Unpublished Canadian music for jazz ensemble: Selection and analysis for schools

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Research into unpublished Canadian jazz ensemble music suitable for student performers

This article describes recently completed research into unpublished Canadian jazz ensemble music suitable for student performers. This research is discussed within the context of the John Adaskin Project (Canadian Music for Schools), with particular emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between researchers and practitioners, research and practice.

The John Adaskin Project

In developing research methodology for the selection and analysis of Canadian jazz ensemble music for student performers, Cameron Walter adapted John Adaskin Project research procedures utilizing systematic content analysis and panels of expert practitioners. And following completion of his study as an OISE doctoral dissertation (Walter 1994b), he prepared a teacher’s Guide to Unpublished Canadian Jazz Ensemble Music Suitable for Student Performers (Walter 1994a) as the most recent in the series of John Adaskin Project guidelists.

Since 1973, CMEA and the Canadian Music Centre have jointly sponsored the John Adaskin Project which aims to identify Canadian music suitable for student performers, to acquaint teachers with this repertoire, and to encourage Canadian composers to add to the repertoire. Researchers associated with the Adaskin Project have investigated Canadian music for various large and small ensembles as well as for some solo instruments. The Adaskin Project provided the foundation for Walter’s research. Using a building analogy, Walter’s study can be seen as a building block, joining the work of previous Adaskin Project researchers (Shand 1978, 1986, 1987, 1993; Stubley 1989, 1990; Maxwell 1985; MacInnis 1991). But the building metaphor does not capture the essence of the relationship between Walter’s study and the Adaskin Project. He drew on the work of previous Adaskin Project researchers, adapting their research procedures to meet his own needs, and in so doing he contributed to and strengthened the Adaskin Project. A growth analogy would thus seem more appropriate. The John Adaskin Project provided sustenance for Walter’s research, and his study in turn enriched the plot of land, making it more fertile ground for future researchers. A garden metaphor captures more fully the important interconnections between researchers, and it also emphasizes the fact that Walter’s research was not contained by the Adaskin Project. Like a number of other Canadian music researchers, Walter undertook his research within a university context. The research experience and expertise of faculty advisors such as Howard Russell of OISE, Richard Colwell and Charles Leonhard of the University of Illinois, and Wayne Bowman of Brandon University contributed to the work of Walter (1994b), Shand (1984), and Stubley (1985), and further enriched the Adaskin Project.

The garden analogy also suggests the important relationships between researchers and practitioners. Research designed to identify music suitable for student performers must grow out of knowledge of the teaching situation. Basic to the Adaskin Project research process has been consultation with experienced teachers and the trial of music in classrooms and studios. A final product of each Adaskin Project research study has been a reference guide, designed to assist teachers in selecting music appropriate for their own particular students. To carry the horticultural metaphor further, the research efforts have born fruit in the production of guidelists for teachers (Shand 1978, 1986, 1987, 1993; Stubley 1989, 1990; Maxwell 1985; MacInnis 1991).

As a further connection between research and practice, the detailed guidelines for assessing level of difficulty of music for student performers, developed by Adaskin Project researchers, can provide useful guidance to composers writing new music for student performers.

The close relationship between research and practice is perhaps most essential within the researcher himself. Although Cameron Walter functioned as a researcher as he undertook his study, he drew on his own experience as a teacher and performer as he selected and analyzed Canadian jazz ensemble music suitable for student performers.

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The purpose of this study (Walter, 1994b) was to develop standards and apply them to unpublished Canadian jazz ensemble compositions, in order to identify repertoire suitable for inclusion in the school curriculum. Jazz big band performance materials were

1 Kathryn Cemauskas has completed a study of unaccompanied Canadian flute music which is forthcoming as an Adaskin Project Guidelist.

2 These detailed guidelines will appear in a forthcoming publication of the Canadian Music Education Research Centre, University of Toronto.
evaluated, using data from the following sources: (1) holistic evaluation based on the connoisseurship of experts applied to levels of difficulty, improvisational challenges, technical challenges and musical characteristics; (2) degree of difficulty ratings of selected musical elements which may be quantified for study; and (3) the evaluation of challenges included in improvisation sections of performance materials. Although the research methodology had much in common with previous studies connected with the John Adaskin Project, unique to this study was the application of expert panel knowledge to the location of repertoire and to the evaluation of improvisational challenges.

The identification and location of unpublished Canadian compositions for jazz ensemble

Three educators active as either board of education music consultants or university professors were selected to form Panel 1, nominators. The role of each member of Panel 1 was to submit a list of experienced jazz ensemble teachers who had been involved as teachers, clinicians or adjudicators with outstanding jazz education programs, who had experience teaching instrumental music education at the secondary school and/or post-secondary levels, and who had professional jazz performance experience in Canada.

