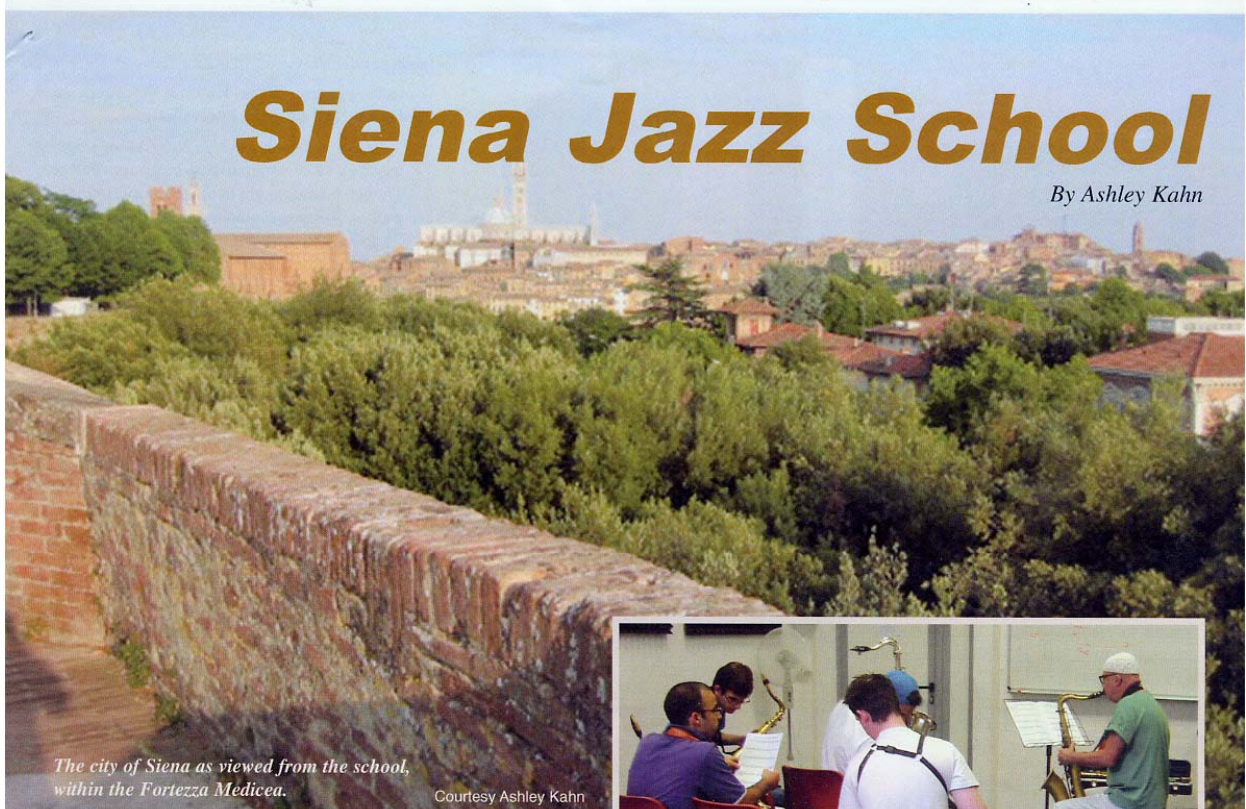


Magazine/Newspaper: Jazz Education Journal (Vol. 38, Issue 6, June 2006, Page(s): 41 – 44)
Title: Siena Jazz School
Author(s): Ashley Kahn
Country - Language: USA – English



Siena Jazz School

By Ashley Kahn



The city of Siena as viewed from the school, within the Fortezza Medicea.

Courtesy Ashley Kahn



School instructor Claudio Fasoli works with students during class.

Courtesy Ashley Kahn

There's nothing like Tuscany in the summer! Rolling green and tan hills under the bluest of skies. Walled, hilltop cities that maintain the sights and flavors of centuries long gone. Cobblestoned plazas surrounded by medieval architecture still occupied by local residents. The restaurants still serve salty, "chinta" sausage and thick steak Fiorentino, fresh pasta and aged Parmesan, and a crisp white wine called Vermentino Antinori that makes the tongue sing.

