



Guitarist Craig Wagner, saxophonist Dimitri Lekveishvili, drummer Moses Ebejyan, bassist Gurgen Ebejyan and others perform a concert at Rabati Castle.

MARTY ROSEN



Mariam Zaqaidze and Nita Gabisonia of Ilia State University



Bero Matchavariani (left), Luka Salagashvili and Soso Tsagareishvili in a workshop



Ana Dvali of Ilia State University participates in a clinic at Tbilisi State Conservatoire.



Dimitri Lekveishvili at Tbilisi State Conservatoire

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Jazz Workshops Bring Students Together in Caucasus Region

By Marty Rosen

THE COMBINATION OF TREMENDOUS musical talent and incredible patience has allowed saxophonist Michael Tracy to become of the most revered educators in jazz studies today. He has been playing and teaching jazz for four decades. When Tracy coaches an ensemble or gives a private lesson, he maintains a relentless focus on technique and details. It's as if his personal clock stops every time he detects an inefficient fingering or a disconnect in the rhythm section, and it doesn't tick again until his students understand what went wrong, why it happened and how to fix it.

But if you ask Tracy what his goals are as a teacher and director of the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program at the University of Louisville, the notion of technique will get only a passing mention. He believes that an educator who focuses solely on technique is losing sight of the whole student. "If we can find a way to connect musical improvisation with all parts of a student's life, all of a sudden there are a multitude of benefits that extend beyond the music," he said. "Learning jazz is like learning a language. Playing together teaches students to communicate and to respect one another. It

teaches students how to lead, how to follow—and that both of those things are important. As an artist and as a teacher, what I love about jazz is its ability to bring people together."

Bringing people together through jazz, at home and abroad, has become Tracy's central mission. At home, he has turned the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program into an attractive destination for international students. Abroad, he's come to be known as a roving jazz ambassador, teaching and performing in every corner of the world.

That same mission—bringing people



Michael Tracy (far right) and Craig Wagner (second from right) conduct a workshop with music students at Tbilisi State Conservatoire.



Local musician Erik Janikyan at Tbilisi State Conservatoire

together—has been central to the career of Helen Mechitova, founder of the Kavkaz Jazz Festival, which over the last seven years has become a fixture on the cultural calendar in Tbilisi, the capital of the Republic of Georgia.

Mechitova's passion has a regional focus and a sense of urgency. Georgia, which just celebrated the 25th anniversary of its independence from the former Soviet Union, is situated in the heart of the Caucasus region. It's a region fraught with tension. In the years since the Russo-Georgian War, which occurred in August 2008, Russian troops have occupied substantial portions of Georgian territory. Two of Georgia's immediate neighbors, Armenia and Azerbaijan, are engaged in a long-simmering border dispute that last April boiled over into what is now called the Four-Day War, which led to some 350 casualties. Neighboring Turkey is faced with myriad domestic and international tensions. And another near neighbor, Iran, has only just begun to engage with the West after years of isolation.

In 2010, Mechitova established the Kavkaz Jazz Festival with the goal of building a pan-Caucasus cultural event that could build cross-border connections in a region where political solutions are rare and fragile—but where it so happens that jazz has deep roots and wide popularity that transcends border, language and religious divides.

According to Armen Manukyan, an Armenia-based jazz critic, scholar and broadcaster, jazz emerged as a popular form in the region in the '30s and was spread throughout the former Soviet Union via Voice of America broadcaster Willis Conover's nightly *Jazz Hour* radio show. Throughout the Caucasus, Manukyan says, musicians in each country have found ways to employ their own distinctive regional sounds and instruments in a jazz context.

Last May, in an article discussing International Jazz Day, English language news

source Georgia Today discussed the country's love of jazz: "There are very few countries where so many youngsters go to jazz concerts as they do in Georgia. This is the victory of Georgian jazzmen who risked their lives and positions, who did not fear the Soviet years and held jazz concerts from the late 1970s."

