Asher Tobin Chodos
Statement of Teaching Experience

Teaching Philosophy

There is a fascinating moment in Herbie Hancock's online jazz piano course where he addresses the issue of learning from notation. He explains that, while many people will tell you that notation is useless, there are actually circumstances under which it can be useful (my paraphrase). He is taking a wry and unorthodox position in the jazz world, where notation is seen as a shortcut and a crutch – so much so that musicians who need to read a standard are sometimes derided cruelly on the bandstand.

Herbie Hancock's maverick pedagogical statement indicates some features of jazz culture that are not really known in the mainstream. When I first began to make music in the contemporary music world, I was struck by how many people – even people who revered jazz – regarded it as a zone of unfettered liberty, a place where you could be yourself without worrying about the baggage of the Western Classical tradition. Nothing could be less true of my experience as a jazz musician. In our reverence for tradition, our anxiety to meet standards of virtuosity, in the aesthetic proscriptions dictated by our teachers, in our feeling of never being good enough, we jazz musicians have far more in common with the exhausted classical acolytes at Juilliard than most people realize.

This is both a good and a bad thing. Where this devotion makes possible the diligence needed to get good at jazz, it is the right posture to strike. Where it traumatizes students, or makes them feel guilty about listening to music that is not jazz, it is counter productive. My favorite teachers struck a balance between the two, and that balance is what I aim for as a teacher.

The traditionalist in me favors an immersive teaching style based on language acquisition models. Pedagogical strategies in this model are spartan; basically, the only advice a teacher ever gives is "listen to the masters and figure out (by ear) how to do what they are doing." We let the music speak for itself, and assume that everything you need to know is expressed lucidly in it. Transcription, memorization and stylistic composition are all variations of that basic pedagogical kernel. I have developed a syllabus for an upper level Jazz Repertoire and Improvisation course that takes this approach, requiring students to learn a lot of standards by ear, transcribe and memorize solos, and compose in the style of a few jazz masters. This syllabus is included with my online portfolio.

I am not just a traditionalist, however, and I have taught courses outside the narrow ambit of jazz performance. I understand that not everyone who takes a jazz course is necessarily preparing for a career as a jazz performer, and I know that the orthodox jazz pedagogy won't work for everyone. As a teacher I can offer something of real value to these students as well. I have a lot of experience teaching beginners and musicians from other idioms, and I can help students navigate the conjuncture of improvisation and "contemporary music."

As a teacher of musical practice, then, I am hands-on and tend to keep discussion to a minimum. My academic courses, on the other hand, are full of discussion. In these, I assign the same kinds of work I would in any humanities course: readings and listening assignments, interpretive essays, and original research projects. When it comes to research, I have a slightly unorthodox philosophy. I have found that students are often very anxious to complete "thesis statements." They have been taught to regard them as the *sine qua non* of all expository writing. But really thesis statements should emerge naturally from the process of trying to answer research questions. Students' anxiety about acceptably argumentative theses has, in many cases, drained the research process of the curiosity that ought to motivate it. Music, because it is by nature so much fun, can be a good way of restoring that curiosity and making research pleasant. For this reason, I usually ask students to submit documents that outline research questions rather than traditional research projects. In these assignments, I have students explain what their research question is, where it comes from, and why it matters. Then, they simply document their attempt to answer it – failed attempts are, in this system, perfectly fine. What matters is real curiosity and a demonstrated effort to satisfy it.

Commitment to Promoting Diversity

My first job out of college was as a full time teacher of Latin at a tuition free school for under-served boys in New York City, the George Jackson Academy. Every day, I taught Latin to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. I also mentored a group of graduating 8th graders, working closely with them on their high school applications. I am proud to have helped many gain admission to some of the country's most prestigious high schools.

Today I teach a different student body, but many of the lessons I learned as a teacher at GJA continue to serve me. I still teach English language learners. My syllabi still accommodate a range of proficiencies and learning styles. I still find that, in some cases, my real role is not to teach the subject matter itself but to help students to feel at home in the academic environment. One of the ways higher education can make the world a better place is by helping people see that they belong in spaces traditionally reserved for the social elite. I see my role as music teacher as part of this effort.

Issues of racial justice and inclusion have informed my curriculum design and academic publications. My Blues course, for example, was cross-listed with Ethnic Studies, and was really a history of race in America told through the lens of music. My Hip Hop course deals extensively with the history of divestment in municipal services in American cities. Both courses, moreover, led me to publish academic essays dealing with racial politics in music studies.

As both a teacher and a scholar I have a demonstrated commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion. I am experienced teaching all different kinds of student, and I take the social justice mission of higher education seriously.