

The “Finite” Art of Improvisation: Pedagogy and Power in Jazz Education

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Repetition and improvisation (or “composition”),¹ according to Jacques Attali, represent two very different modes of thought and practice in music, one limiting us to a stagnant, unmoving social-art world, the other promising new possibilities for creating and transforming identity, social relationships, and the very nature of the world in which we live. In much of the discourse on jazz improvisation, themes of freedom, liberation, and individuality abound and seem to reflect Attali’s philosophy of music as something that can “invent categories and dynamics and regenerate social theory” (4). Listening to jazz musicians speak about improvisation can provide many different perspectives (as many as there are improvising musicians, most likely), but themes such as freedom and re-creating social relations are often expressed. This was especially true of the free jazz movement, with which Attali seemed primarily concerned in his writings on improvisation. Indeed, discussions of the jazz avant-garde of the 1960s are very often imbued with such language (Monson, *Saying Something* 149). Writing about jazz in comparison with western classical idioms, Christopher Small writes that “to improvise, then, is to establish a different set of human relationships, a different type of society, from that established by fully literate musicking” (*Common Tongue* 296).

At times, the ways in which jazz improvisation is practiced and conceptualized truly seem “infinite,” to borrow from Paul Berliner’s superb study on the subject; such a musical and social practice could represent a radical move for higher musical education, with pedagogical and curricular practices negotiated between teachers and students. Yet, formal instructional systems in jazz improvisation are frequently criticized for leading to just the opposite result, limiting individual improvisational choice and having a stultifying effect on performance, and more importantly for the present discussion, profoundly influencing the relative power relations between students and teachers. Such criticisms speak to the relative power relations between traditions and actors involved in the development and practice of jazz improvisation in the academy. Curricular and pedagogical systems are, as Joan Wink writes, following Henry Giroux, “never just a neutral body,” and serve to organize knowledge and the dynamics of social relationships (92). But power in this context extends beyond the relationships between students and teachers in ensembles and improvisation classes. Historical narratives and traditions themselves have power, exerting enormous influence over methods of structuring musical learning, as well as determining what musics are appropriate to formal study. Thus students of jazz improvisation often face competing institutional, cultural and historical forces, between the power of the western art canon (which to this day pervades musical academia) and the traditions of jazz performance, between their own creative interests and the structure of pedagogical systems. Teachers of jazz improvisation, meanwhile, must develop and employ teaching methods that speak to their own precarious place in academic and “street” communities² and to the tension between fostering individual expression and the expectations of the academy. These existing tensions, at all levels, necessitate an often difficult negotiation between competing interests, creating forms of jazz improvisation that are more “finite” in possibility.

In the following section, I discuss how jazz educators confronted an academic musical tradition that was generally dismissive not only of jazz from a racial or cultural perspective, but also of improvised musical forms generally. That jazz met resistance from many in musical academia at least through the 1970s (and arguably still does) is well documented.³ To overcome such opposition, jazz educators employed strategies for the teaching of jazz improvisation that borrowed from methods and perspectives common to higher musical education, drawing upon the pedagogical power of the canon itself. In doing so, jazz educators were subjected to a different type of criticism than that arising from opponents of jazz and improvised musics, and in the next section I address these debates concerning the nature of improvisation within jazz education. Specifically, the teaching of jazz improvisation in the academy has come under increasing pressure from jazz writers and musicians over a perceived lack of creativity and originality. Power, in the narrative of jazz performance, is often seen to rest with the individual performer, whose “self-learning” of the language of the music stands sharply at odds with institutional study. Critics of jazz education from within the jazz community argue that formal study of improvisation strips performers of this essential quality. I conclude by discussing the nature of power within formal improvisational instruction, following Giroux and others in the realm of critical pedagogy, examining how the practices of formal jazz pedagogy are affected by these different historical and cultural forces (the western canon, the jazz tradition, and the academy itself). The practice of improvisation in an academic context has profound implications for the types of social relations among its practitioners, though perhaps not in the way Attali’s vision of improvisation as representative of new social possibilities would suggest.

Jazz and Improvised Music in Academia: Criticism, Exclusion and Pedagogical Responses

Improvisation has long been a troublesome concept within musical academia. Techniques of improvisation are found infrequently within the western art music curriculum, and classical music's legacy of improvisation often appears as a mystery to many novice musicians. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble's notion that improvisation has been "excised" from most musical production in contemporary popular and art cultures (18) can be applied to the music school as well. The centrality of authority given to written historical documents (Kingsbury 87-94) leaves improvised musical forms with less cultural and pedagogical capital. In Bruno Nettl's "heartland" music school,⁴ improvisatory music cultures stand in stark contrast to those in which "great" works are celebrated in "large" formats (*Heartland* 32), marking a distinction between social relationships that are negotiated amongst individuals and those that are constructed through the traditions of the orchestra or concert band, in which individual musical decisions rest primarily with a conductor who acts as interpreter of music (as represented in a score). Jazz, as a predominantly improvised music, began its academic life with a fundamentally different identity within the academy, one which put it at odds with academic musical culture.

