

Jazz on Campus

Jazz at Lincoln Center's Middle School Academy Showcases Youth Class

by Alexander Gelfand

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"SO HOW'S EVERYONE doing today?" flutist Denisse Corporan asks from the stage of Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, on the fifth floor of the Jazz at Lincoln Center complex in New York City. A thicket of camcorders and digital cameras faces her from the floor of the club. Behind her one can see Columbus Circle and Central Park through the wall of windows that gives Dizzy's the best views of any jazz venue in Manhattan. Yet as she schmoozes with the audience, leading them through the lyrics of the Tito Puente classic "Oye Como Va," Corporan is as relaxed and self-assured as any veteran performer. Which is surprising, since she's all of 13 years old, and only began playing jazz this past fall.

What's true of Corporan is true of her bandmates, as well. All 13 members of the first graduating class of Jazz at Lincoln Center's Middle School Jazz Academy attend public school in New York City. All entered the program as 5th to 8th graders last November, and few had ever played jazz before.

According to program coordinator Beatrice Anderson, the MSJA is the first Jazz at Lincoln Center program aimed specifically at middle school students. It's also the first to provide direct instrumental instruction: In addition to attending a four-hour ensemble session every Saturday within the Jazz at Lincoln Center complex, students receive weekly private lessons from the program's 11 faculty members, along with visits from guest teachers like pianist Randy Weston and Jazz at Lincoln Center Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis.

Instructors Ravi Best, Alvin Atkinson and Adam Bernstein beamed with pride as the MSJA ensemble swung its way through standards like "Satin Doll" and "Moon Indigo" during the Dizzy's Club showcase on May 13. The event served as a coming-out party for the students and as a celebration of the program's first year in operation.

"It's been wonderful for us just to see them develop," said Best, a trumpet instructor and ensemble coach, over ham-and-brie sandwiches during the reception that followed the recital. "We didn't know how far they'd develop, or if they'd develop; we only had them four hours a week for six months. They've far surpassed our expectations."

"We are targeting kids who have limited means to pay for lessons," said Eli Yamin, director of the MSJA program. "One of the criteria is that there has to be a financial need."

Prospective students must undergo a rigorous application process that includes auditions, teacher recommendations and parent interviews. Once they're in, the program provides free tuition, along with instruments for those who need them. Listening sessions take place in the Ertegun Jazz Hall of Fame, and classes are held in the Irene B. Diamond Education Center, where students learn the basics of improvisation – though Yamin is careful not to use terms like "jazz theory" and "jazz history."

"I know from experience that's not how to turn on a 12-year-old," said the pianist, who holds a master's in music education from Lehman College and has founded several jazz education programs in New York City. Instead, Yamin and his faculty try to pique their students' curiosity by engaging them in creative play – having them write stories in response to recordings of Duke Ellington's "Echos of Harlem" and "Creole Love Call," for example, or asking them to generate theatrical sketches spontaneously to understand how free improvisation works. Over time, Yamin and Jazz at Lincoln Center's educational division hope to expand the program, increasing student numbers and adding a summer session. "We want a jazz revolution," Yamin said. "We want young people all over America to be crazy about jazz."

So far, the formula seems to be working. Pianist Yimin Peng, who will be attending high school in the fall, paid the program the ultimate compliment. "I'd never played jazz before, and now I love it," said Peng, clutching a bouquet of flowers after the recital. "I wish was I was still in middle school, so I could audition again."

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