

Q&A with WYNTON MARSALIS

As artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, Wynton Marsalis has made a priority of music education, championing highly regarded JALC programs such as Jazz for Young People, the Middle School Jazz Academy, and Essentially Ellington. Marsalis, who began his classical training on trumpet at age 12 and entered the Juilliard School at 17, recently shared his thoughts about music education in this Q&A session with *Teaching Music* contributor Mac Randall. (For more information on JALC's Education Programs and Resources, visit www.jalc.org.)

Q. Is music getting as much attention as it should in American schools today?

A. Inconsistently. We see great eagerness and interest but no training to implement programs for teaching jazz ... no action. Educators are not required to study jazz pedagogy, so it's up to the individuals to bring jazz to their students. We need educators to lobby their local colleges and universities to make jazz a requirement of music education programs.

Q. In terms of overall music education, what is the primary value in learning about jazz?

A. Jazz, because it allows us to interface with the greatest minds in American music, empowers our students to make honest and personal statements. In our music there's a premium on integrity. First, just the integrity of playing your instrument. When you hear someone like Clifford Brown or Art Tatum or Charlie Parker, you know they had to practice that instrument with integrity: every day, being serious about it, addressing deficiencies. They were willing to do that, and do it over and over and over again. Second, jazz demands that our students be confident enough to express how they're feeling, to develop their personal identity, and to play what they are hearing in the moment they hear it. Jazz music teaches us the respect, patience, and attentiveness required to participate in today's worldwide conversation. It enables us to understand and enjoy the individuality of every person and encourages us to listen to one another with empathy.

Jazz also requires each member of a group to improvise, but it won't work for a soloist or an ensemble if the musicians don't play in balance. For example, the drummer can't play too loud or you won't hear the bassist. These group dynamics teach the importance of choice—some choices require sacrifice. You have to listen; you work together to achieve the ultimate goal of an ongoing swinging groove. At any given point you are forced to accept something you really don't like.

Q. Where can jazz fit into the course of instruction for more traditional school ensembles, such as band, chorus, and orchestra?

A. Everywhere. Educators just need to know how to do it—and commit to making jazz a part of their students' lives. Even though it's an area they might not be comfortable with, it's their job to empower students and to teach them to listen and to hear. We should encourage them to get with the harmony, get to the piano, learn three or four basic chords, a blues—it's a great tool to encourage hearing, encourage them to learn solos off recordings. We have to teach them how to hear, just like you have to be taught to listen in a conversation. Don't run away from training their ears just because we, ourselves, may be deficient in this arena. Teaching hearing also gives us the opportunity to develop our own ears to a higher level. Lot of times band directors also have the pressure of the parents or the pressure of the principal. The kids in the school, they don't want to hear this; they don't want to hear that. But when the band sounds good, they don't mind hearing it. Sometimes it's important to utilize



Wynton Marsalis answers students' questions at the Essentially Ellington Competition and Festival at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Photo: Ayano Hisa/Jazz at Lincoln Center

your individual power: the power of one. As the band director, you almost always know much more about music than anyone else in the school. Decisions about music should be made to your taste, not be the choice of those who don't have any.

Q. What is the best entry point into the music?

A. For young instrumentalists, start with free improvisation and jazz from New Orleans. Improvisation allows students to express themselves without boundaries, and jazz from New Orleans illustrates the soul, rhythm, and feeling of the music—like "Lil Liza Jane," have them play and sing nursery rhymes in the New Orleans style.

Don't be afraid of the avant-garde—use free jazz with nursery rhymes to express ideas. Name nine things—three animals, three emotions, three ways to behave in conversation—and then make something up about it. No form, no scales. It's all subjective, and students can succeed.

The rhythm is the vitality of jazz music. It's important to teach shuffle rhythms, two-beat grooves, different types of church 12/8 shuffles, all the kinds of soul grooves, march rhythms, waltz rhythms, and teach kids to play the rhythms with a certain vitality because that rhythm is their identity. You're still a kid; you can miss all the notes you want, because nobody knows until the rhythm stops.

In middle school, students should play swing band arrangements and learn big band architecture. By high school they should start to address the music after bebop—Mingus, etc. The goal is that by college, students will have played the history of the music.

Q. Improvisation over a chord progression is often thought of as an advanced skill, something that requires deep knowledge of harmony and music theory and therefore should not be attempted by younger students. Do you feel this is true?

A. Not at all. People come to jazz at different times, and improvisation is a natural skill anyone can nurture. Young musicians are even more open to free improv because they have fewer boundaries at that age. Improvised music provides a great life lesson for students. Through improvising, kids learn to handle the unforeseen with grace. Musically, group improvisation teaches the individual to adjust circumstances beyond her control and use her portion of influence to create something cohesive that sounds good.

Q. Is there anything in particular about JALC's educational programs that you feel is unique, particularly in the way they present information to students? What can music teachers learn from them?

A. As our Middle School Jazz Academy bassist, Ariam Espinol, said, "At MSJA we learn about the musicians, their lives, their stories and put all of that into playing the music. In band, we just get a sheet of paper on the stand." So it's about depth.

Jazz at Lincoln Center offers a wide variety of programming and resources for ages starting as young as 8 months old. Plus education is integral to our mission, so we make sure it's a priority in everything we do. With all 22 of our education programs, we strive to inspire and engage and bring the transformative power of the music—swing—alive.