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## Online Teaching and Learning in Undergraduate Jazz Ensembles

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### Abstract

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the teaching and learning of jazz-based undergraduate performance students. The necessity to rapidly develop a pedagogical framework in response to ‘iso’ was initially directed towards solving technical problems such as audio latency, online learning platforms and virtual environments. However, this initial response did not entirely address aspects of the jazz and improvisation performance art form that relies on acute listening skills, high instrumental ability, interaction, synchronous playing and importantly socio-artistic transaction.

This paper investigates the enforced necessity to teach tertiary jazz and improvisation ensemble performance online during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will identify adaptive teaching and learning modalities and reflect on these experiences through assessing the pedagogical efficacy within the small jazz ensemble (combo) context. The small ensemble, being at the heart of any jazz curriculum, offers an opportunity to investigate the unique qualities of real-time, mutually informing, and generative artistic practice that is grounded in improvisation and interaction.

It is anticipated that this area of research will be significant in the existing and post-COVID environment by creating a greater opportunity to innovate, develop and refine a blended and flexible approach to digital and face-to-face pedagogy through development through the enhancement and development of documentation, reflectivity and student/staff feedback. Finally, this research aims to contribute to fluctuating teaching and learning environments in an uncertain future.

### 1. Introduction

Online teaching and learning modes of delivery of undergraduate tertiary music performance are not necessarily a new phenomenon, where various modalities of ‘blended learning’ existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003: 227; Lock et al, 2020). However, online teaching of small jazz ensembles featuring synchronous performance is rare. In March 2020<sup>1</sup>, Australian Universities were compelled to shift all classes to online-only teaching as the country entered the ‘Stage

<sup>1</sup> The start of semester 1 for Australian Universities.

3' restrictions<sup>2</sup> of lockdown and are specifically for music performance are outlined in a whitepaper researched by Professor Cat Hope<sup>3</sup> (2020). The challenge presented was to research, develop and implement new teaching methodologies in performance units shifting from on-campus face-to-face classes to remote online delivery within a matter of weeks.

All areas of education (Paudel, 2021; Biasutti et al, 2021; Hodges, et al 2020) have been significantly affected by COVID-19. Moreover, music classes such as the jazz-based small ensembles where students learn the nuanced skills of un-scripted, improvisational interactions amongst a group of highly engaged practitioners have faced significant challenges (Carrie & Terry, 2020; de Bruin, 2021, MacDonald et al. 2021), including the wellbeing of music performers (Johnson, et al, 2020; Galea et al, 2020; Vandenberg et al 2020). At this point in time, publications such as *Creative pedagogies in the time of pandemic: a case study with conservatory students* (Schiavio et al 2021), *Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic* (Mishra et al, 2020) and *Music education in a time of pandemic* (Daubney et al, 2020), are emerging in response to music performance education during COVID-19.

Through two case studies, this paper analysed small ensemble classes in jazz performance from two world-class<sup>4</sup> tertiary music institutions: Monash University and University of Melbourne. It identified how the fundamental learning synopsis and outcomes, and approaches to documentation and feedback were changed in response to the need to develop approaches and methodologies that were more conducive to online learning. Additionally, the case studies reveal salient observations as to how the experience can inform both on-campus face-to-face and online tertiary jazz and improvisation performance teaching.

## 2. The Small Jazz Ensemble

The small jazz ensemble is a context where improvising musicians can make choices and take on defined (and blurred) roles as part of the interactive creative process. Keith Sawyer describes the small jazz ensemble as a “highly developed context within which creative group interaction generates an ephemeral creative product” (1992: 254). Additionally, in his book on group creativity, Sawyer suggests that “no single musician can determine the flow of the performance: it emerges out of the musical conversation” (2003: 4). This is significant because jazz musicians are working together to generate new, improvised music in the moment and rely on each other’s live interactions. Therefore, at the heart of any jazz curriculum is the small jazz ensemble, where, as Onsmann and Burke suggest, the art of improvisation and interaction is learnt and the ephemeral moments of music-making are experienced (2019: 74). According to Ingrid Monson ‘the jazz ensemble, with its rhythm section and soloist roles, is itself a musical framework for participation’ (2009: 82). Moreover, the small ensemble gives the students the opportunity to apply technical and stylistic knowledge learned singularly in the practice room. This is then integrated within the ensemble setting with a focus on interaction. Monson posits that ‘a small jazz band provides a framework for musical interaction...something that unites the improvisation roles...into a satisfying musical whole’ (2009: 26). In this context, repertoire, stylistic interpretation and improvisation methods are learnt whereby students learn to think and listen beyond their own performance and make creative choices of what and when to play essentially, the jazz ensemble participation promotes creativity in learners (Creech & Hallam, 2017: 62). Furthermore, techniques in interaction such as call and response, group time feel, blending, intonation along with broader techniques in understanding the role of sonic environments, indeterminacy, and agency are considered.

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<sup>2</sup> See Victoria Government restrictions here: <https://www.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-restrictions-victoria>.

<sup>3</sup> Head of School - Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music - Monash University.

<sup>4</sup> Both music schools ranked in the top 20 performing arts schools in the world: QS ranking 2020.

