

MUSIC IS FOR LIFE

By Jamey Aebersold

Everyone would like to be able to play a musical instrument. Ask anyone. The reasons will vary as to why they don't play music. This desire is, I feel, built into the very essence of humans, their soul, the inner part of mankind which often doesn't get a chance to be developed in our present educational system. Especially in music!

My question is ...what have we done with the students' original desire to play music? Have we nurtured it and made it rise like a flame or have we merely asked him/her to participate in a group effort which can be used as advertising for the school system, music director's job security or other non-educational reasons? Do we EVER ask a student to use their IMAGINATION in a rehearsal or music class? Making music and using one's imagination go hand in hand. Albert Einstein said "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

The LONG RANGE PURPOSE of music is to provide a means of personal expression and communication, assuming the individual can physically play their instrument. Just because we don't teach musicians how to be creative doesn't mean that they lose their desire to create. They just learn to be creative in some other field, not music. What a shame. Zoltan Kodaly said "Every healthy child would improvise if we let him."

An extremely high percentage of band students stop playing their instruments as soon as they leave high school/college. They were never taught to use music as they were other forms of continued self-development. Music to them meant playing in the band or orchestra or singing in the choir. And playing in the band meant being part of a group which is often used by the school, band director or school administration to promote athletic events or to gain news coverage by bringing home a trophy from some music competition. The INDIVIDUAL and his or her musical growth seems to be lost when we begin thinking in terms of numbers of students enrolled, marching, pep bands, competition, contest, etc. What has happened to the individual who initially wanted to PLAY MUSIC and learn how to MAKE MUSIC, maybe even the music that he or she hears within their own minds, or hums, or whistles? Our present system allows few opportunities for the individual to heighten his or her creativity in music. Everyone has to be a part of a group effort or nothing. I have nothing against groups because we are a society of people who are group-oriented and I am a member of that society. A student MAY have a chance to truly MAKE MUSIC if they enroll in jazz band and if the instructor encourages them to use their IMAGINATION and learn to IMPROVISE using the various scales and chords that make up music.

Why does the student abandon music as a participant upon graduation from high school or college? I feel it is because they have no group to play with. Present day music programs have not equipped them to play music in the true sense of the word. To PLAY MUSIC means to be able to play the melodies which roam around in a person's mind, on their chosen instrument, spontaneously. This is usually called improvisation or jazz. ALL people, the two-week beginner to the symphony player or jazz musician, can improvise. However, not all avail themselves of the

opportunity because they haven't been shown or taught. They are at a loss as to how to bring these hidden melodies out of their mind and into the audible world so others can also enjoy them.

Music means sharing and when I play a melody and you hear it, I share part of my inner being, musically, with you. To the degree that I practice and perfect my instrument, I can lift your spirits, excite you, make you sad, etc., depending on how you and I feel at the moment and how well I can execute the ideas of my mind. This is being CREATIVE WITH MUSIC. This is the "Joy of Music" of which Leonard Bernstein speaks.

One does not have to be talented or special in order to improvise with music. Improvising is the most natural way of making music. Our original nature is to improvise – create. Listen to students in a band room warming up their instruments. What you hear are attempts at improvising. Disorganized but none-the-less improvised. Maybe what we educators need to do is learn how to remove the obstacles to improvising and allow the students' natural creative ability to show itself.

When composers originally wrote the music we listen to every day, they were being creative. In my mind there is no difference in a young child singing a simple melody, and then playing it on their instrument, and a respected composer writing a symphony. They both are being creative. One has more experience on which to draw and, thus, his final product has a greater chance of making a lasting contribution to society. This creative element has always been missing in our school music programs. I feel we are ALL poorer for it because we'll never know how our personal lives might be more enriched by students in our own town, had they been given the opportunity to express themselves through music. As the poet said..."We die with all our music in us."

If the student is fortunate enough to be in a high school jazz or stage band, they MAY have an opportunity to learn to improvise. It's usually left up to the band director as to whether or not improvisation will or will not be taught. Question: "How can you teach what you don't know?"

Again, the colleges and universities do not teach music teachers how to be creative in their teaching methods, or how to improvise while they teach. I feel it's because they themselves have never been given the opportunity or encouragement to be creative with music. They love music but they never get to MAKE MUSIC. Making music means being the originator of the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms. So much music ...whirling around in students' minds, but will we ever get to hear it...?

We've taken the students' freedom to play music and forced them into a competitive mode. They play a few songs, over and over, to be performed at a competition, festival or contest in hopes of winning a trophy. This isn't the purpose of music! When a band director feels he has to win big in order to keep his job, and this happens, we are all in trouble. And of course music programs in the U.S. are in trouble. We all know the first programs to be cut are music and art. If musicians were shown how to be creative in addition to playing in an ensemble, the administration might look differently at music programs. I'm sure parents wouldn't want to cut a program that offered

their child an opportunity to grow, be creative, and add self-worth.

