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A New (Old) Approach to Learning Western Art Music

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A New (Old) Approach to Learning Western Art Music

BRIAN JUDE DE LIMA

To quote the great Greek father of modern medicine, Hippocrates, "Drastic times call for drastic measures." This statement reflects what I am proposing for university music programs across Canada. We need to prepare students within these classical programs with the skills and capacities to embrace modalities of learning that would enable them to contemplate, analyze, and eventually improvise the music they learn. More importantly, these post-secondary music programs need to understand that improvisation and its teaching are, at root, anti-racist socio-cultural practices, and if taught properly, have the potential to penetrate directly to the "purely musical" substance that these programs have to offer, as they are always omnipresent in day-to-day culture (Rose 2017: 24).

For example, consider Simon Rose's *The Lived Experience of Improvisation* (2017). In this volume, Rose, along with an international community of artists such as George Lewis, Roscoe Mitchell, and John Butcher, make a case for, and craftily frame, improvisation as a musical metaphor, guiding the reader to consider improvisation as a phenomenon across "lived experiences" that can only be studied as a reaction to one's socio-cultural surroundings (2017: 159). As well, consider the improvisatory practice *partimenti*, in which students employed harmonic and contrapuntal conventions to realize pieces to a given bass or melodic line. *Partimenti* (from the Italian *partimento*; plural, partimenti) are sketches (often bass lines), written out on a single staff, whose main purpose is to be a guide for the improvisation ("realization") of a composition at the keyboard (Sanguinetti 2012: 14). Seldom seen in today's academic classrooms, it was core to some European art music genres (Gjerdingen 2016) and it intersects in a variety of ways with how contemporary jazz musicians would improvise over a chordal structure (Perlman 2017). But partimenti are just one example of a variety of European improvisatory practices that aren't taught much anymore; others include figured bass, melodic ornamentation, variations over bass formulas, and cadenzas, to name just a few.

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Although both classical and jazz music are still taught widely across Canadian post-secondary institutions, jazz programs still manage (albeit, and in my opinion, incorrectly) to teach their students improvisation while classical programs have abandoned it (de Lima, Reanimating Dissonance 2017; Franklin 2022: 3–28). I raise this point because I believe students should learn to consider European art music as a wider social and cultural practice involving oral/aural learning and improvisational practice — an idiom whose practitioners could interact with those involved with other idioms and traditions (Barton 2018: 14). And according to ethnomusicologist Alan P. Merriam in his foundational work *The Anthropology of Music* (1964), music students could greatly benefit from learning the repertoire and its related performances as interdependent wider social and cultural practices delineated from communities and cultures from which they are a part of (145–63). Consequently, if post-secondary institutions are willing to make the changes I am suggesting, we may see marginalized communities, Black musicians in particular, flock toward programs that they may have never considered before. And university music scholars, teachers, and students would greatly benefit from the more diverse methodologies and modalities for learning such musics.

Robert Walker (2001) posits that behaviours associated with music making cannot be isolated from the social and cultural context in which such behaviours take place, because it is within this space that music has a purpose and is assigned meaning (3–18). Similarly, David Elliott and Marissa Silverman (1995) comment that "before there were musical compositions, there was music making in the sense of singing and playing remembered renditions and improvisations; that many cultures still view music as something people do" (49). Furthermore, Elliot (1994) posits that "music making is essentially a matter of knowing how to construct musical sound patterns in relation to the traditions and standards of particular musical practices (49).

To flesh out these points even further, consider the socio-cultural skill of learning music by ear, a practice that although popular for such music styles as rock and pop, certainly also had its place in both the classical and jazz world. In fact, classical music was largely learned by ear before notation began to take over (Agrell 2008), and jazz was cultivated by both oral and aural traditions before the music became more harmonically complex and needed to be written out on lead sheets (Berliner 1994: 64). Therefore, I am proposing that it is crucial for post-secondary institutions today to follow a similar pedagogical trajectory to the way these musics were originally learned and place less emphasis on teaching their students to learn music by reading — a methodology that contrasts sharply with contemporary post-secondary pedagogies (de Lima, Reanimating Dissonance 2017: 186). I will unpack these concerns later in this discussion.

For the purposes of this essay, I use *classical music* to refer to European art music, as this is the term used in the university and college settings where I teach.

The Reinterpretation of Classical Music Pedagogy

The learning of classical music in conservatory-based programs in universities is rarely associated primarily with students using their ears (aurality). Post-secondary institutions reinforce this point by requiring students to learn a large repertoire visually by relying upon the reading of music. But why do we not emphasize the aural modality of learning music? When we attend a concert, do we not hear the music and react to what we are hearing, conjuring up feelings of concord and discord? We are using our ears to hear, analyze, and "feel" the music. For this reason, in the university and college music programs where I teach, I have recommended enriching their pedagogies to include more aural learning of repertoire as opposed to visual reading of manuscripts.

