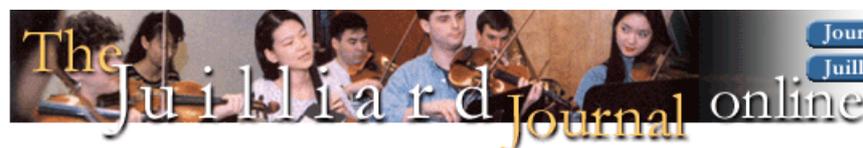


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## Jazzin' It Up in a Virtual Concert

By LISA B. ROBINSON

Divergent time zones and musical styles came together on March 26 when jazz students from Juilliard and South Africa met for a virtual “Jazz Conversation.” Taking place as part of the Cape Town International Jazz Festival, the one-hour workshop brought together a five-piece combo of Juilliard musicians and an up-and-coming South African group, the Kyle Shepherd Quartet, in a compelling demonstration of emerging technology.

Offered as part of the festival’s weeklong series of educational pre-concert events, the workshop gave each group the opportunity to perform two numbers, with time after each selection for commentary and questions from artists in the other location. Juilliard faculty member and acclaimed saxophonist Ron Blake led the event on the Juilliard side, with noted pianist and jazz educator Darius Brubeck as the Cape Town host.



*Left to right.* Juilliard jazz students Pete Van Nostrand, Paul Tarussov, Andrew Klein, and Brandon Lee, exactly as they appeared onscreen to South African musicians participating in “Jazz Conversations.”

As if to underscore the geographical distance between the participants—approximately 7,500 miles—the two groups offered a study in contrasts in their choices of repertoire and presentation styles. Debonair in coordinated suits and ties, the Juilliard musicians—Brandon Lee, trumpet; Paul Tarussov, trombone; Donald Vega, piano; Pete Van Nostrand, drums; and Andrew Klein, bass—offered virtuosic, high-energy renditions of Thelonious Monk’s “Well You Needn’t (It’s Over Now)” and “Five Nights,” an original composition by Juilliard alumnus Marshall Gilkes. The casually attired Cape Town ensemble—Kyle Shepherd, piano; Claude Couzens, drums; Buddy Wells, saxophone; and Chantal Willie, bass—played two original compositions by Shepherd, which evoked the South African landscape with their expansive forms and the haunting sound, in the second piece, of the Khoisan mouth bow. The use of South African cultural elements made a favorable impression on Blake, who commented that Shepherd’s eclectic compositions sounded “very fresh, very 21st-century.”

The influence of geography came up again when one of the Cape Town musicians asked the question, “Does being in New York City—as opposed to Missouri, New Jersey, or even Cape Town—make a difference in the development of your artistry?” Lee responded, “Yes, access to performance opportunities and listening to jazz are greater in New York than anywhere else. The greatest learning opportunity is just going out to clubs and hearing performers who are 20 times better than you—it’s irreplaceable.”

The workshop was conceived and produced by Tunde Giwa, Juilliard’s director of information technology. Videoconferencing equipment and technical support were provided by Ericsson. Reflecting on the event, Giwa noted, “From our point of view in I.T., the virtual event with the Cape Town International Jazz Festival was largely experimental. We set out to prove that, using off-the-shelf technologies, it is possible to create meaningful artistic and educational interaction between parties separated by significant distance. We think that the experiment succeeded. The participants on both sides of the exchange reported being very intrigued by the event. While the audio quality could have been better, it did not diminish the outcome significantly. There is no doubt that future exchanges can be even better. Recent experiments using more advanced tools have already shown that, given enough bandwidth, we are able to achieve HD-quality video and fully uncompressed, CD-quality audio. As we continue to improve our network infrastructure and add new capabilities, we expect to be able to have even richer exchanges of this type.”

Although the event attracted scant audiences—a few interested onlookers in Juilliard’s Room 575 and in the Cape Town auditorium—its implications were immense. South African journalist Gwen Ansell characterized the workshop as “possibly the most exciting

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event of the Cape Town International Jazz Festival” in terms of its potential for artistic collaboration. Imagining future festivals in which the concerts could be “relayed digitally (and free) to community halls across the Cape, a player in New York taking a solo with a band on the Rosie’s stage,” she reflected, “Why was that Juilliard experiment so exciting? That’s why.”

With improvements in technology and cost effectiveness over the past few years, the use of videoconferencing has become increasingly widespread, enabling doctors to demonstrate surgical procedures to colleagues around the world, U.S. undergraduates to serve as English tutors for students in South Korea, and a Marine stationed in Iraq to witness the birth of his first child in Oklahoma, to name just a few applications. At Juilliard, cellist Richard Aaron, who joined Juilliard’s faculty in 2007, has used videoconferencing technology to give lessons from his studio in Michigan on occasions he was unable to be in New York. In the future, projects utilizing this technology will no doubt continue to unite individuals, promote cultural exchange, and enrich the performing arts world in ways previously unimagined.

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