Criticisms of jazz from others in musical academia were not always expressed as criticisms of improvisation itself. In fact, such criticism rarely addresses this aspect of the music directly, but rather its identity within society as a deviant music. In this sense, jazz is associated with undesirable cultural attitudes and behaviors, sometimes bordering on (or lurching into) the pathological, even criminal. Argumentative strategies such as these reach back into the earliest days of jazz as a musical form, as it began to enter the public consciousness. As Anne Shaw Faulkner explains in 1921, the emerging genre of jazz represents a clear and dangerous divergence from the more accepted forms of musical entertainment of the day:

Jazz originally was the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest deeds. The weird rhythm, accompanied by the syncopated rhythm of the voodoo invokers, has also been employed by other barbaric people to stimulate brutality and sensuality. That it has a demoralizing effect in the human brain has been demonstrated by many scientists. (qtd. in Walser 34)

Even into the 1960s, as jazz was becoming more accepted in society at large, many in the academy would employ this same kind of rhetoric in justifying the exclusion of jazz from the curriculum. As Harry Allen Feldman writes,

Training a boy to blow a horn no longer ensures that he will not blow a safe. It might blow him into delinquency, for who can deny the close relationship between jazz and delinquency[. . .] How can one justify the serious discussion on the college level of a subject which, in the words of Professor Ernest Bacon of Syracuse University makes an art out of vulgarity; is monotonous and pornographic, and often outrageously funny; and is replete with intellectual and cultural pretensions? (61)

In all these cases, jazz is clearly and distinctly separated from the established traditions of musical culture (and by extension academia), either due to its perceived vulgarity or through a sense of dismissal.⁵ The idea that European traditions were believed to be of higher artistic quality than vernacular traditions (i.e., African-American traditions) is difficult to separate from the widely held assumption that composed music (well-composed music) was of superior quality to improvised music.

Thus a rejection of jazz could be seen as one manifestation of a larger rejection of improvised traditions within American musical academia (and indeed, throughout the world, at least until recently) that has long been tied to the study of the western classical canon, with emphasis upon studying and performing the music of major composers. Timothy Hays refers to the canon and the conservatory as being "interrelated" well into the 20th century (vi), though by the 1960s there was a "tension which developed between the European high art music canon and the forces of American popular culture" (v); presumably, jazz was included as part of the latter category. This tension was reflected in the resistance to jazz and other improvised forms from many in musical academia. As noted jazz educator and musician David Baker argues, "Because jazz had its origins outside the perimeters of western art music, its lack of acceptance was virtually assured" ("Battle" 21).

Like practitioners of other improvised musical forms, jazz educators had to confront musical and institutional traditions for whom the subject of improvisation was largely unknown or regarded with hostility. Improvisation in academic musical studies has long been the exception rather than the rule and has generally been confined to performance of early music, seldom extending beyond the classic period of the late 18th century.⁶ The importance of improvisation within the western canon has clearly experienced a downward trajectory over the last two centuries. Robin Moore suggests that the de-emphasis on improvisation in academia is a relatively recent development, writing that

It is clear that only in the past hundred and fifty years attitudes towards improvisation in Western classical performance have changed drastically. The mandates of compositionally specified interpretation now supersede those of the instrumentalist. To many, improvisatory expression seems threatening, unfamiliar, or underserving [*sic*] of interest. (63)

Similarly, Christopher Small writes that

[I]n the western classical tradition, the art of improvisation is today to all intents and purposes dead, and resists all efforts to revive it. The resistance, surprisingly, comes largely from performers themselves, who mostly have little idea of what improvisation is or what it entails[. . .] both performers and listeners in the classical tradition have learnt to think of music as a collection of sound objects bequeathed to us from the past[. . .] this idea is negated in improvisation. (*Common Tongue* 283)

As improvisation decreased within the performance of western classical music, the reliance on notated music increased proportionally. Jonathan De Souza argues, with respect to the emphasis on notation in the canon,

[T]he standard history of Western musical notation is a narrative of increasing specification.⁷ One by one, aspects that had formerly been open—instrumentation, dynamics, tempo, and so on—became fixed in the score. As this occurred, the importance of these elements grew: that is, in Bach, “extremely wide variations of tempo and dynamics are possible without misrepresenting the substance of the work,” but in Beethoven “dynamics must be observed with great fidelity” due to their “structural importance [Smalley 73-5].” (De Souza)

In the music school, notation is not simply a document of what was written and what ought to be played: namely those pieces included within the canon.⁸ It is also a source of musical and cultural authority. Henry Kingsbury, in his probing (if perhaps a bit jaded)⁹ ethnography of a musical conservatory (given the fictitious moniker of “Eastern Metropolitan Conservatory” but widely assumed to be Boston’s New England Conservatory), notes the relationship of “unwritten” idioms (a category in which he includes jazz) to those whose authority in the academy is fixed by way of a written score. The score is, Kingsbury argues, a source of authority, but one that exists in a nebulous relationship with performance. In describing a session with the pseudonymous professor “Marcus Goldman,” Kingsbury relates that

[A] fundamental principle of Goldman’s teaching was that students must play what was written on the score, and yet they must not play something simply because it was written on the score[. . .] everything happened as though the score was only a touchstone in the ongoing negotiation of relative social authority among the persons in the room, an authority manifested in musical and verbal performance. (87-88)

In this context, scores, as interpreted and employed pedagogically by teachers, are a marker of power, both as tangible artifacts of the canon and in the formation of the “conservatory culture” of which Kingsbury writes. Teachers are interpreters of these most tangible artifacts of the canon, gatekeepers of power and knowledge, and without them, the authority of both individual teachers and the institution as a whole is thrown into question. I suggest that at some level opposition to jazz from some in academia drew upon a fear of losing such authority within the context of an improvisational idiom. Indeed, as Christopher Small writes, improvisation poses such a threat: in its “freedom from the constraints of harmony and counterpoint” and the “written-out score” improvisation is “closely allied to anarchism” (*Music* 180), a concept not generally favored in conservatory and university environments. Thus largely improvised musical forms such as jazz enter the academy at a profound disadvantage. Improvisation is a musical practice in which, at its extreme,

there is no “authority” save for the performer. The exercise of power in interpreting the artifact of tradition (the score) is lost in an improvisatory setting, and without it institutional power is called into question.

