

The Petting Zoo: Fostering Practice-Based Experience in Jazz Appreciation Classes

Eric J. Lapin

Clemson University

elapin@clemson.edu

Joshua Koury

Clemson University

jekoury@g.clemson.edu

This article was written to call attention to the challenges faced when teaching jazz history and concepts to people with little to no jazz background. The introduction brings into focus the interactive methods that are used to teach introductory courses in the various academic disciplines found in contemporary educational plans. It goes on to outline the

ERIC J. LAPIN is the Director of Artistic Initiatives for the Brooks Center for the Performing Arts and a Senior Lecturer of Music in the Department of Performing Arts at Clemson University. He teaches courses in applied clarinet, arts administration, and jazz history. Lapin holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in music performance and a PhD in Higher Education Leadership. He remains active as a clarinetist and clinician, has presented papers at numerous conferences, hosted research exhibits, published scholarly essays, and was recently named February 2017 Researcher of the Month by the Clemson University Library. His first book with Ron McCurdy (University of Southern California) and Rick Goodstein (Clemson University), *The Artist Entrepreneur: Finding Success in a New Arts Economy*, was recently released by Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. In addition, Lapin serves as a delegate to the Faculty Senate, is a member of the South Carolina Humanities Speaker's Bureau, is on the board of directors for the Pendleton Historic Foundation.

JOSHUA KOURY is a trumpet player and 2019 graduate of the Performing Arts curriculum at Clemson University. During his time at Clemson, Mr. Koury performed as a featured soloist with the Clemson Symphony Orchestra, the Clemson University Symphonic Band, and has performed as a member of the National Intercollegiate Band, a national honor band comprised of top collegiate musicians from across the nation. Koury is also a brother of the Kappa Beta chapter of Kappa Kappa Psi, a national honorary fraternity for college band members that serves the band program at Clemson through many service projects and fundraisers. While in school, Koury discovered a passion for musicology, ethnomusicology, and organology, and his current interests lie in the evolution of trumpet pedagogy and teacher to student lineages, Carnatic music, and polyphonic overtone singing.

problem of introductory music history and appreciation courses lacking the same kind of interactive learning systems and introduces the idea of a similar interactive exercise for these courses. The body of the article goes on to describe how a successful interactive musical exercise for the layperson might look, including details for priming, setting up, executing, and evaluating the outcomes of the exercise in a way that is comfortable and effective for the students, especially those who might not have a musical, or jazz, background. It concludes with discussion for why such an exercise would be beneficial, including expected learning outcomes and technical appreciation.

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If your high school or college music appreciation or general education jazz history class looks anything like the ones at our university, you'll find there is a high likelihood that a large portion of students have little to no background in jazz history or music. Many teachers of similar classes at other institutions often have significant musical training and may forget that, in America at least, less than half of students in high school will participate in performing arts programs (Child Trends, 2015). These teachers may default to teaching these classes using the same language and details they would use to teach a classroom full of music students. Lectures hammering home the concepts of cadences, chord changes, and musical styles may be fine in a setting where the students will get plenty of personal practice with these ideas, but without any hands-on experience, these lectures become something else to memorize, write on a test, and promptly forget once the final exam is submitted.

Other subjects recognize the importance of hands-on practice for general education. Introductory chemistry and physics classes are accompanied by lab courses where students are able to get hands-on experience in a controlled environment, and homework and practice problems make up a large portion of mathematical education. Even history, the subject most susceptible to rote memorization of lectures and books, will practice information gathering and interpretation of sources by way of writing research papers and compiling bibliographies. If we are aware of the value of interactive experiences in learning new skills, why are our general music classes expecting people to grasp and appreciate music simply by attending lectures and one or two required concerts (Borgo, 2007)? That would be like supplementing a Chemistry 101 course by requiring students to watch a famous chemist run an experiment from start to finish with no explanation or commentary. So how do we get real hands-on experience that can spark further understanding of the material to students who may never have been within fifty feet of a trumpet?

Welcome to the jazz instrument petting zoo. In this petting zoo, general education students with no musical or jazz background are introduced to the instruments they are learning about in class. This learning experience gives the student a better understanding of the different challenges and capacity for each of

the instruments. This can then help the student further appreciate Dizzy Gillespie's high notes, John Coltrane's powerful sound, or Art Tatum's blistering speed. Without the experience of trying the instrument, these impressive musical feats lack context and therefore have less meaning for the student.

