



Jazz

YOU LIKE IT

How do you find a jazz (or boogie-woogie) teacher? Can you really learn to improvise? How tricky is jazz theory? Two leading jazz piano teachers reveal all to **Inge Kjemtrup**

JAZZ RESOURCES

Courses and jam sessions

UK

Hideaway, London
www.hideawaylive.co.uk

Jazz Academy, Surrey
www.jazzacademy.co.uk

Jazz Course UK
www.jazzcourse.co.uk

Jazz Factory, Wiltshire
www.jazzfactory.org.uk

Jazz Workshop, Bucks
www.jazzworkshop.org.uk

Morley College, London
www.morleycollege.ac.uk

Music Place Jazz Summer School, Cheshire
www.themusicplace.co.uk

USA

Interplay Jazz Camp, MA
www.interplayjazz.com

Jazz Camp West, CA
www.jazzcampwest.com

New York Jazz Workshop
www.newyorkjazzworkshop.com

Stanford Jazz Workshop
www.stanfordjazz.org

We're all so computer-savvy these days (or we imagine we are), so what's the first step to take when you're looking for a jazz or boogie-woogie piano teacher? Of course: you go to a search engine and type in 'jazz piano teacher' along with the name of your town. The search might turn up a list of teachers in your area – but it won't necessarily help you find the one who will guide you in making the leap from classical to jazz. To get a better understanding of how best to take the first steps in studying jazz, I spoke to two experienced jazz piano teachers from opposite sides of the Atlantic.

For starters, do you really need a teacher to learn to play jazz? Could you try to go it alone, using books and recordings? I put this question to Jonah Cristall-Clarke, director of the London Piano Teachers website. 'What I would say is there is a lot of information out there – there are tons of books on jazz theory – and it can be overwhelming,' he says. 'Lots of students who come to me say they tried to learn on their own, but now they need some guidance. It's maybe more straightforward for classical, but with jazz, especially when it comes improvising, students have trouble finding their way and that's where a teacher can help.'

Matching a student to the right music teacher is at the core of Cristall-Clarke's business. Jazz piano students, he explains, can be divided into two broad categories: those who are interested in 'playing for enjoyment and want to play repertoire that's jazzy or bluesy but they don't want to improvise or play with ensembles' and those who are 'interested in improvising or the more creative elements of jazz'. Once he uncovers a student's favourite jazz style and their reason for branching out into jazz, Cristall-Clarke is better able to find the perfect teacher for them.

'Ideally you want to find a teacher who plays jazz professionally and has the empathy and pedagogical technique to give the student what he or she needs,' says New York City-based jazz pianist, composer and teacher Robert Cowie. As for locating a teacher, he says, 'I would ask around music schools or universities where jazz is taught, or, if you go out to listen to live jazz, ask some players you like if they teach or know people who teach.'

Once you have scheduled your first lesson, other than spending a lot of time wondering if you'll ever learn to swing, what else can you do to prepare? Cristall-Clarke suggests that you think about jazz music you enjoy listening

to, particularly music with pianists, and bring a list of your favourite recordings to your first lesson. He also recommends that you devise 'a vision of yourself in a year: what would you like to be playing? Jazz piano lessons are very individualised to the student and their goals.'

Listening is also an important part of Cowie's teaching. 'To use a language analogy, you can't learn to speak a foreign language without spending a lot of time listening to it being spoken by native speakers,' he says. 'It's how you learn "the music" of the language.' For beginners, Cowie has specific listening recommendations including Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett and Gene Harris. 'Jarrett is just an amazing improviser, whether playing solo, with his trio, or with his quartets in the '70s. Gene Harris is just so swinging and bluesy,



while not being super technical. Every time I hear him play, I just want to smile.'

All black notes

You should bring blank manuscript paper, a metronome and an open mind to your first lesson with Cowie. 'When I am teaching a first-time jazz student, I want to get them improvising as soon as possible,' he explains. 'I usually will play some kind of vamp in the lower end of the piano that they can improvise over using "all white notes" or "all black notes". I also often teach a pentatonic "blues" scale and show the student a simple vamp over which they can improvise using the blues scale.'

'One of biggest challenge of a jazz piano teacher is to structure material in a way that students feels they know they are progressing,' says Cristall-Clark. 'I choose a jazz standard and think of goals for a student to achieve as they are working on it. Maybe they focus on a specific idea like using root and seventh and melody in left hand, for instance.'

Now for the tough question: if you're not comfortable with music theory, must you learn jazz theory? Cowie says it's a key learning tool. 'You have to know the vocabulary and grammar to speak. Even the great players who played "by ear" knew what they were doing,' Cristall-Clarke explains in terms of

the individual student. 'If theory comes naturally to a student, we can just dive in. If not, we need to know how to back off. We have to approach jazz from lot of different angles to play to the strengths and weaknesses of a student.'

Like professional jazz pianists, a novice jazz pianist will eventually want to seek out playing partners. Cristall-Clarke eases into this, first playing along with his students in lessons: 'I'll be the bass player and then they can learn how to play with a bass (for example, they can't play lower notes because that will interfere).' Then he points his students to jazz jams – open mike sessions that are often surprisingly friendly to novices (see boxout, opposite). 'Jazz is communal, social music!' exclaims Cowie. 'It's meant to be played with other people.'

Cowie draws parallels between learning a language and learning jazz. 'When you speak in your native tongue, you don't have to think about vocabulary, grammar or accent to have a conversation. However, when you learn a new language you gradually build your vocabulary, grammatical knowledge and accent to a point where you can have conversations of greater depth and complexity. Likewise, as you learn to improvise, you gradually build up a vocabulary of rhythms, harmonies, and melodic fragments that you can use

STUDYING JAZZ: USEFUL BOOKS

As selected by Robert Cowie

The Real Easy Book (Chuck Sher, editor; Sher Music)

An excellent book of tunes geared toward the beginning improviser, with information about theory and how it applies to each particular tune.

Effortless Mastery (Kenny Werner; Jamey Aebersold Publishing)

An inspirational book that explains this pianist and composer's approach to playing and practising.

The Jazz Musician's Guide to Creative Practicing (Dave Berkman; Sher Music)

Geared more towards advanced students, this practice guide is also interesting for the beginner.

The Jazz Piano Book (Mark Levine; Sher Music)

An excellent reference on different jazz piano styles. (It can also be overwhelming to the beginner, so don't think you need to learn how to play everything in it.)

to express yourself musically in the various dialects of "jazz".'

Who could resist the idea of becoming fluent enough in jazz to join the musical dialogue? ■

Find out more about Robert Cowie at www.robertcowie.com and Jonah Cristall-Clarke at www.londonpianoteachers.co.uk

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