Siena is one of the most idyllic and historic of the towns in "Tuscany-land" (as American tourists dubbed the region; Brits call it "Chianti-shire"). At the crown of the city, sits a red-bricked fortress, a reminder of a time when nearby Florence—a day's journey to the north—held Siena under armed occupation. The crest of the Medicis, the leading Florentine family in the 15th and 16th centuries, is still visible on the garrison's sloped walls when one visits the wine store or "Enoteca"(wine bar) downstairs.

Before this all reads too much like a travelogue for epicureans (though culture and context are a big part of the story), the true focus at hand is what currently takes place on the upper levels of that converted fortress.

Tuscany can be hot in mid-July, and that's difficult not to notice in one of the annex rooms in the garrison courtyard, where air-conditioning is nonexistent. But to the students of trom-

bonist Giancarlo Schiaffini, the temperature is hardly noticeable as they deal with an artful deconstruction of Neil Hefti's supple gem, "Lil' Darlin'" (a less disjointed, more straight ahead re-working of "Jumping with Symphony Sid" filters in from the next classroom).

It's an unusual mix of instruments—amplified harp, tenor saxophone, electric piano, guitar, bass, and drums. Schiaffini quickly runs through the form, reminding his students of the order of musical events for the piece: a pointillistic introduction, followed by the melody stated by the bass, and a series of jaunty, blues-based solos on sax, guitar, harp, and piano. The performance is to end as it began—the music loosening itself from its form, introducing more silence until the tune fades away. It's unorthodox and allows much room for interpretation and improvised play. The students are all focused, sweating a bit, and smiling.

Fortezza Medicea, through the support of the town, is the site of the Siena Jazz Foundation, or "Fondazione Siena jazz." The 28-year-old school began as a group of friends in a local garage, and today has grown into one of Europe's leading jazz-focused institutions. It is

a charter member of the Holland-based International Association of Schools of Jazz (IASJ), with a student body spilling out of the 25 classrooms situated in and around the Fortezza. The same site that once housed medieval *carabinieri* now draws a force of young jazz students arriving from all points in Europe and, once in a while, the U.S.

Not bad for an institution that has yet to attain official status, and has only recently been deemed a non-profit. "We have never been formally recognized by the Italian Ministry of Education," said Franco Caroni, one of the school's original organizers in 1978, and its director since 1990. "There are talks currently going on to reform private musical education, and Siena is in position to become the first publicly recognized private jazz institution in Italy."

The immediate (and desired) effect of such recognition would be financial. But even without it, the school has maintained a respectable growth rate through the years. A three million lira (about \$3000 US) grant from the city



Courtesy Ashley Kahn

Director Franco Caroni gives last minute instructions to one of the many festival volunteers.

sparked the school's first year, enabling the school to hire three musicians/instructors for a student body of 18. This past year, the school's budget topped 1.2 million Euros, as it welcomed 540 students for the full year, and an additional 200 for the summer session.

Caroni lists local businesses and provincial government grants as primary sources of revenue beyond tuition (900 Euros for a full year; 200 for the summer), focusing on the substantial support of the famed local bank Monte dei Paschi di Siena (the world's oldest continuously active savings and loan). He also mentions that the school receives funding to produce "three series of concerts in the summer that uses all public spaces of Siena."

"There's jazz at the Enoteca that presents the instructors' bands—some of which are very famous in Italy. There are jam sessions with mostly student bands in the *contradas* (neighborhoods). And then two special *concerti*—sometimes international acts like Dave Liebman or John Scofield and Dave Holland with ScoLoHoFo. Sometimes it's top Italians, and opening will be a student big band."

Another gauge of the school's progress through the years is in its academic approach. "In the beginning it was very organic and independent," reports Caroni. "When we started we knew that the jazz education in the U.S. was further developed; but instead of that shaping our approach we started by choosing whatever we wanted to learn, and created workshops. After three or four years of that, we developed a clear picture of the curriculum that we wanted to implement."

The school's current curriculum is an amalgam of basic music classes, theory, and instrumental instruction—not unlike most American



Courtesy Ashley Kahn

Students jam in the *contradas*' gardens.

jazz schools. What differentiates the Siena approach is twofold: a marked emphasis on integrating all styles of jazz into every class, from swing and bebop to free and avant-garde. And related to that sensibility is the freedom each Siena instructor has to improvise, change and refine one's own class.