In the class prior to the zoo, have the students listen to influential musicians on each of the instrument families they will be experiencing. Catalogue the students' reactions to various elements of the performances. By asking open-ended questions about what they found important, impressive, or enjoyable, the instructor will then be able to compare the responses to a similar experience after the petting zoo. This will allow the professor to track learning, growth, and understanding in the class.

Prior to breaking into the instrument stations, student facilitators should collectively demonstrate their instruments. Playing as a combo with each musician taking an extended solo, the non-musical students will receive an up-close view of each instrument. As best as possible depending on the ability level of the student facilitators, these solos should demonstrate the range of the instrument, dynamic capacity, and model appropriate sound quality.

The petting zoo experience should be set up with stations featuring selected instruments in a larger room with plenty of space. The cacophony created by having the instruments together in one room actually provides non-musical students with some cover for their insecurities. In isolation, the students' trouble with the instruments will be highlighted, but in a large room with many different sounds, instruments, and mistakes, the students will feel less self-conscious. Each of these stations, which should be manned by a student musician, is assigned an instrument, with faculty only serving as floating cheerleaders.

As musicians know all too well from experience, playing a musical instrument involves a high degree of vulnerability. We are constantly working through mistakes and trying to improve. Non-musical students in the zoo may have far less experience with the sense of exposure created by trying something new. Having peers demonstrate and teach the instruments at each station will alleviate some of the pressure that a faculty member can create. At the college level, this can also serve as a valuable exercise for jazz or music majors in articulating different elements of performance and technique.

Once broken into the stations, the peer facilitators should teach their instruments and faculty should resist the temptation to interject any additional tips or historical context. For many of the non-musical students participating in the zoo, faculty interference will only take the fun out of the experience or make it more stressful. However, during the classes before and after the petting zoo, the faculty member can bracket the performance experience with valuable perspective.

In the class following the petting zoo, return with similar open-ended questions. Ask students what they found difficult, what was more challenging than they expected, and what was relatively easy? Then, encourage the students to draw historical connections themselves. Allow them to make the connection between

their experience producing a trumpet sound with the powerful sound of Louis Armstrong. If they make this connection, instead of it being handed to them by a faculty member, it will have a greater long-term impact. These before and after sessions can then be used to provide evidence of student growth and understanding. In our still limited experiences with the zoo, we have seen immediate improvement in instrument understanding, terminology comprehension, and appreciation of the historical value of important artists. However, perhaps most importantly, it also seems that the hands-on zoo experience drives excitement and enthusiasm for the remainder of the semester. Students are excited to learn about artists later in the term that are playing “their” instruments.

In producing the zoo experience, we have also started to identify a few different best practices. Size of the participating group matters. If the group is too large, students become easily disengaged in the process and the experience is lost. Too small, and students can feel under the spotlight and become insecure. Have enough stations and student facilitators to accommodate between three and five students each. It is also important to continue to engage the students who are at the stations but not currently playing the instrument. Require the students who have already played or are waiting to play to take on a peer facilitator and/or cheerleader role at the station. This will better keep them involved with the process. Lastly, it is essential to require an atmosphere of encouragement and fun. We are asking students to be very vulnerable by trying something new and difficult. It will only take one student being laughed at or made fun of to ruin the experience for everyone.

Jazz is a genre especially sensitive to the moods, ideas, knowledge, and abilities of the performers, and it is as much, if not more, of an experience for the musicians as it is for the audience. To the layman, this “musician’s music” can oftentimes be difficult to comprehend. With interactive jazz education, non-musical students can experience a broad range of jazz instruments, techniques, and challenges. This can allow for a deeper understanding and appreciation of why and how musicians make their musical choices.

Jazz is a living music, not a stagnant chapter in a textbook. So we can’t teach it that way. From its inception, jazz has been a way to understand the world and communicate with those around us. The petting zoo experience can help to bring more people into the ongoing jazz conversation. This will deepen the non-musician’s understanding and appreciation of the art form and help to continue the conversation for future generations.

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