Even arguments in defense of jazz (to varying degrees) have problems with its improvisatory practices. Jazz’s improvisational nature is sometimes reflected in the personalities of its practitioners, providing another obstacle to its entrance into academic study. Ted Gioia suggests that such qualities made musical academia unsuitable for jazz performers, and vice versa:

Perhaps this unremitting emphasis on spontaneity helps to explain the peculiar personalities of so many of jazz’s most noted practitioners. If the jazz artist is impatient and unpredictable, it is only because his art stresses precisely those mercurial qualities[. . .] One can scarcely imagine a Charlie Parker or a Lester Young thriving in a situation which demanded the production of elaborate symphonic scores, or the ability to survive in the environment of the conservatory or university music department. (589-590)

In some cases, early critics of jazz saw a measure of value in the music, but only insofar as it contributed to composition. Improvisation is dismissed, while the potential for jazz to contribute to the development of compositional forms is sometimes praised. For example, writing in *The Musical Quarterly* in 1926, Edwin J. Stringham argues that

[N]aturally, there is both good and bad jazz—that is, good or bad from a compositional standpoint [. . .] I have in mind only the better type of jazz; that which is composed by understanding musicians, that which is well conceived and written according to ordinary esthetical and technical standards, and that which is really clever in either *composition* or *orchestration*. The other kinds of jazz need not bother us at this time; for the bad types of jazz are self-evident and carry within themselves their own swiftest and surest condemnation. (191, emphasis added)

This attitude towards jazz, in which the compositional aspects of the idiom are praised, is further reflected by Harvard music professor Walter R. Spaulding, who argues, in *Etude* magazine’s famous “Jazz Problem” feature in 1924, that the

good features [of jazz] will gradually be incorporated into the conventional idiom, and extreme mannerisms will be eliminated; for, whatever music is or is not, it is a free experimental art and has always been developed by *composers* trying all sorts of new possibilities. (qtd. in Walser 51, emphasis added)

Thus jazz as improvisation is seen to be incompatible with academic musical study or is ignored altogether. David Baker comments on this idea in his spirited defense of jazz education in *Downbeat* from September 1965:

Administrators must be made aware of the difference between jazz and jazz-derived music that bears little more than a superficial resemblance to the real article. (“Stepchild” 29)

The “real article” refers, as Baker later states, to improvisation, asserting that “the essence of jazz is improvisation” (30). Thus efforts to legitimize jazz within the music school by necessity advanced a view that improvisation was a musical practice that was just as important (and more importantly, teachable) as traditional practices in the western canon. Attempts to accommodate an overemphasis on jazz’s compositional potential within early jazz education would, in this view, miss the point of the music entirely. Improvisation was at the core of jazz as it was understood by its practitioners,¹⁰ and this practice must be reflected in its institutional identity.

Despite the fact that academic criticisms of jazz did not focus squarely upon improvisation itself, in constructing methodologies to address critics of jazz, and to gain entrance into musical academia, jazz educators responded pedagogically. Hence the pioneering generation of jazz educators, primarily during the 1960s and early 1970s, constructed pedagogical methods for improvisation and the study of jazz history,¹¹ which drew from the language and approaches of higher education. Improvisational practices were codified and cataloged, sometimes in print, in a way that presented jazz improvisation as a practice that was not all that different from genres and approaches familiar to the academy. Significant recordings replaced scores as tangible cultural artifacts.¹² Early literature on the subject often attempted to “speak the language” of the

academy, to frame the teaching of improvisation in ways that it was more acceptable to classically-trained faculty and administrators. For example, Billy Taylor makes such relationships explicit in attempting to justify the teaching of jazz, linking it with specific structural and formal elements of the western art music canon:

observe how many devices of the past can be found in the capsule form of jazz[. . .] the two part song form, rondo form, and the through composed variation form. The various basso ostinato patterns in use are the direct descendent of the passacaglia, and the twelve-bar blues is a true chaconne. Clear-cut harmonic sequences are the off-spring [*sic*] of the Baroque instrumental style of Corelli and Vivaldi; the majority of harmonic structures are pure Ravelian-Debussyian impressionism or Scriabinesque stereo-types [*sic*], and the roots of the subtle melodic glissandos, slycops, the chromatic embellishments range all the way from the 17th Century bel-canto to the 'elevated speech' of Milhaud's Les Choéphores. (qtd. in Barr 28)

This might be seen as a sort of accommodation, bringing into play musical language that is clearly articulated in a manner that musical academia could understand. The development of a *canon* in jazz, whether devoted to the construction of jazz history or a canonization of improvisational method, is also a direct result of this kind of thinking. Canon, it is argued, puts jazz on an equal footing with the western art music tradition. As Krin Gabbard explains,

The new parity of jazz with classical music in the sign systems of popular media is an important breakthrough. Because jazz has been treated historically as a "stepchild" of "serious" music, the music's value is usually established with appeals to standards developed for classical music. The project is explicit, for example, in the title of Grover Sales's *Jazz: America's Classical Music*. All jazz writers are richly aware of the various strains of prejudice that place classical music in a loftier position in the cultural hierarchy. A great deal of jazz writing implicitly or explicitly expresses the demand that jazz musicians be given the same legitimacy as practitioners of canonical arts. (2)

Regardless of the nature of the criticism of jazz in musical academia, whether born of an attachment to scores as primary sources (both musical and cultural) or deep-seated cultural and racial bias, the primary response from educators centered on improvisation and how the practices of jazz improvisation could be situated within the academy. In doing so, they emphasized elements of the improvisational process that appealed to formal and structural sensibilities seemingly reflected in the western canon. This response was as much about legitimizing¹³ jazz as a cultural form as it was about musical practice. As Floyd Hart argued in a 1939 essay, teachers of music were "loyal to their art and they [had to] be convinced that this jazz music is not a travesty on [*sic*] the art to which they have dedicated themselves." (24)

In creating pedagogical and curricular systems, teachers of jazz improvisation not only sought to demonstrate the complexity and artistic value of improvisation, but also the vitality and validity of jazz as a cultural practice. These methods, which today are still largely in use, emphasize harmonic and melodic materials, the application of chords to scales, the use and development of improvisational language through the use of patterns and transcriptions, and the performance of standard repertoire based primarily on bebop, hard bop, and to a lesser extent, Dixieland, swing, fusion and jazz-rock (all genres which are generally included within the canonical history of jazz). The reliance on such canonical, core historical jazz repertoires was important to the ways in which educators confronted an academic environment that was hostile to jazz and improvisation. Moreover, in constructing improvisational methods that emphasized the language of the academy, and foregrounding musical structures that could be readily analyzed and classified using common theoretical techniques, jazz educators found ways to satisfy administrators and critics who were skeptical of or hostile to jazz.

