

# Grading Jazz Improvisation:

by Antonio J. García

A couple of years ago I was reading one of the MENC (Music Educators National Conference) journals when I came upon a letter to the editor from a Northwestern University student in Music Education, Michele Kaschub. The thrust of her inquiry: why did a recent article on grading students in music courses focus so much on attendance and attitude—and so little on musical content and progress?

As I reflected on seminars with my Master of Music in Jazz Pedagogy students on the topic of assessment, I realized that jazz educators have yet as a group to address the issue of grading a Jazz Improvisation course, much less advocate any direction for the next generation of teachers. The matter never even surfaced during years of Curriculum Committee discussions I shared that led to the *Teaching Jazz* guide—nor is grading discussed in the other MENC curriculum guides. Yet if grading music in a creative, credit-bearing course is any challenge at all, how much more daunting is it to grade something as personal, even as amorphous, as jazz improvisation?

## New Ground...or Taboo?

How does one grade a Jazz Improvisation course? Is it appropriate to evaluate students' creativity, their *expressiveness* in soloing? Is that defensible against potential student appeals? Or is it better to restrict the grading to students' more technical skills, their ability to re-create the required chord/scale relationships?

# On What Basis?



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Visiting artists Max Roach (above) and Zim Ngqawana (below right) offer improvisation workshops for Northwestern University students including Shilad Sen (saxophone, below left).

Does that *de-emphasize* the importance of creativity in the students' work? After all, don't students focus most on what will get them the best grade?

For years IAJE and individual educators have pushed for Jazz Improvisation to become more available as a curricular offering as well as existing extracurricular occurrences—and will continue to do so. But with credit-bearing curriculum comes the responsibility for assessment and grading. Given the recent inclusion of improvisation skills in the National Standards, one could expect an increasing emphasis on Jazz Improvisation in the classroom. This will only add to the questions already circulating at the secondary and university levels about grading student work in such courses.

Paul Lehman, Past MENC President, stresses: "The only justifiable basis for grades is student progress in learning specific skills and knowledge in music, as outlined in applicable standards...and made explicit in a written curriculum guide.... Thinking carefully about grading forces us to think carefully about our objectives, and it provides a basis for improving our instruction."

What *are* the objectives in a Jazz Improvisation course, and how can they be graded? Surely there are a variety of approaches, yet few references are available for those educators seeking advice. My inquiries thus far have un-cov-



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ered only one substantive research paper, plus a few scattered pages in several books. Is this because little interest exists in the topic? Not according to dozens of educators with whom I've broached the subject. The response of many could be summed up in the words of one individual, who wrote: "You are bringing up some interesting points. I hadn't thought of the issue in my own grading. I may rethink some things I am doing in light of that."

For some, this is more a taboo topic. "It seems that you were trying to evoke some ideological war between teachers," wrote one educator. "I would hope that rather than focusing on the dichotomy between concrete or abstract principles, you would help us learn how our colleagues reconcile the two."

The latter is indeed my goal: let's discover how jazz educators reconcile the difficulties of grading an individual's growth in a Jazz Improvisation course. I sense no war erupting but rather a growing curiosity about what trends may already exist at the national and international level.

### The Initial Survey

Following experimentation with a sample document, I decided to address the issue by direct-mailing questionnaires on the topic of grading improvisation to nearly 200 jazz educators in October 1996. Countries targeted included the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, England, Israel, Germany,

Switzerland, Japan, The Netherlands, South Africa, and Malaysia—plus Europe and Latin America at large, with recipients including the then-current IAJE Executive Board, all Section/Region Coordinators, all Unit Presidents, more than 25 Interest Chairs of current or preceding term at the time, representatives from the IAJE Curriculum Committee, and a number of jazz educators who would not have otherwise been included in the survey. I also distributed additional copies at the 1997 IAJE Conference.

The response to the survey was swift, with most activity completed within one month. Respondents currently represent four countries, including 17 states in the U.S., and include educators at the junior high, high school, community college, college, and university levels. Nearly half of the responses apply in some way to vocal jazz education as well as instrumental.

I extend my sincere thanks to those who have already participated (see sidebar below). Yet as informative as the results of the survey are thus far, I believe it is essential to gather the input of more than these 31 respondents.<sup>2</sup> For that, I need your assistance!

MENC has since begun its own grading survey, published in its journal nationwide.<sup>1</sup> Having received only 150 responses in the few months following, Paul Lehman wrote in the December 1997 *Teaching Music*: "I believe there is widespread interest in this topic. Many teachers are looking for help, but relatively few are stepping forward and offering to provide

help at this stage because there is a great deal of uncertainty over how to proceed."<sup>3</sup>

Surely the topic of grading Jazz Improvisation prompts the same uncertainty for many—but that makes your participation all the more important. Organizations such as IAJE often hear concerns that there isn't enough "grass-roots input" or "international input"; so now I am asking *you* directly. In addition, I encourage responses as applicable from the current and incoming IAJE Executive Board, Section/Region Coordinators, Unit Presidents, Interest Chairs, and the IAJE Curriculum Committee; for your representation of views around the world is a vital part of your role in IAJE.

