

The Primacy of the Ear

by Ran Blake

“Third Stream” is a term created by Gunther Schuller in 1957 to describe a cultural phenomenon which was then occurring in American music: Performers who were adept in both jazz and classical styles, jazz composers who borrowed harmonic and formal ideas from Euro-American concert music, contemporary classical composers who used jazz and improvisation as resource material. The music which resulted from this phenomenon synthesized characteristics of the two main-streams, classical and jazz, into a “third stream.” In 1973, I, with the sponsorship of then-NEC-President Schuller, founded the Department of Third Stream Studies. My idea was to gather a student body of talented and eclectic improvisers each of whom would attempt to forge a unique personal improvisational style from a synthesis of his or her stylistic roots. I soon came to include world musics of all kinds (not only African-American) as potential sources for this personal synthesis process which eventually came to be called “Streaming.” As the diversity of source styles expanded, the term “Third Stream” came to be understood more as a process of learning and creating music rather than a label for a specific musical style. Thus, in order to understand what Third Stream is, one must focus on the philosophy and teaching methodology rather than a set of stylistic characteristics.

Most teachers of music recognize and acknowledge the importance of the ear, but most “ear training” is taught through the eye. Advocates of Third Stream agree that the ear itself should be the main conduit for learning music -- not just learning music, but exercising one’s long-term memory, while establishing a broad repertoire and assimilating styles in detail. But the development of memory and other learning skills are not the only benefits from such an approach. The deeper emotional and spiritual aspects of music can be absorbed by the soul of the musician if we can validate music’s chief sensory organ -- the ear.

The most important premise is one that is so obvious that it gets laughs wherever I go. Music is an aural art. Let me repeat, music is an AURAL ART. So many educators may nod their heads in approval at a conference or at a cocktail

party, but the following day classes are held as usual with visual aids, the royalty of the learning pyramid.

Many of us feel that, of all students of music in the world, those who study European concert music exercise their ears the least and are the most aurally deprived. There is no doubt that solfeggio helps students hear what they are performing, and one may argue that musicians who plan to make a career of performing exclusively orchestral music may find the Third Stream approach less valuable. Solfeggio is taught through the eye. Of course, it is desirable to be able to sight-sing a score. But it is only a shell. Musical information can be transmitted, but the process does not really alter or extend the scope of what a person hears - IT DOES NOT DEFINE THE MUSICAL PERSONALITY. We contend, however, that hearing what one plays and notating this (even though this is an extremely important professional tool) will not by itself expand one's aural imagination. And while composers and improvisers wishing to expand their horizons may benefit most directly from the Third Stream approach, it would be very exciting to see what would result from using this approach with a group of operatic, chamber and orchestral performers for a period of several months to two years. Now some teachers of concert music performance may contend that their students would be corrupted by learning by ear, for example, a Pablo Casals recording of a Bach cello suite before reading the score. This raises the question: What possible harm is there in a student scrutinizing and aurally internalizing the interpretive style of the great classical performers, past and present, as a step towards developing his or her own interpretive style? In the African-American tradition this is the norm rather than the exception. Billie Holiday became the most original singer of her era by studying the recordings of her mentors Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith rather than studying the written notation of their music.

Although the Third Stream approach is quite original, its basic premise is as old as the birth of music. Music has been learned and cultivated by ear over centuries in Africa and most of Asia. It has been passed down generation to generation, embellished and revised in the process.

Our curriculum is a progression from an initially rather structured, disciplined and uniform aural training program towards greater flexibility and

individuation as the student has mastered the ear skills and looks toward defining herself or himself as a creative musician through choice of repertoire and a listening program.

The beginning student is assigned a specific set of recorded melodies, asked to “chew” on them, to “marinate” his or her ears in them, eventually to sing these from memory without using musical instrument or musical notation in the process. The first goal is to develop long-term memory which can lead to permanent change in how and what a person hears and which can allow this change to be processed into one’s own style.

These beginning steps of memorizing -- one might say, working the ear into shape aerobically -- can be unsettling and even painful for some. Gone is the music stand. Thus, one visual crutch is now removed. Students are encouraged not to learn these melodies intervallically or by visualizing finger positions. Thus, other crutches are removed.

