PRAXIAL VS. AESTHETIC: CONSIDERATIONS OF THE COMPARATIVE BENEFITS FOR JAZZ EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Jazz is a complex and multi-dimensional art form. To define it alone is a topic of much debate and scholarship. The improvisational nature of jazz almost constantly requires the musician to function as both performer and composer simultaneously. With this in mind, the student of jazz not only benefits from, but indeed requires an educational foundation rooted in both the ‘musicing’ and ‘flow experience’ tenets of a praxial approach, and the deep aesthetic understanding, judgments, and values brought to the fore by an aesthetic philosophy of music education as well. Through a review of current and recent scholarly literature, the main relevant terms and concepts of jazz, aesthetic music education, and praxial music education will be addressed and defined. I will then review the challenges in the field of jazz education and show how aspects of both aesthetic and praxial music education may be beneficial in approaching the complexities of teaching jazz musicianship and performance.

**Definitions**

**Jazz**

The great jazz pianist Bill Evans described jazz not as a style but as a creative process of spontaneity. “It’s the process of making music, making one minute’s music in one minute’s time.” Bill Evans, The Universal Mind of Bill Evans: The Creative Process and Self-Teaching, Produced by Helen Keane, DVD 45 min., Rhapsody Films, Inc. 1991.


Taylor describes jazz as America’s classical music, an indigenous American music “whose roots and value systems are African.” Tucker and Jackson assert that the term conveys “different though related meanings” including among them “a style characterized by syncopation, melodic and harmonic elements derived from the blues, cyclical formal structures and a supple rhythmic approach to phrasing known as swing.”

While describing the difficulties of a concise definition of jazz, Alperson suggests that “attempts to define jazz solely in terms of formal characteristics

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4 Ibid., 22.

are inherently reductive.” As a form of art, Kraut asserts, “various standards of similarity and difference are deployed when determining whether a musical event lies sufficiently close to paradigm cases to qualify as jazz.” Almost without exception, all definitions of jazz do however include reference to its predominant improvisational nature, and in doing so sometimes compare jazz to a sort of language. “Jazz presents itself” writes Kraut, “to engage performers and listeners as a mode of linguistic activity: the phenomenology of musical conversation dominates the genre.” As is hopefully clear by now, a concise definition of the nature of jazz is likely not forthcoming and indeed as a music of exploration and innovation, “the essence of jazz is the process of change itself.”

Aesthetic Music Education

As the prevailing philosophy of music education since the mid-twentieth century, Bennett Reimer’s aesthetic educational approach posits that “the arts as a totality constitute a distinct mode of being or way of ordering experience…[and] aesthetic education very simply[is] the attempt to enhance people’s ability to participate in such experiences and to garner the rich and profound meanings that such experience affords.” The aesthetic concept of music “focuses on the inner happening that we undergo when we attend to the sensuous and structural properties of sound forms…The core experience of music is that of dwelling in an alternate world, the world of structured sound.” As Reimer points out, the aesthetic philosophy seeks to discover the nature and value of music and “is not founded on a static revealed body of truths and proper

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8 Ibid., 13.
actions; rather it is based on an attitude that truth consists of a growing and changing conjunction of carefully examined ideas about what music is and does."¹³

Praxial Music Education

A former student of Reimer, David Elliott is generally considered the founder of the praxial approach to music education that in many ways stands opposed and in contrast to Reimer’s preceding aesthetic philosophy. Elliott asserts that the “music education as aesthetic education” (MEAE) doctrine is “severely flawed…[and] fails to provide a reasonable explanation of the nature and value of (i) music and (ii) music education.”¹⁴ In that the MEAE philosophy “claims that the knowledge to be gained from music is to be found not in the actions of musical performing, but exclusively in the ‘aesthetic qualities’ of musical aesthetic objects,”¹⁵ Elliott argues that Reimer’s concept reduces artistic engagement in musical performance to nothing more than a means to an end.

The praxial philosophy of music education “puts human consciousness and selfhood at the center of its concern. In the praxial view, music is for the benefit of the self, in the sense of self-growth, self-identity, self-community, and so forth.”¹⁶ Drawing on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’ and ‘optimal experience’, Elliott suggests that musical enjoyment, the positive ‘inner happening’ we call ‘musical experience’, “arises from the fit or match listeners feel when their musical understandings enable them to mentally construct, follow, and grasp the unfolding sonic patterns and layers of meaning presented in a given musical work.”¹⁷ In this view, ‘musicing’ is both knowledge and a source of knowledge, and engaging in music is something worth doing for its own sake. “At root, then, musical enjoyment

¹⁵ Ibid., 22-23.
¹⁷ Ibid., p. 87.
is the feeling of what happens when we engage effectively with musical works (or ‘challenges’) as a listener and/or music maker.”