The small jazz ensemble is a communal experience. Like the Japanese Tea Ceremony, the concept of 'Ikchigo Ichie' where 'the moment' is celebrated by 'host' and 'hosted' the players and audience create an experience that only 'lives' for that moment. It is an experience that binds the music, the players and audience into a community of participation. The small jazz ensemble is also, as Ailbhe Kenny states, a space for 'collaborative creativity in practice' which is 'characterised, negotiated, fostered and promoted through leadership and membership . . . and captures members' perspectives on the creative aspects of these practices' (2013: 1). Significantly, prior to COVID-19, this was achieved through the honouring of the physical presence. How is the community of participation changed in its core nature through virtual participation? In a pedagogical sense, if the primary experience of 'virtual community' is expressed through the jazz ensemble, does the experience translate to a real-world presence? Other research examining online improvisational experiences suggest enhanced communication, music creation, and engagement with other practitioners through online improvisation. For example, MacDonald et al posit that the online improvisation during the COVID-19 period has "enhanced mood, reduced feelings of isolation, and sustained and developed community" (2020: 1).

### **3. Methodology**

A case study methodology approach (Barrett, 2014) was used to collect qualitative data to gain concrete and contextual understandings of staff and student feedback on the effect of the switch to online teaching and learning of jazz small ensembles. Both case studies feature methods (detailed within the case studies sections) that were designed to collate data from both students and teachers through open-ended questions and an ethnographic approach of qualitative observation.

### **4. Case Study 1: Monash University - Melbourne, Australia (Burke/Williamson)**

#### **4.1 Background**

In 2002, the Monash University Jazz and Improvisation (MUJI) Bachelor of Music course was initiated at the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music (SZCSOM) Monash University. Since the inception, the course has steadily grown through a combination of factors, including rigorous curriculum development, international benchmarking, performance opportunities with national and international leaders in the field, and global experiences. This development has resulted in the SZCSOM developing a reputation as a tertiary school of music of proven excellence.

The six main performance subjects in the three-year bachelor of music degree consist of the following weekly classes: one to one lessons, small jazz ensembles, masterclass, and performance workshop. Academic progression is at the core of this performative structure with each class having a discrete role in developing skills ranging from the individual expertise of craft through to the collective learning of improvisation, interaction, reflective and reflexive practice.

#### **4.2 On-Campus Face-to-face Delivery**

Prior to 2020, the teaching method for the small ensemble class was undertaken within the context of repertoire. Students learnt repertoire by both listening to recorded interpretations of the composition and/or reading the sheet music which was then followed by a student-led process of developing an arrangement. Repertoire also functioned as a vehicle for exploring style and developing an understanding of common language and improvisational materials. The improvisational methodology included adapting learnings from the technical syllabi (taught in one-to-one lessons and part of the course progression) and assimilating this information within the ensemble improvisational context. An implicit aim for students was to develop a personalised, expressive and creative improvised and interpretive approach to melody, harmony, and rhythmic without an over-reliance on well-worn licks and cliches. Furthermore, the teaching and learning approach included consideration of developing ensemble skills. These included the exploration of interaction, role-playing, choices, constraints, dialogue, and listening. Throughout the classes, ensemble directors were given agency to impart their own musical aesthetic and

approaches as they helped students prepare for the weekly performance class and the final performance at a public and prestigious jazz club. The performance class context was a key aspect of the student's music education, providing experience and linkage to jazz industry venues, and to perform publicly.

A teaching method for the small ensemble class was encouraging the students to develop their musical language and creative strategies through repertoire. Within the class, students listened to different recordings including reading the sheet music. This was then followed by a student-led process of arrangement of structure and orchestration<sup>5</sup>. Repertoire also functioned as a vehicle for exploring style and developing an understanding of common language and improvisational materials. The improvisational methodology included adapting learnings from the technical syllabi (taught in one-to-one lessons and part of the course progression) and assimilating this information within the ensemble improvisational context.

### **4.3 *Switching from on-campus face-to-face to online delivery***

On 25 February 2020, SZCSOM academic staff were advised that due to the COVID-19 pandemic all teaching and students contact was to be delivered online with a week to prepare. Unlike other university modules who already utilised virtual learning environments such as Moodle, small jazz ensembles had only taken place face-to-face.

As a starting point, staff discussions centred on the needs and wellbeing of the students. How were academic staff going to develop a program that engaged students in an unknown setting, offering key elements of improvisational interaction and creativity and also being inclusive of pastoral care for the students? Moreover, an awareness of what students were experiencing with changes in their lifestyle and personal challenges as a result of learning remotely from home. Understandably, there was apprehension from students which meant that there were many discussions from academics re-assuring the students that 'going online' would be a positive experience and that we were 'all in this together'. This was the starting point of creating a virtual creative community journey. Obviously, we needed to address the pedagogical challenges, processes, qualitative observations and outcomes. Furthermore, we needed to include an understanding in our teaching that embodied compassion for embracing uncertainty, self-consciousness, self-awareness, trust, awareness, changing of habitual patterns, failure and new approaches to the collective experience.

We identified evident challenges that included, first, the latency limitations of video-conferencing that affected synchronous group rhythmic time/feel and in-the-moment interaction. Second, a short turnaround to shift to online delivery. Third, creating an alternative to a synchronous real-time performance that had generally focused on interaction and ensemble improvisation and fourth, student wellbeing. A positive emphasis was the emergent possibilities of creating virtual communities within each ensemble. Essentially, the essence of the message to students was that this was an opportunity to develop new understandings of artistic approaches in a combined human-machine experience: an opportunity for both educators and students to problem-solve allowing new ideas of learning and creating music for now and future.

