

Flute Talk
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Jamie Baum

Interview with Jamie Baum

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A Fresh Look at Music Education

With Flutist Jamie Baum

By Victoria Jicha

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Although Jamie Baum's latest recording is titled *Moving Forward, Standing Still*, it is doubtful whether she ever is motionless. Her tour schedule, performance dates, and reaching responsibilities keep this jazz flutist extremely busy and looking forward with a fresh musical eye, fed by a passionate belief that traditional music education could easily adopt a few training techniques from the jazz world. "Fear-Free Approach to Improvising for the Classically-trained Flutist" is just one of the workshops that she has given at National Flute Association conventions and flute fairs around the country. "I came up with the title after playing numerous weddings with fine Juilliard-trained musicians, who refused to play client requests at parties unless they had the music in their gig books. Sometimes the song was a simple one, such as *Happy Birthday*, but without the music in front of them, they wouldn't play it. I was shocked. Surely they could sing the song, so why couldn't they play it? That experience taught me that classical music students need to know that playing by ear or improvising does not require special talent.

"Classical musicians are mainly taught visually, not aurally. They learn to read music, developing an incredible ability to look at notes and transfer them immediately into correct fingerings. I believe that same skill can be learned aurally, so that players who hear a tune will know intuitively what pitches to finger. The ability to improvise comes from hearing melodies in your head and being able to execute them on the instrument. Many call this playing-by-ear, although I refer to it as knowledgeably playing by ear. To develop the skill, players need ear training and an awareness of the intervallic relationship between what they hear, what they can sing, and where the fingers go. Contrary to popular belief, playing-by-ear is not a gift. It is a

skill to develop in the same way that music reading is a skill.

"Both jazz and classical musicians would benefit from a more integrated approach to teaching, and this has become a pet project for me. Most flutists can probably pick up a flute and create melodies, although the tunes might not be in a jazz style. A Baroque line might be easy because they have played that type of music. Improvising in a jazz, rock, or Irish style, however, requires study to learn the idiomatic phrases and characteristics.

"I provide basic skills in workshops that lay the foundation for developing improvisation techniques. Students learn to shift the way they think about improvisation and often report that the new approach helps their classical playing tremendously. By understanding the harmonic implications of a musical line, their memorization and intonation improve because they listen more carefully to what they play.

"The idea that every aspect of a performance should be perfect is quickly assimilated by classical music students, a concept that can be counterproductive for jazz players, because it prevents them from exploring and experimenting. When players combine listening skills, harmonic awareness, and knowledge of the compositional form, their confidence rises and playing improves. Nobody sings *Happy Birthday* incorrectly because they have sung it so many times. The lesson is that players who listen carefully and can sing a piece will never play it wrong. There is so much value to the way classical music is taught, but I wish the traditional education door could open just a bit."

School Years

Baum is passionate on this topic, because she was trained classically, first on the piano and later on flute. She grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut in a musical family; her father loves music and her mother was a trombone major with minors in piano and voice at Juilliard. “My mother left school after the first year to marry my father, and although she is extremely modest, I assume she was very talented. When I was in high school she sang sometimes with big bands that came to town. Consequently we had many Count Basie and Frank Sinatra records in the house as I was growing up. She was also on the board of the Bridgeport Symphony, which meant that we attended all of the classical and jazz programs there, as well as going to New York City to hear the Philharmonic on occasion.

At age three Baum began piano lessons and studied for about nine years, although she admits that she was never very serious about it. “Playing piano was something that I enjoyed, but I didn’t practice very hard and never envisioned becoming a musician. Later, I worked for about a year with jazz pianist, lecturer, and critic, John Mehegan, who wrote one of the first jazz books. He lived nearby in Westport and was head of the jazz department at the Metropolitan Music School and held posts at Juilliard and Yale.