If we accept Attali's argument that improvised music creates new forms of social interaction and new dynamics, we can posit that the reaction against jazz improvisation in the academy taps into a similar belief that improvisation represented a challenge to the existing order. New ways of doing things musically and socially were not what many music educators had in mind, at least until 1968, when the Music Educators National Conference released a report from its retreat in Tanglewood¹⁴ noting the necessity of including different musical subjects in the academic curriculum, lest the barrier between "ivory tower and flaming ghetto" be broken down forcibly (Murphy, *Music* 5). Like Attali, music educators at the time saw improvisation as potentially altering the established order; unlike him, they did not always see this as a positive development.

The Jazz Tradition: Criticism from Jazz Musicians and Writers

The emergence of jazz in academic musical study has long been heralded by many in the jazz community as a sign of its emergence as a significant artistic and cultural form and as part of a larger social struggle in American society.¹⁵ Indeed, jazz's identity as "America's classical music" and the development of jazz education seem to have developed in parallel. And yet, the practices of jazz improvisation in the academy have often met with resistance not only from traditionalists in the musical school, but among many in the jazz community as well. In his 1993 book on the history and development of jazz, James Lincoln Collier makes the following statement about the teaching and learning of jazz in higher education:

With students all over the United States being taught more or less the same harmonic principles, it is hardly surprising that their solos tend to sound much the same. It is important for us to understand that many of the most influential jazz players developed their own personal harmonic schemes, very frequently because they had little training in theory and were forced to find it their own way. (155)

Collier, in this passage, articulates a common mode of criticism of jazz education, namely that a perceived standardization of methods of improvisational pedagogy has led to a sense of stagnation amongst student jazz performers in the academy. Similarly, Stuart Nicholson writes (in his book on the stagnation of American jazz in general),

Today, hundreds of thousands of students and thousands of teachers study [a] narrow repository of stylistic inspiration[. . .] which for many students has resulted in both a similarity of concept and execution. (106)

Writing over a decade apart, both authors advance a view of the academic study of jazz improvisation that portrays it as limited, repetitive, and ultimately uninspired. By themselves, arguments such as these are not new; jazz improvisation in the academy has been a frequent target of some in the jazz community since its inception. Such criticisms, however, must be considered within the broader context of two other significant developments in jazz over the last 25 years.

First, educational activity in jazz has grown exponentially during this period. Although jazz education is, in theory at least, as old as jazz itself (jazz has always been learned and taught in some context), the beginnings of formal jazz pedagogy are usually traced to the late 1940s with the establishment of programs at what are now the Berklee College of Music and the University of North Texas, although the wholesale growth of the field occurred after the development of improvisational methods and the creation of "jazz theory" in the 1950s and 1960s (Prouty, "History"). Following the establishment of the National Association of Jazz Educators in 1968 (now the International Association for Jazz Education), participation in jazz studies, and in formal instruction, began to grow. Today IAJE is, in many ways, the leading jazz outreach and advocacy organization on the planet, hosting an annual conference that draws upwards of 10,000 attendees over several days.¹⁶ Jazz studies programs, whether granting degrees or not, have proliferated throughout the United States and around the world.¹⁷

The massive growth of jazz education since the early 1970s has also led to a cottage industry devoted to the teaching and learning of improvisation. There are, quite literally, hundreds of texts available on jazz, representing a multiplicity of approaches to the subject. Textbooks represent both a major boost to the dissemination of information about jazz and pose a significant intellectual challenge to the field as well. The production of written improvisation method books, as well as those dealing with theory and history, has vastly increased the availability of such information for potential learners. Most major sources are easily obtained through mail order or via the internet, and most college-level and pre-college jazz students have used some written text at some point in their studies. The ready availability of such materials has generated a significant amount of debate as to whether they are of benefit to students or whether they have a negative impact. Even as early as the late 1970s, some critics were blaming the publication of pedagogical aids for turning jazz into a "written tradition" (Hores 2) at the expense of a more fundamentally oral identity (Galper qtd. in Prouty, "Storyville" 81-84).

Accompanying jazz education's explosion over the past few decades is the rise of the so-called neo-traditionalist school of jazz, led by trumpeter and Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) artistic director Wynton Marsalis and aided in the jazz press by critics such as Stanley Crouch. The rise of and opposition to

Marsalis, Crouch, and the JALC are well documented, and I will not re-visit these debates here. It should be noted, however, that criticism of Marsalis (both as a musician and as an influential figure on the current jazz scene) and of academic jazz improvisation often share many of the same characteristics. For example, Eric Nisenson links the rise of Marsalis and his peers with a “clear indication that jazz is fading as an art form,” resulting from what he regards as the “increasing diminution of genuine creative vitality” (13). The development of “canonical” ways of improvising, of which Marsalis’s most vocal critics accuse him, are often seen to be at odds with *real* historical practices and resonate with criticisms of academically-trained improvisers. As Collier argues, again critiquing formalized study,

Jazz musicians, in an earlier day, had to learn for themselves. Bix Beiderbecke[. . .] worked out a system of cornet fingering that remains unique; Jack Teagarden developed an unorthodox trombone technique that is almost inimitable[. . .] self-teaching gave them something else, and that was a distinctive, individual quality that made their work instantly identifiable. (152)¹⁸

It is this last passage that interests me the most with respect to the current discussion. Of the most frequent criticisms of institutionalized jazz pedagogy, the most damning is that student players all sound alike, that there is little or no individual distinctiveness among them. Through “self-teaching,” commonly held as an essential marker of the non-academic jazz tradition, performers had the power to determine their own aesthetic course, instead of relying on an institution or instructor to do so.¹⁹ Such judgments on improvisation are, of course, subjective, yet they are frequent and are troubling to many educators.