We set ourselves the challenge to research the most compatible multi-person group video chat communication software/app that addressed our needs: good quality sound, video and latency. We initially tested the software chosen by the University which offered technical support: Zoom. In pre-class tests undertaken by MUJI staff playing together, it became immediately apparent that the obstacles of latency(135ms) and the differing internet capabilities of each user would likely hinder the common class synchronous performance approach (Redman, 2020). Staff then set about exploring a range of alternative software programs in the hope that one may be more suitable for synchronous music performance, including Skype, Google Hangouts, Facebook Messenger, WhereBy, Soundtrap, SmartMusic, Cadenza

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<sup>5</sup> This orchestration rarely included specific reading of notated parts for each instrument

and JamKazam (Howel et al, 2020). Most of these programs, such as SmartMusic, were suitable applications for classical and popular music styles, where individuals could play a predetermined part along with a click track. However, this approach was not suitable for jazz small ensembles where despite the use of a musical road-map (lead sheet), the ensemble members rarely use specific predetermined notated parts. Furthermore, the performance and creative decisions in jazz small ensembles are heavily guided by the collective simultaneous interpretation, dialogue and interaction. For these reasons, the program JamKazam was tested as it was designed specifically for jazz musicians to “play music live and in sync with others from different locations”(ibid). However, initial tests revealed that the prevailing latency issues were still largely determined by the quality of the technical infrastructure, namely the quality of internet connectivity and the device used by each participant (such as mobile phone, computer, tablet etc.). At the conclusion of trialing these different platforms, the decision was made by MUJI academic jazz staff that Zoom was likely as good an interface and program available, and along with University technical support, it would be suitably accessible for both staff and students.

#### **4.4 Methods**

When considering how the face-to-face on-campus teaching of small ensembles could translate to the online medium, a primary aim was to maintain and develop an immersive, engaging and inclusive approach to teaching and learning for each individual within the ensemble, whilst also focusing on the collective and creative nature of jazz ensemble performance. The MUJI staff’s suggested strategy for small ensemble directors for the first week of small ensembles (undertaken via Zoom) included the following in-class approach:

- The ensemble to interact in a free improvisation
- Individuals taking turns to play (on prescribed improvised and interpretation tasks) Play along with backing tracks (such as Jamey Aebersold Play-alongs, iReal Pro and Band-in-a-box)
- Group discussion on performance strategies (based on chosen repertoire)
- Group discussion of small ensemble jazz performance exemplars (audio and video recordings)
- Group discussion of compositions and arrangements
- Create an action plan for the following week (practical and reflective tasks)

After completion of the first week of small ensemble classes, the hypothesised concerns regarding audio latency and varying internet capabilities were confirmed through feedback from staff and students.

The qualitative methodology included the method of gathering feedback through open-ended questions emailed to 111 jazz students and 15 small ensemble directors. More specifically, these questions asked for feedback on the adaptability of ensemble rehearsal content, use of technology and general challenges and limitations, possibilities and discoveries. The feedback from students came from three sources: (1) verbally to the ensemble directors; (2) through email, and; (3) an anonymous student feedback survey (SETU)<sup>6</sup>. The feedback indicated that many ensembles were experiencing internet disruptions that hindered the flow of discussions, causing audibility issues. Furthermore, audio latency and distortion were experienced during attempts at synchronous playing. In addition to these technical limitations, staff and students identified experiencing screen fatigue and concentration issues – staff conveyed that this made it challenging to keep their ensembles engaged during the two-hour class. In response to the feedback and the testing of different software programs, the decision was made to shift practical playing away from a collective synchronous approach to either individual asynchronous playing during in class, or alternatively pre-recorded tasks.

#### **4.5 Flipped Learning Teaching Methodology**

After discussions with teacher/learning experts at the university, it was agreed that a *flipped* learning methodology as outlined by Catherine Grant in *First inversion: a rationale for implementing the*

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<sup>6</sup> Student Evaluation of Teaching

*'flipped approach' in tertiary music courses* would be increasingly incorporated to enhance the existing teaching strategies in learning jazz language, repertoire and ensemble performance. Grant posits that 'students should be active agents in their learning; that exploring, experimenting, questioning and reflecting on real-world problems leads to deep understanding' (2013: 4). These processes were particularly pertinent for the small ensemble class as experimenting, exploring, and discovery are intrinsic elements of jazz improvisation and performance. The ability to reflect within jazz small ensemble teaching and learning is an important skill in enabling students to develop a sense of efficacy (2019: 9). This includes students developing an understanding of crucial ensemble performance concepts beyond the acquisition of harmonic, melodic, rhythmic jazz language, such as listening non-judgmentally, self-awareness, trust, spontaneity, embracing uncertainty, flow, problem-solving and working with failure and mistakes.

#### 4.6 *Pre-class, in-class, and post-class*

The structure of teaching and learning online necessitated a restructure to provide a more coherent framework to enable students to explore, experiment, discover and reflect on their performance, through pre-class (preparation), in-class (collective feedback, critique and discussion) and post-class (reflection) activities. The revised small ensemble class framework of included the following inter-related content:

**Pre-class** activities: these goal-orientated preparatory activities included the student recordings based on assigned tasks, listening, transcribing, creating arrangements, liaising with their fellow ensemble members in preparation for each on-line ensemble class. Students communicate and formulate creative actions in a virtual community using recording (DAW)<sup>7</sup> and online platforms.