The article went on to report that the Georgian Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection has hopes that UNESCO will select Tbilisi as an International Jazz Day Global Host City sometime in the near future.

It was against that backdrop that the Kavkaz Jazz Festival had grown. And when Mechitova visited the United States in 2015 through an arts exchange sponsored by the international arts organization CEC ArtsLink, she and Tracy soon found common cause around the idea of expanding the festival to include a series of educational jazz workshops.

The idea found a strong partner in the rector of the venerable Tbilisi State Conservatoire, Reso Kiknadze, who had some goals of his own. Before taking up his administrative post, Kiknadze had built a varied musical career as a composer of contemporary music and a busy jazz saxophonist who can be heard nearly every night in the clubs, cafes and restaurants of Tbilisi. In his new role, he was looking for ways to expand the school's three-year-old bachelor's program in jazz.

Kiknadze said that because his career bridges the worlds of classical music and jazz, he has become aware of the ways in which these two areas complement and inform one another, and feels that it is important to integrate jazz into the conservatory curriculum.

Over the next several months, Tracy and Mechitova sought support for the workshops, and though funds were tight, the project gained endorsements from the Georgian ministries dealing with culture and tourism. In the United States, Tracy gathered support

from the Fulbright Senior Specialist Program, the University of Louisville School of Music and a group of anonymous Louisville donors. And in June, Tracy and guitarist Craig Wagner (a fellow faculty member at the University of Louisville) traveled to Tbilisi to perform at the Kavkaz Jazz Festival and run the workshops.

The festival took place over three days in multiple venues: the Conservatoire's Grand Hall and The Movement Theatre in Tbilisi, and the Rabati Castle in the city of Akhaltsikhe. Crowds responded enthusiastically to concerts by ensembles from Georgia (Reso Kiknadze & Friends, Stumrebi, Kanudosi), Armenia (The Birds, Miquayel Voskanyan & Friends), Azerbaijan (J.E.F. Experiment), Turkey (Tulug Tirpan Quartet) and Iran (Arte Music Group), as well as performances by Tracy and Wagner. Some of the concerts continued into the night, long past the programmed schedule, culminating in riveting jams that brought together players from multiple nations (including students from the workshops) and demonstrated the boundary-shattering power of jazz.

During the daytime, Tracy and Wagner did much of their work. Playing on the fest stages was a pleasure, Tracy said, but the workshop was their primary reason for the trip. "We wanted to offer these students an opportunity to study jazz in a structured environment," he said. "We had no idea what to expect from the students, and they had no idea what to expect from us."

The workshop format included private and small group lessons from Tracy and Wagner, but most of the time was dedicated to ensemble work. All the sessions were free and open to anyone. Participants included students (both instrumental and vocal) and faculty from both the Conservatoire and Ilia State University. Likewise, festival performers from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Iran attended and participated, as did other professional jazz per-



University of Louisville's Michael Tracy (left) and Tbilisi State Conservatoire student Dmitri Lekveishvili

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Natia Ogruashvili of Ilia State University

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formers from the region.

Because classes were still in session at the Conservatoire (and finals were imminent), students came and went as their schedules allowed. Enthusiasm and participation remained high from the beginning and grew steadily over the course of the two weeks.

"I was surprised at the quality of the students," Tracy said. "We knew this was a fairly new program, and I was expecting many more challenges. But one thing was clear: We could see the impact of pedagogical approaches developed by [seminal jazz educators] like Jerry Coker, David Baker, Dan Haerle and Jamey Aebersold."

Wagner agreed. "From the beginning it was obvious these students were really well prepared," he said. "The instrumentalists had a very strong base. We didn't need to spend time on basic musical elements. What they needed was experience with group interplay, ensemble practice and etiquette."

