

Stylization as an Oppressive Force

By Stefan Kac

kacattac@gmail.com

TCJS education chair Vicci Johnson recently invited members to share their views on jazz pedagogy. Having been preoccupied with this question for some time, I have plenty (perhaps too much) to say. The following is my best attempt at fitting it all into a relatively concise article-length piece.

First, let's start with a pop quiz for all of you musicians and educators out there:

(1) What does it mean to imitate Louis Armstrong?

- (a) To swing convincingly
- (b) To invent swing altogether

(2) Who is the better Charlie Parker imitator?

- (a) The player who sounds just like him
- (b) The player who sounds like no one else

(3) What should a piano student attempt to glean from Cecil Taylor?

- (a) Some hip "outside" licks
- (b) An uncompromising attitude towards realizing his/her artistic vision

Did you answer (a) every time? Did you do so on the grounds that (b) was simply impossible? And did you also just mutter to yourself that these three jazz greats have absolutely nothing in common with each other? Congratulations! You passed the quiz with flying colors because the mainstream of jazz education agrees with you. I, however, do not.

The musician Anthony Braxton has coined two terms that would be of great use here. He refers to musicians who consciously imitate the personal style of an earlier musician as stylists and those who create a new style altogether as restructuralists. Each of the three musicians featured in the pop quiz is an archetypal example of the latter, and each has ultimately inspired countless subsequent stylists over the years. By no means do I intend to argue that jazz musicians need abandon conscious and overt imitation of other players, or that jazz education need concern itself entirely with seeking out the next big thing. Nonetheless, as both a student and (more recently) a teacher, I have always been deeply upset about the dominant paradigm in jazz education because it embraces stylization as an oppressive force. Restructuralists by definition come along only so often, but even so, it seems to me

that today's most widely accepted and utilized methodologies fall well short of fulfilling their obligation to encourage and nurture the development of traditional and innovative players alike. The following specific objections to the current paradigm are made in support of this claim and, I hope, point towards some more desirable and comprehensive alternatives.

First of all, the jazz educator must be able to distinguish between the concepts of intent, technique and habit. Intent is the preconceived notion of what the musician wishes to play or sing while improvising. Technique is the means by which this notion is realized on the instrument or voice. Habits and reflexes, meanwhile, are executed by the subconscious; it goes without saying that they can easily become barriers to realization of a intent, if not to the creation of one in the first place. It is paramount, then, that jazz pedagogy strive to (a) inform and nurture the cognitive faculty that creates preconceived musical intent, and (b) develop the instrumental or vocal technique(s) required for accurate and consistent realization of such intents in real time. Even Jamey Aebersold says, "If you don't think before you play a phrase, it is not improvisation - just an exercise."¹ Whatever one thinks about his other views, he most certainly has this much correct.

Traditionally, objective (a) has been achieved through listening, transcription, and analysis of recorded music, and no issue need be taken with this approach in my opinion. To attain objective (b) without instilling blind habits is a more complicated proposition, for to some extent, the very idea of technique presupposes the creation of habits or reflexes through directed repetitive practice. Basic tone production on a wind instrument, for example, quickly becomes habit for accomplished players, as does good hand position, breathing, posture, etc. This is on purpose, for the player intends to use each of these skills every single time he or she plays a note. When a skill is of such primary importance, it is indeed advantageous to make it as close to subconscious as possible. Conversely, the following "lick" is not nearly so universally applicable:

figure 1:



Blind habits or reflexes are *disabling!* When "good" tone production becomes subconscious, the player has succeeded in disabling him/herself from producing a "bad" tone. (Don't believe me? Try teaching jazz to a professional classical musician!) Similarly, licks such as Figure 1 (as well as the various scales and patterns used to teach music theory) can easily come to unduly dominate the player's intent if practiced and studied in a way that encourages their ossification as blind habits. To be sure, such licks will always have a place in jazz improvisation as stylistic or allusive devices. Nevertheless, they must be used *intentionally* rather than *habitually* in order to be effective.

Given these observations, it follows that one of the absolute pillars of contemporary (with a lower-case "c"!) jazz pedagogy is also the most substantial undue burden on it. I am speaking of "vocabulary." That this word has or has ever had any currency at all as a pedagogical term in jazz is galling. It embraces a false analogy between language and music which equates words not with single notes or sounds but with entire phrases or "licks" such as Figure 1. Certainly there is great value to be placed in the ability to teach stylization, and vocabulary as a concept is indeed appropriate (perhaps essential) to this task. However, is this all that jazz education is charged with accomplishing today? To create revivalists, legacy bands and sound-alikes? Jazz education has bigger fish to fry, or at least it should. We cannot expect our students to innovate like Charlie Parker did simply by teaching them to sound just like him.

