

Miguel Zenon Residency Reflections

The residency activities began on Tuesday morning, when Miguel (alto sax) and Luis (piano) went to the jazz theory and improvisation class. Of the ten people in attendance, seven were students. Miguel talked about being part of the Kennedy Center Jazz Ambassadors Program, a group he went with to West Africa, and the SF Jazz Collective. He said that all eight members of the SF Jazz Collective are commissioned to write a piece, so there are at least eight new pieces for the group every year. In this class, they played Miguel's piece "Light at the End of a Tunnel," a piece in 9/4 time. They then broke it down for the students. They did the same with a piece by Luis, and broke that down, too.

Tuesday afternoon Miguel and Matt (bass) went to two combined classes, Arranging and Composition along with a Beginning Improv class. 28 people attended; 25 of whom were students.

Tuesday evening all four of the band members worked with the UMass chamber jazz ensembles. 20 people attended, 18 of whom were students. Three different groups performed for them, and the band gave their individual input into how the students could make improvements to their playing. I think the biggest comment heard throughout the evening was that the students should do what they can to get out of the (written) music and play by memory; especially all the jazz standards, which every jazz musician should know. And in every key, so you can play on a moment's notice. Learn the tune: listen to many versions, one for sure with vocals so you can learn the words. "You can't feel the music if you're reading the music" was what they were saying.

Wednesday morning began with Miguel conducting a radio interview for WMUA with Ron Freshley, who was sitting in for Ken Irwin, host of Java Jazz.

After the interview, Miguel and Jeff (drums) went to Amherst Regional High School, where they worked with the jazz workshop there (about 30 people attended). Miguel commented to me later how impressed he was with the ability of the students who played for him. Luis and Matt went to the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts High School, where 73 people, the majority of them students, heard them play the jazz standard "I Hear Rhapsody," along with the blues song "Take the Coletraine." Both guys commented about how very enthusiastic the group was (they wished all their audiences were as enthusiastic as they were!), answered some questions, and then they listened to a small combo of students play. Both Matt and Luis were impressed with the students' abilities.

On Wednesday afternoon, they all had their own master classes (about 10 in each class, again the majority were students). Each one focused on something different, depending on who was in their audience. In Miguel's class, one student asked, "Yesterday, the theme seemed to be 'Get out of the charts, get out of the music.' How do you go about learning tunes?" Miguel's response was that he listens and transcribes as much as possible. He listens to vocal versions (of jazz standards) to learn the words. He transcribes solos to learn them intimately. He might use a score to learn the melody, but he memorizes it as quickly as possible. He definitely notices a difference between when he plays reading the music and when he plays from memory, and all four of the band members definitely noticed it when they were hearing students play for them the night before, most of whom were reading music at the time.

In Matt's master class, they were discussing rhythms. A couple students were clapping a steady beat, while the others were clapping something in 12/8 time. Eventually, Matt played along with his bass, and with the continued clapping, it sounded (almost) like a rhythm section!

Luis at the piano, played one of his compositions. One student asked if she could play an original composition of her own for Luis and get feedback from him about it. One of his suggestions was that perhaps she could use inversions (and adding the 9th) to add flavor and variety to the piece.

Jeff talked about the role of the drummer in the band. He suggested to the students that they learn music from as close to the source as possible. For example, what is the tango? The dance is full of sensual moves, the music includes accordion and acoustic bass. Knowing that, choose drum sounds based on that information. He said, "If any of you write music and say to the drummer, 'play a Latin beat,' slap yourselves or something! What do you mean? Samba? Bassa nova? Straight 8th notes? South America is a big area, with lots of countries and different rhythms. Be specific with what you want from the drummer."

Our guest artists found their way to Open Square in Holyoke, where they mingled with others who were there to hear a great salsa band, Combo Sabrosa. Miguel had gone to school in Boston with some members of the band. There were about 100 people there for the Fine Arts Center sponsored salsa party.

Thursday morning was a pleasant surprise. We had a different residency activity planned, but it was cancelled on Tuesday. In between all the residency things happening on Tuesday and Wednesday, and with help from Jeff Holmes and Paul Lieberman of the UMass Music Department faculty, we were able to replace the activity with a very cool event. The students had heard the band play a little bit in the previous two days, and the band had heard the students play. What the students really wanted was to play WITH the band, in different combinations. Well, the guys of the band were willing to do just that, so on Thursday morning in Bezanson Recital Hall, with 47 people in the audience (most of them students), Miguel asked if there were any horn players who would like to join the quartet (they were going to play a blues piece). Three UMass students went up on stage, two alto sax players and one bari player. Miguel played the head with the rhythm section, took the first solo, and then opened it up to the student soloists. It was so exciting to watch the interaction between the students and the professional musicians. Having fun, making music, together. Very cool.

Next up for students were a trumpet player, and a guitar player, along with Matt on bass and Jeff on drums. Also a blues, a little faster tempo. Again, Miguel played the head and the first solo and then passed it over to the students. This was the form on every tune played. Third was a student bass and piano along with Jeff on drums. Finally, to close out the set, there was a student drummer and guitar player with Matt on bass and Luis on piano.

Some of the comments made to the students were (in no particular order): "Make sure to look at each other. In addition to listening, you also need to communicate with your eyes, too." "Moving around is cool if that's what you feel, but you may want to try to ground yourself just a little more." "Don't be afraid to take your solo." "Make sure that what you're playing in the rhythm section works with what others are playing. If you want to experiment a little bit, that's cool, but it should still 'fit' with what the others are playing." "Rhythm section (piano or bass): don't be afraid to comp when it's not your solo. I know sometimes you want to give them space, and that's cool, but don't be afraid to comp so that the soloist has the chords to assist them."

With about ten minutes to go, Paul asked the students if they wanted to ask Miguel, Matt, Jeff or Luis anything. They had only one question.... "Will you play for us?" To which the band happily obliged.

Total numbers of people at all Miguel Zenon residency activities (not including Wednesday night salsa party):

Tuesday: 58 (50 students)

Wednesday: 143 (131 students)

Thursday: 47 (40 students)

TOTAL: 248 total attendance, 221 were students

All this culminated in the public performance on Thursday evening, with 500 people in attendance.