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A TRADITION OF INNOVATION

The New England Conservatory celebrates four decades of groundbreaking jazz education

BY MICHAEL J. WEST

Gunther Schuller works with NEC students



link and you might miss the New England Conservatory, three buildings of mismatched architectural style adjacent to Northeastern University in Boston's Fenway neighborhood. Yet this tiny school of 750 undergrad and graduate students serves a monumental role in American musical history. Not only is it the oldest conservatory in the United States, but in 1969 it became the first to offer a fully accredited jazz studies program—the creation of its then-president, the composer and jazz scholar Gunther Schuller.

Four decades after its founding, NEC's jazz studies department is among the most acclaimed and successful in the world; so says the roster of visionary artists that have comprised both its faculty and alumni. This October sees a citywide series of concerts and events in Boston commemorating the program's 40th anniversary, with a weeklong celebration in New York to follow in March.

More than just honoring an influential academic curriculum, however, the NEC



Ken Schaphorst

events honor the legacy of Schuller in jazz education and the larger realm of the music. His work at the Conservatory also includes the Third Stream program (now known as Contemporary Improvisation, or CI), the first—and, to date, only—degree ever offered in the fusion of jazz and classical music that Schuller codified. Though he left NEC in 1977, Schuller's name is forever inextricable from any discussion of the Conservatory since 1969.

"Gunther's a modernist," says Ken Schaphorst, class of '84, now the chair of the jazz studies department. "He has no patience for people repeating what's been done, for music that isn't really pushing him as the listener. I think even 40 years after the fact there's an interest in that at NEC—in not taking the easy road."

"Afro-American Music"

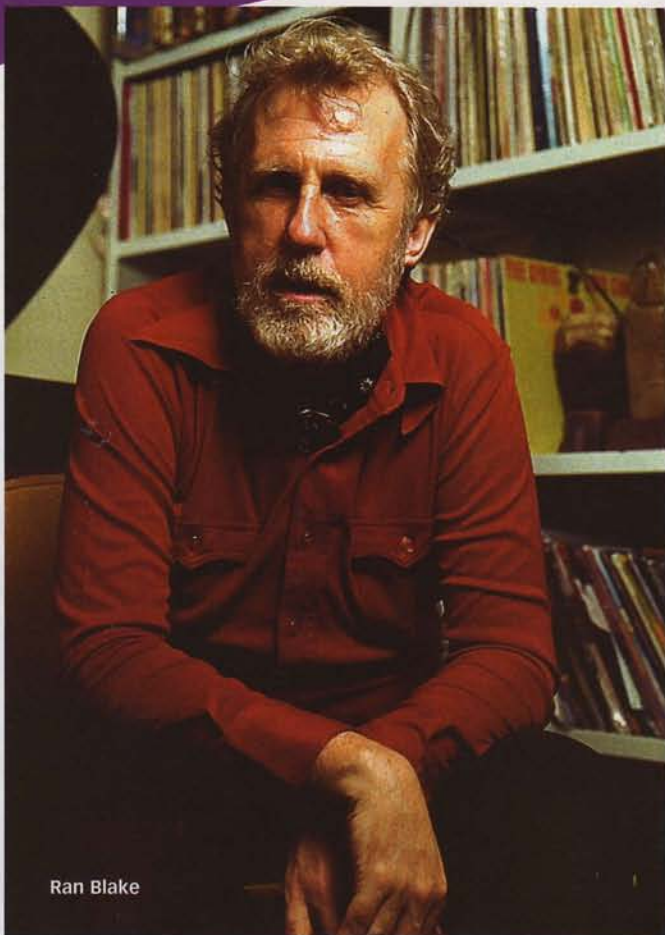
Once unsurpassed in prestige as an American school of classical music, the New England Conservatory was in dire straits by the time Gunther Schuller was offered its presidency in 1967. "The enrollment, which had a capacity of 750 students, was down to 225," Schuller, now 83 and still living in Boston, recalls. "They couldn't even have an orchestra, or a chorus. It was also virtually bankrupt: Maybe a couple of hundred thousand dollars in the till. The sheriff was about to put the padlock on the door, and I was brought in for the rescue."

