THE DARIUS HOULE AWARD FOR BEST DEMONSTRATION OF SPONTANEITY AND/OR IMPROVISATION IN A JAZZ, POP, GOSPEL OR RAG STYLE WORK

The great classical pianist Vladimir Horowitz admired jazz pianist Art Tatum. Ravel and Bartók revered George Gershwin. In his last interview Leonard Bernstein expressed high admiration for the Beatles. Yet the artificial divisions between "serious" and "popular" music persist. Music of any style - classical, jazz, pop, gospel, rag, etc. - can vie for most of the festival prize categories.

This prize, however, is exclusively for the best demonstrations of spontaneity or improvisation in a jazz, pop, gospel, or rag style. Performances need not demonstrate literal improvisation. At the least, however, performances should sound spontaneous, as if improvised on the spot. Playing from "fake charts" (also called "lead sheets," wherein only the right hand melody is notated, along with chord symbols) is encouraged, but music fully notated is also acceptable, as long as it sounds free and improvisatory.

Is music by George Gershwin "classical" or "jazz?" He's "classical" in the sense that compositions are fully notated, but he certainly comes off as jazzy, so we would be fine with anything by Gershwin. Keep in mind, however, that Gershwin never played his own pieces the same way twice. No edition should really be regarded as the "one and only definitive authentic" edition, no matter how excellent or well researched! It is fascinating to hear Gershwin’s improvisatory style in piano rolls and radio performances -- don’t expect to hear the same notes on these as what you see published as music! For an example of this, ask your local librarian to locate (or get a copy by interlibrary loan):

"I Got Rhythm – the music as performed by George Gershwin on radio, February 19, 1934, transcribed by Dick Hyman," Keyboard Classics, Jan/Feb 1984, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 24-25 (quite different from the published version!)

or check this out:

"The Man I Love – the music as performed by George Gershwin on radio, February 19, 1934, transcribed by Artis Wodehouse," Piano & Keyboard, Jan/Feb 1993, No. 160, pp. 24-32 (also different from the published version!)

Lastly, for the ultimate in "alternative" improvisatory Gershwin, get your hands on this book of transcriptions* of his piano roll performances (prepare to be shocked if you compare the tunes with the "standard" published versions!):


Here's a terrific new step-by-step text on the fundamentals of improvisation, especially geared for pianists with classical backgrounds:

Improvisation at the Piano by Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond

*Important note: performances of Gershwin transcriptions would also qualify for "THE KAREN GREENHALGH AWARDS FOR TRANSCRIPTION/ARRANGEMENT."

You can order Gershwin’s music from any music store.

For teachers and students who need an easy to understand, step by step method series for how to read jazz/pop fake charts, here's a highly recommended 5-book series for beginner to intermediate level students:
Easy Keyboard Harmony: Teaching Improvising from Standard Chord Symbols (Provides Opportunities for Ear Training and Music Writing), by Wesley Schaum, in five books, Schaum Publications.

Three of the most important and highly recommended "how to" jazz improvisation books for more advanced students are listed below:

- The Jazz Piano Book by Mark Levine (Sher Music Co.)
- The Jazz Theory Book by Mark Levine (Sher Music Co.)
- Jazz/Rock Voicings for the Contemporary Keyboard Player by Dan Hearle (Studio P/R, Inc.)

See also: How to Play Jazz Piano.

John Salmon has recorded CD's of Brubeck's solo piano works. One of these CD's is available by visiting the following web site:

http://www.phoenixcd.com/

or by contacting:

Jeffrey Kaufman
Founder and President
Phoenix USA
200 Winston Drive
Cliffside Park, New Jersey 07010
Phone: 201-224-8318
Fax: 201-224-7968
E-Mail: Sales@Phoenixcd.com
or jeffkauf@ix.netcom.com

You may also contact John Salmon directly.

Here's an easy-to-read introductory book on improvisation, blues, jazz, rock, and pop styles:
http://www.edly.com/epiti.html

Click here for tips on Improvisation by Houle.

See also improvisation tips by Marjorie Burgess in her "A Piano is for Playing."

Teachers and students should check out the online FJH Pedagogy Newsletter for great ideas on creativity and improvisation.

For fledgling composers and improvisers, we also recommend the Pattern Play Series.

Below is an abstract of a paper that articulates beautifully the challenge of finding a good balance between rules and freedom in improvisation. As Burrows points out, creativity and originality must be tempered with tradition and discipline. The complete paper (and others on improvisation) can be found at:
http://www.geocities.com/thirdrailmusic/academic.html
Confucian Philosophy and the Jazz Improviser:
Thinking Through Jazz Performance and Education

By Jared Burrows

In the pursuit of musical freedom, the jazz improvisers continually negotiate a complex set of musical rules, traditions, and artistic demands. Intriguingly, Confucius illuminates a parallel path of negotiations toward personal freedom through respect for tradition, personal discipline, and adherence to societal "rules" and cultural demands. Investigating jazz improvisation in terms of Confucian philosophy provides us with tools for understanding the jazz performance process and for improving the way that we educate improvisers and other performers.