The lists submitted by the nominators (Panel 1) provided a directory of experienced jazz ensemble teachers eligible to participate in the study. A panel of three jazz education connoisseurs (Panel 2) was chosen from the names which were common to all three nomination lists. No further participation in the study was required of the initial panel of three nominators. The members of Panel 2 were invited to participate in the process of selecting jazz ensemble literature and validating the evaluation process developed through the study.

Panel 2 members were asked to submit names of Canadian composers who met the following criteria: (1) they had composed original jazz ensemble repertoire appropriate to the pre-professional performance level; (2) they had included the element of improvisation within their compositions; (3) they had used the standard jazz ensemble instrumentation; (4) they had made scores and parts of their compositions available for public performance. Initial nominations provided the names of 19 composers who were invited to participate in the study. Each of these composers was asked to nominate additional eligible composers. Fifty-five Canadian composers were finally nominated for participation in the study. All 55 nominees were invited to submit compositions. Seventy-two submissions were received from 21 composers.

Establishment of guidelines for the level of difficulty

The process of establishing guidelines for assessing level of difficulty employed two methods: holistic description and elemental analysis. Literature related to the holistic description of curriculum materials was investigated and adapted to the appraisal of jazz ensemble repertoire. Related literature was investigated to assess guidelines and grading categories used to classify the difficulty of music for student performers. A four-level descriptive adjective scale was selected for the evaluation of unpublished Canadian jazz repertoire. The four levels were defined as follows:

- **Easy** repertoire would be suitable for players who have had less than two years of instrumental music instruction.
- **Medium** repertoire would be suitable for players who have had two to three years of instrumental music instruction.
- **Difficult** repertoire would be demanding for average high school performers who have had over three years of instrumental music instruction.
- **Very Difficult** repertoire would be too demanding for the average high school jazz ensemble, but might be suitable for university, college or professional performance.

Draft level of difficulty guidelines were developed and submitted to the panel of three experienced jazz teachers for revisions and suggestions. Evaluation forms were constructed based on the final guidelines (see Charts One to Four). The level of difficulty of all 72 located scores was assessed, using the guidelines for assessment of level of difficulty and the evaluation forms.

Forty of the 72 scores were judged to be **Very Difficult**. These were considered too challenging for secondary school use. Thirty-two scores were judged to be within a suitable difficulty range for secondary school use. Of these, nine were rated **Medium**, and 23 were rated **Difficult**. No scores were judged to be **Easy**.

Establishment of guidelines for technical difficulty, improvisational challenge and musical characteristics

Related literature was investigated to determine the primary concerns of teachers when analyzing repertoire for student performances. Three draft content analysis frameworks, based on the related literature, were developed: one for analyzing technical challenges (Chart Two), one for analyzing musical characteristics and ensemble challenges (Chart Three), and one for rating improvisational challenges (Chart Four). These frameworks were refined by submitting them to Panel 2, requesting revisions and suggestions, and securing a consensus on a final version of each framework. These analytical frameworks were then tested on four located compositions to verify their usability.

The finalised frameworks were included in the Repertoire Evaluation Form, and were subsequently used when analyzing all the located jazz ensemble literature included in the study. A description of dexterity challenges, articulation vocabulary, embouchure demands, endurance challenges, and independence of individual parts was recorded in a holistic form. A framework of three elements, including Special Effects, Piano Voicing Density, and Ensemble Dexterity received an elemental difficulty rating which was then combined with the holistic rating (see Chart Two).

Evaluation of Improvisational Challenge

Jazz improvisation textbooks were nominated by the expert jazz educators of Panel 2. These texts were surveyed to determine if a common approach emerged in terms of concepts and materials and their order of presentation. Most of the nominated textbooks followed a common approach to sequencing materials for jazz improvisation. The commonality of presentation implies an inherent level of difficulty and a possible progression through the tools for jazz improvisation. The materials follow a sequence which moves from limited materials in use to more complex materials implying an
inclusive materials vocabulary.

The analysis of improvisational challenge in the study included a prose description of that musical element and its function and framework within the selected repertoire. Individual difficulty ratings were assigned to specific elements including the number of improvised solos, duration of improvised solo sections, harmonic density (i.e., frequency of harmonic change) and harmonic language in solo sections (see Chart Four).

Establishment of guidelines for the appraisal of pedagogical value

The literature was reviewed for suggestions concerning characteristics of pedagogically valuable repertoire. Draft guidelines were developed and refined by submitting them to the members of the expert panel for revisions and suggestions. The guidelines were tested on four located compositions to verify their usability.

Guidelines developed by Shand (1984) for the rating of pedagogical value of string orchestra repertoire, and criteria developed by Stubley (1985) for the assessment of Canadian brass chamber music were used as the basis of guidelines for the evaluation of potential pedagogical value of jazz ensemble literature. The inclusion of improvisational challenges of an appropriate level was indicated as a necessary variable for evaluation because of its integral connection with all jazz music. The members of Panel 2 confirmed that a pedagogically valuable big-band jazz composition should:

1. be well-crafted;
2. be written idiomatically for all instruments including rhythm section;
3. have musical interest in all parts;
4. be technically challenging at an appropriate level in all parts;
5. include improvisational challenge at an appropriate level;
6. provide potential for student musical growth.