Schuller's first act was to announce the fulfillment of a long-held ambition. A professional classical musician since his teenage years, Schuller had decided upon first hearing Duke Ellington that "jazz was going to have to be a big part of my life, equal to my life in classical music." By the 1960s Schuller had been both principal horn player for the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and French horn player in Miles Davis' *Birth of the Cool* nonet. But only one of those career arcs was considered worthy of academic pursuit. "In the land where jazz was born, it was simply impossible to understand why there wasn't, in any school, a full jazz department," he says. "So there was no question when I came to NEC: If I did nothing else at this school, I had to do this thing about jazz."



George Russell

It took two years after the announcement of the program—then called Afro-American Music—for it to come together. "Many people were actually opposed to it, even within jazz," Schuller says. "They believed jazz could not, should not be taught; it would stultify it, ruin it, make it 'academic.' Those were possible dangers, but it wasn't inevitable."



Ran Blake

You just had to get the right people for the faculty.”

The right people included Jaki Byard, the style-spanning pianist; Ran Blake, a self-taught pianist and improviser; multi-reedist Joe Maneri, who'd broken new ground by improvising with microtones; and George Russell, an influential composer and jazz's only major theoretician, who published *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* in 1953. (Russell, who taught at NEC for more than 30 years, died at 86 during the research for this story.) “From the beginning, the faculty was a collection of eccentrics,” says vibraphonist/composer Nicholas Urie, '09. “People who are fierce individuals, and go at teaching with the idea that everyone is and should be as much an individual as possible.”

What Schuller wanted, says Schaphorst, was for students to learn jazz “as it was taught on the bandstand. It was less about a curriculum, more about mentoring in the way that jazz had been taught throughout history, before there was anything like jazz education. Gunther had a trust, and a well-founded one, that the faculty would simply share what they had learned about jazz with these students.”

But Schuller also offered the classical teachers to his jazz students: “Your technical lessons on your instrument were to be taken with the same people the classical musicians studied with,” recalls Hankus Netsky, '78, now the chair of NEC's Contemporary Improvisation department. “He encouraged students to be able to play in the symphony orchestra and in the big band. Gunther wanted the school to produce ‘complete’ musicians. The closest he came was in the jazz department; he couldn't really get the violinists and opera singers to improvise, but he could get the jazz majors to learn some Beethoven.”

The very notion of a jazz degree, as well as the chance to work with

revolutionaries like Jaki Byard and George Russell, began replenishing NEC's dismal enrollment—and even poached some students from the nearby Berklee College of Music. “The Misters Berk were pretty pissed off with me,” Schuller chuckles. “By my creating a jazz degree program, which Berklee did not offer, a lot of Berklee students transferred over to the Conservatory. They got over it, but that shows you again how radical that move was.”

The radical moves didn't end in the classroom. To parallel the classical department's various orchestras, choruses and chamber groups, Schuller and his new faculty began forming jazz ensembles. Byard led a basic big band, playing standards and swing, and Schuller started a Duke Ellington repertory band—innovations at the time, though they've since become staples of scholastic jazz. Other Schuller creations are as novel now as they were then: a Paul Whiteman repertory band, for example, and the New England Ragtime Ensemble.

“Gunther wasn't the kind of conservatory president to just sit around doing administrative work,” says Netsky. “He'd rather hatch wild ideas of what the students could do.”

Third Stream

One of Schuller's wild ideas was to create another fully accredited program for Third Stream music—the marriage of jazz and classical that he'd defined—in 1974. What he had in mind for NEC, however, was never that simple. Schuller wanted to open the boundaries among all genres of music, from all nations and peoples. “There are 300,000 vernacular musics on the face of this globe,” he says. “The idea was always a philosophical point—those musics should integrate, cross-fertilize, but always at the purest level; not just something commercial.”

To that end, Schuller built the program around one man: Ran Blake, the autodidact pianist who was Schuller's protégé and perhaps the greatest exponent of Third Stream. “You can't fully describe what Ran does, except as a remarkable combination,” says Schuller. “What he does is so incredible, and so impressive, and so wide-ranging; sometimes you think you're listening to Schoenberg or something, and other times to Monk and Mingus, and then of course to his own remarkable compositions and style which is all developed through improvisation.”