“In high school I started flute but am embarrassed to admit that it was motivated by other than lofty aims. My parents rented a summer-house near a beach, where sonic guitarists tended to gather. I wanted to meet them, so I rented a flute. It would be nice if I could say I had a big epiphany, but unfortunately, that was not the case. I taught myself at first and then took a few lessons with Kenneth Fears at the University of Bridgeport. After graduating from high school a year early, I enrolled at the University of Vermont as a political science major. I also auditioned to take flute lessons, and the judges said that I had a nice tone but discouraged me from going into music. After that I started practicing regularly, something that I had not done before. I also jammed with the jazz students.”

Serious Flute Lessons

During spring semester that year, Baum drove to Montreal to hear Hubert Laws. “He was very nice to me when I met him backstage and told me about the equipment he was using. That concert was one of several events that turned me toward a music career. I knew my flute playing level was not high enough to get into a reputable music school, so I took a year off and went to Paris, where I was fortunate to study a bit with Michel Debost and his wife Kathy. He also referred me to George Alirol, who was second flute in the Orchestra Lie Paris. Light bulbs began to go off, and soon I was practicing six hours a day. It was a wonderful experience. I also attended master-classes with Jean Pierre Rampal and Moyse at the Paris Conservatory. Classes at the Ecole Normale de Musique and the Schola Cantorum, where I played in the Schola Cantorum orchestra, filled out my curriculum.”

Returning to the U.S., Baum studied flute for a summer with Ransom Wilson and also took a few lessons with Thomas Nyfenger, but she still felt unprepared for a traditional music college program. She decided to attend a program Gunther Schuller developed at the New England Conservatory, called Third Stream, in which students could study various types of music. The first two years she studied classical flute with Robert Stallman and jazz flute with Jacki Byard. “By the middle of the second year, I switched to the jazz department. Although I wanted to continue playing classical music, I was not interested in an orchestra job. The time demands required for studying jazz theory and technique were tremendous, and I didn’t want to spend precious hours on Anderson etudes and orchestral excerpts.”

Jazz Studies

The conservatory assigned Baum to study jazz flute with Joseph Allard, a famous saxophone teacher, who taught at Juilliard for many years as well. She refers to him as the Julius Baker of the saxophone. Allard had taught John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy, Lee Konitz, Paul Winter, Michael

Brecker, and many others, although he knew very little about the flute. “He told stories about the old days. At one point he suggested that I explore the soprano saxophone because the register is similar to that of the flute. I tried it for a brief time, and he thought I was a natural on it, but because I wanted to spend time writing and was still playing catch-up on the flute, there weren’t enough hours in the day. After that short stint, I decided to focus only on the flute.”

A Busy Career

After college, Baum moved to New York City, where she studied with Keith Underwood for five years. “Because it is so competitive there, I began to evaluate my skills to find something that might set me apart from other musicians. I didn’t know any-when I moved to New York but soon was playing for weddings and corporate functions with flute, violin, and cello, flute quartets, or flute, harp, and cello. At one point I played on college campuses, often playing jazz on the first half of the concert and classical works with the school orchestra, such as Chaminade’s *Concertino*, on the second half. Performing both classical and jazz concerts created a new time crunch. It was exciting to know that I could do it, but both genres were suffering from too little attention. I continue to play small chamber gigs in libraries and for private functions and feel that it is extremely important to know how to play both jazz and classical music; each style benefits from the other.”

Baum teaches improvisation to classical flutists at the New School and Long Island University, and her studio includes both doubters and jazz-flute majors. They learn traditional etudes, Bach sonatas, and other standard flute repertoire, because she believes that traditional flute music is best for developing technique and understanding articulation, volume, and tone color nuances. “Most of my students are jazz players these days, although I have occasional classical students, who want to learn to improvise.”

Not only a performer, Baum is also a gifted composer. She earned a master’s degree in jazz composition from the Manhattan School of Music, where she studied Bartok string quartets with Ludmila Ulehla, the head of the jazz composition department and the music of Debussy, Ives, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg with Nits Vigeland. That study laid the groundwork for her most recent C.D., *Moving Forward, Standing Still*, which was inspired by music from Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, the Bartok string quartets, and Ives’ *Central Park in the Dark*. “Charlie Parker, as well as many other jazz musicians, were as influenced by Stravinsky as Stravinsky was by jazz.

