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The Road to a Successful Jazz Festival Experience

by Dr. Benjamin Boone and Dr. James Miley

Based on a True Story: the Saga of Last Band of the Day

We've been judging for nine hours at a recent Jazz Festival. After completing written comments for the next-to-last band, we await the *Last Band of the Day*. We hear them before we see them – shuffling loudly towards the performance area from backstage, then scrambling onto risers and giggling under the glare of the lights. I count the saxes as they file in. Three altos... one – no two baris...now three tenors...until I see nine saxes on the front line, dwarfing the second row of three bones. I open the performance packet and find a semi-legible tune list and poorly photocopied scores loosely bound with a lone paperclip. Once the director arrives, each member ostensibly “tunes” while staring at the flashing lights of a digital tuner as they push in or out. Just before the now-delayed downbeat, a trumpet player runs in out-of-breath from somewhere offstage. Unsurprisingly, the group opens with an out-of-tune, unbalanced, non-idiomatic and un-nuanced rendition of *Basie Straight Ahead*. On the tape I stop just short of congratulating the bass player for being the loudest member of the band as images of Spinal Tap and "this goes to eleven" run through my mind. During the ballad "feature," the lead alto player alternates between a written solo and something vaguely related to a blues scale. The set closes with a jet-engine volume Latin number featuring the drums playing a funk/hip-hop groove. At the end of her solo, the final soloist lifts her fist in the air in a triumphal gesture that says it all. I am, for the first time all day, left completely speechless.

Last Band of the Day's mistakes may seem far-fetched, but quite often potentially good groups commit many of these same jazz festival faux pas, though in a much less egregious manner. So what can you do to help your band *maximize* its festival experience and avoid the pitfalls of the *Last Band of the Day*? Here's are some suggestions, compiled in consultation with leading jazz adjudicators, to help better *everyone's* experience.

PRESENTATION

Here are a few tips on how to present yourself in a professional manner:

- 1) Be prepared. Make a list of everything that needs to be done before the festival (and when it needs to be done), including selection of charts, preparation and copying of scores for the judges (if required), a clearly defined practice schedule (including sectionals), outside work with soloists, listening assignments, etc. Make an additional checklist for everything that needs to be brought to the festival (folders, cymbals, patch cords, etc.) and a list of each student's responsibilities. Don't forget to practice how you will execute all non-musical aspects of your performance, including entering the stage, setting up, tuning and exiting.
- 2) Treat the performance environment, other groups and each other with respect. Realize that the actions and body language of the group (before, during and after the performance) convey a strong message to the judges. Similarly, how the director responds to pressure situations and/or bad circumstances (delays, etc.) will send either a positive or negative message to the judges, and set a positive or negative example for the students. Strive to project a focused countenance.
- 3) It is more important that the band have a similar “look” than an actual uniform. Avoid attire that has the effect of drawing attention away from the group and the music – or shows a lack of familiarity with the jazz style.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT EDUCATION

We all like to win, but the main focus of a festival should be education. Students and directors can learn a tremendous amount at any festival.

- 1) Attend Master classes, evening performances and performances by other ensembles (both strong and weak). Critique these afterwards with your students to hone their perceptual skills.

- 2) Be a sponge. Musicians in general dislike being told what they could do better, and as such, it is hard not to personalize artistic critique. But as educators, we must learn to accept feedback in a non-defensive manner and embrace evaluation as a stepping stone to improvement.
- 3) As such, listen to tapes, read all adjudication sheets, and seriously consider all comments. If one adjudicator says you need to re-think your concept of swing, you very well might. If another says the exact same thing, you can rest assured it's something on which you need to work. Consider every suggestion seriously.
- 4) Share the critiques with your students. Be positive but also honest. Let them know their strengths and weaknesses and how the group can become better. Use festival feedback as a springboard for improvement by setting realistic goals and charting a path through which the group can realize those goals.

CHARTS & PROGRAMMING

Choose charts appropriate for your group and then program them effectively (so they flow together yet show diversity). Avoid charts that are too simplistic or too difficult, poorly composed/arranged, or charts outside the jazz idiom. One task at a festival is to scope out good charts. Collect chart ideas by listening to other groups and noting interesting arrangements, asking the judges or an accomplished director for recommendations for your group, signing up for publisher mailing lists and/or commissioning a work from an accomplished composer.