**In-class** activities: these were guided by the director, but co-led by the director and students. The activities were centred around the prescribed preparatory activities that students had undertaken pre-class and included feedback for each student on their weekly recording and the broader discussion of ensemble elements.

**Post-class** activities: these were activities undertaken in response to feedback and self-reflection derived from the in-class activities (listening, discussions, performances). Whilst the components were similar to pre-class activities (individual practice, listening, transcribing, working on arrangements) they differed in that were informed by feedback and reflection resulting from in-class activities. Students communicate and reflect on the in-class activities in a virtual community using online platforms.

The following section presents a discussion of two exemplars that incorporate a flipped teaching methodology. It will feature an evaluation of the efficacy of the pre-class, in-class, and post-class structure, and includes observations and experiences of staff and students.

#### 4.7 *Exemplar 1*

In response to the ensemble's inability to interact 'in the moment' due to time-feel constraints as a result of audio latency, a starting point to each class was the introduction of a 10-minute collective synchronous free improvisation followed by discussion. This contributed to the ensemble focusing on listening and interacting without the constraints of pre-determined harmony or pulse and allowed group connectivity, inclusivity and a sense of belonging. The next activity was centred on a structured pedagogical component (40mins of the class time) that involved transitioning elements from another assessed component of the performance unit, the technical syllabi, which included improvisational exercises (melodic and rhythmic) set as weekly improvisational practice tasks. These included melodic improvisation exercises using guide tones, b9s, #9s and different permutations of guide tones and chord

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<sup>7</sup> Digital Audio Workstation

tones. The aim was for students to ‘hear’ these notes in chords and negotiate in an improvisational setting using an online accompaniment platform such as iReal Pro or Band-in-a-box. The premise of the activity was to have students interact with the time feel and negotiate chord progressions as they developed their improvisation skills at their own pace. Each week, students were asked to record three improvised choruses of a jazz blues which were to be uploaded to a central digital repository; the being to reflect on their assimilation of information and progress over the semester. The structure of the exercise looked like the following with a focus on self-reflection:

- Pre-class: record three choruses of the tune and uploaded to a central digital repository
- In-class: reflection of recording including student-led analysis and discussion
- In-class: set exercise, set the context of exercise, class practice the exercise
- Post-class: practice exercises, improvise ‘sounds’ (assimilation and creative)

The reflection process within all three stages of activities was both engaging and challenging for the students giving them new approaches to the collective emergent learning experience. At the start of the semester, many students were apprehensive about the inability for synchronous performance interaction within the ensemble class. However, the opportunity to get detailed feedback from staff along with student-led discussion was positive, as is exemplified through one students’ reflection, “the teachers and the students are able to communicate effectively and clearly and we’re still able to learn really well these musical aspects” (anonymous, 1st yr. BMus Jazz student). Furthermore, the exercises such as the one listed above gave the students confidence of advancing their craft and artistry through reflection and developing the skills to interact as a supportive collaborative group, as one student reflected “Online learning was different...we got more support from staff ...that enabled us to hone in on some other skills that meant that the semester was still really valuable” (anonymous 1st yr. Jazz BMus student). There was also a sense of purpose and achievement where engagement was measured through the execution of tasks completed with an increased understanding of the value of organised practice, as is exemplified by one of the ensemble members:

My favourite part of the semester was working with my small ensemble...we were recording ourselves each week and we were critiquing each other and it was really great to learn in this positive environment. I think we all improved across the semester as we were constantly reflecting on our past weeks - it was a really positive experience and it was fun.

- Anonymous (1st yr. Jazz BMus student)

#### 4.8 *Exemplar 2*

At the conclusion of the first rehearsal, the ensemble director observed that the structure of activities in the online virtual environment would need to be flexible according to what the technology would allow in learning tasks, and how that would relate to the sense of participation and feedback from the students. The director also recognised the importance of understanding the student’s ability and technical knowledge to both navigate and program optimal settings for the online platform (Zoom). Moreover, how could Zoom be used as a tool that would encourage student engagement and sense of community, which was going to be key to the success of the functioning and creativity within ensemble class? Functions that were utilised included the ‘share screen’ function between staff and students to annotate scores, compose music and play recordings, and the ‘chat’ function which allowed simultaneous feedback and discussion<sup>8</sup> enhancing student engagement. Student feedback indicated that these adjustments and creativity within this new virtual environment was impactful, as one participant remarked “...it has allowed us to be able to complete all our studies easily and conveniently via the internet using Moodle and Zoom” (anonymous, 1st yr. BMus Jazz student).

