

## **THE WHOLE PACKAGE – PLAYING BY EAR, READING & IMPROVISING FOR ALL MUSIC STUDENTS.**

After about 15 years teaching in tertiary jazz programs I began to question the way in which music was being taught more generally. The following is largely a survey of the literature from researchers who have looked for the answers.

“And he doesn’t read a note of music!!” is something you’ll often hear from members of the public who have been impressed by an instrumentalist (never a singer – which is another whole discussion to be had.) My response is, “So what?” That musician might be an even better player if he could read music, or, just as legitimately, he may not. My concern is with the apparent dualism that is perceived by not only the general population, but within the musical establishment, between playing by ear and being musically literate. In the view of many, one either plays by ear or doesn’t; either reads music or doesn’t. In practice, this issue is far more nuanced. Nolet (2007) articulates this view by noting:

“When music literacy and orality are perceived not as a dualism but rather, as a dialectic, both musical literacy skills and orality skills are strengthened, for the purpose of enhancing the overall musicianship of the learner.” (p. 33)

As a jazz bass teacher over many years, I have always encouraged and trained my students to use their ears, reasoning that the better they hear, the better they can learn to play the music that they like to listen to. I grew up in an intensely musical family where classical music, jazz, church music and pop were all present, and whilst we were all sent to classical piano and theory lessons, it was the norm in our household to be able to play music by ear. The ability to play by ear is a great advantage in jazz performance because attention that might otherwise be given to the notation on your music stand can be instead given to what the other members of the band are contributing at any given time and reacting appropriately. Throughout childhood I also participated in small group part singing, which I have come to realize was invaluable for ear training. Learning to hold a part whilst listening to other parts is an efficient and fun way to learn to understand harmony.

It is only in more recent times that I have come to understand how lucky we were to learn both to read and play by ear concurrently. I have also become aware over my years as a professional musician that my understanding of notation and theoretical concepts enables me to deal cognitively with the music that I hear. It is definitely not an “either/or” proposition.

In the popular imagination, jazz musicians are often perceived to be musically uneducated in the formal sense, playing “what they feel”. This is of course an un-helpful simplification. Prouty (2006) points out that the jazz masters were not always as theoretically uneducated as people like to believe, and that the tradition has been handed down in various ways including one-to-one instruction, listening, and notated methods, sometimes all methods used by one person. “Charles Mingus, in fact, was known for regularly teaching his band members their parts by singing them, while at other times he relied on notated scores” (p. 5).

## **NORMS IN MUSIC EDUCATION, CHILDHOOD TO UNIVERSITY**

Throughout my experience of teaching in jazz programs at universities, I have noticed what I see as a shortcoming in the way music is generally taught. Theory, ear training and instrumental instruction are seldom presented in an integrated way so that students see that they are in fact facets of the same thing. This phenomenon is by no means limited to the *jazz* education field. Jacques-Dalcroze was complaining about it in 1921: “The music courses are too fragmentary and specialized.....Syllabuses are profuse in their subject matter, but there is no coherence in the tuition.” (p. 6)

Hiatt (2006) writes:

“In university music programs it is all too common to keep aural-skills training and applied instruction separate. Our experience as aural-skills and applied teachers has shown us that musicianship basically depends on the ability to audiate – that music reading proficiency, meaningful musical performance, and musical activities in general are the result of clear mental images of sound. We believe that all music teaching can be improved if it is combined with efforts to improve students’ mental hearing. (p. 49).

It is not helpful that the Ear Training part of the equation may be in danger of falling victim to rationalization in all kinds of music education because (as we all know) it is something that is quite labour-intensive to assess (although online programs can be helpful in this area.) Pratt (1998) noted that “conventional aural training programs suffer from being driven by the need for assessment...”.

Another attitude that arises in the instrumental music teaching space is the fear that playing by ear will diminish a child’s (it’s usually a child that

is in question) capacity to learn to read music. As observed by Musco (2010), "some educators are leery of teaching students to play by ear for fear that motivation for learning to read music will be compromised." (p. 51). I guess many of us will have anecdotal evidence for this, but I think that largely comes down to the way in which such students are taught. Colwell (2015) states: "Many instrumental music teachers do not spend time helping students learn songs by ear. Many of these teachers may have struggled with their own aural skills in freshman theory class. There is a connection." (p. 4).