BALANCE

If you can get the band to truly listen to each other and understand their individual roles, you will have a balanced band. Each player should be able to identify his or her role at any given moment. Are they articulating the melody, a counter-melody, a harmonization of the melody, a melodic response to the melody, a percussive punch, a rhythmic figure or a harmonic pad? Can they identify who they are doubling, or the role of others in the group? Given their role, how can they best serve the music at this point? Ask questions they can answer only if they understand their role and are listening to each other.

Another effective exercise is to have the band (particularly the rhythm section) play at a level they find excruciatingly soft, but with maximum intensity. Doing so usually enables them to hear the ensemble more clearly and ascertain how they fit into the texture. Your group will listen as never before: Backgrounds will indeed serve as backgrounds, punches will be lined up with the melody, sections will sound cohesive and the rhythm section will support, rather than drown out the band (also see music at a higher level below).

INSTRUMENTATION/SET UP

The old adage "the more the merrier" simply does not apply to jazz band instrumentation. You should have no more than six saxes, six bones, and six trumpets—ideally five saxes, four-to-five bones, and four-to-five trumpets. Another truth is that having eight saxophones does not make up for the lack of bones and in fact causes a greater imbalance in the group's sound. Try rewriting bone parts for tenor or bari sax. Or if you have any (French) horn players in your program, recruit them and use marching horns. If you have a peculiar instrumentation, do your best to fix it or commission appropriate arrangements specifically for your group.

Food for thought: If your district won't pay for two groups, have only one and take the best kids. Your band will immediately sound better, and the large group of students who still want to play but didn't make the cut may help you in your efforts to convince your school that another group is not only viable, but necessary. They will also be working hard to make the elite group next year!

IMPROVISATION

Improvisation is one of the hallmarks of jazz, so it saddens judges when they hear a soloist either playing a written solo or being forced to blindly slash their way through chord changes without sufficient instruction or preparation.

It is essential that you have a library of improvisation manuals/play-alongs available in your office for checkout (Coker and Aebersold are my favorites). If you cannot improvise, then make an effort to learn *with* your students. Listening and singing along with professional jazz solos engrains the idiom and helps the students understand how to develop pacing, phrasing, and an overall musical arc to their improvisations.

LISTENING

During feedback, I often ask members of a band what their favorite Big Band CDs are. Unsurprisingly, members of weak bands cannot give an answer (they tend not to listen to Big Band music- and it shows) while members of strong bands tend to reel off a long list of favorite Big Band CDs. Familiarity with the genre not only matters, it is the key gaining the proper sound, feel, balance, articulations, phrasing, etc. So facilitate the learning of the jazz idiom by having a library of jazz CDs and accompanying charts available for your students. Play selections from this library as the students set up and tear down. Let them check items out. During class, play original recordings of standard charts (like Nestico or Ellington) while the students follow along with their parts. Encourage your students to hang out with each other and listen to jazz. You will be amazed at the results. The feel will be there, the articulations, the shaping of the lines with accents and ghosted notes, the solo concept, balance. The secret is simple: listen and study.

FOCUS ON FUNDAMENTALS

Many errors can be traced to a weak fundamental foundation on the instrument. Below are a few possible ways to help solidify basic technique.

PRACTICE: What goes in (incorrect or correct rendition) comes out. If a player cannot execute a figure accurately at a slow tempo, playing it at a more rapid tempo will only engrain sloppy technique and make it more difficult to play correctly in the future. Alternatively, if one can play a figure perfectly at a slow tempo, increasing the tempo is quite often a simple matter.

RHYTHM: Count rhythms and sing figures before attempting to play them.

DYNAMICS: Most soft dynamics are played too loudly and most loud dynamics are played too loudly. Judges love to hear a true “p” and an “f” that doesn’t sound like “fff.”

