Historical Perspectives and a Case for Inclusion

Why Teach Jazz?

Music has been a part of the American educational curriculum since the 19th century. Traditionally, the content of the music curriculum has been focused on the classics of the western European tradition. The band movement of the early 20th century introduced brass and military band literature to instrumental music classrooms. Although it was an American creation early in the century, the incorporation of jazz music into the school music curriculum and justification for legitimate formal study of jazz has been a slow process. Learning how to play jazz and appreciating its impact on American culture has primarily been achieved through an informal process that most often has taken place outside the traditional classroom.

The history of jazz from its roots in New Orleans to the golden age of Dixieland in the 1920’s and swing music of the 1930’s to the free style jazz of the 1960’s and the rock and fusion of the 1970’s has been a microcosm of the musical and sociological history of the United States in the 20th century. To understand jazz is to understand the history of 20th century American culture. Given the influence of jazz on much of the artistic and popular music and culture of the 20th century, it is appropriate to address the inclusion of the study of jazz as a part of the formal music curriculum.

It was not until the early 1940’s that the thought of teaching jazz was even considered in the academic world. In the 1940’s, ten colleges offered jazz courses on a non-credit basis, and...five colleges offered jazz for credit. Among those were the Berklee School of Music, Westlake College of Music, Los Angeles City College, California State Polytechnic, and North Texas State College (now University of North Texas). Yet there was a reluctance to legitimize jazz instruction until much later. Most “jazz instruction” took place either with private instructors or “on the bandstand”. Perceptions and myths about jazz, its negative influences, and its lack of artistic merit persisted in keeping jazz off the traditional educational stage. The traditional music education philosophy in the United States in the first half of the 20th century was solidly rooted in the western European tradition.

After World War II, the G.I. Bill veterans, who had experienced jazz during the war, entered the teaching ranks at the high school level. This provided the impetus for the start of the dance band movement in high schools. Even so, another twenty years would go by before there was acceptance of jazz ensembles (most often called stage bands), in public schools. In 1960, about 5,000 U.S. high schools had at least one band; most of these were not part of the formal curriculum. Many of
these groups were entertainment oriented ensembles that played for school dances and community social events. They generally rehearsed outside of school hours.

By the end of the 1970’s, over 70% of the 30,000 junior and senior high schools in the U.S. had at least one stage/jazz band. Well over 500 colleges were offering at least one jazz ensemble or course for credit. Fifteen percent of the 500 plus schools offered jazz related degrees. By the 1990’s, almost all junior and senior high schools had jazz ensembles as did most colleges and universities. Many of the high schools also offered jazz courses, and some even initiated a jazz curriculum. The colleges and universities developed degree programs, and some initiated pedagogy programs in jazz for their music education majors.

Today, much progress has been made to include jazz as a standard part of the music curriculum. Indeed, at the college level jazz courses and degrees have proliferated at both the undergraduate and graduate level. At the high school level, however, there is much progress to be made. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many schools still relegate their jazz ensembles to solely entertainment purposes and do not incorporate the study of jazz into students’ curricular music instruction.

There are many reasons why jazz has not become more ingrained in the school music curriculum. Foremost among them are time and scheduling constraints as well as a lack of preparation for educators in how to teach jazz. Time and scheduling are legitimate constraints that must be addressed not only by the music teacher, but also by building administrators and district leaders. The importance of comprehensive music study should be embraced at all levels of instruction. In light of recent developments and trends in curriculum and standards based instructional requirements, it is both reasonable and necessary to consider the place of jazz in the school music curriculum.

As early as 1963, the Yale Seminar on Music Education noted that “jazz, popular, and folk music have been almost altogether neglected” in music education materials. The Tanglewood Symposium in 1967 determined that music of all periods, styles, forms, and cultures belongs in the curriculum. There still, remained a reluctance for practitioners in the field to embrace these recommendations. With the incorporation of the National Arts Standards, which were developed in the early 1990’s, the inclusion of jazz in the school music curriculum has become a subject for more serious consideration by music educators nationwide.

With the current trend toward district and state wide curriculum requirements which are test- and standard-based, it is becoming increasingly important for teachers to justify the content in their music instruction. The study of jazz not only addresses the National Arts Standard of improvisation, but also provides a convenient vehicle for the exploration of the historical and sociological context of America’s growth and development. In addition, jazz provides performers an extensive and varied repertoire of music which encompasses musical styles of diverse cultural origin. Jazz has been called the purest expression of American democracy, a music built on individualism and compromise, independence and cooperation. Indeed, even the United States Congress has recognized the significance of jazz in the cultural development of the nation by declaring that jazz is an American treasure which must be preserved.

Including jazz in public school music instruction will not only preserve the music and build audiences for the future, but will enlighten students about the performance skills and artistic endeavor that jazz performance requires. The study of this indigenous music is essential to understanding the United States as it is today and as it developed in the 20th century. In addition, studying jazz will provide insight into the history of America’s diverse population and the social contexts that inspired such music. With the increased emphasis that is now placed on interdisciplinary connections in the education of today’s students, there is a logical connection between both history and sociology and jazz.

Many teachers fear teaching jazz because they have had limited or no experience with it themselves. It is important to note that one does not have to be an accomplished jazz performer to teach jazz. Gaining proficiency as a teacher of jazz requires understanding how the fundamental elements of music are applied in a jazz setting. Jazz incorporates melody, rhythm, form, timbre, and expression just as other music styles do. How these elements are utilized is what makes jazz so unique. Understanding the application of music fundamentals to jazz can be compared to learning a new language.