Changes in the jazz scene are also cited by advocates of improvisational pedagogy and jazz educators alike. Jerry Coker, who is considered to be one of the first significant figures in the publication of improvisational materials, writes the following in his text *Improvising Jazz*:

In bygone days, the young jazz musician acquired his skills (his “bag,” in jazz parlance) in those two now-defunct institutions, the “jam session” and the “big band”[. . .] For the young player of today these opportunities are virtually non-existent. The jam session and the big band are a memory of the past. (viii)

For Coker, and many jazz educators of his generation, the economic realities of the jazz world have necessitated the move to institutionalized pedagogy (and, as he points out, books like his). Both Coker and Collier agree that jazz was learned differently in the past than in the present, and both lament this fact. Where they diverge is that Coker sees this as an opportunity to take improvisation into a new pedagogical context, while Collier sees that context as part of the larger problem. There is certainly no easy answer to this situation; student jazz musicians need to play, but opportunities are somewhat limited outside the academy.

Repertoire is another area that critics from within the jazz community take issue with, particularly as it relates to what is seen as a rather limited approach, emphasizing a few select jazz styles and canonical players as a basis for the pedagogical system. For example, pianist and jazz scholar David Ake writes in *Jazz Cultures* that such methods tend to be based on a relatively narrow view of jazz’s improvisational tradition: in particular, an emphasis upon those styles and musicians whose playing reinforces an easily classified and teachable improvisational tradition (122-145). Looking at the construction of stylistic identity for John Coltrane in the academy, Ake argues that the saxophonist’s later creative output gets short shrift in relation to the academy’s emphasis on “Giant Steps” and similar recordings that are more readily explained in the conventions of music theory (129-131). Similarly, Stuart Nicholson laments what he sees as a narrow focus upon bebop-based stylistic conventions as a basis for pedagogical systems:

The problem with basing the educational curriculum on a bebop-styled repertoire is that solos in this style—and it is a style that focuses almost entirely on solos—were becoming so circumscribed stylistically and technically it was increasingly difficult for musicians to say anything original in this idiom. (107)

Criticisms such as these are not limited to institutionalized pedagogy in the academy. Derek Bailey writes,

Jazz provides a good example of the dangers of sequacity in a largely improvised music[. . .] The tendency to derivativeness and the prevalence of imitative playing in all idiomatic improvisation

seems to have produced in jazz a station where increasingly the music became identified with the playing style of a handful of musicians. (69)²⁰

Peter Townsend quotes the late saxophonist Joe Henderson as expressing a similar concern, writing that through academic study “everybody is doing the same thing, you don’t get that individual fingerprint like you used to among players” (179). Even some of the most prominent supporters of improvisational pedagogy emphasize the relatively limited stylistic basis of the jazz educational system and its use in deriving pedagogical methods: David Baker calls bebop the “lingua franca” of jazz, a point he makes in several of his pedagogical publications (Prouty, “Storyville” 134). Pedagogical systems that depart from these models are much less common (though not unheard of), with respect both to later improvisational forms (free jazz and other experimental music) and, perhaps more surprisingly, earlier forms (generally very little attention is paid in jazz studies programs to pre-bebop styles).²¹

Addressing methods of improvisational pedagogy directly, Ake takes direct aim at educators such as Baker whose influence and prolific publication of improvisational materials have largely created and maintained the “standard” methods of improvisational pedagogy:

[Baker] also laments the tacit Eurocentricism of most conservatories. In his handbook *Jazz Pedagogy: A Comprehensive Method of Jazz Education for Student and Teacher*, Baker often objects to the reinscription of classical ideals on jazz students. But even he reinforces these aesthetics to a large degree. The sample course syllabi he provides for potential jazz improvisation teachers deal overwhelmingly with memorization of songs and jazz-related harmonic theory. (Ake, *Jazz* 178)

The “Eurocentricism” of which Ake writes is often interpreted by some as a reliance on written methods. Certainly jazz improvisation texts have had an impact on the practices of improvisational pedagogy, but their impact within programs is uncertain. In a 1996 interview in *Jazz Times*, John Scofield comments that students in jazz education programs “play the same licks because they have the same books” (qtd. in Townsend 176). On the other hand, when asked about the use of texts in improvisational pedagogy, Baker responded that he rarely, if ever, uses his method books in his classes (Baker, Personal). Nevertheless, the disdain of written materials in improvisational pedagogy is expressed frequently by critics of jazz education. Jazz’s historical identification as an “oral tradition” would seem to preclude such materials, as their use threatens not only the practice of the music, but the very identity of the music itself (Prouty, “Orality”). Improvisation and written materials would seem to be at odds, and in a very real sense, this discourse on written materials in improvisation resonates with that concerning the place of scores in the western canon. As markers of a “Eurocentric” approach (according to critics), books are to be avoided in such a view. In both cases, written texts impart power: in the western classical canon, power is wielded by the teacher, while in jazz, power is taken from the performer.²²

