

Jazz in Estonia

By Michael Tracy – Director, Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program at the University of Louisville

Friends and colleagues gave me the oddest looks when I told them that I was going to Tallinn, Estonia for ten weeks. Their first question was - “where?” Which was followed by - “why?” They were used to my traveling to far away places but this was a new one - off their familiar map. Most did not know where Tallinn or Estonia was located. If they did, they had almost no knowledge of the history, culture or people. I regret to say that I knew little more than they. I knew it was one of the three Baltic states which had been annexed (nice word for overrun) by the Soviets and had recently become independent. I knew where the Baltics were located but was unsure which was Latvia, Lithuania or Estonia. I have always been curious about people and history and this was an opportunity for me to study both first hand. I had much to learn. First a little background on how this adventure began.

Representatives from the Estonian Music Academy (EMA - www.ema.edu.ee) visited the University of Louisville’s School of Music at the end of our fall 2003 semester. They came at the invitation of our former Dean, Herbert Koerselman. Herb had met Rector Peep Lassmann and Vice Rector Marje Lohuaru while attending meetings of the European Schools of Music and had visited the EMA. I remembered his commenting at how remarkable a school it was, that the administration was very open and innovative and that Tallinn was one of the most beautiful places he had ever seen. I discovered that Rectors Lassmann and Lohuaru were in the United States observing jazz programs and had been particularly interested in seeing ours at UofL. They came at a great time - exams. After sitting in on an entire day of juries, the three of us spent a good two hours discussing improvisation of all styles, educational philosophy, the value of a jazz program in a university setting and personal values as they relate to our students and teaching. I was informed that they were interested in beginning a jazz program at their Academy in the near future. I shared with them the challenges we had in developing our program and how exciting it would be to build one from scratch, with a concentrated effort made by administration, faculty and students. During the conversation, I mentioned that I was planning to be on sabbatical the following year. Our meeting ended with dinner and I remember thinking what a great opportunity it would be for their students and faculty. Little did I think that they would be contacting me a few months later with an offer to help them establish their program. I was quite flattered and honored.

Now I had to quickly begin to learn about Estonia, the EMA and consider options for beginning a jazz program where none had been before. Ironically, the very day I received the invitation there was a program on National Public Radio about Estonia and the progressive attitude of their people. It was very enlightening to hear about the history and outlook for this country. The story included information about Estonia’s joining the European Union and the role technology was playing in their desire to join the West. It was exciting hearing about a place where I was going to live, that until a few months ago I knew almost nothing about.

This was a great opportunity for me professionally. I am very proud of our program at the University of Louisville. We have come a long way but it was not easy and there is still much to do. There were the typical obstacles that could be found in any established school or department of music. Everything seemed to be an uphill battle. Jazz was for many years a dirty word and looked down upon. Many thought jazz was unworthy of study in an academic setting. It was thought that it couldn’t be

taught and that one just knew how to do it. Fortunately those days are over, for there are now many excellent programs throughout our country and many overseas. Jazz now is playing an equal and vital role in music education. I looked upon the challenge of helping to establish a new program at the EMA as one vastly different from my previous experiences. Here the administration was actively seeking the establishment of a program. They were taking the time to observe quality programs and researching what was right for their faculty and students. I dare say that I know of no other administration who approached establishing a jazz program in this fashion. Most programs just evolved, usually on the back of one dedicated individual. This would be different.

Early in the summer I began communicating with Jaak Sooäär, a fine guitarist who is director of the EMA's jazz program. We started to develop a time table for my stay and possible teaching activities. Soon I was informed that the Academy had requested that I be accepted into the Fulbright Senior Specialists program. This is a relatively new designation within the larger Fulbright program. It is "designed to provide U.S. faculty and professionals with opportunities to collaborate with professional counterparts on curriculum and faculty development, institutional planning and a variety of activities". This was another excellent opportunity for me and I am most grateful to the Academy for helping me to become part of the Fulbright family. In addition, the Fulbright helps to fund otherwise difficult, if not impossible, educational activities. Without the help of the Fulbright I soon discovered that the EMA would not be able to support a sustained stay.

It was determined that my time in Estonia would be in two parts. The first would be at the beginning of their academic year, thus enabling me to begin working with their students immediately. This visit would be approximately three weeks in length. The second visit would be six to seven weeks in length and occur toward the middle to end of the term. I would then be able to work more in depth with the group collectively and with each individual. The EMA then began their process of selecting their first group of students. It was their decision to limit the size of this group to essentially a combo. Everything was now in place for my work to begin.

My wife and I arrived in Tallinn in late August to find a beautiful, medieval city with a charm not found in America. A castle with numerous towers surrounded the old town. Within the walls were a variety of churches each with their own unique tower, a spectacular Russian cathedral, cobblestone streets and many buildings dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries. Each structure has been maintained and continues to function as an active part of the city. We found the people to be very proud of their heritage and yet eager to embrace the future, technology and all. The weather was quite a change from the Ohio Valley. It was cool to brisk this time of year. While the structures were impressive, the most amazing aspect for me was the sky and its sunrises and sunsets. They are most stunning, with various layers of clouds and colors - each changing by the second as the wind gusts through the city. It was like living in an impressionist painting as it was being created.