Musco also found that "skills in playing by ear are correlated with skills in music reading." (p. 54.) Mishra (2014) investigated this more deeply and found that "the greatest improvements in sight-reading were associated with treatments focused on aural skill training or creative activities, such as improvisation." Improvisation, of course, is another thing that many music teachers are unskilled in themselves, and therefore unwilling to engage their students in.

Improvisation for young music students has been recommended by such writers as Plude (1996) and Covington (1997), Covington stating:

"Recent research studies in cognition and learning theory, specifically in the areas of constructivism and schema theory, have revealed that meaningful knowledge acquisition of complex concepts cannot occur unless learners interact with these concepts in an active environment. That is, learners cannot be expected to comprehend the complexity of musical elements and their integration, nor can they be expected to transfer musical knowledge and skills to real-life situations unless they have the opportunity to work actively with these elements in some mode of performance." (p. 49).

Improvisation provides that opportunity. Recently in my position as lecturer in contemporary music at USQ I was involved in delivering a module of improvisation to second year students. Ours is not a jazz course, and almost none of our students are expecting to become improvisers, but my skepticism as to what they would gain from the module was put to rest when I saw how it caused them to *internalize the musical materials in order to be able to manipulate them*.

My teaching career has been exclusively in the tertiary setting and I have to admit ignorance about many things that go on in primary and secondary schooling. But it strikes me that the students I have been seeing at the tertiary level for the last 20 years do not seem to have had a musical education that includes integrated ear-training or improvisation. The Kodaly music instructional method, which promotes 'ear-to-notation', cognition, or mental hearing, exists quite healthily in Australia, but is not

used systematically in school music education, unfortunately for our music students.

In school music, large performing ensembles are often the major activity and many schools place a lot of pressure on students and their music teachers to achieve success in competitions in this field. Whilst this is generally a great experience for the students, the fact is, as Swanwick (1999) points out, that a student can play in such an ensemble for several years without improving their musicianship one iota. "School music' becomes a different phenomenon from 'music'".

Doubtless many of these students have loved their experiences in bands and orchestras and have been moved to go on to become music teachers. Whilst I would never suggest that these teachers cannot go on to be inspirational band leaders and instrumental teachers, I would advocate for a more holistic style of music instruction, encompassing aural skill, reading and improvisation in an integrated way, to be the norm in our schools.

The most convenient and inexpensive way to achieve this is through the use of singing.

## **CONSCIOUS SINGING, THE GATEWAY TO MUSICIANSHIP**

Many musicians writing from the perspective of jazz and contemporary music advise that the idea of an 'aural image', and the use of singing to solidify it, is central to becoming a fluent improviser. The keyboard player Graham English (2006) talks about singing bringing learning into the body and changing the information from something you know, to a part of your identity. This is akin to the "knowing that" as opposed to "knowing how" described by Helding (2014); "know-how is bound to the body" (p. 229). Donelian (1992), advocates for the use of singing in aural training as a fundamental aspect of jazz training:

"The place to start working is with listening and singing (or tapping, for rhythm), which are physical actions, in conjunction with theory, which is cerebral action. When theory is joined to the physical action of singing, (or tapping), a complete grasp of the music is created." (p. 14)

Wolbers (2002) posited that students in school concert bands and the like could improve their musicianship by singing their parts prior to playing them on the instrument. This teaches them to not only hear and feel how

the notes in their parts interact with the notes in the other parts, but also heightens their awareness of balance and phrasing.

And Bernhard (2002):

“At a time when support for comprehensive musicianship is prevalent in the profession (e.g., Music Educators’ National Conference, 1994), vocalization is an important instructional strategy for instrumental music educators to embrace. Based on this collection of research, vocalization activities, particularly when related to tonal understanding, may promote instrumental performance achievement, as well as musical comprehension. Thus, while developing and maintaining quality instrumental performing ensembles, teachers may enhance musical learning and foster the development of complete, independent musicians.” (p. 33).

## **AUDIATION AND THE AURAL IMAGE**

I’ve been using the word ‘audiation’, which unfortunately is still not a word to be found in dictionaries, although it is immensely useful in the music sphere. ‘Audiation’ is the term used by Gordon (1999) to describe the difference between merely hearing sounds and being able to understand those sounds within a musical framework or syntax. Audiation also describes the reverse process; that of hearing sound as one looks at the printed page:

To notationally audiate, we need to transcend the printed symbols and audiate the music that the symbols represent. Just as aural perception is different from audiation, so the process of decoding notation is different from notational audiation. (Gordon, p. 42)

Schleuter, writing specifically for instrumental teachers, (1997) is uncompromising on the subject of teaching tonality via audiation:

“Instrumental students are allowed and encouraged to use instruments as *tonal crutches* by primarily associating notation with correct fingering – not the correct sound...Instrumentalists should first audiate tonally and then compare the sounds produced on their instrument with that internalized model.” (p. 42). When a student sings, there is no available “tonal crutch”.