Who would knowingly buy an instrument if they knew at the end of high school they would never use it again? What parent would invest in this type thinking? I'm sure if you told the parent this is what happens 99% of the time they would probably answer, "I want my child to play and enjoy music their entire life, not just through school." What if Math or English were taught that way? Don't you imagine those programs would also be cut during budget cuts?

I can't picture a high school teacher working his students over and over on the Gettysburg address for three months or more just to be able to bring home a first place at a contest. An anonymous quote reads "Competition and cooperation cannot coexist." Many band directors feel they have to compete in order to "get the students out," to enroll in band. I don't doubt that this is true in many programs because of the way music is treated as a sporting event ...someone wins, someone loses.

I have heard several jazz bands where everyone in the group stood up and took an interesting solo. Improvisation was taught as a basic part of music and to just play the written notes would not be fair to the students who signed up for the course. They were taught the basics of ensemble playing along with improvisation and everyone reaped the rewards. No one truly enjoys playing second fiddle, but the myth that "you either have it or you don't" has persisted to this day and we are all poorer for this type of thinking.

I've never heard a loser. I have heard many students who don't play very well because they were asked to play an instrument they really didn't choose to play, or, they weren't encouraged or shown how to practice so that the rich rewards of music might manifest in and through that student. Music is one of the building blocks of the UNIVERSE.

If we could get students at an early age to compose and perform simple melodies of their own making, and start this early...4th, 5th, grade and sustain it through the grades, LOOK OUT! You would have to limit enrollment in the music programs. Teach people how to be creative and draw on the OWN resources and they'll make music ALL THEIR LIFE, not just while they are part of our school systems' organized ensembles.

It would take time and effort to change, but everything worthwhile demands time. It is the rewards that make the effort seem like nothing.

For too long, music has been neglected in the overall development of humans. Each person, each soul, longs to be creative and contribute if they could only have the chance. Educational systems are the path if they would only take the lead.

Imagination is the key word. Dare we use it?

Keep reading for a possible solution...

THE SOLUTION

One of the easiest ways to begin improvising is to encourage the beginning student to improvise, make up simple melodies using what they know. If they only know several notes of a scale then use those notes to improvise with. As they learn more notes, have them incorporate those notes, too. Set up a slow tempo and ask them to play whatever melody comes to their mind. You may have to sing an example or play an example for them to get them started. They need to realize that making music up of their own is part of learning music – nothing to be afraid of. It's natural and there are no losers.

Listening to recordings of jazz artists will provide the student with role-models or acceptable melodies, phrases, tonal color, use of articulation, dynamics, etc.

I've found that Volume 24 "Major and Minor" is one of the best ways to teach scales, technique and creativity at the same time. All 12 major scales are covered for durations of up to 5 minutes each on the recorded accompaniment. Minor scales are also covered in the same manner. The recorded backgrounds make learning the scales and chords fun and this leads to experimentation which leads to improvising. It's a most natural sequence of events in learning music.

This is one of the fastest ways I've found to stimulate the musician and break down inhibitions. It helps to activate our Right Brain, the creative side, and gives us a glimpse of our true potential. You'll find yourself, as a teacher of music, coming up with ideas you never knew existed. Quite possibly the excitement of MAKING MUSIC will re infect you. Too many music instructors have given up playing their instruments. This is tragic and probably wouldn't happen so often if the basics of improvisation had been shown to them early on.

The rhythm section background of piano, bass and drums teaches the student how to play with others via listening to the recording rather than watching the conductor's baton. It stresses listening and comprehension of the basic music elements – melody, harmony, and rhythm. Practicing the basics, scales and chords, becomes fun and the student understands why these basics are SO important. Once learned, these basics turn into music. Creative music. Jazz.

I have found students pick up and understand theory and harmony much quicker than you would ever imagine when relating the actual learning of scales and chords to the theory and harmony. Stop and think about it ...shouldn't learning the fingerings to scales lead to their being used to make music? Of course it should, and when you also teach improvisation along with the basics you get the best of all musical worlds and well-rounded musicians.

Many private music teachers use Volume 24 (Volume 24 "Major and Minor" is available as a BOOK/2-CD set for \$19.95). Maybe it's time to bring it into the classroom and incorporate it with your own imagination. There is no end to the possibilities once the desire to make music truly hits you.

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Jamey Aebersold Jazz, P.O. Box 1244, New Albany, IN 47151-1244 USA www.jazzbooks.com