It's an extremely influential method in Italy. Not only because most Siena instructors are active, working musicians, but also because the school has proven to be the launching pad for an entire generation of improvisers. "Almost everyone who plays jazz in Italy has studied in Siena," states Caroni matter-of-factly.

The summer Siena afternoon light pours through the window as saxophonist Claudio Fasoli, an instructor at the school for 25 years, leads a third level saxophone class. In the seats are four tenors and one alto: three Italians, a Frenchman, and an American. They are taking

turns playing Eddie Harris's "Freedom Jazz Dance" and studying intervallic values.

Fasoli is best known in Italy as an original member of a seminal fusion group, Perigeo. Though he has taught in other schools in Italy as well as Austria, Finland, and the U.S., he said, "it sounds strange but only Siena allows me to be more a musician than a teacher. In most instrument classes, there are only four or five students—that's the perfect size, and I only do two combo classes a semester."

Fasoli offers his third-level class a lot of individual attention. He comments on technique and sound, as the students help each other with fingering. Then he begins to expound on how school can lead to regulation and conformity in sound while the music itself leads to individual expression. It's the core of his philosophy.

"I never liked to teach in a conservatory," Fasoli explains later. "I prefer a clinic kind of

approach—one or two weeks to tackle certain problems with students. When you have to teach classes the same topic again and again, in the same type of schedule—it takes away from the creative."

"School, in its nature, goes against the essence of music. I tell my students, the better you get, the more cautious you have to be about the difference between what you're studying and what you're playing. Yes, you have to work and work—but you have to reserve time for the poetry of music and what comes spontaneously. So

if you study scales for years, then you play scales in the end."

Fasoli offers examples of exercises he has developed to encourage a balance of practiced technique and musical freedom. "When I'm teaching combos and they're reading out of the Real Book, I'll underline every other two bars and tell them not to play there—to be silent, then come back for five. This takes the student out of a conditioned situation and they realize that the music continues even if they don't play—even better sometimes. The natural tendency is to play too many notes and I try to wake them up from that, and give breath to the music. Another device that I sometimes use in my private lessons is to record a student soloing on an Aebersold play-along of a standard like 'All the Things You Are' or 'Solar'. Then we go back to the beginning and discuss the solo for 30-45 minutes from the perspective of tone and



Tomaso Lama Quartet with Tomaso Lama (guitar), Paolo Ghetti (bass), and Fabio Petretti (tenor sax). Not pictured: Massimo Manzi (drums).



Michael Heller (sax) plays with his ensemble class at the jam session in the Contrada of the Tartuca (Tortue).



Faculty members Claudio Corvini (trumpet) and Pietro Leveratto (bass) during their group set in the Enoteca Jazz Club.

timbre, then the rhythmic approach and the harmonic/melodic approach. Finally we discuss if the solo has unity, the way it develops and its dynamics, and how it works emotionally. Some students don't want to be recorded, because this puts them in front of themselves and that can be too uncomfortable. I realize I am there to help them in a collaborative way—trying to be very supportive—because I am still working on this myself."

"I was most apprehensive about language when traveling—but now since classes began it's the performance aspect that has me worried," laughs Michael Heller, one of the tenor students in Fasoli's class. It turns out most of his instructors (save the larger lectures on analysis and history) easily accommodate him by speaking in both Italian and English. As Heller discovered, most of the students also have little trouble communicating in English.

"The first question I get is 'you're from the U.S.? What part?' When I say New York City they ask, 'What are you doing here?'"

Heller is the lone American in Siena's summer session. A 24-year-old graduate of Columbia University, he's currently enrolled in the jazz history master's degree program at Rutgers University. He also has taught research classes himself, ran the jazz department at Columbia's radio station, and helps produce Vision Festival—New York City's longest-running avant-garde jazz celebration.

But little in his education had made him aware of Siena.

"When I saw the school's website I was blown away by the staff. They're all big, recognizable names from the Italian scene, like [trumpeter] Enrico Rava, [pianist] Stefano Battaglia, [clarinetist] Mauro Negri . . . [Professor] Lewis Porter had played Negri in class at Rutgers."

Well into the second week of the session, Heller provides an American perspective on the Siena experience. "I would compare this a little to a jazz camp in the States—that's the closest parallel. A lot of the classes are like the U.S. Today we had to think of a tune that opens with an interval and people were yelling out all the usual ones—"Here Comes the Bride," a perfect fourth. You can find that in any ear training class anywhere. And what Claudio was showing us about finger memory, about not practicing scales all the time so your finger always goes to the root, that's not just Italian. Level 3 classes in America would discuss this too."

