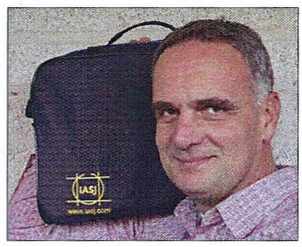

Good enough for jazz!

When it comes to jazz, standards are generally lowered. There are many examples. In bars, cafes and other places that try to attract clientele by writing "jazz" on the outside window, the piano inside is of bad quality. Most of the pianos on which jazz was recorded were inferior quality. However bad the piano, it is still good enough for jazz. The old fake books were full of mistakes and some of them still are. If classical music books contain mistakes, they would not sell. Music books with wrong chords are good enough for jazz. Except for the very top level, jazz musicians get underpaid. But bad payment is good enough for jazz musicians.

The acceptance of inferiority is fully accepted in the jazz world, both by the non-jazz people and the jazz people themselves. Part of the explanation for this abnormality is that inferiority in jazz is romanticized. Old jazz recordings must sound bad. Too much restoration on new CDs is suspect. The low quality of the sound is not only good enough for jazz but also a prerequisite.

But it goes further. Perfectionism in jazz is suspect. If something is extremely good, it is too good for jazz. A jazz instrument must be old, something must be wrong with it and it must be hard to play. And it goes even worse. Jazz musicians who earn a lot of money are suspect. Something must be wrong, especially if the jazz musician is a singer. But not only singers face this problem. Lately The Bad Plus, a new piano trio with a lot of attention in the press, had to face irrelevant critic because of the sheer fact that they were successful.

The acceptance of the inferiority as being normal in jazz is definitively present in the view of outsiders on jazz education. Most people still believe that anyone can play the drums. Swing gives you a happy and easy feeling so it must be easy to play. Many non-jazz people firmly believe that improvising is nothing else than fooling around with notes on the spur of the moment for which no talent is needed. It is hard to explain to people who are not involved in jazz education that it takes many years of hard work for a student in order to become a professional jazz musician. Too bad for these ignorant outsiders but what if they are the decision makers at the ministry of jazz education or the managers of the board of a school? Jazz education has to find an answer to the ethical problem of acceptance of inferiority in jazz. If jazz accepts that it is 'just' jazz then it deserves bad pianos, it deserves low fees and it deserves the lack of success. If jazz education accepts that jazz is 'just' jazz, then it does not deserve proper housing, a strong curriculum and decent salaries for the teachers. Jazz education must solve the ethical problem in order to guarantee a decent future for itself and for the students!

The mere fact that jazz has crowned itself as an art form a few decades ago did not solve the ethical problem. It is nice that the Congress of the USA has written on a piece of paper that jazz is a valuable art form but the right ethics standards and the high self esteem have to come from within. Jazz education should no longer accept mediocrity and badness as the standard. The IASJ can play a role in this by setting the standards and fight a constant battle against inferiority. Surely, a couple of colorful aspects of jazz and jazz education will disappear but their loss will be compensated and soon be forgotten.

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