

The Jazz Chameleon –

Report of the 9th Nordic Jazz Conference 18.8.–20.8.2010

The 9th Nordic Jazz Conference was held 19.8.–20.8.2010 in the premises of the National Archives in Helsinki, Finland. Before the beginning of the official programme, there was a get-together party at the brand new office of the main organizer, the Finnish Jazz & Pop Archive. The get-together was quite relaxed event with plenty of good food, beverages and, of course, lots of old and new friends from all over the world. We even enjoyed some live music when conference guests played jazzy tunes with piano, bass, violin and clarinet.

After a very enjoyable evening, everything was ready for the first conference day. First we heard the opening words of Janne Mäkelä, the director of the Finnish Jazz & Pop Archive, and Markku Mäenpää, the head of unit of the National Archives. The first lecturer of the day was Pekka Gronow, a legendary Finnish music researcher. His keynote presentation was called “Was jazz invented in Paris in October 1932?” He told us interesting facts of the early days of jazz in France, and how jazz clubs, first named as “Hot clubs”, were opened in all over Europe to spread the joy of jazz. He pointed out how it is quite impossible to define when jazz really started, mainly because the definition of jazz is continually changing and the music called jazz in the 1920s was very different from the present day definition of jazz. He also discussed how and why has jazz gained such a special status among the many different genres of popular music, and would it be possible to find answers to the cultural changes of jazz using the tools of modern musicology.

After a short break started the first session called “Approaches and definitions” which included papers from three different researchers. Olav Harsløf from Denmark analyzed some of the essays of Theodor Adorno who is famous of his negative attitude on popular music, especially on jazz. Adorno wrote many essays in which he attempted to prove that jazz and popular music couldn't be called culture at all. The second speaker was Danish PhD student Ole Izard Høyer whose paper “Defining Jazz...” discussed questions of the genre. It is impossible to create a specific way to define jazz, and it is essential to pay attention also to the social context of the music instead of concentrating only on the musical aspects. The last speaker was Bulgarian music researcher Claire Levy whose paper “Parody rhetoric, intertextuality and the Jazz aesthetics” presented how parody can be part of jazz music. We also heard interesting examples of Bulgarian jazz tunes, which were composed in meters 11/8 and 9/8 that are typical to Balkanese folk music.

The second session “Technologies and disseminations” dealt with jazz in new circumstances and surroundings. Adam Battersby from the UK has studied the influences of technological innovations on Norwegian jazz music. He argued that European jazz is more open to influences than American jazz because Europeans are not so bound to the American heritage. Norway is exceptionally potential place for developing new jazz styles because of the culture funding, supportive atmosphere, and high quality musical education. The second paper, a research of John V. Ward from the USA, presented how the internet has made music globally accessible for everyone. His research concentrated on examining five different download sites where anyone can find music and information about the artists and gain access even to rare publications or out of print recordings. The third presentation was held by British researcher Justin A. Williams. He introduced us two musicians, Russell Gunn and Soweto Kinch, who combine the elements of jazz and hiphop. Both of them challenge the boundaries of genre. In addition to that, they present strong opinions about jazz and questions of the genre in Kinch's blog site and in Gunn's song lyrics.

The first seminar day ended with two roundtables. The first one was chaired by Dr Ari Poutiainen. He introduced us a Finnish research group which is preparing a book on an original Finnish phenomenon called “Jazziskelmä” that can be described in English as “Finnish jazz-pop hit song”. Jazziskelmä was very popular musical genre in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It had elements of jazz, pop, and dance music, and the performers moved somewhere between jazz, film stardom and pop stardom. The singers were always women who typically performed songs in “girlish” style. The song structure differed from the traditional oldies songs. There were also specific jazzy elements that made this genre recognizable, although the name “jazziskelmä” was not yet in use. These kind of songs were very popular also in films and commercials.

The second roundtable had participants from the UK and Norway. The subject was “Rhythm changes: Jazz cultures and European identities”. The research project has 13 participants from five countries, and they are studying the inherited traditions and practices of European jazz cultures. Tony Whyton, the leader of the project, spoke about how jazz often has an effect on the society and on the nation's view of itself. He also examined the Nordic tone by comparing Norwegian and Danish jazz cultures. Whyton also pointed out how the local culture is increasingly affected by global influences. Petter Frost Fadness has conducted case studies of Norwegian and British jazz performers. His research dealt with different improvisation styles that have evolved along with new bands and foreign influences. Andrew Dubber presented how new mediation changes the characteristics of jazz performances. His research examined what happens when video cameras are given to the members of audience or to the performing musicians. He discovered new perspectives

to the musical experience and also noticed changes in performances which occurred only with the presence of cameras.