The Aesthetic/Praxial Debate

In recent years, the debate between the two schools of thought (aesthetic and praxial music education) has indeed been the topic of much scholarship. According to Bowman, perceptions rooted in the neo-Kantian tradition have for a long time framed the aesthetic domain (not to be confused with Reimer’s aesthetic philosophy of education) as consisting, in a sense, of the leftovers of rationality, and thus placed the arts in the awkward position of being separate from social matters and “in a word, purposeless.” Such historic views have indeed only contributed to obfuscating the field of debate over contrasting approaches to music education. The extent to which the aesthetic/praxial conflict has become a polarizing issue is illustrated by a footnote in Bowman’s 2001 paper in which he writes,

I deliberately made no reference to praxis in this lecture, because of personal wariness about the extent to which that term has become a flash point in music education philosophy. "Praxial" and "aesthetic" have become badges, categories into which we sort people, rather than analytical or intellectual tools. The unfortunate result is that the terms frequently curtail rather than enable thought. Accordingly, I try to avoid the labels in order to keep discussion focused on the ideas being explored.

Wheeler argues that this debate has been “contentious and has had the effect of fracturing the philosophical underpinnings of the music profession” although the aesthetic and praxial philosophies are each based on seeking the nature and value of music and are essentially two “extreme points on the epistemological continuum.” Koopman similarly posits that Elliott fails to establish superiority of his praxial approach and that indeed “both approaches are valid, and they should be understood as complimenting rather than contradicting each other.”

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18 Ibid., p. 84.
20 Ibid., 19.
22 Ibid., 7-10.
Characterizing aesthetic theory as regarding works of music as valued for their own sake, Regelski’s critique does in fact sound very similar to Elliott’s praxial view of musicing for its own sake. As it seems neither MEAE nor praxial philosophy will ultimately demonstrate exclusively superior in supporting the teaching and learning of music\(^{24}\), it may indeed prove advantageous then to consider both approaches when addressing the complexities of jazz and jazz education.

**Challenges of Academic Jazz Education**

Currently jazz education generally involves a grounding in conventional Western music theory but is specifically aimed at conventions particular to jazz including jazz harmony, improvisation, ear training, and composition and arranging. Often much scholarly discourse can be found highlighting the troubling perception that academic jazz programs are too far removed from the traditions of jazz and the professional jazz community.\(^{25}\) Similar criticism has been leveled regarding the institutional intellectualization of jazz and the pedagogic framing of jazz within the confines of Western art music. Such views regard the heritage of jazz as a precursor to the ‘real thing’ when jazz entered the “mainstream (read: white-controlled) educational institutions”\(^{26}\) of the 1950s and 60s. Thus when considering jazz education it must be remembered that “formalized academic methodologies are only part of the totality of experience for student jazz musicians.”\(^{27}\) In that jazz may be considered just as much a social and political art form as a technical one, Alperson argues, “It is the rare jazz education program which turns its attention in a systematic way to the question of what it means to be a jazz musician.”\(^{28}\) By separating jazz from its social and ethical nature, and reducing it to nothing more than selected repertoire and technical training, Alperson continues that in the Aristotelian view, such professional music education may be considered even vulgar “in the specific sense that it makes one ‘less fit for the practice or exercise of virtue.’”\(^{29}\) In America, at the undergraduate level, jazz programs “are concerned more with creating generic professional musicians and educators than jazz musicians.”\(^{30}\) In high schools, Vax draws attention to deficiencies not only in the teaching of jazz, but also in basic musical training in general. “Joy and creativity goes out the window… [as

\(\text{\footnotesize\(^{24}\) Wheeler, “Toward a Framework for a New Philosophy of Music Education”, 6.}\)

\(\text{\footnotesize\(^{25}\) Ibid., 79.}\)


\(\text{\footnotesize\(^{27}\) Ibid., 100.}\)

\(\text{\footnotesize\(^{28}\) Alperson, “Aristotle on Jazz”, 53.}\)

\(\text{\footnotesize\(^{29}\) Ibid., 54.}\)

Praxial and Aesthetic Applications to Jazz Education

Overview

The practical study of jazz requires that a student address both the mechanical challenges of his or her particular instrument, as well as the theoretical and stylistic qualities of jazz and jazz improvisation including applied harmonic analysis, scale knowledge, repertoire, form, rhythm, and the like. Jazz performance is uniquely demanding in that musicians must unify technical mastery of their instrument with expressive and meaningful spontaneous improvisational interaction within a group (or with an attending audience). The performer must balance these elements within a theoretical and stylistic framework relative to both the jazz idiom as a whole, and the particular chord sequence or song structure of the moment. The student of jazz must learn to master all facets of jazz style, form, theory, and perspective, to the point where musical insight and technical expertise coalesce to become almost conversational in nature. In order to address such deep complexities of the nature of jazz as both ‘involved performance’ and informed reason, a student of such music indeed requires the benefits and strengths of both the aesthetic and praxial approaches to music education.

