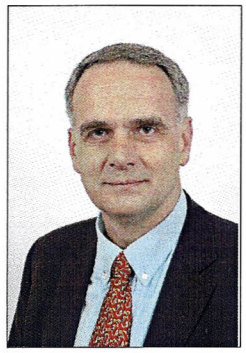
FROM THE EDITOR



Who, outside jazz, understands improvisation?

'Every musician of the 21st century must be able to improvise!' With this statement I terrorize my colleagues from the classical department at every meeting. Over the last two years I have met with my classical colleagues more than before. Professional music education, not only in my country, is going through major shifts. Some conservatories in Europe nowadays call themselves "conservatoires" or they have become music universities. The bachelor-master structure will be implemented everywhere in higher education in Europe. Accreditation committees check on the implementation of the ECTS, the new credit system. These and other issues bring my classical colleagues and me to the meeting tables on a regular basis.

We also discuss music pedagogical issues. When it comes to improvisational skills, it is like talking about a better environment in nature: in general we all agree that it is needed for everybody. Only a few die hard classical music pedagogues deny that a musician who can improvise is better equipped in the fast changing professional music world of today where boundaries tend to dissolve. I always hurry to say that I do not want to turn every classical musician into a jazz musician. I strongly believe that the lost art and skill of improvising have to be returned to classical music education. Jazz education can serve as a role model, a tested and working example of how improvisation can be taught and learned in various circumstances. I must say: most of my classical music pedagogues, after some hesitation, are willing to admit that there are some things that they can learn from their colleagues in the jazz department. And then the confusion begins!

Ah, yes, they sigh, it would be better if modern day classical musicians could improvise but they are not gifted in the same way as jazz musicians are. The myth of the divine gifted jazz musician, who "out of the blue" can play anything he likes, is still very much alive especially among classical musicians who cannot play a note if you take away their notated music. I tell them stories about Jamey Aebersold and his anyone-can-improvise publishing emporium but it does not often help.

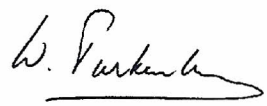
Ah, yes, they sigh, improvising might be good for classical musicians but there is no time for it during their study. Classical pedagogues are hard to convince that the time spent on learning how to improvise makes classical students better performers in less time.

The avoidance of improvisation by pedagogues of classical music is bad enough but overexcitement is even worse. The colleagues I fear most are the classical music pedagogues who become completely open to improvisation. In their view improvisation makes the student so wonderfully creative and beautifully expressive, and gives them unlimited freedom! Here it really goes wrong: improvisation is loved to death. In the eyes of this type of classical pedagogues improvisation is not seen as a musical phenomenon but as something outside music. Improvisation is good in order to become a better and more social human being! Of course it is bad for your technique but that is the price to pay. If I tell them that much improvisation is the in-tempo re-arranging of known and thoroughly studied material they look at me as if I did not understand it, as if I got it wrong. Explaining that four years of hard study of improvisation is just the start of a life-long-learning process is confused with having a good time. After all, they think that jazz is entertainment, good time music, or 'light music' as some of my Dutch colleagues still call it. It takes a lot of explaining before they understand that learning to become a good improviser requires theory skills, instrumental skills, hearing skills and yes indeed also social and creative skills. It takes even more explaining before they understand that all of these skills are needed while improvising, and that they all improve while improvising and that they all integrate while improvising.

In music pedagogy the jazz world and the classical music world are still at odds when it comes to finding a common ground in the teaching of improvisation. Progress has been made but in a slow tempo. It is true what Jamey Aebersold said at the end of his keynote address to the 1st IASJ Jazz Education Conference in 2003: music education will not change much unless in all classical music curricula all over the world improvisation becomes part of the fixed program for at least two years. That will take a while! In the mean time jazz education can only become more aware of how the teaching and learning of improvisation really works. At the same time alliances should be made with classical music pedagogues who are really interested in developing improvisation methods for classical musicians.

In whatever way and however fast the developments occur, the IASJ is the forum for discussion, in the IASJ Newsletter, during the ongoing dialogues at IASJ Jazz Meetings and on-line on iasj@yahoo.com and in person-to-person contact.

Walter Turkenburg



Editor