At a number of Canadian universities where I have taught and presented, students have approached me after they saw me improvise and reharmonize classical music repertoire. They expressed their wish to develop their own aural and improvisation skills, as they have seen their jazz student friends do. For these classical music students (and perhaps countless others that have remained silent), there is an ongoing conundrum prevalent in their education. Today's classical students are adept in reading music at a high level, but my observations tell me that these students may not understand the broader relationships within, much of the inspiration for, and many of the deeper meanings of the music they play. I and other music scholars, such as lutenist Ben Stein, have suspected that there has been a breakdown within the curricula and pedagogy of classical post-secondary education that has veered away from how such composers as Scarlatti, Reinken, Bach, Salieri, and the like developed abilities to improvise on given themes and partimenti (Perlman 2017). So how did these great historical musicians develop such strong aural and improvisational skills while our current classical students struggle?

I suggest that the answer may lie in the fact that modern classical curricula within post-secondary institutions have done our students a disservice by offering them what I call "cheat sheets"; that is, they have given our classical students a convenient methodology to learn European art music by opening a music book or manuscript that has the written score and simply reading it. This system of "reading music" has its advantages: students develop sight-reading skills, and if their sight-reading skills are highly developed, they can read music that is new to them in any setting and perform with musicians who are new to

them. This is beneficial and convenient, but is it not also a form of cheating? And by "cheating," I am proposing that the manuscript is acting as a cheat sheet much like the one students would conceal on a test: it provides the answers, ultimately robbing students of assimilating the material on their own, while also depriving its user of the crucial feel, nuance, and expression that one would only get by listening and transcribing the music from a recording.

In the process of learning by ear and transcribing to manuscript, a person develops analytical skills and a deep understanding of the music they are playing. Ethnomusicologist Ann Marie Musco (2010) has studied current thoughts, practices, and research about playing by ear (49), including performance of music from memory, music that was learned aurally without the aid of notation, without the visual stimulus of watching a live instrumental model, and without verbal hints such as being told the solfège. Musco also investigated skills development with and without specific training: the correlation of skills with music reading and other variables, and the effects of play-by-ear instruction. She concluded that the literature to date supports the importance and efficacy of aural-based instructional activities, including learning by ear (63).

Concert pianist Nahre Sol posits that early composers would play compositions as well as improvise on the spot, and such improvisations were never written out (Sol 2021). Music historians have also shown that Bach employed improvisation at the request of kings, Beethoven used improvisation as a "weapon" in musical duels, and women swooned when Liszt became carried away (da Fonseca-Wollheim 2008).

To connect this issue with a jazz perspective, I turn to the words of the great jazz pianist and educator, Barry Harris. In one of his jazz workshops, Harris postulated that, "at one time, the best improvisers were European classical musicians" (Harris 2016). Harris went on to say that when classical music made its way to post-secondary institutions in Europe and North America, its musical nomenclature became compartmentalized into a formula adopted from colonialized pedagogical methodologies. In other words, reading the score with little to no emphasis placed on improvisation or transcription became the norm. Sol (2021) has also suggested that, over the last one hundred years, classical compositions suffered from being too dense and harmonically advanced and, consequently, posed problems for performers who would otherwise freely navigate during improvisation. Sol also suggested that composers wanted more control in their music and, for this reason, wrote out cadenzas that would normally be left for the performer to improvise.

In the fifteen years that I have been teaching on contract and as a guest instructor at post-secondary institutions in British Columbia and Ontario, I have noticed a similar pattern in the curricula of classical music programs. In

my opinion, these programs come up short in providing students a robust and well-rounded education. More specifically, they have stripped away from their programs the vital technique of improvisation, and of learning repertoire by ear — skills that were historically and originally part of the music (Alberge 2008). The irony here is that most of the classical students whom I have taught over the years have expressed to me that they want to learn how to improvise in this repertoire, but are at a loss about where and how to begin to develop this and other skills that their jazz counterparts already know. They feel helpless because they recognize a void in their education that is ultimately a systemic issue: they are being taught by classical teachers who are not fluent in improvisation and on-the-spot reharmonization and who subsequently develop curricula and pedagogy that eschew these skills.