Criticisms of improvisational pedagogy, such as those discussed above, are not unique, and they are not without problems themselves (namely Ake’s focus upon Baker’s text, rather than teaching methods in the classroom). But certainly, as an accomplished pianist and jazz educator himself, perspectives such as those advanced by Ake must be taken seriously. They reflect how jazz educators, and students themselves, sometimes get in on the act of criticizing improvisational pedagogy. While obviously supportive of learning improvisation in the academy, many involved with it nevertheless express skepticism at the ways in which it is conducted. “We stomp on their creativity,” stated one teacher when expressing his views on the inadequacy of contemporary methods and practices of improvisation (Prouty, “Storyville” 219). Students, too, frequently complain of having to work on improvisational exercises at the perceived expense of more creative activities, with a perceived focus on the “nuts and bolts” of improvisational technique (216). Comments by musicians outside of the academy who may feel threatened (and not without good reason) are one thing—criticisms by those engaged in the process are quite another, and speak to an underlying uneasiness with regard to the standardization of improvisational methods.

The discourse of academically-based jazz improvisation reflects the precarious existence of educators and students within it, caught between competing traditions of academic musical study, with its long established canons and methods and the expectations of an improvisationally-based idiom which demands individuality and freedom of expression. Sometimes these two cultures are at odds: pedagogical methods within academic jazz improvisation reflect this, with their emphases on what is measurable, assessable, and readily able to be codified. This forms the core of criticism of jazz improvisation in such contexts: it tends to be too codified, too easily constructed and replicated by student performers whose improvisations show little

creativity. Criticisms by Nicholson and Collier are by no means exceptions—they are, in fact, quite common in the literature of jazz. Such critics place the blame for any perceived expressive or artistic failures squarely on teachers and students.²³ For others, such accommodations are the price of doing business in the academy, arguing that improvisational pedagogy in the academy can (and should) only go so far, providing tools for future performance. Such debates underscore the contested nature of improvisation itself: improvisation cannot be neatly defined, either as a “structured thing” (Berliner 63) or as “allied to anarchism” (Small, *Music* 180). In practice, improvisation exists on a continuum between conformity and innovation: the nature of jazz improvisation in academia is but one point on this continuum, drawn to either end by potent historical and cultural practices.

Jazz Improvisation, Pedagogy and Power

Educators who wish to teach improvisation in the academy have faced two main hurdles. First, from an historical standpoint, opposition to the inclusion of jazz from more conservative elements of the academic establishment had to be overcome. Such opposition, sometimes in blatantly elitist or racist language, could only be answered by the development of teaching strategies that demonstrated jazz improvisation’s compatibility with the language of academic pedagogy. Systems like George Russell’s Lydian-Chromatic concept or the work of pioneering educators such as Coker and Baker went a long way to providing important, effective, and easily replicable models for instruction. At the same time, however, in adopting the trappings of academic study, jazz educators have come under attack from those in the jazz community who feel that they have given away the store, that too much accommodation has occurred, leading to a certain stagnation of style and improvisational technique. To be sure, jazz educators and students are acutely aware of such a precarious position between two traditions, and working in this context can often involve a series of accommodations. They have, out of institutional necessity, defined improvisation in the academic context in ways that have fit into that culture.

The creation of academic pedagogies and curricula for jazz improvisation should, in theory at least, proceed from a relatively stable definition of improvisation,²⁴ one that can be readily represented in a course syllabus and in a graded, sequenced course of study and that is based on a circumscribed historical and musical canon. But such efforts as these can prove difficult, as how we define improvisation says a great deal about how we talk about improvisation and how we teach it. It is, as Derek Bailey writes, “the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood[. . .] Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description; essentially non-academic” (1). And yet, many of us who write about jazz seem to know what improvisation is, how to practice it, and how to teach it, with a comfortable certainty. Let me give an example to illustrate this. Throughout his highly successful series of pedagogical aids, saxophonist and educator Jamey Aebersold makes the bold claim that “anyone can improvise.”²⁵ On the surface, this would of course be true; anyone *can* pick up an instrument and play, regardless of their mastery of the instrument or idiom. Of course, this is not what Aebersold refers to. His intent, rather, is to express his belief that anyone can, given the proper circumstances, and perhaps of more immediate concern to marketing, the proper materials, learn the proper techniques to become proficient in jazz improvisation. A statement such as “anyone can improvise” would seem to suggest that power, that is, the power to define and practice improvisation on one’s own terms, rests with the performer. And yet, Aebersold’s publications are very systematic and stylistically determined in their approach to jazz improvisation, which is defined primarily in harmonic and melodic terms. Clearly, Aebersold’s circumscription of improvisation in such a manner reflects an attempt to organize knowledge, and is thus an exercise in power itself (Foucault, *Power* 52-53), one that is a direct reflection of much (if not most) improvisational pedagogy in jazz studies.

What *this* in turn implies is a definition of improvisation in jazz that is at odds with Attali: here, improvisation lies not just with the creation of new spaces and possibilities, but also with the adherence to established techniques and approaches, with what has come before. In the conventional understanding of jazz improvisation demonstrated by Aebersold, composition (to use Attali’s term) and repetition exist together: student musicians have the opportunity to adhere to an established set of aesthetic criteria (repetition) or to make their own decisions to depart from it and create new possibilities (composition through improvisation). Thus jazz improvisation always exists in relation to both musical and social convention, either in departing from it or by reinforcing it. Some performers choose to abandon those conventions to lesser or greater degrees while others embrace them, either by choice or in an attempt to gain acceptance and fulfill specific requirements set forth by their teachers. In both cases, practitioners self-identify what they do as improvisation. Within an academic context, however, in which assessment and instruction sometimes limit these choices, students may not always have the opportunity to make their own decisions or to discover their own paths towards improvisational practice.