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<sup>8</sup> This included discussion of seminal recordings, practice strategies and student reflection and expert feedback from the director

The pre-class activities were goal-orientated, and included sourcing and analysing existing recordings, critiquing recordings of other ensemble members, and practical tasks within prescribed repertoire (that were often documented through recordings). For example, students were instructed to record a single chorus on selected repertoire with the goal being to demonstrate one or more of the following:

- A clear indication of the form whilst improvising
- Play with a rhythmic feel and control to infer the underlying pulse
- Clearly outline the underlying harmonic structure and sequence whilst improvising
- Personalisation of the phrasing and rhythm of a melody
- Alternating fragments of the melody with improvisations
- Incorporate motives derived from the melody within an improvised chorus
- Play/sing improvising solely on the root and 3rd of each chord

The recordings were uploaded to a central digital repository (Google Drive and Dropbox) where ensemble members were able to review the different recorded performances, and these formed the basis of class discussions, critiques and feedback for an in-class discussion. This resulted in additional workload for staff as they reviewed the uploaded files prior to the scheduled class time.

During in-class activities, students were encouraged to engage by asking questions, responding to questions from the director and participating in group discussions. These discussions helped the ensemble members develop a sense of community and students also expressed the importance of these within their learning and development, as was noted by one participant:

I can certainly say that although it's been a different experience, it's been a really great learning experience. For example, in our ensemble classes, it's been a really great opportunity to engage in discussion about ensemble playing, to talk about the history of our craft, to learn from listening to recordings deeply and discuss the learning outcomes from that.

- Anonymous (3rd yr. BMus Jazz student)

Another participant recounted "having really deep and exciting conversations about the music" (anonymous 1st yr. BMus Jazz student), which arguably contributed towards a sense of engagement within the online context. The students were also encouraged to post helpful links and comments within the zoom chat forum to augment the discussion and learning resources. The chat was then saved and shared at the conclusion of each session<sup>9</sup>, and became a useful additional resource for students to draw from.

Whilst the in-class practical activities, such as improvising and accompanying within specific repertoire and styles, were undertaken asynchronously, they were largely focused on ensemble performance. Additionally, certain activities, such as recording individual parts in duets or full ensemble instrumentation required students to make creative decisions according to the pre-existing pre-recorded parts. Although this required reactive rather than interactive aural skills, it resulted in students listening to others and adjusting their playing according to the music, as one student remarked, "I've had some really awesome moments in my ensemble studies, being able to still interact with other students and

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<sup>9</sup> The chat was only shared when a verbal consent was obtained from all students in the ensemble. Staff and students are expected to comply with the Monash University expectations for integrity and respect/behaviour policy: <https://www.monash.edu/about/a-culture-of-integrity-and-respect/behaviour-expectations-at-monash>

teachers...it really felt like I was in the room with them” (anonymous 1st yr. BMus Jazz student). Conversely, students who recorded their part first prior to the other ensemble members were encouraged to be mindful of the other parts and to adjust their playing to allow space and contributions of others. This required an increased awareness and use of audiation within individual practice and recording, whereby students were encouraged to imagine the sound and musical contributions of the ensemble. It often resulted in students playing with an increased sense of restraint, space, pacing and phrasing, as was evidenced in their weekly recorded uploads. This practical in-class and recorded tasks presented opportunities for collective listening, discussion and detailed feedback<sup>10</sup> from the ensemble director and ensemble members - with the discussion and conceptual focus centred around the ensemble performance context. It was noted that the quantity and detail of the feedback and discussion<sup>11</sup>, and subsequent reflection<sup>12</sup>, far surpassed that experienced in the usual face-to-face on-campus teaching mode, as the following participant reflection suggests:

I've developed more in this semester than at any other period of my life. It's definitely been a challenge adapting to this format, but it's forcing us to develop new skills as well as giving us the time to do a great deal of introspection.

- Anonymous (3rd yr. BMus Jazz student)

A variation on the aforementioned tasks was for students to record an accompanying improvisation along with the recorded chorus of another ensemble member, resulting in an asynchronous duet. Once students became familiar and confident with this process, the ensemble directors set more ambitious approaches to generate an ensemble recording. These included individuals recording (audio and video) their parts asynchronously to a guide track and also recording synchronous free improvisations, which were then edited and mixed to form ensemble performances. The outcome was a portfolio of individual and ensemble recordings that had been assembled asynchronously and then subsequently mixed. In addition to providing an ensemble goal, it was acknowledged by students and ensemble directors the importance to hear their asynchronous playing within a synchronous context and for all involved to have a sense of documenting a tangible 'ensemble' outcome. Despite initial reservations from students regarding recording jazz music asynchronously, the quality of the final outcome frequently surprised the participants, as one ensemble member reflected, “one of my favorite moments this year was in my small ensemble, when we got the recording process right and the tunes sounded like we'd all recorded there in the same room - it was so rewarding” (anonymous, 1st yr. BMus Jazz student).

The in-class discussions were often informed by or led to the incorporation of external sources such as recordings, literature, and theoretical and conceptual concepts. This included ideas and reflections of experiences on individual practice approaches from the students that informed the ensemble performance, and weekly tasks were often designed around these identified approaches, related recordings. For example, one such task involved students nominating an album they enjoyed listening to, critiquing the ensemble playing they observed as being good, bad, interesting, and innovative. They were also asked to share audio excerpts to demonstrate these, and discussion centred around how these aspects of ensemble playing could be developed within individual and collective practice. Ensemble directors also used a similar approach to develop collective compositions. For example, an album nominated by a student as being an exemplar of high-quality ensemble playing was used as the basis for a new composition. Using the tempo, key, and rhythmic feel/groove of the tune, students were given fifteen minutes to individually write a 2-4 bar melody with an accompanying harmonic sequence. At the

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<sup>10</sup> Feedback was provided verbally and through the 'chat' function.