The first jazz class at the EMA included Ahto Munak - trumpet, Margus Männa - tenor sax, Liina Saar - vocal, Paul Daniel - guitar, Henno Kelp - bass, Ahto Abner - drums. This proved to be a fine group of students who were both eager to learn and fun to work with. One unusual aspect of the group was that they were mature students, between the ages of 25 and 40, graduate-age students. They were truly committed to their education and getting as much out of our time together as possible. There were also a number of other students interested in studying jazz who were not part of the degree program, pianist Tõõnu Laikre and saxophonist Danel Aljo. They attended almost every session and

were a great asset to our group - our sextet became an octet. The group was remarkably well balanced and, while not seasoned jazz players, they were very gifted instrumentally and musically with more than a basic knowledge of the jazz idiom. Regular classes included jazz theory, improvisation, combo and private applied lessons.

Raul Soot, an Estonian and excellent saxophonist/arranger who had recently graduated from Peabody University in Baltimore, had just been engaged by the Academy to teach the jazz students. Raul would prove to be an excellent resource for both the students and myself. He would be stepping in to continue classes between my visits and would eventually teach all of these courses once I completed my stay.

In addition to these classes, there was a Jazz Ensemble or Big Band at the Academy which was made up of both jazz and non-jazz students. Teet Raik directed the ensemble which met once a week. This too was an excellent group especially when one considers their limited rehearsal time, diverse students and relative inexperience in the idiom. Regardless of the material, the ensemble played very well technically and always musically. The jazz majors were the core of this ensemble which helped to add continuity and a high level of musicianship. Performers in this ensemble included:

Saxophones: Danel Aljo (AS1), Jandra Puusepp (AS2), Margus Männa (TS1),
Kristjan Mazurtchak (TS2), Eha Sõelsepp (BAR)
Trumpets: Ahto Munak (TP1), Ivo Jürisson (TP2), Marti Suvi (TP3), Peep Geraschenko (TP4)
Trombones: Johannes Kiik (TRB1), Anton Besschotnov (TRB2)
Rhythm: Paul Daniel (g), Jüri Kõlvart (pn), Henno Kelp (b), Ahto Abner (drs),
Aleksandra Anstal (drs, vibes, perc)
Vocalist: Liina Saar

There were also meetings which were more like mini history classes where I showed DVDs and played recordings of the jazz masters. It was fun being able to show them material which they had never been able to see previously. Another positive was that we got to just hang out. This was great for me for I got to know more about them, their backgrounds and the evolving history of Estonia.

I was also called upon to help modernize and expand their library's jazz texts and recordings. I was able to purchase classic recordings, acquire a variety of texts, play-along material and other types of resources. This was done with EMA funds and donations by interested third parties.

My first visit went very well and much was accomplished. I left the students with specific assignments and hopefully a fresh, graduated way of looking at and listening to jazz music. I too now had a better understanding of what needed to be done and some ideas on how to accomplish our mission.

Returning in October was more of a challenge for joining my wife and I were our eleven-year-old twins, Lake and Jenna. Both are seasoned travelers having just spent a month in Brazil earlier this summer. They also are involved in music - Lake on piano and saxophone, Jenna on piano and harp. Being away for six to seven weeks from familiar settings of home and friends could be difficult. They did marvelously, adapting to my frantic schedule and their new found independence in a foreign land. School work was done via the web with a lot of reading and writing about their experiences. Being in Tallinn also afforded us the opportunity to show them more of Europe. During our stay we visited

Helsinki, Stockholm, Berlin and London. They were able to experience history, not from a book but first hand. In addition, each enrolled in a class that taught them what it was like to be a knight in the middle ages. They had an outstanding instructor, Allan Bernard, who put them through the rigors of learning to use medieval weapons (fake of course) and a strenuous regime of exercise necessary to live in another time. They loved it!

Course work at the Academy picked up where we left off in September. Raul was now working with them on ear training while they also had courses in piano and rhythm. I continued to focus on improvisation and various ways to approach playing. The group also began to develop a recognizable repertoire of standard jazz literature. Playing opportunities also became more available. In the last few weeks of my stay, the combo performed on a national television show and at two venues in the Tallinn area. They were asked to do more but had to decline due to time constraints with class work. There will be more opportunities.

Our final project was for the Combo and Jazz Ensemble to perform their fall concert for Eesti Jazziliidu (www.estjazz.ee) at Vanalinnastuudio on December 3. It was an exciting evening since most of the individuals had never performed in a club setting with so many listening. Some in the Jazz Ensemble had never improvised in front of people before. It was a packed house and very appreciative audience. While there were a few nervous moments at the start, the groups played the best I had ever heard them. I could see them becoming more and more comfortable and relaxed. It was obvious to all that they were enjoying playing. What a great way to end my time in Estonia!

The jazz faculty and administration are now poised to continue. We discussed ways in which I could remain involved with their program and possible options for growth. It is an exciting time for them and I trust the jazz program of the EAM will soon become another vital component in their very successful musical curriculum.

I wish to thank the following: Rector Peep Lassmann and Vice Rector Marje Lohuaru for their forward thinking and trust in my abilities. Herbert Koerselman for opening the door. Jaak Sooäär, Raul Soot and Teet Raik for their willingness to try new ideas and helping me adapt to their system. Vice Rector Margus Pätlas, Professor Olavi Kasemaa, Jane Heinsoo and the staff for their assistance to me and my family. Thomas Hodges, Public Affairs Officer at the American Embassy in Estonia, for supporting my efforts and the many other cultural events throughout Estonia - you are a vital resource. To the people at the Fulbright Senior Specialists program, for without your support my visit would not have been possible. And finally, to the students who were willing to let me into their lives, let me challenge and encourage them, for reminding me to speak English a little more slowly, for putting up with my constant questions about them and their country, and for putting up with my bad jokes. I had a wonderful time and learned a great deal - I will never forget you or your city. Amazing what can happen in a year!