If pedagogy is the practice of power, then instruction and assessment, by necessity, involve teachers making decisions that will have potentially profound implications for students. But when authority and power are wielded in a subject such as music, whose standards for evaluation can be, at times, personal and difficult to clearly define, decisions about what constitutes a good performance or what constitutes a good improvisation are often contested. Such contestation can, at times, lead to pedagogical power being used to reinforce existing social orders. Kingsbury's account of life in a major conservatory is rife with references to how nebulous concepts such as talent, creativity, and even music itself are constantly used to establish social hierarchies within the institution. In one striking example, a failed student jury brings into sharp relief the power that faculty have in determining the course of a student's career (Kingsbury 77-78).

Power, like talent, is difficult to define. It is, following Foucault, not something that is possessed, but rather something that is used or exercised (*Discipline* 27). Power has always been an important element in the relationships between jazz improvisers. Bandleaders could certainly make (and did make) decisions based on playing styles as to who got hired or fired. But the academic context implicates a number of different agents: teachers exercise power because they are in positions in which they make assessments of students' performances. Whereas teachers in the western canon might make assessments based on their roles in interpreting how students should play a score (as Kingsbury argues), teachers of jazz improvisation make assessments based on the correctness of harmony and melody, whether students have truly mastered patterns or are interpreting a recording correctly. Jazz educators say, "these are the patterns you should practice, these are the people you should listen to," thus "translating the tradition" for students. The authority of the score is replaced by the authority of recordings or by the theoretical constructs and the language of bebop. Self-teaching has long been held as integral within the jazz tradition, with the power to interpret and innovate resting mainly with the performer.²⁶ Institutionalized pedagogy can disrupt this tradition and thus is seen to take power away from the performer, limiting the ability, seemingly, to interpret and apply historical narratives and musical language for themselves.

Power extends beyond the student/teacher relationship, as teachers in turn are assessed by administrators who make judgments about their relative effectiveness both as performers and as educators. Institutions exercise power because they make decisions on whether someone is hired or earns tenure. Boards of trustees and state agencies have power because they set funding priorities, and so on. All this may seem to get far away from jazz improvisation, but in the final analysis, discourses about jazz improvisation are deeply informed by such discussions of power. Jazz in the academy was criticized by those who disapproved of the music because they feared the loss of institutional and cultural power of the established canon. It is also criticized by jazz musicians and others outside the academy who express dismay that pedagogues are exerting too much power upon contemporary performance practice. Those within jazz education criticize institutional structures as well as the western art music pedagogical system for having too much power. In the discourse of jazz education, there are many opinions as to who has power—teachers, the institution, traditions of jazz themselves. Students are answerable to all these. Jazz has often been regarded as a "democratic" form²⁷ in which individual voices of improvisers interact in a relatively equal manner. But pedagogy, as Giroux and others have argued, can be a very undemocratic system when it comes to the relationships between students and other actors.

To conclude, I return to the development of jazz improvisation itself within an academic context. Facing enormous opposition from many in the world of musical academia, jazz educators created, with the best of intentions I believe, a relatively codified system for improvisational instruction that sought to place jazz on an equal footing with the pedagogical traditions of the western classical canon; indeed, the development of an historical canon in jazz (in which improvisers replace composers as canonical figures) parallels this. Such efforts have been heavily criticized, perhaps unfairly at times, for ceding too much power to the traditions and procedures of academia. If we grant that improvisation is used to construct and maintain relationships between its practitioners and that the nature of those relationships varies (whether hierarchical or egalitarian) with the nature of improvisational practice (whether formalized or free), then we must ask what types of relationships have been and continue to be created by the development of improvisational pedagogy in jazz studies. Does improvisation in the academy, in such contexts, challenge existing social orders or does it reinforce them? In 1968, the former was likely the case, as the very presence of jazz in musical academia was a groundbreaking development. But the worlds of musical and academic study have changed, and for jazz studies to remain a radical site in which assumptions about musical and social practice in the academy are called into question, educational methods must by nature evolve as well. All this might be too much to place on the shoulders of teachers who are just trying to get their students to "play the changes," which at the end of the day is a laudable goal in itself. But the nature of jazz improvisation is not,

in such a context, “infinite,” and perhaps we should question whether the practice of jazz improvisation in the academy remains a site for contesting the nature of social relationships and musical canons as it once was.

Notes

¹ Attali uses the term “composition” to refer to the act of creating a musical state that generates new types of social interactions, a state achieved, in large part, through the practice of improvisation (especially free improvisational forms). It should not be confused with traditional musical composition, the performance of which would likely be classified (using Attali’s rubric) as repetition.

² Sometimes referred to jokingly as the “university of the bandstand.”

³ See Baker (“Neglected” and “Battle”), Barr, Carter, Hays, McDaniel, and Prouty (“Storyville” and “History”).

⁴ Nettl’s “heartland” music school is a conglomeration of several large university music programs from the American Midwest. Based on his reflections as a longtime teacher and ethnomusicologist associated with such institutions, his work in this area is best understood as what I would call an “ethnographic memoir” on his own experiences and observations over several decades.

⁵ An interesting side note is the insistence by some in American education that schools should focus upon “western” ideals and themes, of which the western classical canon might be one. A notable example was an attempt by then Secretary of Education William Bennett, who in the late 1980s proposed that such a philosophy should be at the core of learning in the U.S. (Giroux and Simon 236-7).

⁶ While the improvisations of Mozart, Liszt, and other pre-to-early-Romantic figures are often studied historically, rarely do their improvisational exploits form a substantial part of instrumental pedagogy. Such individuals are still regarded primarily as composers within musical academia.

⁷ The idea of “increasing specification” is an important element of many curricular sequences and is reflected in the curricula of many jazz educators whose improvisational methods feature increasingly detailed, complex harmonic systems and frameworks (i.e., moving from modal or blues-based systems to bebop and post-bop progressions).