Bero Matchavariani, a talented young guitarist who studies at the Conservatoire with Tamaz Darsavelidze, said, "Our teachers here are amazing. They give us good knowledge, but this was a mind-blowing experience. I knew it was very important to listen to the other members of the band, but I never had the experience to play with a quartet before, so the collective work was the most important thing for me. Now I am more confident onstage."

According to Wagner, offering ensemble experience is a challenge for any program. "It takes a lot of resources if you're going to give students a chance to play multiple times a week in a jazz ensemble," he said. "Just from a logistical standpoint, it's difficult to supply the space and equipment students really need. You can teach some of this in an abstract sense with guided listening. You put on a track and say, 'Check out what Philly Joe is doing here,' or 'Listen to the way Wynton Kelly is comping here—the soloist is really low, so he's going high, or the soloist is really busy, so he's not comping at all.' But ultimately, a student needs an immersive experience to master these ideas. Otherwise, a gui-

tarist can learn all kinds of hip voicings but not really know when or how to use them."

As the workshops proceeded, there was a strong emphasis on simple, practical ideas, such as making sure that rhythm section players positioned themselves to have eye contact with one another. Another tip was that soloists must listen mindfully to what other players were doing. These ideas were illustrated and reinforced with references to particular artists, recordings, online videos and smart-phone apps. The students were hungry for listening advice, so Tracy and Wagner often illustrated their lessons with examples drawn from canonical figures and contemporary artists.

And as it turned out, the diverse mix of workshop participants, which included a number of vocal students—mostly women—from Ilia State University, created fascinating learning opportunities that not only brought together players from different countries, but created an interesting musical and gender dynamic.

"Having the voice students was really fortunate," Wagner said. "Many jazz programs don't have a vocal program—we don't have one yet at U of L. But accompanying vocalists really exposes the challenges of good rhythm section playing. All the instrumentalists really have to focus on listening in a different way. You have to play differently behind a vocalist than behind a saxophone. You have to be much more sensitive to textures and inflections. And for drummers and guitar players, especially, it requires you to really focus on listening—which is really the key to good jazz playing."

The fact that most of the vocal students were women added an important dimension to the workshops. One of the stated goals of International Jazz Day is "fostering gender equality." For Tracy, the participation of the women vocalists offered an opportunity to work toward that goal.

"I was surprised so many women participated," he said. "But it really enriched the experience. In any workshop, regardless of gender, you'll have students who are a bit shy at first and need to be coaxed into participating. But

whether because of lack of experience or social attitudes, at the beginning the women were a bit reluctant to exert themselves as leaders. We worked with them the same way we work with a drummer, a saxophonist or a guitarist. And by the end, you could listen to them improvising, soloing or counting off a tune, and know that they felt very empowered. It's hard to assess, but I would guess that in some way it was a new experience for them."

It certainly was for Ana Dvali, 25, who recently graduated from Ilia State with a double major in music and English. "Our teacher [Irine Ebralidze] talked a lot about Jamey Aebersold, his method and the jazz school," she said. (Ebralidze has published a Georgian text on jazz theory and harmony that is based on the Aebersold method.) Dvali added, "I had experience singing individually, but I didn't have experience working in a band or group. I learned so much from this workshop."

In an email exchange a few weeks after the workshops, Kiknadze wrote, "Our students were inspired by Mike and Craig's playing, and since then, I've observed certain students focusing on their material differently. I've been surprised at how two guitar players, in particular, have advanced since then, taking a couple of big steps in just a month. The singers of Ilia State University were inspired as well, and I expect they will advance faster now."

"I think all the students made amazing progress," Wagner said. "They were so receptive to everything. We saw progress in every session. At first, the ensembles just sounded like four, five, six people playing at the same time. But by the end, you could really hear that they were playing like groups."

Tracy agreed. "From a musical standpoint, I think they made amazing progress. But for me, the great thing was that we had so many festival performers joining us. Just seeing Iranians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Georgians all in the same room, playing music with one another, with no trepidation of resentment, just the joy of sharing music: That's the most valuable thing of all."

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