Conversely, many Black musicians learned their craft by cultivating their aural skills during their youth, for example, when learning stride piano, in the church, or in swing bands (Berliner 1994: 24–59). They assimilated improvisation and the habit of rapidly deconstructing musical passages into functional harmony. This enabled them to quickly recognize tonic, subdominant, and dominant functioning chords. For a musician, the ability to recognize and deconstruct music typically leads to an ability to seamlessly choose appropriate scale(s) for improvisation. Even though the methodologies used by the progenitors of jazz reflected the zeitgeist from the turn of the century (Berliner 1994: 21–35), it is worth considering these same methodologies for current pedagogies, as I believe the music should be learned in a manner that is close to the way it was developed at its source. Since improvisation was indeed a staple in early European classical music, a way for students to gain fluency in rapidly deconstructing musical passages into functional harmony (Franklin 2022: 3–28), then I believe this practice should be returned to classical programs, so classical musicians would likely feel less helpless, while also developing their artistic autonomy and agency.

This could be accomplished by integrating an approach that rejects reading music as a primary source and rather focuses on aurality. After students have attempted to learn the music in the manner I am proposing, they can proceed to consult written manuscripts as a tool for verification and accuracy. Not only does this approach to learning have many advantages for all students, it particularly targets students from racialized communities, who have been nurtured in households where socio-cultural practices, norms, and learning styles diverge from the current colonial, Eurocentric methodologies and modalities of practice that have, until now, been central to our post-secondary institutions. Such changes would also offer equity to students of colour, as many in this demographic were more likely to have been raised on oral/aural traditions in

their families and communities in the learning of urban musics (Berliner 1994: 36), but they would normally not consider current classical programs.

Where Are All the Black Jazz Teachers in Post-Secondary Institutions?

One of the current challenges that Canadian post-secondary institutions face is to find qualified jazz instructors who are familiar with dialogical methods for teaching African American jazz histories. And since jazz's progenitors were originally African American musicians (Roth 1952: 305–316), it is crucial that we seek out such individuals that have learned from its oral/aural traditions. But there remain some concerning issues. For example, universities and colleges across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) have been experiencing challenges locating Black instructors whose musical genealogy can be traced back to African American oral/aural histories, instructors who can draw on personal experiences from within these historicities, and musicians who live their lives as part of Black communities and music cultures (de Lima, Reanimating Dissonance 2017: 13). The reason for seeking out such individuals is that jazz may not be a music popularly listened to in households today, and as such, what was once a popular music at the turn of the century, up to the 1960s (Berliner 1994: 24–35), has now become an archaic (if not arcane) relic being taught by instructors not enculturated in its socio-cultural traditions and practices.

But, unfortunately, from what I have observed, few of the many African Americans or African Canadians who were raised in an environment that nurtured jazz as its contemporary music are still alive, and fewer still have accreditation to teach in post-secondary institutions. This presents a pedagogical conundrum: although these individuals hold life experiences from oral/aural music and cultural practices and grew up in Black families and communities, they may never get a position in academia because they have not obtained appropriate accreditation (de Lima, Reanimating Dissonance 2017: 13); but post-secondary institutions crucially need these individuals to "pull back the curtain" of jazz's mystery and usurp conventional pedagogies that miss their mark. To explain further, I draw attention to my own experiences. I have performed and taught jazz music to/with numerous graduates and professors in post-secondary institutions across Ontario. I have also conducted research with these individuals regarding their musical upbringing (Reanimating Dissonance 2017). Through these studies, I found that the vast majority of these individuals neither come from African ancestry nor learned to play jazz according to the historical tradition of how African American musicians

themselves developed jazz (Berliner 1994: 21). That is, for the vast majority of jazz musicians in Ontario, their primary means of learning was by way of reading manuals and textbooks and in a classroom. They did not primarily learn jazz on the bandstand, in back rooms of juke joints, or at rent parties, nor did they participate in Black socio-cultural practices akin to the way the music was originally cultivated (Berliner 1994: 36–62; Wilf 2014: 85). This has led me to conclude that the institutionalization of jazz education has transformed what was originally an African American music with its roots in slavery, spirituals, gospel, and the blues and learned through aural/oral histories (Wilf 2014: 54) into a commodity that can be bought and assembled from the musical equivalent of a "big box" store.

It is this transformation of jazz — from its African American progenitors' cultivation of field hollers, shouts, gospels and hymns, the blues, and the like to the conventional mainstream — that has resulted in what author Kenneth Prouty (2012) views as a major concern (47). Prouty writes that academia is so far removed from the traditions of jazz that it does not intersect with discourses that marry "the street to the school" (51). In other words, he argues that jazz in academia neglects to take into consideration relationships between urban communities and their socio-cultural practices. I wholeheartedly agree with Prouty, and in a study that I conducted from 2012 to 2016 (de Lima, Reanimating Dissonance 2017), I found that the current methodologies used by Ontario post-secondary jazz instructors were not based in historical tradition and did not engage the practices that the African American originators of this music used to create it (Berliner 1994: 22–28). Thus, students were left to their own devices to try to understand jazz by way of "how to" textbooks or instruction by professors whose original musical upbringing/education lay in genres other than African American music (de Lima, Reanimating Dissonance 2017: 259–61). In short, today's jazz music students and musicians lack understanding of the music's histories and its foundations. As a result, they lack capacity to play it with a depth of understanding, and they lack capacity to expand upon the music in performance.