Writers like Hiatt (2006) and Rawlins (2006) have interesting things to say about the necessity of holding an “aural image” in order to crystallize

the notes to be learnt on an instrument. As an instrumentalist I have always mediated between the notes on the page and my instrument by singing. In a very direct operational way, I have always found it difficult to play any tricky passage on the instrument without being able to sing it first. Of course, singing is the manifestation of what one hears. The aural image is important for the eventual production of the music.

It is worth mentioning here the findings of Cope (2005), who found that adult fiddlers in the Shetland tradition who had trained formally in music as youngsters found the folk tradition of learning by ear more difficult than other adult players who were coming to music from an informal place. Indeed, many of *those* were people who had rebelled against the formality and perceived restrictiveness of childhood music lessons. Woody (2012) made a comparison study of musicians; on the one hand, the classically trained and on the other those who used what he calls a "vernacular" way of learning, that is, using imitation, improvisation and ear-based methods. His experiment involved participants hearing melodies and performing them back and then reporting on the methods they used to complete the task. He found that the vernacular musicians "applied a more sophisticated knowledge base to generate accurate expectations", encoding the musical material heard into elements such as arpeggios, harmonically explicit melodic material, using pattern recognition - in other words, "audiating". The classically trained players were more likely to look for fingering patterns and intervals in isolation from harmony. He posits that the kind of self-directed learning used by the 'vernacular' musicians positions them for lifelong engagement and enjoyment of music, and both of these authors make the point that the Western world has moved a long way from the way music was traditionally learnt and still is in other cultures.

## **MUSICIANSHIP**

As we have seen, many authors have posited that ear playing ability has a positive effect on general musicianship, sight-reading, (McPherson, 1995, Luce 1965, Ketovuori, 2015) and independent musicianship.

But what is musicianship?

When I began my research career I found some disturbingly incomplete definitions of musicianship, such as this one from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary:

a person's skill in playing a musical instrument or singing: *The sheer musicianship of this young woman is breathtaking.* POWERPOINT

I find this unsatisfactory because it seems obvious to me that a person

can cultivate skill in playing an instrument without necessarily developing strong musicianship.

*Read from Jaques-Dalcroze p.*

In my subsequent reading I have seen 'Musicianship' and 'Aural Skills' used almost interchangeably which does not seem to me entirely complete either. I like the way Priest (1989) articulates the complexity of the problem: "Like sportsmanship, seamanship – or intelligence, musicianship tends to represent a collection of behaviours which can be demonstrated in a way which is recognized by those who have it, but which is difficult to define in a way acceptable to all" (p. 176).

My definition for Musicianship would involve the integration of skills - theoretical, aural, stylistic, performance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Within the jazz education literature there is an as-yet small sub-branch dealing with the issue of scat singing, or vocal improvisation, which is expected of vocalists within the jazz world. (I'm talking here about improvising over chord progressions rather than unstructured improvisation in which harmony is optional.) They have no option to resort to musical machinery in order to 'find' notes – they must understand pitches in relation to harmonic organization. In the words of Michelle Weir (2015) "players can play things that stem from their cognitive understanding and technique, whereas the nature of a singer's instrument requires them to *hear* everything that they sing." (p. 30). The scat singer is actually bringing together all of the elements of musical skill that I have been discussing so far.

Of course, I'm not saying that every music student must learn to scat-sing. But this aural understanding is in essence what I wish to guide instrumentalists towards, and singing, particularly in harmony, can promote this. Weir (1998) says "the fact that singers must "hear" everything they sing is both a challenge for them and also a blessing: they are more naturally connected to their innate musicality" (p. 72). Doesn't this seem like a good idea for instrumentalists as well? Instrumentalists can only benefit from the connection to their innate musicality that Weir speaks of. To quote Zoltan Kodaly, "Free singing without instruments is the school of true and deep musicality. We should make musicians before we make instrumentalists and all would be better." (1994, 14)

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