The students hear a melody repeatedly, again and again. These may or may not include accompaniment -- chords, a rhythm section, an orchestra. The melody might be one by Frederico Mompou, Stevie Wonder, Irene Higginbotham or from the Spanish Sephardic tradition. The student might hear such a melody five times during a sitting -- listening and singing with the music, and listening silently again. By the second day, the student might be able to immediately sing the melody back but may forget it later that day. Usually, the most difficult step at this point is to remember the beginning notes of the melody. At this point, the student is not yet attempting to internalize harmonic background or to duplicate complicated vocal ornamentation. Some people find it convenient to hook up the cassette player by their bed and listen subliminally during sleep. As they try to absorb these melodies during their regular practice hours, students are encouraged to keep a journal, a log which documents their difficulties, the challenge of each piece in terms of rhythm, pitch content, or style. Students are encouraged NOT to listen to music during specific moments of the day in order to rest the ear.

After a few months of this very intense work on total recall, changes occur. First, the quantity of memorized material doubles, triples. Second, exciting aspects of aural concentration emerge. Themes in a movement of a symphony that are

repeated by a different instrument in a different key and rhythmically transformed are noticed. Ears are revitalized. Third, students have been exposed to tapes which include artists of the caliber of Billie Holiday, Victoria de los Angeles and Thelonious Monk -- not dry textbook examples. Faculty members Abby Rabinowitz and Scott Sandvik are currently adding new music: Schoenberg, Ruggles, music from South America and the Middle East.

At this juncture, the work progresses to the more abstract study of pitch material: the ability to identify and reproduce intervals and then simple chords. The eighty-eight possible two-chord progressions combining major and minor triads are studied (a good 50% of which are not used in pop, rock, and jazz music). Students write melodies over conventional and not-so-conventional chord progressions and then memorize them.

At this point, the musical path, the journey, begins to sharply change. Up to this point, the teachers, the mentors, have been very much in control. In many respects, they will continue to be, particularly in the first few months of the listening program. Until this point, the student has been treated as an individual only in the sense of observing the speed of learning and concentration skills. Now the musical goals and horizons of the individual come into play, how they do and do not relate to the market place and to one's self esteem. Much of the work described to this point is essential to develop the sense perception of the ear, the instrument most undernourished during the student's early life.

The student is now encouraged to consider her or his future musical journey, to dream up a blueprint, an architectural plan. The ear is still the primary force but now -- instead of memory, harmonic and rhythmic skill-building dominating -- taste, musical curiosities, and preferences begin to take a larger and larger role.

Our overriding goal in this teaching approach is to nurture the growth of creative individuals, to facilitate the aural *and* emotional/spiritual absorption of a wide stylistic range of music and then to help the student focus, through an intensive listening program, on the styles or artists most germane to that individual student's musical personality. The final step is to create an environment in which the student can synthesize these influences into an integrated, unique personal style. In a culture dominated by market place values, in which musical conformity

is rewarded and individuality shunned, we respect and defend the sanctity of the individual and his or her right -- indeed, if he or she is being honest, *need* -- to create a music true to the uniqueness of his or her personality.

Our mission causes us to wish to initiate new aspects to our work. The Third Stream approach has yet to be applied to 20th century atonal concert music. Faculty member Scott Sandvik, a “contemporary classical” composer, proposes including Aural Training and improvisation in atonal music. Students would memorize melodies from the compositions of, e.g., Schoenberg, Ruggles and Webern and would create improvisations based on them. They would build on the abstract study of intervals and chords - built-in-thirds mentioned above to include the study of atonal pitch combinations -- trichords and tetrachords -- *all* the possible harmonic combinations of three and four notes. Memorization of these types of melodies and work with this kind of pitch material through improvisation would give the students an entree into the concert music language of our time, besides probably producing and improvisational approach the likes of which have never been heard before. It goes without saying that this kind of work would be invaluable to both composers and performers of contemporary atonal concert repertoire.

We feel the necessity to analyze and document the results of our research on aural musical sensation, the memory, creativity, growth and change. We feel that important work could be done in this area in partnership with someone with expertise in the areas of psychology and physiology which deal with the brain’s ability to process aural musical information.

We want to explore how the Third Stream teaching approach could work with younger students in the public schools. Again, we would want to collaborate with an expert in public school music education to develop a pilot program which would emphasize the ear and creativity.