My own jazz education, however, followed a different path. I was born in Nairobi, Kenya, and grew up in an artistic household. My father specialized in painting and traditional jazz guitar. My father's musical influences included modern swing and bebop players Count Basie, Errol Garner, Dizzy Gillespie, Wes Montgomery, and Oscar Peterson. In 1970, our family migrated to Canada and moved into the GTA. My father wanted to find a Black jazz teacher for me, someone who would embody the "feel" (phrasing and rhythm) of the African musicians he was accustomed to playing with nightly on the bandstand in Nairobi and of the great African American and African Canadian artists he

listened to while he was growing up. I was lucky because my father found Alf Coward, an African Canadian jazz pianist who played in the style of Oscar Peterson and the great swing / ragtime pianists of that era. Instead of learning classical music first, I started to learn music by playing the Blues, boogie-woogie, and traditional jazz — all by ear — in a way that was similar to that of the progenitors of the music. I further developed my aural and transcription skills as a teenager, and I noticed even then that I could transcribe classical music (such as Bach and Chopin) and improvise over the harmonic structure of their compositions. (For an example of me playing a Chopin nocturne by ear and improvising, see de Lima, Chopin Nocturne 2017.) I began to wonder if I was an outlier, or if I was merely (and unconsciously) following in a manner of how most musicians learned music, some three hundred years before I had been born. Upon reflection and further learning, I believe it was the latter.

Now, as an adult in my fifties, I identify as a racialized postmodern pianist with allegiances to the style of Art Tatum, Bud Powell, and Thelonious Monk, and also as a musician indebted to the harmonic language of Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Olivier Messiaen. I find that my interests have veered toward raising awareness within post-secondary curricula of the importance of learning the arts, particularly African American musics, as intersections of an interdisciplinary unified whole: music, dance, poetics, fine arts, theatrics. As a result, my research connects with ongoing debates related to the institutionalization of jazz (Ake 2001; de Lima, Reanimating Dissonance 2017; Prouty 2005; Wilf 2014). I focus on the teaching of jazz performance in post-secondary programs across the GTA and how these pedagogical practices diverge from jazz, understood as a practice inseparable from its history in African American culture.

For example, within my research, I referred to "music as sound" as representative of pedagogies that limit their concept of jazz to a colonized or Eurocentric model of codified chords, scales, rhythms, motifs, and the like. In contrast, drawing on a common understanding in ethnomusicology, I posit an approach to jazz that understands it through the lens "music as culture." This emphasizes jazz as a social practice informed by other culturally and historically performed practices. In other words, my research is based on the idea of jazz as an intertextual, or, to borrow from musicologist Ingrid Monson (1995), "intermusical" (396) practice that, while certainly hybrid and informed by a range of histories and cultures, is inseparable from its history as practised by African Americans (422). Furthermore, my research has elucidated that jazz was originally shaped by particular African American cultural sensibilities and historical experiences, and therefore, cannot be reduced to teaching it from the context of how institutions might teach classical music (de Lima, Reanimating

Dissonance 2017: 3). Most importantly, my research has shown that, even as African American history and culture might be acknowledged in some programs across the GTA, there is a tendency within these post-secondary institutions to focus on technical skills (especially reading jazz repertoire) and to reduce jazz to "techniques" while abstracting them from the people, places, and experiences in which many of these techniques emerged (Cohen 1993: 123). Ultimately, these programs miss their mark, I believe, in delivering what anthropologist Sara Cohen refers to as "the challenge to treat music as social practice and process," while striving for an approach that is "comparative," "holistic," and "dialogical" (123).

Finally, despite the attention I pay to a very particular localized setting, the issues I raise in this discussion and my research more broadly should be asked of both jazz and classical programs in Canada and beyond. In the Canadian context, the power of local post-secondary programs to shape Canadian jazz and classical music is immense. For this reason, it demands careful and critical attention, such as I have attempted to employ here. Both classical and jazz post-secondary institutions across Canada need to re-examine their curricula and pedagogical practices and to embrace approaches used by early African American musicians to support students in their development. These changes would allow students to learn the repertoire and its related performance as an aggregate aligned to the music's wider social and cultural practices, ultimately positioning musicians to develop the artistic autonomy needed for innovating this music into the future.

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