In the process of institutionalizing the teaching of improvisation, we have often reduced it to a series of courses, or textbooks, a set of skills to be acquired in sequence and the student wrongly assumes that after completing the sequence, she will be a competent improviser. The cultural and artistic guidelines that guided the great improvisers in the past are not clear to the neophyte improviser today who often has no sense of tradition or requirements for personal effort. She sees rules and tradition, often rigidly codified as "course requirements", as somehow in the way of personal expression.

Confucian ideas of naturalness and balance, and his teachings concerning the Path and the Mean have great relevance in addressing these problems. These ancient teachings provide a practical philosophical solution to the apparent paradoxes between rules and freedom, tradition and innovation which are central to jazz improvisation. The Confucian concepts of naturalness and the development of a "second nature" through education can help us to teach improvisers more intelligently and effectively by deepening our understanding of how musicians learn to improvise.

Learning From Each Other
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With jazz programs now present in almost all college level music departments and conservatories, there is a wonderful opportunity for classical and jazz students (and faculty) to learn from each other. Although styles may be quite different, I believe it is important to recognize the commonalities, as well as notice and understand the differences in the pursuit of becoming a jazz or classical artist. I see a hierarchy of musical topics, a musical value system, that come up for students in both disciplines. These topics come up differently, and with different emphasis, depending on the music studied and performed.

Tone/Sound, Rhythm, Improvisation/Composition and Listening/Aural study are four big topics that are fascinating to contrast, and learn from the differences in the study of jazz and classical music. Tone and sound are of high importance in both disciplines. But to contrast approaches, classical pianists likely spend much more time in learning how to produce tonal shadings and colors in their chords, as well as creating color and orchestral effects based on balancing of voices, and listening for texture and touch. These “issues” are not the first order of business for jazz pianists, but they would undoubtedly benefit from listening for, and working on these aspects of piano sound.

On the flip side, a personal, identifiable sound is an important part of the jazz aesthetic. A classical soloist, in addition to striving for beautiful sound, might investigate how to make their sound more personal and identifiable.

Rhythmic approaches vary greatly in jazz and classical styles. Playing with a steady pulse, where you hear and feel the beat, is extremely important in jazz. A flexible pulse, phrase momentum and hiding the bar lines is commonplace and often desirable in classical music. It might be useful for a jazz student to try to incorporate flexible pulse and rubato playing in their musical studies and approaches. It would also be useful for the classical musician to learn and absorb jazz rhythmic approaches, experiment with feeling - not hiding - the rhythm and the pulse. For the classical
musician this could lead to better execution in contemporary styles, possible new approaches in standard repertoire, and certainly better preparedness for commercial gigs, which use modern rhythmic styles. They also might enjoy learning to swing!

Improvisation - composition in real time - is at or near the top of the hierarchy in jazz musical values, and largely does not exist in traditional classical study. The skills developed in studying improvisation are many, including: harmonic and rhythmic knowledge; creating melodies; being able to play what you hear; musically responding on the spot; instant arranging and presenting songs. Classical musicians can apply many of these skills and concepts to their playing: an "in the moment" approach to performing (not playing the same piece the same way each time); improvising or writing your own concerto cadenza. A deeper analytical knowledge of the pieces you perform as well as being able to play what you hear is a great antidote for the fear of memory slips, a fear shared by a good many of my classmates, back when I was in conservatory. Finally, the joy of playing music by ear is something I believe should be done by all musicians, no matter what their specialty.

Listening/aural study is a huge part of jazz study. “The records are the textbooks,” is a phrase I’ve heard from jazz musicians and teachers since I was a teenager. It exemplifies the importance of listening to understand, study and absorb jazz. I have heard a different approach coming from some classical pedagogues discouraging the student from listening to recordings of pieces they are studying. This is supposed to prevent any one recording from unduly influencing a student’s interpretation. I respectfully disagree. Now, with Itunes, Ipods and YouTube, the student can listen to not one, but numerous versions of the pieces they are studying. For aural studying, they should also listen to other relevant pieces by the composer, the composer’s contemporaries, teachers, and disciples, as well as pieces of a similar form, character, etc. In this way they will listen to, and absorb musical style and sound, as well as historical context.

I encourage students to use this inclusive approach to studying music. It will help broaden your musical skills, deepen your musical knowledge and understanding, and help you achieve your goals in your chosen musical specialty.
- Ted Rosenthal, jazz pianist and composer, teaches Jazz Practicum for Classical Pianists at The Juilliard School, and is also on the faculty of Manhattan School of Music.

His website is http://www.tedrosenthal.com

Scales, arpeggios, and cadences are the building blocks of improvisation, composition, and piano technique. See Houle resources.

Cowboy Jazz, Dr. Houle's collection of original piano solos for intermediate level students, is published by the Hal Leonard Corporation and available locally at Roper Music Store.

See also: THE BEST PERFORMANCE OF A COWBOY JAZZ SELECTION.