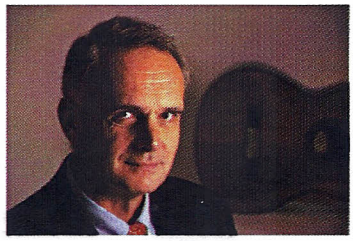

Minding and mining the facts

In April 2006 I met jazz bass player and educator Ulf Radelius, one of the founders of the IASJ. Ulf has a clear recollection of the first gathering of the IASJ in Germany in April 1989. He knows who was there, who brought his wife, their names and the names of the kids. Ulf Radelius also knows what happened, who said what, what was decided and how it worked out. I was very surprised with his extremely detailed recollection of the history of the IASJ.

Although I have participated in every IASJ Jazz Meeting I am not as good as Ulf in remembering the details. I realized that the entire IASJ is not very good in remembering its past let alone celebrating its success! The figures however are impressive. The Annual IASJ Jazz Meetings have taken place in eleven different counties in the past seventeen years. Although the IASJ is often referred to as a European organization, the country in which most of the meetings have taken place is the USA: three times. Seven European countries follow with two meetings in the past. Statistically speaking, the largest figure is the total amount of participants in the past seventeen years which is about fifteen hundred. That's not bad. Another relatively big figure is the hundred combos formed at all of the meetings. Not bad either for the relatively small organization the IASJ really is. However, at gatherings of our friends, the IAJE, there are about seven thousand people and at my middle size conservatory I schedule about eighty combos every year.

The true power of the IASJ lays in the quality of the small numbers. Each of the hundred combos that were active at IASJ Jazz Meetings consisted of six to eight players from different nationalities and from all continents. There is, to my knowledge, no other organization in the world that has been able to bring that many jazz combos together with such a high difference in the cultural backgrounds of its players. This tremendous result is to be regarded as a high level of cultural dialogue that is extremely seldom seen in arts education.

This high level of cultural diversity of the utmost importance for the development of jazz as an art form. Students at jazz schools all over the world have an excellent sense for what is the latest thing in jazz and where the real action is taking place. This "what's happening now" is one of the main issues of their conversations. They try to figure out when and where new things are occurring and if they are able to contribute and experience them. The IASJ Jazz Meetings have become opportunities to participate in such new experiences. A selected student for an IASJ Jazz Meeting will enjoy all the sweet things that come with it such as the trip to another country and the CD that will arrive at his home half a year later with some of his playing on it. All of that is nice but not the most important. The attraction for a participating student is the experience during a full week of being at the forefront of the development of jazz, being in the very centre of where it all is happening!

I give an example to show my point. In the mid nineties about ten years ago at the IASJ Jazz Meetings, the jam sessions bands started to mix all sorts of patterns in the rhythm section. As a result the wildest spectrum of grooves were played. In the mix everything was allowed and anything could happen. In these jam sessions the students did not play the Real Book standards anymore. They jazzed-up tunes from the pop repertoire they grew up with. In the process of jazzing up excerpts from pop idioms, bits and pieces of world music were included as well resulting in some incredible moments of diverse rhythms all coming out at the same time. The "head" or melody section was no longer a safe place. Bebop, Cool Jazz, Free Jazz but also New Orleans style kind of improvisations were mixed in one tune and sometimes even in one solo. Consciously or not, the students took a non-historic approach to jazz improvisation. What happened was the deconstruction of jazz. It was seen as a gimmick at that time, ten years ago. Had our dear and respected excellent students been drinking too much, the teachers were wondering?

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