



## JAZZ EDUCATION JOURNAL



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### Jazzaar — Possibly the Best Kept Jazz Education Secret in the World

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October 2005

I regularly meet artists and agents from around the world. In July 2004 I had the pleasure of meeting Ilse Weinmann who was touring as manager with Johnny Griffin. Our conversations led to jazz education and especially to IAJE. In an effort to learn more about the vibrant jazz scene in Europe I asked Ilse if she knew of any outstanding jazz education projects taking place in Europe. Without hesitation she recommended an event taking place annually in a region of Switzerland. Because Ilse's recommendation was so strong, I attended the event in 2005. I discovered what can only be described as...



Photo: Gildas Bocle  
Orchestra student awaiting instructions.

Possibly the Best Kept Jazz Education Secret in the World!

Over the years jazz education outside the United States has been somewhat under-reported in the *Jazz Education Journal*. This is not a criticism, but more an indication of how jazz education projects can take place in isolation, often in remote parts of the world, and as a result, remain hidden gems of the jazz education world. Furthermore, the contributions made throughout the history of jazz by Europe, and indeed other parts of the world, even though well appreciated by those involved in the business, have also been somewhat under-credited. One only has to examine jazz history books to realize that the role played by Europe, especially in the area of generating a good level of audience support and appreciation for modern jazz, generally receives less than its fair share of credit.

As successful as these projects usually are, the priorities for those organizing the event place most issues way ahead of writing articles about the event. This is rather a shame because often (but not always) great things happen at such events. Sometimes these take place, relatively speaking, on "our own doorstep" and so it is even more surprising when we discover them. Within the first hour of arriving in Aarau (pronounced A'Row), Switzerland, it was obvious to me that here was a jazz education project that we should all know more about.

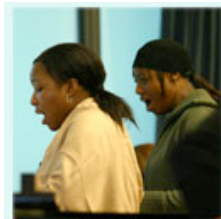


Photo: Gildas Bocle  
Guest vocal group "Black Voices" appeared with vocal students.

Fritz Renold, organizer and mastermind of the project now in its 15th year, has taken an interesting approach to jazz education. Preferring less formal classroom-based, teacher-led sessions, he places professional players and students together in ensembles that rehearse over a six-day period culminating in evening concerts on the final three days. Big band, symphony orchestra, and vocal music ensemble all play an important part of Renold's ongoing project. Instrumental students numbered around 60 with the vocal students of around 12 joined by guest vocal group "Black Voices" from Birmingham, United Kingdom. Further activities included a series of workshops on various subjects including African Gospel Music, The Use of Computer and Synthesizer Sounds on Stage, Improvisation for Beginners, Drums versus Percussion, Advanced Improvisation, Middle Eastern Music, and a Trumpet Seminar with Randy Brecker.

Each year Renold, along with his wife Helen who plays a crucial role in the continued running of the project, assembles an impressive line-up of professional players. As a graduate of Berklee College of Music and a top player himself, he has been able to hand pick players who are not only his friends but also have superb communication skills and an excellent attitude towards music and learning. The team for this year's event comprised Helen Renold, Steven Bernstein, Barry Lee Hall, Amir El-Saffar, Vincent Gardner, Dave Taylor, Donny McCaslin, Greg Tardy, Tommy Smith, Adam Nussbaum, Danny Gottlieb, Randy Brecker, Jamshied Sharifi, Renata Friederich, Patrick Furrer, Werner "Vana" Gierig, Monika Altdorfer, Eliane Zweifel, Tobias Preisig, Daniel Scharer, Gildas Boclé, Bernd Konrad, Willie Murillo, Miroslav Vitous, Arnold Moueza, Oliver Serigba, The Black Voices, Patrick Lerchmüller, and Christof Schnyder.



Photo: Gildas Bocle  
Werner "Vana" Gierig was one of several talented Jazzaar instructors.

Each year a specific theme is chosen for the event with this year's being African Heritage. In previous years, themes have included Brazilian Music, Gospel Music as Roots and Fruits, the Music of Kurt Weill, Duke Ellington and Euphrates and Tigris (a fusion of the Blues with Middle Eastern music).

The uniqueness of Renold's approach to his jazz education project comes from the choice of repertoire. Unlike other jazz education events I have attended, standard tunes are not part of this project. Instead, all tunes are original compositions focusing on the theme of the event. Renold himself contributed a substantial amount of material including *African Heritage Overture*, *Suite from Springtime*, *Where is this World Going to Go*, *If There's Love*, and *Let Wisdom Guide You All Your Life*. Five compositions from Sharifi made up most of the first half of one of the concerts. *Night Creature I, II & III* from Duke Ellington were also included in the concert program. One of the most challenging compositions performed during the week was Mike Abene's *Heritage New/Old And Then Some*, a concerto for bass trombone written for Dave Taylor. The score was frightening to look at, let alone play. The ease with which Musical Director Patrick Furrer controlled the orchestra was testament to the serious amount of preparation he must have completed for the performance of this complicated work. Dave Taylor's performance showed his total command of the trombone within the most contemporary of pieces. Although Taylor was featured soloist for the final concert of the week, his humbleness and total commitment towards this project (true for all members of this team) was evident as he joined the trombone section of the Youth Orchestra for the final piece of the week.

"Imagine having the premiere bass trombonist in the world just sit in with the section," commented Ferrer.

Clearly, what made this such a positive and creative experience came from attitude. Everyone helped to shape the end result by adding constructive comment and support, with the receptiveness and attitude of the student players making the comments of the professional players even more effective. The speed at which the young players learned was another feature of the week.

"At the first rehearsal last Saturday I felt sure there was no way these kids would ever do it, but they worked so hard and learned so quickly that they not only played a great gig but did it in absolute style. We were all so proud of them," said New York based trumpeter Steven Bernstein, who incidentally played some impressive slide trumpet (and secretly hopes that one of Renold's future compositions will be a "Concerto for Slide Trumpet").

Never has funding for the arts been as important as it is today, and youth music and jazz must surely top the list of the most needy. Yet, with financial support comes the danger that the music produced can be obscure and inaccessible music. For sure I have heard more than my share of music that fits that description. The music of Renold and Sharifi certainly does not fall into that category. It is as enjoyable for the audience as it is for the performer; in fact, it is almost as though the audience is invited to be a part of the performance. This promotes a better understanding of the music, and even during its more obscure moments, audience members looked involved and attentive. Clearly Renold writes from the heart, a characteristic that is sure to guarantee the longevity of this project.

So why has this project continued so successfully for over 14 years? The answer lies in the fact that like all good jazz educators, Renold never stops working, never stops thinking about his next project. Quite simply, he never stops. Like most jazz educators, he is a workaholic. Having experienced the vibrancy of the Jazzaar week in Aarau, Switzerland, I remain completely mystified as to how this event has existed for so long without the international publicity and recognition it deserves.

Full marks to Fritz, Helen, and the team!

*The Jazzaar project is supported by the County of Aargau, the City of Aarau, and several private sponsors.*

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