

Teaching and assessing jazz ensemble performance: A South African perspective

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Jazz education in South Africa: a brief overview (I)

Jazz studies as an educational offering in South Africa begins in the mid-1980s with the introduction of formal programmes at tertiary level.

Established some twenty-five years ago, such programmes have produced a fair number of high profile star performers as well as those who contribute to the changing field of music education in South Africa by teaching.

Jazz education in South Africa: a brief overview (2)

Many such graduates now find employment in secondary schools throughout South Africa, and direct school bands who perform at events like the Standard Bank National Youth Jazz festival held annually in Grahamstown.

Jazz and popular music studies are now established in schools with the resources and expertise to offer such programmes, and beginner musicians may now engage in private instrument or voice lessons as well as perform in ensembles as part of their formal educational curriculum.

This situation, while encouraging in terms of the growth of interest in these fields, poses some challenges for teaching and assessing ensemble performance.

Ensemble directing

Ensemble is defined for these purposes as a group of individuals rehearsing towards a public performance. In music education, this is usually linked to assessment for formative (developmental/feedback) or summative (assigning grades) purposes. In this case, the audience may consist of the general public or examiners or both.

Directing the ensemble requires:

choosing appropriate repertoire (continuum of simplicity to complexity)
(Csikszentmihalyi conditions for “optimal experience” a.k.a. *flow*)

defining roles and responsibilities as clearly as possible (rhythm section, soloist, singer)

formulating clear learning outcomes

providing opportunities for participants to contribute through scaffolding

Ensemble assessment

Formative assessment:

Provide constructive feedback in rehearsal period (from director as well as peers)

Build in sufficient time for final debriefing (videotape): makes it possible for participants to see themselves from the audience's perspective

Summative assessment:

Clear learning outcomes with buy-in from participants

Postgraduate recital: Circulate assessment criteria to external examiners and participants for comment (agree on key focus areas)

Key questions

- How does a more nuanced understanding of creativity (encompassing notions of embodiment and social cognition) add value to the assessment process?
- How may creativity be re-defined in a group context so as to go beyond stereotypical definitions of the creative process? (Sawyer 2007)
- How do we take account of the potentialities for communication that are possible within a group setting?
- How is improvisation (by implication, the defining creative element of jazz ensemble performance) to be assessed?

A more nuanced understanding

How could a more nuanced understanding of creativity (encompassing notions of embodiment and social cognition) add value to the assessment process?

It seems to me that some definitions of creativity as a cognitive process could be enhanced by considering the role of the body in enacting sensorimotor, kinesthetic and social processes.

“Focusing on the body as the source of musical expression implies that musical expression is *a means of communicating basic qualities of human nature to one another*, qualities which emerge out of movement and which are translated and abstracted into musical forms.”

(Davidson 2002:145, emphasis mine)

This line of thinking might encourage assessors to consider the creative process as not limited to pure mental activity, but also situated in a specific bodily engagement with the world.

Individual vs. group creativity

How may creativity be re-defined in a group context so as to go beyond stereotypical definitions of the creative process?

Gradual move in concept of creativity from historically individualistic notions of the “lone genius” to viewing creativity as also emergent through group interactions: dialectical relationship between the individual and the group

Focus on teamwork, the collaborative as well as the competitive, how the accompanists interact with and support the soloist, for instance. Extensive ethnographic studies of accomplished jazz performers (Berliner 1994, Monson 1996) provide benchmarking on the expert dimension of the creative process.

Jazz historiography and competition

Jazz historiography tends to mythologize its pioneers as individual “lone geniuses,” leading to canon-formation of the great tradition of Morton, Armstrong, Ellington, Mingus, and Miles Davis, to name a few. One should bear in mind that these innovators were empowered to articulate their particular musical visions through the co-operative efforts and support of their accompanists.

In the bebop period, especially, the competitive element of jazz performance became normative (cutting contests). Competition is not particularly appropriate for institutional jazz studies, because:

“It may be the case that for experienced artists (or other creative performers), competition serves as a facilitative, rather than inhibiting, mechanism, but for novices who are new to the domain, the external pressures of competition detrimentally affect creativity.”

(Eisenberg and Thompson 2011:135)

Potentialities for communication

How do we take account of the potentialities for communication that are possible within a group setting?

Look at “micro-processes of interaction” (gesture, facial expressions, and other bodily signifiers)

Attitude and bearing: Merleau-Ponty “intentional arc”

Shuffle rhythm: “Since several individuals combine their efforts to produce these layers, the *interacting and interlocking musical roles simultaneously articulate social relationships* between collaborating players.”

Monson, in Sawyer 1997:99, emphasis mine

Assessing improvisation (I)

How is improvisation (by implication, the defining creative element of jazz ensemble performance) to be measured?

Theory (chord scales etc.) – cognitive background, formal skills
and understanding

Balance between imitation and originality

Listening skills

Phrasing (language): practical skills

Assessing improvisation (2)

Creative element of improvisation balances the familiar with the new

“Performances also aim at the bringing-forth of a *fresh* presence or phenomenon. By fresh, I mean that a performance offers a pure, vibrant, and original appearance that shines forth full of life , like fresh fruit or fresh hope. I also mean that a performance can be fresh without being entirely novel.” (Crease, in Sawyer 1997:218)

With developments in neuroscience, a broader view of cognition is beginning to emerge, taking account of concepts from situated learning, distributed and social cognition, and related fields of inquiry

Cognition in the wild

Following Hutchins' epic study of navigation (1995), is it possible to factor in our understanding of how creativity may be distributed in performances involving some degree of collective improvisation, so as to improve the teaching of creative performance as well as the creative experience of participants?

Not just a cognitive process sited in the brain, also to do with a complex set of emergent social phenomena.

Difficulty arises when assessing individual performances in a group setting, in balancing notions of figure and ground, soloist and accompanists, and so on.

Sawyer: “Novel emergent product”

“In both a jazz group and a successful work team, the members play off of one another, with each person’s contributions inspiring the others to raise the bar and think of new ideas. Together, the improvisational team creates a novel emergent product, one that is more responsive to the changing environment and better than what any one team member could have developed alone.”

A large part of what makes improvised music interesting is precisely derived from unexpected interactions with classic forms (standards, the blues, 32-bar song form). These interactions illustrate a somewhat fluid relationship between process and product.

Ensemble performance and creativity

Ensemble provides a platform for exploring and developing creative potential

Repertoire: from global jazz, popular music (allow participants a stake in choosing material for exploration)

Purpose: to engage musically with an audience in staging a musical event

Create opportunities for learners to experience flow state, often linked to creative fulfillment

Conclusion: Teaching jazz ensemble

Move beyond authoritarian models of objectivity to consider the ensemble as a site for potential intersubjective creative expression

“The ability to recognize is relative to the historical, cultural, and technological embodiment of the observer. New forms of embodiment mean recognition of new phenomena, and I might recognize something as a horn, a saxophone, or a phrase by Ben Webster.” (Crease 1997:218)

Peer learning and formative opportunities: scaffolding allows students to experience the director’s role and responsibilities (choose repertoire, set tempi, engage in debates around assessment activities, etc.)

Conclusion: Assessing jazz ensemble

Authoritarian model: necessary to use grid system for accountability purposes and to fulfill institutional imperatives (grading, summative assessment). Nonetheless such assessment criteria do not guarantee the objectivity of the assessment process

Encourage investment and participation

How are the participants experiencing the performance? Allow opportunities for feedback, debriefing, balanced criticism, peer learning and participation, avoid “blame game”

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