular interest in this problem. Trumpeters, as well as trombonists, saxophonists, and the performers of numerous other wind and brass instruments have often faced an identity crisis pivoting on the following myth: we must choose one kind of music to master and preferably one setting in which to concentrate our creative energies. In this brief article, I will argue three points: that jazz is indeed integral to the complete education of most musicians; that the meaning of professional specialization has changed dramatically; and to suggest a starting point for those who are still seeking one.

Legitimate arguments may be made, of course, in favor of the traditional idea of specialization. Clearly, it is possible to spread oneself too thin in the interest of achieving versatility. All of this music – falling under the almost ineffectually broad designations of "jazz" and "classical" – is very complex, possesses a rich heritage, and is resistant to any quick or easy path to mastery. Therefore, it might be argued, a musician ought to focus his or her energies on a smaller portion of the music continuum and to aim for exceptional achievement in a narrow field rather than mediocrity across the board. Of all the arguments that have been advanced, this is one of the most compelling, which is why I present it here.

Other arguments advanced by classical musicians – e.g., that jazz is not as rich a musical idiom as classical music; that jazz is not as demanding; that it is "uneducated" or "unsophisticated" music; or that jazz musicians do not master their instruments to the same degree as their classical counterparts – simply do not hold up under the scrutiny of those who know both idioms of music intimately. Flying in the face of the specialization argument, however, is the large and increasing number of musicians who demonstrate exceptional success as "crossover" players. By "success" I mean, quite simply, the achievement of a high level of technical and musical integrity. Some purists claim that artists should limit themselves to music that occupies a place of great importance "in their hearts." To rephrase this viewpoint as a question: why should a promising trombonist who is devoted to Bruckner and Mahler force herself to love and learn jazz? Or, an even more difficult example, why should a band director whose major instrument is the oboe concern himself with the works of Coltrane? There are two ways to answer this question: the first addresses the issue from the standpoint of pragmatism; the second focuses on cultural and social values. On the practical side: young wind and brass players who are convinced they will find a place in a full-time professional orchestra are, frankly, working against the odds. Not only must they be truly outstanding practitioners of the very particular craft of orchestral performance, but they must also audition with hundreds of other gifted players and somehow rise to the top of the heap. It's a difficult field, and it's growing more difficult as orchestras face financial challenges and the pool of eligible players continues to swell. Most wind and brass players make their living dealing with various idioms of



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music in a number of settings, from orchestras to chamber ensembles to big bands, and ignorance of jazz will not hold any of these players in good stead. Furthermore, those who do prevail and win a coveted orchestral position may be surprised to still have not escaped jazz and pop music!

Unless an orchestra is invested heavily into endowments, there is an expectation to perform pops concerts, and of course even the preeminent pops-free ensembles will often perform contemporary works, many of which blur the lines between jazz and classical in their concept and structure. Beyond this, as a recitalist and soloist, I have often found myself performing works by living composers who assume the ability to improvise on the part of the classical performer! In these instances, hard-earned jazz skills are invaluable. The practical parallel for our hypothetical band director is the requirement in most high schools these days for at least a jazz band, and at times a jazz lab or jazz improvisation class. No dedicated music educator would shirk the responsibility of bringing the same level of expertise to this setting as when they are in front of their concert or marching band. While it is troubling, countless directors seemingly put as little effort as possible in to the development of their jazz program. The reality must be faced: young band directors need to know some jazz in order to meet their professional obligations, and to short shrift this responsibility cheats the music, the students, and themselves.

Turning now to less tangible issues: many performers must face the fact that jazz makes up a portion of their heritage at least as rich as that offered by the classical repertoire. Trumpeters who are unable to address the contributions of such virtuosos as Louis Armstrong, Clifford Brown, and Freddie Hubbard seem to have been musical anomalies in recent years. Consider a violinist deciding arbitrarily that she would not play music from before 1750, thereby leaving out music from the baroque, the renaissance, and so on into antiquity. This, clearly, is a bizarre and very limited viewpoint. For an educator, the same principle applies: jazz is simply too important an art form and facet of American culture to be ignored or neglected.