“I have made three CDs of my original compositions and numerous recordings of jazz standards. To perform these original jazz compositions and arrangements, Baum established the Jamie Baum Septet, which includes trumpeter Ralph Alessi, alto sax and bass clarinetist Doug Yates, Tom Varner on French horn, pianist George Colligan, drummer Jeff Hirshfield, and Johannes Weidenmuller on bass. For the past five years, they have performed at noted jazz clubs and festivals and on *Moving Forward, Standing Still*. “The Septet is a fun group to write, arrange, and orchestrate for, because the pieces can be more complex than traditional jazz standards. The Baum-Wessel Harris is a smaller group created for the State Department Jazz Ambassador tours, a program that has been in existence since the 1950s. In the mid-1990’s, the program was reinstated, and a different theme is announced each year. The first time that Baum won the audition the theme was the music of Duke Ellington. The Baum-Wessel Harris group performs music of an older style, with arrangements of Armstrong and Fats Walter and has represented the United States around the world several times.

“As for performing at home, I play a variety of jazz gigs. The venues and budgets vary, from small clubs in Connecticut to major ones in New York, such as the Blue Note. Often I travel without members of my groups and play with local musicians. At the flute fair in Washington D.C. recently, I gave a workshop followed by a

club performance with local musicians. When playing with local musicians, all of the players have to know a common repertoire which includes jazz standards.”

When asked to clarify the difference between traditional jazz standards and her original compositions, Baum explains, “A good way to look at it is that jazz standards compare to the works by Bach and Mozart in the classical music world. Original modern jazz compositions compare to the modern classical music, where compositional forms usually vary from the norm. Terms like avant garde are interesting, because they are a matter of taste and perspective. Some people think Stravinsky is avant garde, and those who love Louis Armstrong’s style of music might think that what I do is avant garde, although I would not classify my work that way.

“I avoid labels, because people often close their minds when a classification has been inappropriately applied. When I was trying to establish a record deal for the Septet, some of the recording companies thought that my music was too modern for their label, while companies that specialize in modern jazz said my music was too traditional for them. My music is modern has free elements, and different compositional formats than those found in traditional jazz, but I love melody and harmony, so the music is not atonal. It includes lot, of melody and harmony.”

Baum chooses not to use microphones that insert into the cork end of a headjoint, opting for lavalier nits that Hubert Laths recommended after the Montreal concert she attended in college. “I Live had so many compliments from people, who say how natural my tune sounds, that I have just never changed. Besides, I am not much of a technology person. If it’s, not broke, don’t fix it.

The piccolo is noticeably absent from her instrument arsenal. “I used piccolo on be-bop briefly, which was really fun, but the use of a microphone in jazz concerts precludes playing piccolo. I’ve always preferred the flute’s lower register and was a bad girl when I stopped studying with Robert Stallman. I learned the jazz vocabulary licks, patterns, and solos in the first two octaves -

never in the third, and without a jazz flute teacher, I lacked the guidance that might have encouraged me to work throughout the flute’s range. I preferred the warmth and robustness of the lower registers for jazz in the last few years I have forced myself to practice in the third octave, relearning how valuable it is to have that register and now require my students, to their dismay, to do the same.

“Listening to jazz on other instruments, the drama that occurs when players ascend is obvious. The first time this realization hit me, James Newton was giving a master-class at a New York flute club event, and I performed for him. He was the first flutist to ask why I did not play in the third register. I was missing an important voice and the contrast that it creates.”

The future looks bright to Baum. “I feel fortunate to have toured all over the world. The State Department tours were incredible and sent us to India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Srilanka, Thailand, Japan, and South America. I love touring, performing with other musicians, and teaching at workshops. In India one of the highlights was playing with top Indian musicians. We did a televised concert at the Taj Mahal, for which a great Indian musician wrote a special piece for us. I had to pinch myself, because it was so exciting. To be able to record my own compositions and play with great musicians has been wonderful. I hope to be doing more of the same thing in the future.”