While the “new” language may share letters, symbols, and pronunciations with the “familiar” language, the application is different. The more one hears the proper application of the “language”, the more comfortable one becomes in understanding, appreciating, and utilizing it. That is why listening is critical to successful jazz instruction. Compilation CD’s such as the Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz as well as recordings by great jazz masters such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane, and others are essential for providing appropriate listening examples.

Can one really teach jazz? Despite the existence of
fears, myths, and misconceptions, the answer is a resounding yes! One of the myths about jazz is that one must have an innate gift to play it, and that everything that happens in a jazz performance is the result of “divine inspiration”. While jazz performances naturally display the gifts of the participants and are often inspired, technical knowledge of scales, chords and harmony is common to performers of all types of music. The stylistic nuances that distinguish jazz are the result of the evolution of performance practices that have been studied and codified just as the practices of the western European traditions have.

Improvisation, while evident in many other styles of music, has a unique place of importance in jazz. It is often their unfamiliarity with improvisation that is a stumbling block for many educators. To be sure, improvisation is a crucial element of jazz, and any valid jazz instruction should include improvisation. This does not mean that the teacher must be a master improviser, in order to teach improvisation. The teacher’s role is to help the students become aware of the options and possibilities. While it is impossible to create a master jazz artist without significant individual practice and study, it is possible to develop knowledgeable practitioners of the style. As noted jazz educator, David Baker stated, “Any time the performance practices of the giants of a particular kind of music can be analyzed, rules can be formulated based on those practices, enabling others to (perform that music).” In spite of the need for inspiration and emotional involvement that goes beyond the playing of cliches, patterns, and formulas, one must have an understanding of fundamental jazz concepts. The teacher serves as a guide to help students understand these concepts.

The concepts that set jazz apart i.e. spontaneous composition, stylistic nuance, and harmonic and rhythmic complexity can be taught if one understands how they work in context. To use the language analogy again, teaching jazz involves helping students learn the proper syntax and grammar of the jazz language. Does this mean that teachers have to go back to school to learn new skills to teach jazz? No, but it is important for teachers to know where and how to get information that will help them effectively teach jazz.

Many colleges now offer optional jazz methods classes, and an increasing number now require jazz methods and/or improvisation as a part of their instrumental music education degree programs. The University of Louisville is among those schools that require both jazz methods and jazz improvisation for instrumental music education majors. There are also a number of summer workshops offered by colleges and organizations to aid teachers who

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feel unprepared to incorporate jazz in their teaching. Among them are the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops which are held annually in July on the U of L campus and the Kentuckiana Jazz Style Workshop held each June at Bellarmine University. Other colleges and universities also sponsor workshops and camps for both students and teachers. In addition, the International Association for Jazz Education, the largest jazz support organization in the world, sponsors Teacher Training Institutes at various sites each summer. These three day institutes focus on providing methods and information for teachers already in the field at all instructional levels who have had little or no background in jazz and feel ill-prepared to teach it.

There are also methods and resources which can make teaching jazz much easier. Teaching Jazz, jointly published by IAJE and MENC, is a comprehensive curriculum guide that can be used as a resource for implementing jazz in the school curriculum. Major publishers have developed method books for teaching jazz on a developmental basis. Two of note include Essential Elements for Jazz Band (Hal Leonard) and Standard of Excellence for Jazz Ensemble (Kjos). Both of these methods utilize concepts and instructional methods that transfer from the band methods of the same name. They also have performance literature that is correlated with the concepts introduced in the method books.

Publishers of jazz ensemble literature provide graded material which is suited for any level of student skill, and they provide explicit directions for interpreting the music and achieving authentic performances. Most also include demonstration CD’s that provide an aural model for the students. There are also many improvisation methods, play along CD’s, instructional videos, and computer software programs that are helpful teaching aids. A catalog of materials is available from Jamey Aebersold Jazz, Inc. (www.jazzbooks.com).

There are also numerous websites, including the IAJE site (www.iaje.org) which provides interactive contact with a resource team of experts who will respond to questions and inquiries on topics of concern in their specific areas of expertise. Likewise, members of the jazz faculties of Kentucky’s colleges and universities are available and willing to provide advice, suggestions, and on-site workshops to help you incorporate jazz into your music program. Gaining skill in teaching jazz is a matter of knowing where to go to find the right information and assistance.

Jazz represents a myriad of American music traditions that express all the elements and aspects of music. In addition, the originators of jazz have reflected through their musical artistry the struggles, determination, hopes, and dreams of a disenfranchised population and have cont. p. 14
supplied a portrait of American culture in the 20th century. Music provides an education not only through the acquisition of musical knowledge, but through its ability to help students understand the world in which they live and from whence it came. Many musical influences have been a part of the historical, sociological, and cultural development of our society. A complete music education should include an exploration of as many of those musical influences as possible. Those musical influences are comprised of a musical landscape that reflects many cultures, many ethnicities, many styles, and many origins. A comprehensive music curriculum should address as many aspects of that musical landscape as possible. So to not teach jazz as a part of the total music curriculum is to leave a large portion of the musical canvas unpainted.

4IBID, p. V.
5IBID, p. VI.
6Mark, p. 35.
7IBID, p. 44.
8Jazz, A Film by Ken Burns; Viewer’s Guide.

Jerry Tolson teaches music education and jazz studies at the University of Louisville. A graduate of Drake University and the University of North Texas, Tolson is active nationally as a clinician, adjudicator, guest conductor, and jazz camp instructor. He is also active as a jazz composer/arranger. His vocal jazz charts are published by UNC Jazz Press. Performing on flute, saxophone, keyboards, and vocals, Tolson leads three jazz/popular music groups and has a CD of original jazz selections called, Nu View. Tolson has been named to "Who's Who Among America's Teachers" and has been the recipient of the Kentucky Music Educators "College Teacher of the Year" award.