⁸ Austin B. Caswell discusses at length the close relationship between the emergence of a canon in European art music (and American emulation of the canon) and the development of musical academia in the 19th and 20th centuries (134-36).

⁹ See Ellen Koskoff’s review of Kingsbury.

¹⁰ Baker argues this point in several publications, noting that practicing jazz musicians, especially ones who were black, were a rarity in musical academia, even among teachers of jazz. His emphasis on improvisation seems to go hand in hand with his call for more practicing jazz professionals in the academy and speaks to the ways in which jazz was treated within most academic contexts up to the 1960s.

¹¹ Though not a performance idiom per se, I would suggest that the construction of an historical canon of jazz is also an exercise related to improvisation, as the vast majority of individuals within the canon are those whose contributions to jazz are seen as advancing the development of improvisational techniques (Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and so forth), notwithstanding composers such as Duke Ellington, Thelonius Monk, and Charles Mingus (all of whom, it should be noted, were also innovative improvisers).

¹² This followed a common practice in non-institutional learning systems. See note 23 below.

¹³ The phrase “legitimate” (or “legit” for short) is one that is still in use among teachers and students to refer to studies in western art music. The fact that this term has survived to the present day is an indicator of the pervasiveness of this type of academic dialogue in shaping the debate around jazz education. Even

teachers and students within jazz education use this term in referring to western art music students and repertoires: students often refer to applied musical study (i.e., lessons) on their major instrument as “legit” study and to works from the art music repertoire as “legit” pieces (Prouty, “Storyville”).

¹⁴ See Keating for a more detailed discussion of jazz and the Tanglewood symposium.

¹⁵ The development of jazz studies can be viewed within the context of student movements in the late 1960s, such as the Free Speech movement on many college campuses and the Civil Rights/Black Power movements. Indeed, the emergence of jazz programs occurs in parallel with the development of programs in Black Studies, as well as with the development of the field of ethnomusicology. See Prouty (“History”), Hays, and Snyder.

¹⁶ In April 2008, IAJE declared bankruptcy, citing significant debt, the failure of its capital campaign, and a massive drop in attendance at its January 2008 conference in Toronto (“Letter”). For all practical purposes, the organization is now defunct. Discussions among a number of jazz educators have indicated a willingness to initiate a successor group, but to date no such development has occurred.

¹⁷ See Suber, Carter, McDaniel, Daniel Murphy, Porter, Ake (“Learning”), and Prouty (“Storyville”).

¹⁸ To be sure, Nisenson and Collier come from vastly different perspectives, the former a modernist and champion of the avant-garde, the latter a traditionalist whose views were reflected in his frequent appearance in Ken Burns’ documentary *Jazz*. Both, however, have been vocal critics of institutionalized jazz study. Both have also directed intense criticism at Marsalis (in fact Marsalis wrote a blistering letter to the *New York Times* in 1993 responding to the newspaper’s positive review of Collier’s book). See Collier, Nisenson and Marsalis.

¹⁹ Indeed, this emphasis on self-teaching lies at the heart of many studies of improvisation, most notably Paul Berliner’s encyclopedic account, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. The term “infinite” in his title refers to the seemingly inexhaustible ways in which jazz musicians individually construct and apply their own unique methods of learning and playing jazz.

²⁰ There are a number of references to this in the recorded history of jazz. One notable example was tenor saxophonist Paul Quinichette, whose similarity to the playing style of Lester Young earned him the nickname “Vice Prez.” This was not generally meant as a compliment. See Berliner (273-276) for a more thorough discussion of these ideas.

²¹ A point made in the discussion that followed my paper presentation at the Society for American Music annual meeting in Lexington, Kentucky (9 March 2002).

²² There is a rich discourse on the use of recordings as texts in jazz pedagogy, and some have argued that recordings have simply replaced scores as an “urtext” for performance (e.g., Berliner, Monson (“Saying Something”), Daniel Murphy, and Rasula). The use of recordings as pedagogical tools in jazz has been compared to the use of scores within academic study, with young musicians copying solos from recordings of their favorite artists; such practices predate formal improvisational study, however, and although they are sometimes mentioned in these debates, they are not seen as *the* central problem. Indeed, for critics of jazz pedagogy to question the use of recordings would be to undermine the traditions of learning jazz itself. Using recordings in such a context is often referred to as a manifestation of oral tradition, a claim which I find dubious (Prouty, “Orality”).

²³ To be fair, Nicholson does also cite institutional and economic pressure as a contributing factor (103-104).

²⁴ I would suggest that such definitions are reflected in the emphasis on melodic and harmonic models, patterns, and so forth, to say nothing of repertoire. In emphasizing what is teachable and explainable within conventional pedagogical methods, improvisation is thus reduced, at least in the pedagogical context, to an easily defined body of work and practice.

²⁵ This phrase, or another like it, appears with great frequency throughout Aebersold's series of instructional aids, including a 2007 DVD entitled "Anyone Can Improvise." See the transcript of Aebersold's speech in The Hague for his explanation of his philosophy (Aebersold).

²⁶ Whether such "self-teaching" could truly ever exist is open to debate. Musicians work with other musicians and within the context of their own communities. Nevertheless, self-teaching as a marker of identity within the traditions of jazz holds great sway within discourses on learning jazz improvisation.

²⁷ In 1987, the U.S. Congress passed House Resolution 57, which states in part that jazz "makes evident to the world an outstanding artistic model of individual expression and democratic cooperation within the creative process, thus fulfilling the highest ideals and aspirations of our republic" (the full text of the resolution can be found at <http://www.hr57.org/hconres57.html>). Former president Bill Clinton famously hosted a White House program entitled "Jazz: An Expression of Democracy" in September 1998. These are perhaps the most "official" expressions of an idea that has been articulated by many musicians in the literature of jazz.

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