When pressed on this matter, educators will typically respond one of two ways. First, the staunchest traditionalists will retort that what I am advocating is fine and dandy, but that it is not "jazz" education. To be worthy of the most coveted four-letter word in the English language, the music must be a stylization, an overt imitation of a previous restructuralist (of which there have been no new ones, by the way, since 1967) in a clearly identifiable, linear fashion. In response to this, I can only say that I am more than willing to forfeit the "jazz" label in exchange for escaping such traditionalist dogma. Stylization and literal imitation will always be part of jazz, but the view that this is the only pathway to success is relatively new. The most qualified educators are the ones who are equally comfortable working at various points along this continuum.

On the other hand, slightly more enlightened or eclectically-minded individuals may indeed believe in fostering more individual approaches, but will argue that the creation of a vocabulary is only an intermediate step in the process, one of those rules that must be learned before the player can be permitted to break it. To evaluate this claim, simply listen to recent and new generations of players who have come up through this system and ask yourself how many of them, even among the most celebrated, have truly moved beyond this intermediate level of regurgitating phrases drawn from a closed inventory of possibilities. I suspect that you will then

agree with me that vocabulary is an oppressive pedagogical force, both in theory and in practice. It always closes more doors than it opens, and the results are now on display for all to hear as never before.

The elephant in the room here is the fact that if we are talking specifically about junior high and high school bands, then we are talking about classroom (as opposed to "studio") teaching, and about large "big bands" rather than small "combos." Quite frankly, this can be crippling: varying ability levels, surpluses or deficits in instrumentation, and the sheer size of the groups can lead to a necessary shifting of priorities that is not always favorable to the ideal curriculum. Indeed, we could hash out the musico-philosophical rigamarole *ad nauseum* and not be left with anything whatsoever that could be applied effectively to this particular educational context.

There is, however, one important observation that can be made: the two styles of jazz that allow for the most collective improvisation among large groups of horn players are (a) traditional, and (b) free. Unfortunately, these two styles are all but absent from the mainstream of jazz education. Why? Because mainstream jazz educators are by and large not personally interested in or engaged with this music. For all the talk of linear tradition, that these styles would be so conspicuously absent from the picture speaks to the possibility that there is indeed something at work here that is both more powerful and less directly mediated by logical thought: in a word, taste. Nonetheless, traditional and free jazz are vital to any comprehensive understanding of the jazz tradition if for no other reason than that they represent the earliest and the most recent innovations respectively. That they would also offer potentially valuable solutions to a major conundrum of classroom teaching is a happy coincidence, yet one which mainstream jazz education has seemed slow to avail itself of. As the saying goes, the silence is deafening.

We do not need to install musical relativists in every school band directorship in the country in order to remedy this situation, but we do need individual educators to step up to the plate by putting their own likes and dislikes on the back burner when necessary. It also would not hurt for influential mainstream organizations like Jamey Aebersold Jazz Inc. and the International Association of Jazz Educators to contribute whatever tangible support they can in the form of materials and guidance. If stylization and tradition are indeed so inescapable, then why emphasize them so dogmatically from day one? Instead, teachers of beginning and intermediate students should feel confident in emphasizing broadly applicable skills rather than stylization, and exposure to rather than advocacy for various jazz styles. You will not know immediately when the next restructuralist is sitting in your classroom. The least you can do is allow yourself to find out.

After reading what I have to say on these issues, you may think you have me pegged as nothing more than a jazz dilettante, as someone whose CD rack contains a calculated assortment of music aimed more at attracting women than at providing listening pleasure, and as one of those people who espouses an all-encompassing musical relativism that is in reality no more rational than it is honest. Hopefully, you *haven't* jumped to those conclusions, but if you have, I must apologize for (somewhat deliberately) misleading you; there are plenty of people like that out there, but I am not one of them. I am a veritable jazz-head, but I know better than to rail against anything that deviates from what has been done so far simply because so much of that music came out of left field when it was made. It is just that simple. Furthermore, those musicians had nothing like the resources that modern communications technology has made available; that fact alone ought to have subsequent generations of musicians and educators aiming higher than ever. First, however, we need to revisit that quiz you took at the beginning of the article. If you answered (a) to any of those questions, I would politely ask you to reconsider your answer(s) in light of what I have said here. I feel strongly that the essence of jazz lies in being willing to part ways with what was done in favor of what might be. That is what guides me as both a teacher and a player.

NOTES

1. See

http://www.jazzbooks.com/miva/documents/handbook/52_points_to_remember.pdf