The finalised guidelines were incorporated in the repertoire evaluation form and applied to the located jazz ensemble literature.

Classroom-Testing

The members of Panel 2 examined all 32 compositions determined to be of suitable difficulty for high school use. The panel selected five of these 32 compositions for classroom-testing, and provided a list of Toronto area high schools with students of appropriate musical ability to perform the designated compositions. Three high schools, selected from this list of schools, were invited to participate in the classroom-testing. Each participating music educator was asked to select and rehearse a minimum of two and a maximum of three of the five compositions. The rehearsals were observed and recorded, and the written and audio tape records of the rehearsals were analyzed to determine indicators relevant to established guidelines.

Findings and conclusions

This study differed from previous analyses of Canadian repertoire in the following ways: (1) its use of two levels of expert panels, (2) the use an expert panel to assist in the classification and sequencing of improvisation materials into a hierarchy of difficulty, and (3) the application of the developed methods of analysis to musical concepts which are unique to jazz.

Seventy-two unpublished Canadian jazz ensemble compositions were identified and located. The guidelines developed in this study were applied successfully to eligible unpublished Canadian jazz compositions. The number of compositions located confirms that there are many unpublished compositions by Canadian jazz composers. Most of the located repertoire was Very Difficult and Difficult. Fewer pieces were rated Medium, and none corresponded to the criteria for the Easy level of difficulty. This indicates a need for additional Canadian jazz composition at the lower end of the difficulty scale. Composers should be made aware of this need. The high quality of submitted compositions resulted from the connoisseurship of the two levels of expert panels who nominated the participating composers. All submitted compositions demonstrated qualities which would contribute to a valuable educational experience. Students and teachers involved in classroom-testing confirmed the appropriateness of this repertoire for secondary school use and reacted positively to the possibility of performing Canadian jazz repertoire.

Dissemination of the research findings

In order to disseminate the research findings and make them accessible to practitioners, A Guide to Unpublished Canadian Jazz Ensemble Music Suitable for Student Performers has been prepared.3 This Adaskin Project Guide provides teachers with information on the level of difficulty, musical style, technical and improvisational challenges, and pedagogical value of the 32 compositions identified as being appropriate for school use. A guide to the Very Difficult repertoire, suitable for college and university level performers, is being published by the Canadian Music Education Research Centre.4 Through these guides, research can have a direct influence on practice in Canadian schools and universities.

Reference List


1 This guide can be ordered by mail from the Canadian Music Centre, 20 Joseph Street, Toronto, ON, M4Y 1J9.

2 Unpublished Canadian Repertoire for University Jazz Ensembles can be ordered by mail from the Canadian Music Education Research Centre, Faculty of Music, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, M5S 1A1.
teachers. Toronto: Canadian Music Centre.

Chart One: Assessment of Level of Difficulty

(1) Holistic Level Rating:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>very difficult</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Holistic Rating

(2) Element Difficulty Rating:

- (a) Key Signatures
- (b) Tempo Average
- (c) Rhythm Patterns
- (d) Trumpet Range
- (e) Trombone Range
- (f) Duration of Piece

Total element difficulty rating

Average element difficulty rating

Elemental Average and Holistic Level Rating Combined

Score conversion to Canadian Rating System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 - 3</td>
<td>easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 - 6</td>
<td>medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 - 9</td>
<td>difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1 - 12</td>
<td>very difficult</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Level of Difficulty Rating:
Chart Two: Analysis of Technical Challenges

Description of dexterity challenges, articulation vocabulary, embouchure demands, endurance challenges, special effects, use of mutes, and independence of instrumental parts.

HOLISTIC DESCRIPTION:

(1) Holistic Level Rating: ( )

(2) Element Difficulty Rating:

(a) Special Effects ( )
(b) Piano Voicing Density ( )
(c) Ensemble Dexterity ( )

Total element difficulty rating ( )
Average element difficulty rating ( )

Elemental Average and Holistic Level Rating Combined: ( )

Technical Challenges Level Rating: ( )

Chart Three: Musical Characteristics and Ensemble Challenges

(1) Holistic Description:

(2) Element Description:

Form:
Style:
Melody:
Rhythm:
Orchestration and Texture:
Balance:
Phrasing:
Expression:

Chart Four: Analysis of Improvisational Challenges

(1) Holistic Level Rating: ( )

(2) Element Difficulty Rating:

(a) No. of Improvised Solos ( )
(b) Length of Solo Section ( )
(c) Chord Frequency of Change: Solo Section ( )
(d) Harmonic Vocabulary ( )

Total element diff. rating ( )
Avg. element diff. rating ( )

Elemental Average and Holistic Level Rating Combined ( )

Improvisational Challenges Difficulty Rating: ( )