<sup>11</sup> Increased discussion and feedback were possible due to less time possible for synchronous performance with more emphasis placed on analysis and reflection.

<sup>12</sup> Student reflection was increased due to the addition of pre and post tasks.

conclusion of the task, each student played their composed material and discussed their conceptual intention and challenges faced. The ensemble then discussed similarities and differences in their approaches and how their composition materials may be interwoven. The students were then set a further out-of-class task to refine their ideas and send them to the ensemble director who would piece together a draft version of a collective composition for the next rehearsal. The resulting composition was played (using music notation software) during the next rehearsal and the ensemble members were thrilled at the outcome, expressing the rewarding feeling of hearing something fully formed and tangible resulting from their combined contributions. The task served to reveal: the potential of using existing compositions as an exemplar and source of inspiration for creating new material; an approach to getting started with composition with a small achievable task-orientated goal; increased knowledge of jazz composition approach and materials through collective discussion; an emergent and fun way to learn original compositions that involved co-authors and potentially collaboration; an opportunity to develop skills in building a portfolio.

Virtual communication between ensemble members outside class time was also encouraged to organise clarification on arrangements, support in understanding the technology and general conversations about music-making and a social connection. Students were encouraged to reflect on what they could do differently over the week to further explore the process and elicit better performative outcomes

#### **4.9 Case Study 1: Summary**

The shift to online delivery resulted in the necessity for new teaching methodologies in flipped learning, and reflective practice alternatives to dissemination. Students expressed satisfaction through an anonymous student feedback survey (SETU). The unit offered a systematic approach in monitoring their progress, which gave them the opportunity to make discoveries, place their performance under the microscope. It also allowed students to gain insight into their sound, their sense of time and rhythmic feel, the accuracy of their improvisations including the development and connection of their improvised ideas, and the importance of audiation within their practice. Students also developed skills and knowledge of technology, software programs, gained experience in recording and mixing, and became increasingly mindful of the importance of stagecraft in video recordings. There was also an increased sense of a virtual collaborative bonding that was different from their normal approach to online communication through social media. In post-class discussions with staff, students spoke of a sense of progress, belief, satisfaction, belonging and that ideas and opinions did not have the same bias and prejudice which can be present in jazz ensemble situations.<sup>13</sup>

### **5. Case Study 2: University of Melbourne - Melbourne, Australia (Vincs)**

#### **5.1 Background**

The Jazz and Improvisation Department (J&I) at the University of Melbourne (Formerly 'Improvisation Department' at the Victorian College of the Arts) has had a forty-year history of educating jazz musicians into all sectors of creative professional music performance and composition. Although there had been much pressure from administration to develop online teaching and learning, there was a reluctance to comply for the principal reason that music-making is primarily a community-based activity with a particular focus on the performers, their interactive skill within the repertoire they choose to play, their ability to respect 'the moment' and most importantly their ability to 'connect' with an audience. However, the advent of COVID-19 in 2020 challenged all of those assumptions.

Within J&I, the prime focus of the course is the subject 'Ensemble'. Students are selected on their perceived ability to contribute to the ensemble. That is, structurally, we create seven small

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.spectator.com.au/2018/11/jazz-is-dominated-by-men-so-what/>

ensembles and therefore select seven drummers, seven bass players a total of seven piano players and guitarists, seven vocalists and a variety of horn players. This is different in approach to the Classical Music Stream insofar as candidates audition as potential solo performers with the developing ability to perform concerti. This is significant because it again demonstrates the prime importance that J&I, and other institutions, place on the small jazz ensemble.

## 5.2 *Method*

Similar to Case Study One at MUJI, the intention for J&I at the University of Melbourne was to collate qualitative data from permanent and casual teaching staff and students. Similarly, there was an open-ended approach to collecting the data given that the imperative at this stage of the pandemic was to primarily get classes working without knowing how long the COVID-19 event would last and which technologically driven pedagogy would offer the best learning outcomes.

The size of the student cohort was 103 students undertaking the Ensemble subject distributed across twenty-one ensembles and led by twenty-one teaching staff. Students and staff were invited to give informal feedback via email to the Department head and via the Student Evaluation Survey (SES) that occurs for each subject across the university. The feedback was qualitatively analysed to ascertain any thematic concerns emerging and the extent to which ‘novel’ problems affected individual students. There was no particular structure to the feedback in terms of setting distinct questions as there was a desire to keep the dialogue as ‘open’ as possible and seeing what would emerge. Hence, the data that was collected consisted of email correspondence from students and staff, conversations, and the formal SES results.

## 5.3 *Switching from on-campus face-to-face to online delivery*

In 2020, the first semester began in March with a distant sense that there was ‘something brewing’ overseas. The subject Small Ensemble began as per usual on-campus with students meeting their groups and planning with the ensemble teacher the repertoire they would be developing throughout the semester. J&I has a particular feature in its approach to developing ensemble insofar as first-year students are embracing the jazz tradition and leaning to play and improvise on jazz standards. However, second and third-year students are mixed together and are required to develop their own unique compositions and/or arrange the jazz standard for the group. This shifts the emphasis pedagogically away from a teacher-led class in first-year to a peer-led class in the combined second-third year classes. The significance of this distinction in terms of COVID-19 responses will become apparent in a moment.