While I find the cliché “America’s classical music” to be misguided and smacking of cultural condescension, the fact remains that the range of music that has become important enough to warrant serious study in high schools and conservatories have broadened considerably. You may not like it, but jazz is here and must be dealt with! And yet, even for those with the best intentions, considerable problems remain in teaching and learning jazz, particularly for musicians who have reached a certain level of accomplishment through classical training. Orchestral and chamber music has a very rich, very successful tradition of conservatory training that has developed over hundreds of years. We know how to train musicians to perform in these settings, as well as related ones such as the wind ensemble and solo performance. In

stark contrast to this, however, jazz is a music that was born through an essentially accidental clash of European and West African musical traditions, and it arrived at its adolescence in the seedier parts of New Orleans and other cities in the beginnings of the 20th century – that is, jazz is barely a hundred years old! Add to this the fact that the cultural backdrop of jazz’s origins is in many ways antithetical to academia, and the pitfalls of applying conservatory principles to “jazz education” become clear. This is not to imply that jazz offers little in the way of intellectual content.

On the contrary, even classical musicians will admit that academia has no corner on genius, and certainly musicians such as Duke Ellington and John Coltrane leave legacies every bit as inspired as the “heaviest” icons of European classical music. However, the learning process in jazz has been fundamentally tied to aural learning, and oral tradition, in the same way that the musical score has traditionally been the supreme artifact of knowledge transmission in the field of classical music. Nearly all of the greatest jazz musicians learned their craft initially by copying music by ear – only later to be supplemented, and only in some cases, by a thorough working knowledge of harmony and tools of musical analysis, as well as fluency in reading music. Coltrane is said to have immersed himself in Nicholas Slominsky’s formidable *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*, while Wayne Shorter studied (and stole from!) Sibelius intensely. Many jazz players have delved into the modal and rhythmic techniques of Olivier Messiaen. And yet, perhaps the most brilliant of them all – Louis Armstrong – was said to have remained a very poor reader of music throughout his career. Thus, while the value of theoretical and analytical rigor cannot be denied, the starting point for jazz must be the traditional one: listening and copying.

An immersion in recordings and hours upon hours of assimilating their contents is a necessary part of the process. After all, if it worked for Bird and Diz, who are we to improve on the pattern? Enter Shelly Berg, and his *Chop-Monster* series. Berg, who is a master musician and professor at the University of Southern California, subtitles his method a “Jazz language tutor.” This is very appropriate for a number of reasons; Berg delves beyond the cliché of the music-equals-language metaphor to find very real and practical parallels between how we learn and perform in both mediums. I was first introduced to Berg and his series at the Bands of America Symposium in June 2001, where we both served on the jazz faculty. I was stunned to observe, in the course of a week, the speed and fecundity with which a large group of high school students made their first positive, musical steps in learning jazz and improvisation. Using a CD included with the director’s packet, the students imitate short musical gestures by ear, and learn that this is the cornerstone in building a complete set of skills as an improviser. At the same time, Berg supplements this aural learning with a healthy dose of music

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theory, scale knowledge, and specific listening assignments of classic recordings. Thus, he integrates aural and theoretical learning, thereby laying the foundation for a continued growth into a “complete” jazz musician. This is not a commercial advertisement for Chop-Monster! I have no financial interest in the sales of the series whatsoever and am promoting it entirely on my own view of its pedagogical merits, in the interest of seeing a widespread improvement in students’ and band directors’ first experiences with learning jazz. To learn more about Chop-Monster, please email Julia Fraser at chopmonster@jfraser.com.

To sum up, I would like to reiterate the need for jazz to play a vital role in the musical education of most, if not all, musicians. After all, there is precedent for inspired jazz performance on some less traditional instruments such as the violin, cello, or double reeds. Between the realities of the music and music education industries and the growing importance jazz has assumed in the global musical and cultural landscape, it is hard to find a defensible excuse for neglecting the study of this vital and demanding art form. And, finally, a performer-educator has created a way to formalize the traditional learning process in such a way that it can be simulated in the classroom: Shelly Berg, with his Chop-Monster series. Still unsure of where to start before you get your hands on Berg’s materials? Again, go to one of the most important sources for jazz musicians for decades: the recordings. Start with Miles Davis’ “Kind of Blue.” It’s probably the most famous of all jazz recordings, for good reason, and it should be the start of a beautiful musical relationship.

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