In the evening, we had time to relax and enjoy a nice dinner at the restaurant of Hotel Marski. After dinner we went to new Birdland jazz club to enjoy the music of the Manuel Dunkel Quartet led by Finnish saxophone virtuoso Manuel Dunkel accompanied by bassist Ville Huolman, drummer Jussi Lehtonen, and Seppo Kantonen behind the piano. The group performed quite an impressive concert including Dunkel's own compositions and some old classics. After the concert there were also open stage jam sessions. We heard groovy tunes played by bassist Wade Mikkola, trumpeter Ted Curson, guitarist Tuomo Autio and special guests from the jazz conference: clarinetist Olav Harsløf and pianist Ole Izard Høyer from Denmark, and violinist Ari Poutiainen from Finland. Altogether, it was a very enjoyable and entertaining evening and a perfect ending for the day.

The second day started with Australian Bruce Johnson's keynote paper "The redemption of jazz". It was a fascinating presentation of jazz in early Australian movies, dealing with both silent films and early sound films. Johnson argued how jazz was first seen as a bad thing that represented the immorality and degeneracy of modern youth. Jazz was associated with urbanization and technological development that seemed to pose a threat to the traditional rural lifestyle and values. The development of sound films improved the status of jazz. Jazz was now associated with the kind of modernization process that increasingly held promises and possibilities of the better society and life.

The first session of the day was called "Histories and hybridizations". Heli Reimann's paper "Constructing Estonian jazz tradition: shifting paradigms during Soviet time" examined the influence of Soviet propaganda and social realism to the Soviet Estonian jazz culture. Jazz wasn't officially forbidden but it was not allowed either. Therefore, the attitude towards jazz was complex. Jazz was seen as a part of the capitalistic culture and the enemy of the Soviet. However, some writers pointed out how jazz was the music of the oppressed people. The second speaker of the session, Deborah Mawer has studied how French classical music has influenced the music of Bill Evans. The improvisation style of Bill Evans is very imaginative but, according to Mawer, it is possible to hear strong influences of French composers like Chopin and Ravel. She presented us some musical examples and notations which clearly proved the resemblances.

Christa Bruckner-Haring has examined the hybridization of Cuban music and jazz by analyzing the works of Cuban pianist and composer Gonzalo Rubalcaba. In his compositions, Rubalcaba

combined elements from jazz and traditional Cuban styles such as danzón and bolero. Bruckner-Haring presented impressive transcriptions that showed us the complex harmonies, variations and rhythmic changes which make the Rubalcaba style so special.

The last roundtable of the conference was presented by musicians Ari Poutiainen, Risto Toppola and Wade Mikkola, all members of the Association of Finnish Jazz Musicians. They were accompanied by Finnish composer and musician Henrik Otto Donner, Danish musician and professor Olav Harsløf and Australian musician and professor Bruce Johnson. They discussed one of the most important issues of jazz culture – the interaction of younger and older generations. In the past, before jazz education was developed, the musicians learned from each other, and the interaction between the experienced musicians and new beginners was continuous. Nowadays, when jazz education is available in conservatoires and music schools, the interaction between generations has decreased. To improve this situation, the Association of Finnish Jazz Musicians has started the Helajazz festival. This annual event offers a venue for the younger and the more experienced musicians to play together and to learn from each other. Not only has the festival been a success story but it has also proved to be a great way to gain popularity for the younger performers who are still quite unknown among the wider audience.

The last session of the day included two papers about musicologies and improvisations. British musicologist Katherine Williams has studied the music of Duke Ellington. Comparing the improvisation style of different variations of “Diminuendo and crescendo in blue” from 1937, 1953 and 1956, she elaborately showed how Duke Ellington's music changed during years. Finally, Benjamin K. Davies examined in detail the improvisation of Bobo Stenson Trio and their version of Alban Berg's “Liebesode”.

The conference was concluded by the closing words of Janne Mäkelä. He spoke briefly about the upcoming Nordic jazz conference that will be held in Stockholm, Sweden in 2012. Admiring the passion and commitment that was heard in the presentations that provided us different perspectives and approaches to jazz culture, Mäkelä gave warm thanks to all the speakers and participants as well as the team of organizers. With 50 participants from 11 countries and exciting programme, the 9th Nordic Jazz Conference was a very successful meeting of jazz researchers and enthusiasts.

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