As the classes had begun, the increasing anxiety amongst some students and staff became apparent. This resulted in many students not attending scheduled rehearsals and performances. For example, timetabled classes have students working in a supervised ensemble on Mondays, a peer-led rehearsal on Wednesday and performance class for the student cohort and staff on Thursdays in a subject called Workshop. As COVID-19 began to spread, a tense and anxious environment amongst the staff and students developed, and some students expressed a reluctance to use public transport to attend rehearsals or the performance class. For example, an email received from a student read:

Due to the conditions of the virus, my parents are concerned for my health, and wish for me to remain home as a precautionary measure. Especially considering that I will be interacting with other students in the university as the nature of the course, and that I take public transport daily to university. Are there any updates regarding online classes?

-Anonymous (1st year BMus J&I student)

Prior to 2020, students and staff made a concerted effort to communicate with one another if they were running late or could not make a class, but during COVID-19, communication from students

diminished, and it was noted that the students were putting their own needs ahead of the needs of the ensemble.

At the point of going into total lockdown and the subsequent shift to 100% online teaching and learning for the small ensemble class, the first thing that became apparent was the varying technical expertise of students and staff. Some students and some staff had previous training and experience with high-end recording hardware and software whilst others students and staff had limited access and knowledge of the technology<sup>14</sup>. This resulted in a resources scramble within the J&I department to source extra audio interfaces, microphones and other relevant accessories and to develop instructional worksheets to operate technology. A subset of the technological knowledge divide, was the acknowledgment in staff and class discussions that some felt a degree of shame for not having the technical equipment and knowledge to successfully navigate the class environment. It was an unintended forceful outing of those students and staff who had not found it necessary or perhaps were frightened by the technology.

#### 5.4 *Exemplar*

Initially, ensemble classes that began online (via Zoom) attempted to negotiate the latency issue with synchronous performance. How bad could it be? Within a very short period of time, it was observed that synchronous performance was not going to work. Although certain software solutions, such as Reaper, were purported to address the problem of latency in a novel way, by designating a common zero clock time for each player mediated by a shared server rather than real-time synchrony. It became obvious that our ensemble program that is staffed by a mixture of full-time, fractional and casual staff, were unable to mandate a single technical solution with appropriate technical support to each of the twenty-one small ensembles across the J&I Department.

As mentioned earlier, there was a further issue. Within the Teaching and Learning priorities of the first-year cohort, the core emphasis is placed on students learning the essential jazz repertoire that is taught individually through Principal Study (one-to-one) lessons and then exercised through the ensemble class. As is the case in the first case study, students are learning how to play their role within the small ensemble context and develop their creative skill in improvised soloing by relating their individual endeavour to the distributed creative function of the small ensemble group. On the one hand, the interactive nature of ensemble performance was all but disintegrated through the necessity to move to online performance. However, on the other hand, teaching and learning for jazz musicians has utilised the benefits of tools such as the Hal Leonard program Music Minus One play-along records stretching back at least fifty years where interaction was not possible, to more contemporary digital versions such as the iReal Pro that approximates a small ensemble accompaniment to the essential jazz repertoire. Contrary to this practice, much of the face-to-face instruction is intended to move beyond the backing track play-along phenomenon and teach students how to creatively negotiate their role and become more interactive in the way they play with each other. In every sense, the word 'play' is significant here because the creative basis of jazz-based improvised music is in the 'interactive play' that occurs in performance.

For our combined second-third year classes, the move from the essential jazz repertoire to creating new original music poses a different teaching and learning challenges for ensemble. Here, a student has to devise new music and find ways to present it to the class. Some students present very fully formed compositions. However, other students present sketches that they hope the rest of the ensemble will elaborate upon. In a face to face environment, this is easily handled where a student asks their group to try out certain ideas. For example, a piano player presenting a work might not be specific in the kind of 'feel' they want to create rhythmically. A conversation might start, for example, 'play a sort of Latin feel'. The drummer responds 'like this'? And plays a generic Samba feel. The piano player says, 'no, a

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<sup>14</sup> This was not observed as a major issue within the first Case Study as MUJI has a music technology subject for their students.

little bit freer, like Brian Blade would do it'. This sort of banter continues until the piano player is satisfied that their composition is developing positively. In an asynchronous environment, the immediacy of this way of working gives over to the student composer having to be more deliberate in their instructions to each of the players given that the technology mediates the nature of the transaction in a temporal sense. This is significant because again it exposes students who feel less confident in their ability to conceptualise music beyond the limitations of their own instrumental perspective to being vulnerable to perceived criticism if they make naive or obvious choices. In a synchronous on-campus session, students will be keen to help each other. In an asynchronous session, the necessity of making strong artistic decisions where one cannot really determine the reactions of the other ensemble members may create a defensive way of approaching the problem. For example, whereas previously the piano player might have said to the drummer, 'play something Latin' and some negotiation occurs until the best solution is found. In an isolated environment and feeling vulnerable the piano player might say to the drummer, 'play whatever you think sounds good'. In this type of example which I have observed, the piano player misses the opportunity of negotiating their creativity with another player because their social isolation makes them feel more exposed in making a poor creative decision.