As much as (or even more than) Schuller, it would be Blake's vision that would define the new department. That vision was expansive—and iconoclastic. “Third Stream classes tended to be excuses to form small little chamber groups of duos or trios, and create our own genre,” Greg Wall, '82, recalls. “It was about being able to come up with a particular musical language to express what you wanted to do. They really wanted to inspire us to come out and be artists, and to have our own voice. And to do that, you have to be as eclectic as possible, to see what's out there, chew it up and see what comes out.”

“Anybody who was an improviser, or played music by ear, tended to fall into Ran's orbit,” says Netsky. Not that Blake made it easy for them: “Ran doesn't believe in using any printed music, so you had to learn everything by ear,” Netsky adds. “Then you'd go into your lesson and play this song you thought you knew, and he'd modulate every two bars! You couldn't follow him; you'd have to go home and work on it.”

Blake's ensembles, coupled with the sheer force of his musical personality, drew many of the jazz students to explore his curriculum as well. Soon the students at NEC were moving freely between programs, permeating both with Schuller's ultimate philosophy: try everything; blur the boundaries between musics. There were ensembles featuring country fiddlers, and Netsky, one of Blake's best pupils, formed the Klezmer Conservatory Band—through which passed future wall-breakers Frank London, '80, Dave Douglas, '83, and Don Byron, '84.

“One thing that's great about NEC is that there's not a huge

emphasis on the naming of things," says Urie. "Nobody worries whether it's jazz, or not jazz; world music or not world music. And so, consequently, the student body feeds off of the faculty's desire for a certain level of ambiguity, which allows us all to mix and match and intermingle in a way that is very natural and open."

"People with musical talent bring their backgrounds into the other musics that they learn to work with," says Schuller. "It's just inevitable. And that was always the dream of Third Stream."

Contemporary Improvisation

Schuller left NEC in 1977, after 10 years, to return to the work of composing and conducting he'd had to neglect in order to administer the school. The Conservatory has continued, however, in his image. Indeed, when Hankus Netsky became jazz studies chair in 1986 and found the program in need of a recharge, he specifically aimed for "what I remembered from Gunther: a very creative program based around jazz as an art form, and around the complete musician, with lots of performing opportunities for students. And when I hired faculty, I looked to hire people who were innovators and good teachers. I feel like we've been able to keep that going now for the last 23 years. That's kind of been the pattern."

Among the current and recent jazz faculty members are groundbreakers like pianist Danilo Perez, saxophonist George Garzone and trombonist/composer Bob Brookmeyer—who started an ensemble called the Jazz Composers' Workshop Orchestra that allows student composers to hear their own work. "You're constantly getting feedback, you're constantly getting to hear what you've done and refine and shape it," says composer and bandleader Darcy James Argue, '02, who had planned to work as a small-combo pianist before being invited to study with Brookmeyer. "That experience, more than anything else, changed my whole concept about composing in jazz." Other innovative alums include Douglas, Bill McHenry, Jamie Saft and Rachel Z.

The Third Stream program changed its name in 1992 to Contemporary Improvisation—but only because the terminology had gone out of fashion. Schuller and Blake's ideas are still very much alive and disseminated there; Blake, in fact, still teaches in the CI department. Around it, the broader music world has largely adopted their inclusive, genre-blending precepts, thanks in part to the Conservatory's graduates. "I think of Beirut, Radiohead, Vampire Weekend, even Crooked Still, which is our own graduates playing a kind of bluegrass fusion," says Netsky. "The other day I drove Gunther home after one of these [40th anniversary] events, and I asked him, 'How do you feel about being the father of alternative rock?'"

"I like to think the spirit and values that were

there at the beginning, when Gunther started the department in 1969, are still there," says Schaphorst. "Respect for the tradition of jazz, but also extending that tradition into the future."

"Sometimes at meetings I'll hear, 'I'm tired of hearing about Gunther's vision,'" adds Netsky. "I say, 'Well, do you have a better one?' The fact is that we're the only school that's articulated that vision, and it's been a very good vision in terms of anticipating where music was actually going."

Those three scant buildings in Boston cast quite a shadow. **JT**

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