### Take Action!

The adjoining survey (pgs. 62-64) is intended to generate a representative—but not necessarily comprehensive—view of Jazz Improvisation teachers' perspectives regarding grading concretely the abstract art we call Jazz Improvisation. Please photocopy, complete, and return this survey to me as soon as possible. The apparent length of the questionnaire is deceptive: since virtually all the questions seek check-marks or short answers, you should be able to complete it in **15 minutes** or less. Some questions are rather pointed; however, *there is no right or wrong answer*. Make every effort to focus your answers within the spaces provided.

Only those educators who issue credited grades for Jazz Improvisation class or lessons

## INITIAL RESPONDENTS TO IMPROV GRADING SURVEY

Jamey Aebersold	University of Louisville	Louisville, KY
Lee Bash	Illinois Benedictine College	Lisle, IL
Darius Brubeck	University of Natal	Durban, South Africa
Chris Collins	Wayne State University	Detroit, MI
Rick Condit	McNeese State University	Lake Charles, LA
Pat Crichton	Western Australian Conservatory of Music	Mount Lawley, West Australia
John Davis	University of Northern Colorado	Greeley, CO
Orbert Davis	Columbia College	Chicago, IL
Pat Dorian	East Stroudsburg University	East Stroudsburg, PA
Larry Engstrom	University of Nevada Reno	Reno, NV
Paul Evoskevich	College of St. Rose	Albany, NY
Pat Harbison	University of Cincinnati College	Cincinnati, OH
Andy Hoefle	Highland Community College	Freeport, IL
Sparky Koerner	College of the Mainland	Texas City, TX
Bob Lark	DePaul University	Chicago, IL
Eric Late	San Jacinto College	Pasadena, TX
Bryce Luty	Hutchinson Community College	Hutchinson, KS
Bart Marantz	Booker T. Washington HSPVA	Dallas, TX
Dan Murphy	University of Redlands	Redlands, CA
Jeff Phillips	Hendersonville HS	Hendersonville, TN
Ellen Rowe	University of Michigan	Ann Arbor, MI
Peter Scheiner	Columbia College	Chicago, IL
Phillip Simon	Thomas Jefferson HSST	Alexandria, VA
Bob Simcrope	Milton Academy	Milton, MA
Janis Stockhouse	Bloomington HS North	Bloomington, IN
Bryan Stovell	Dover Bay Jr. High/HS	British Columbia, Canada
Michael Tracy	University of Louisville	Louisville, KY
Chuck Tumlinson	Washburn University	Topeka, KS
Chris Vadala	University of Maryland	College Park, MD
Jeff Waggoner	Hinsdale Central HS	Hinsdale, IL

need complete this survey; non-credit classes do not pose the issue discussed. If you feel that a colleague is more suited to answering the focus of this survey than you, please forward it to him or her immediately. If you are aware of accomplished Improvisation educators who you feel should also participate in this survey, please photocopy it and request that they complete it and forward it to me as well. IAJE membership is not a prerequisite, and both vocal and instrumental viewpoints are welcome.

Since for-credit Improvisation classes are less common in high, junior high, and elementary schools, I especially welcome participants in these categories. (International participants should note that the term "college" is used within to describe a track parallel with universities.)

### Future Discussion

My analysis of the results will form a future article for the *JEJ*. In addition, I have proposed a panel discussion on the topic for the annual IAJE Conference, as I believe it is important for

educators to exchange their experience and advice in an open forum. With your assistance, I will be able to obtain and communicate a larger, clearer view of Jazz Improvisation grading policies, providing a valuable perspective for current and future educators.

I look forward to hearing from you!

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lehman, Paul R. "Assessment & Grading," *MENC Teaching Music*, December 1997 (Vol. 5, No. 3), pp. 58-59.

<sup>2</sup> I thank John Perrine for his assistance in collating the data from the initial survey.

<sup>3</sup> "How Do You Grade Your Students?," *MENC Music Educators Journal*, September 1997 (Vol. 84, No. 2), p. 10. An October 10, 1997 deadline for response was requested.

<sup>4</sup> "Grading Survey Under Review," *MENC Teaching Music*, December 1997 (Vol. 5, No. 3), p. 29.

**Antonio Garcia** is an Associate Professor at Northwestern University, where he directs the combo program, teaches jazz and integrated arts curricula, and for four years directed the Vocal Jazz Ensemble. In 1992 he



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was a nominee for CASE "U.S. Professor of the Year." He is Editor of the *IAJE Jazz Educators Journal*, Co-Editor and Contributing Author of *Teaching Jazz: A Course of Study*, Illinois IAJE Past-President, and past IAJE International Co-Chair for Curriculum and for Vocal/Instrumental Integration. A trombonist, pianist, and avid scat-singer, he has performed with such artists as Ella Fitzgerald, George Shearing, Mel Tormé, and Louie Bellson. His music has aired on international TV and radio and merited grants from Meet The Composer, The Commission Project, and The Thelonious Monk Institute, with originals published by Kendor, UNC Jazz Press, and Doug Beach Music. Tony is a board member of The Midwest Clinic, a coordinator of the Illinois Coalition for Music Education, and has worked with the Illinois Board of Education and the Chicago Public Schools to develop standards and resources for K-12 music education. A Bach/Selmer trombone clinician, he has presented instrumental and vocal jazz workshops in Canada, Europe, and Australia and is a widely published author in more than a dozen jazz and education periodicals.

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