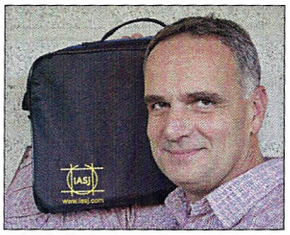

The inner power of jazz

When I look outside I see that there are more leaves on the ground than on the branches of the trees. The days are getting shorter and the daylight is dimmed. Winter is fast approaching. I am in Krakow, Poland with the IASJ Daily Board. Together with the Host School Coordinators Grzegorz Motyka and Piotr Mazurkiewicz we prepare for the next Annual IASJ Jazz Meeting in 2005. We also discuss the current state of affairs in the organization and we have long talks about what is going on in jazz in general. This is big time for thoughts and reflections.

What strikes me, while here in Poland and fully experiencing it, is the complete change of the position of jazz in this country in the last fifteen years. Poland has been run over, sliced up, relocated and occupied in the last two centuries. There has been no real freedom in Poland for many consecutive generations in a row and now suddenly it is there. Jazz has functioned as the sound of freedom for the last two generations. The occupying authorities, who were against jazz and often forbid jazz, are gone now. Jazz is left without the enemy who made jazz so interesting, so appealing, so much sounding like freedom. Could jazz, once the symbol of freedom, ever survive now that freedom was gained; now that jazz has lost its heavy symbolic function? Many were skeptical.

Most people think that what happens in life is reflected in jazz. Changes in jazz are the result of what happens in society. This way of thinking about jazz has a long tradition. It started in the roaring twenties of the last century when jazz came forward. In fact, the whole age was called the "jazz age". This went on in every decade and became the strongest in the sixties when Free Jazz was closely associated with all kinds of movements such as Freedom Now! The claim that the changes in society determine the changes in music can also be found in classical music and in popular music. Ethnomusicologists and researchers in popular music studies tell us that you cannot understand pop music if you do not understand popular culture of a certain period. Researches of Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical music make similar claims.

The history of jazz in Poland of the last two decades proves the weakness of the point of view that music is determined by what happens in society. Jazz in Poland is not the mere result of the cultural or historical factors surrounding it. Jazz, and not only in Poland, lives and it takes its own path to go. This swinging and improvisational music called jazz that came into existence some hundred years ago, has developed on its own potential, on its own inner power. The development of jazz is slowed down, or accelerated by the society surrounding it. However strong the outside musical forces were, they never determined the development of jazz! Jazz is claimed by many often opposite parties: Afro-Americans, Europeans, traditionalists, avant-gardists, right-wing politicians, left-wing politicians. Cultural claiming always leaves a sense of injustice because of its excluding character: it is a dead-end street.

Jazz lives on its own powers, no matter how the scene changes, no matter which political system is in charge. Jazz in Poland has proven this. It is the task of the IASJ to support schools of jazz like our Host School that work on defining their place in a new and free society. The Annual IASJ Jazz Meeting 2005 in Krakow, Poland is a fulfillment of that task.

Walter Turkenburg

Editor