SIGHTREADING: Here is a fun exercise: While one student plays, have the other cover up the beat being played with a sheet of paper (so the paper moves from left to right, covering up the music, but one beat ahead of the note being played). This will force the player to look ahead, memorize the rhythm/pitch and focus on the next note. Next cover up two beats ahead, then three. Also, provide students with a mental sight-reading checklist, and then pass out new charts to read on a regular basis.

TUNING: In short, students need to first *hear* (not see on a tuner!) what is in tune and what isn’t, and secondly they need to have the technical facility to make the proper adjustment. Here are some helpful exercises adapted from Gerald Eskelin’s *Lies My Music Told Me*:

- 1) Have the students sing and match a pitch played on the piano. Next, match with their instrument. In both cases, once in tune, have them raise, then lower the pitch slightly so that they learn to hear “sharp” and “flat.”
- 2) Have half the class sing a pedal tone while the other students slowly glide up from that pitch, listening for the relative consonance and dissonance between the two pitches. Guide them as they glide up to the fifth and then the octave. Perfectly “in tune” octaves and fifths are slightly different than the octave or fifth on a piano or a tuner, which are based on “equal temperament” and are acoustically “out of tune.” You will have to teach your students to hear these intervals without the use of a piano or a digital tuner - relying instead on their perception of consonance and dissonance.
- 3) Tuning to one note on a tuner divorces the ear from the tuning process and reinforces the mistaken notion that there is one “right” frequency for each note. I believe the misuse of digital tuners accounts for numerous tuning errors. To ingrain the much-needed concept of “flexible tuning,” play a low Bb on the piano and have the students play a Bb concert. Have them hold the pitch while you move to a low Eb on the piano. They will have to alter the tuning of the Bb to be in tune with the Eb! Why? Because now Bb must align with the overtone an octave and a fifth above Eb (Bb) rather than the overtone and octave above Bb (Bb). The harmonic context has changed, and so must the tuning. Next try a Gb in the bass, then a G.

MAKING MUSIC AT A HIGHER LEVEL

“Correct” rhythms, notes, articulations, dynamics, balance and tempo do not necessarily add up to either an inspired interpretation or even “good” music (which to me is music where the intent is understood by the performer and conveyed to the listener). So how can you raise the musical level of your group?

Ask questions that inspire students to think about the dramatic flow of the music, the musical intent and the manner in which the music unfolds. Once the group recognizes *why* particular notes, rhythms and markings are on the page, they will be able to convey this intent to the audience. For example ask, “what is the piece about?” Perhaps the music is about a constantly moving figure – or about a melody that keeps trying to ascend, or about one figure interrupting another. Other questions include, “What do you think the composer is trying to get you to do here...what emotion(s) do you think should be projected when we play this piece...does this ever change... what musical parameters in the piece will help convey that emotion...what can we do to project that feeling even more (or less) ...what is the attitude of the piece and what makes you think so...where are the climaxes...which is most intense...what makes it more intense (so we can bring it out)?” Note: If your band consistently has trouble answering these questions about a particular arrangement, it's more than likely a reflection of the poor quality of the chart rather than a problem with your students' musical perception!

Every note is simultaneously being heard in the context of where it came from *and* in the context of where the listener *thinks* it is going. Music works because it creates expectations, and identifying when, where and if these expectations are met reveals a great deal about the dramatic flow of any piece. As such, being aware of – and articulating - this dramatic flow will enable you to infuse the music with a sense of direction and musical impetus – ingredients that render inspired performance!

In summary, before your next jazz festival, consider your presentation and performance from the perspective of the students and the judges, and take a time to ponder how you can make it the most educationally and musically rewarding festival it can be. We hope the suggestions outlined above help you begin to think of ways to do just that.

Brief Author Sketch

Composer/saxophonist Benjamin Boone (California State University, Fresno) and composer/pianist James Miley (Cuesta College) appear together on *State of the Union: 2001* (Electronic Music Foundation). A Fulbright Senior Specialist candidate, Boone's music has been recorded on eleven CDs by leading performers/ensembles, received performances from Carnegie Hall to seven European countries, garnered honors from ASCAP, the American Music Center and *Billboard Magazine*. Miley is the recipient of IAJE's 2004 Gil Evans Fellowship. Craig von Berg and Gary P. Gilroy contributed to this article.

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