Over three weeks of exploring ways to negotiate the ensembles in lockdown, a number of things emerged. In particular, the focus shifted from developing the ability to be interactively engaged in performance to creating step-time layered 'tracks' leading to a finished product. As a result of this changed focus, approximately 40% of students deferred their enrollment due to the lack of real-time on-site engagement with other students and staff. For example, feedback from students included (email):

My strong preference is to complete small ensemble as an in-person intensive course. While I acknowledge that the online option provides some potentially excellent growth opportunities as an individual performer, this subject in particular requires real, face to face teamwork in a rehearsal room to achieve its intended learning outcomes.

- Anonymous (1st yr. BMus J&I student)

*and*

At this point I'm thinking I'll be withdrawing from individual and ensemble for at least this semester, I was just hoping to get an idea of what that actually means for me when uni eventually comes back, will it put me behind in all further ensembles or will I be able to catch up at some point (maybe do two ensembles in one semester? That doesn't sound likely, not sure how it works)?

- Anonymous (2nd yr. BMus J&I student)

The staff that were successful in rapidly establishing a working methodology for students to record and upload their tracks into a composition that would either be mixed by one of the students or staff members in their personal DAW retained more students. However, staff were also nervous in terms of what was possible in adjusting the curriculum. For example, an email from a J&I Staff member read:

I also had another question for you re: ensemble. I've been bouncing the idea of using Soundtrap with my ensemble and they seem keen. I was wondering if I may be able to adjust the assessment of my ensemble so that they get assessed on the process and outcome of the online demo making, instead of being assessed on the analysis of recordings as described in the new ensemble guidelines. I think it may encourage them to work hard on this new method. Would that be ok do you think?

-Anonymous J&I Staff Member

At the time of writing, in preparation for Semester Two 2020 and still in a current state of lockdown, the plan is for students to return to face-to-face on-campus ensemble class with the following restrictions: that there is to be a nine square meter zone of social distancing between each player. That ensemble times will be staggered so that students are not congregating in corridors, that brass players will need to bring receptacles to catch their personal condensate, that singers will need to use only their personal microphones, that non-horn player or singers will need to wear masks whilst playing, that ensemble time will be drawn back from 120-minutes to 90-minute sessions and that hand sanitiser and wiping instruments such as pianos down will be essential. In this way, providing COVID-19 restrictions lift, ensemble may resume. However, as many students have relocated back to other parts of the country, an online version of the subject will continue in the second semester and students and staff will nominate their personal preference.

### 5.5 *Case Study 2: Summary*

For the J&I Department at the University of Melbourne the most useful data came from received emails from staff and students. The formal Student Evaluation Survey did not yield useful data as the quantitative statistical data had too few responses as to make it meaningful and that there were no qualitative responses that related to the pedagogical adjustments made because of Covid-19. Of the students that maintained their enrolment in Ensemble, that email data suggests that the online experience of learning to play improvised music, jazz in particular, resonates with their experience of practicing and learning with 'play-along' technologies such as iRealBook and Music-minus-one. This is a successful pedagogy in developing the individual nature of improvised music performance where a student presents their pre-recorded work to a class for analysis and feedback. Also, where students are creating new works, the asynchronous model of playing a part and layering it into a multitrack recording actually models the professional reality of a contemporary musician and students welcomed the opportunity to develop their recording skills. This was evidenced through students asking each other in Zoom classes about recording techniques and appropriate and affordable recording gear. In contrast, staff reported in conversation and via email that the skills of interactive-play and support within the Ensemble were not learned within the online context regardless of the sophistication of the technology and this was seen as a problem because, particularly for first year students, there appeared to be a lack of awareness regarding the essential jazz skill of real-time inter-personal communication within the ensemble.

## 6. **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for change within education, in particular by accelerating the shift from on-campus face-to-face to online delivery. The initial experiences in the online context have highlighted the need for change in the process of teaching and learning music. With these changes in delivery, teachers are now faced with additional questions, such as, what will a jazz ensemble rehearsal room or performance space look and sound like in future music-making? How will this impact teaching and learning within the jazz ensemble context?

Through reflections on case studies, this article speaks to these changes, challenges, and possibilities within the jazz small ensemble context. Although students and staff missed the face-to-face interaction, the transition to online teaching modalities has resulted in a positive increased awareness of the 'specialness' of jazz small ensembles, and the nature of intimate communication and sense of community that they facilitate. The shift online enabled the participant-researchers and students to explore new ways in which we communicate, create music, and engage as a creative community. As a result, from this online experience, we posit that two key changes in learning and teaching of jazz ensembles were the enhancement and development of documentation, reflectivity and student/staff feedback.

The successful incorporation of new methodologies, documentation, feedback and technology to suit online delivery suggest that there will be a new normal beyond COVID-19 that features a hybrid of both face-to-face and online delivery. It is also likely that tertiary jazz studies will be required to integrate blended and flipped learning models as a result of the financial losses incurred by Universities as a result of the pandemic. Finally, this paper suggests that where these new technologies of learning

are integrated into the curriculum, there will need to be a clear pedagogical identification of those elements which are gained and those elements which are lost. Whilst the creative and pedagogical challenges illustrated in this paper reveal one focus, the mental health and motivational factors arising from COVID-19, particularly the social isolation and its subsequent impact on music performance, creativity, and sense of community, arguably need to be further investigated and understood.

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