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Joy in the "Unsticking"

By Sherry Mazzocchi

During a pandemic, one of the worst things people can do is gather together in a large group and sing.

"That is a core of what we do," said Eli Yamin, founder of Jazz Power Initiative. The nonprofit organization teaches jazz music and singing skills to young people.

Like so many other educational programs, Jazz Power Initiative transitioned from in person classes to online instruction.

And it's been working thus far.

Now that lessons are just a couple of computer clicks away, attendance is way up. Students tend to be more focused because it's just a screen and the teacher. Children are singing and dancing in their living rooms and bedrooms.

"We're happy to be able to connect with each other online. The teachers are so exuberant and passionate that their spirits burst from the screen," Yamin said. "The kids are matching the enthusiasm of the teachers and really identifying with the music in a wonderful way."

These days Yamin is a student as well as a teacher. He is preparing for a Doctor of Musical Arts Degree at Stony Brook University. Part of his studies includes a November 20th online solo piano concert featuring the work of Thelonious Monk, Scott Joplin, Charles Mingus, J. Rosamund Johnson and his own compositions.

When he asked if the concert could also be a fundraiser for Jazz Power Initiative, Stony Brook said yes.

"These things go hand in hand," he said. "One of the biggest reasons why I went to do the doctorate is to try to advance opportunities with the children that I work with."

When he earned his undergraduate degree at Rutgers University 30 years ago, the classes weren't musically integrated. Students took classes in either jazz or classical music. "I'm surprised as I have entered academia again that we really haven't moved the needle too far from where we were 30 years ago," he said. "I think it really important for us to look at jazz music as music, and put it right next to Beethoven, Mozart and all of the great music of the world."

Yamin said campus discussions about Black Lives Matter have recently begun to influence some of the ways music is taught. When he suggested that classes on the tonality of Beethoven and Duke Ellington be taught together instead of separately, the teacher complied with the request.

When people start thinking about classical music at the same time as jazz, Yamin said the results are "amazingly freeing."

"When you are not separating, you can look at what these two gentlemen do with form and what they do with rhythm and melody and how they organize the music. You're actually hearing some great similarities and some very interesting differences. It's wonderfully freeing to break down some



An 1820 portrait of Beethoven by Joseph Karl Stieler.



Ragtime pianist and jazz pioneer James D. Johnson at the piano.

of these walls that have been set up for so long."

This kind of approach allows people to take ideas from Beethoven and combine them with, say, ragtime pianist and jazz pioneer James D. Johnson. "You never run out of ideas. I think that is what this time is about," he said. "How we can get unstuck."

The experienced performer is branching out in his own work.

At his upcoming concert, he will perform his version of Beethoven's Adagio Cantabile (Pathétique op 13).

"This is a first for me and I look forward to seeing how it goes."

Eli Yamin's concert will be performed via Zoom on November 20th between 5 and 6 p.m. There is a suggested \$10 donation.

For more information, please visit jazzpower.org.



An 1820 portrait of Beethoven by Joseph Karl Stieler.



Ragtime pianist and jazz pioneer James D. Johnson at the piano.



Singing together is a core activity for the organization.
Photo: Enid Farber



"You never run out of ideas," says Yamin.



The group works with over 500 youths a year.



Bringing music genres together is "amazingly freeing," says Eli Yamin. *Photo: Jim Cummins*



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