Praxial Music Education Applications

Aristotle’s original concept of praxis from his work *Poetics*, distinguishes three modes of knowing (or dianoia) that can be of significant relevance to the study of jazz. Theoria refers to pure knowledge created and contemplated for its own sake, or eternal truth. Techne is associated with the knowledge needed to make things or getting results. Praxis, however, is “centrally concerned with the critical and rational knowledge of both means and ends needed to bring about ‘right results’ for people.” 32 The concept of theoria may be applied to music theory, and techne to technical ability and knowledge on one’s instrument. With the application of praxis though, to temper and guide the previous two modes of knowledge, the musician may ultimately possess

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the wisdom and insight to elevate the craft of music to the art of meaningful musical expression. If educational goals focus too much on instrumental technique at the expense of music, a disservice is done to the student. With praxis in mind then, students may come to know not just their instrument, but the world of music through their instrument instead. Without praxis, the art of jazz is reduced from liberated and enlightened expression to mere technical exercise.

The praxial philosophy of music education also incorporates Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow and optimal experience. Elliott writes of this concept: “When our levels of musicianship match the challenge-levels of the pieces we interact with, we achieve the central values of musicing and listening: namely, musical enjoyment (or "flow"), self-growth, self-knowledge (or constructive knowledge) and (through continuous involvements with music over time) self-esteem.” Much in the way a skilled surfer rides a perfect wave, a musician in the state of flow is in perfect balance with himself and his musical surroundings—music becomes both selfless and effortless. Optimal experience is what jazz musicians continually strive for throughout their careers and it is at times described by performers in almost spiritual terms. Elliott asserts that since creativity (an intrinsic component of jazz music and flow theory) occurs within a particular context, “teaching and assessing the development of people’s creativity depends centrally on teachers who understand the style in question.” With this in mind, students of jazz must be taught and guided by educators with significant professional experience not only in music pedagogy but in the practicing world of jazz as well.

Aesthetic Music Education Applications

Evans said, “I believe that all people are in possession of what might be called a universal musical mind. Any true music speaks with this universal mind to the universal mind in all people.” In this way, the development of improvisational skills in jazz music is often compared to becoming fluent in a kind of foreign language. While speaking of teaching young guitar students, jazz master Pat Martino said, “If they were shown that music is a language, like any

35 Evans, The Universal Mind of Bill Evans
other language, they’d realize it’s only couched in different symbols.”36 Framing jazz as language opens the door to Langer’s conception of “non-discursive symbols, of which music is one example, [that] share similar functions to discursive symbols, but differ principally in that they have no assigned connotation.”37 This view as part of the basis of the aesthetic philosophy is most certainly in alignment with the conception of ‘jazz as language’ as expressed by many professional jazz musicians like Martino.

As the improvising jazz musician must constantly make choices and judgments regarding the spontaneous employment of expression, scales, arpeggios, rhythmic choices and the like when navigating the form and harmonic structure of any given composition, such arguably aesthetic considerations of meaning and value come to bear. Stubley describes Reimer’s four modes of knowing, “knowing of,” “knowing how,” “knowing about,” and “knowing why” and their interconnectedness as essential to the understanding of music.38 Thus from the aesthetic approach to music education, the student comes to contemplate and understand jazz from all possible points of view in his or her attempt to move freely within its scope. Plummeridge refers to “a form of inquiry best described as the philosophy of art: aesthetic education thus conceived involves the study of topics such as artistic meaning, judgments, and values.”39 The jazz musician, as simultaneously composer and performer, must have a keen awareness of such principles of aesthetics when employing his or her craft as art. Without such insight and depth, the music produced may become “dull, impoverished and tedious, or what Dewey called ‘anaesthetic’.”40

36 ibid., 13.
40 ibid., 117.
Conclusion

In view of the numerous ways that the complexities of jazz and in turn jazz education may benefit from both a praxial and an aesthetic approach, and considering the many difficulties facing jazz learning in general, perhaps as Bowman suggests, “music education does not need a philosophy so much as it needs to become more philosophical.”41 He further indicates that theory and practice do not need to be conceived as opposites, “but rather as dialectical requisites, each of the other.”42 In this way, the praxial and aesthetic may indeed coexist and function in the spirit of the Chinese yin and yang—interconnected opposites, each giving rise to the other. Much work needs to be done to improve the educational systems we already have in place. Regarding aesthetic music education alone, Stubley argues, “our understanding of this concept and its potential applications has been far from clear or universally agreed upon.”43 The same may perhaps be said for the much younger praxial philosophy as well. As jazz is a fluid and ever changing art form drawing and growing from a multitude of viable sources, so too must our be our pedagogic philosophies. As I hope I have demonstrated, the depth of jazz music cannot be confined to a single viewpoint or an irreconcilable debate over the superiority of one philosophy over another. Stubley maintains that we have a professional responsibility to “systematically explore all ideas and concepts that can potentially broaden and deepen our understandings of music.”44 As America’s classical music, jazz indeed deserves the best of both worlds of philosophy.

42 Ibid., 7.
44 Ibid., 9.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