But the differences, Heller states, were obvious from the start. "I noticed that among the students the idea of identifying themselves as one style or another is a lot less pronounced. They seem to be a lot more accepting."

"I'm in an analysis class with 75 students. Stefano Zenni is teaching, and he definitely has a very different approach from anything I've experienced in the U.S. He gave a really good talk on how the Real Book is over-utilized by musicians and really doesn't take into account countless innovations in jazz. There's hardly anything in there that's not AABA. Zenni played us Ellington's "On a Turquoise Cloud," "Rouge" from *Birth of the Cool*, and "Salt Peanuts"—which is in the Real Book but no one thinks anymore of how the original recording has three transitions, plus an intro and the coda, and subdivisions. Zenni covered that."

"Then again, I got into a combo class and the first thing we played was from the Real Book. In Francesco's class we'll be concentrating a lot more on later jazz styles than most U.S. classes would."

"Francesco" is Francesco Martinelli—a jazz educator, journalist, archivist, and Siena's first instructor specializing in the history of jazz. His classes—spoken in Italian and English—are among the most popular of Siena's summer session.

"It's impossible to cover the full history of jazz in twelve one-hour classes, so I focus my lessons on the things that they are less likely to know about, like—anything that happened before 1945 including major musicians like Bix Beiderbecke or James P. Johnson. It's not always Ellington to Coleman Hawkins to bebop.



Courtesy Fondazione Siena Jazz

Claudio Fasoli (tenor) and Giampaolo Casati (trumpet) during an impromptu faculty concert.

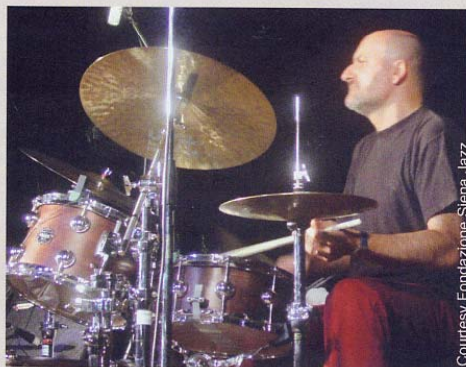
“After 1945, it’s things that are still on the fringe of the jazz canon—like Henry Threadgill’s 1970s recordings or other non-fusion musicians of that decade who seem to be forgotten in a black hole. But even in the best-known time period there are major gaps, like many of them never heard about Lennie Tristano or Andrew Hill.”

“I try to instill the idea that there is a wealth of artistic knowledge that has been obscured—not willingly—by the difficulties that jazz artists had to overcome. My last lesson I usually try and introduce them to various European jazz musicians—they might know about [Norwegian saxophonist] Jan Garbarek, but not about [British saxophonist] John Surman.”

Martinelli also acts as the school’s librarian, and has been assembling an archive of recordings (in all formats, from 78s to mp3s), literature (books and publications in all languages), and memorabilia to assist students in their individual study. In what he calls the “sancta sanctorum”—the climate-controlled racks holding mostly vinyl—he displays a one-of-a-kind, audition copy of a Charlie Parker 78. But he remains proudest of the latest technological addition—a 30-station intranet linked to external hard-drive containing a substantial percentage of the library’s music holdings in digital files.

“We’re still transferring from vinyl, but already it makes it so easy for the students who want to hear more of what we’ve discussed in class. A case in point: playing them a Herbie Nichols piece which sent them running back to the archives—and then to Elmo Hope . . .”

Martinelli thinks for a second of the new technology around him, and adds: “I think that what is special about Siena is not just the technical, or the musicianship that comes from



Courtesy Fondazione Siena Jazz

Professional artist and faculty member Ettore Fioravanti leads his group, Belcanto, during an open air concert in one of the villages near Siena.

here. I think it’s special because it tries to help the students experience the widest range of choices of the different languages that are under the jazz umbrella.”

As of spring 2006, the Siena Jazz Foundation is in full swing, finishing up one year and readying for another summer session. The long-awaited accreditation from Italy’s ministry of education has yet to arrive, but the students continue to pour in from all over Europe, while Italy’s top improvisers take on teaching roles and meet them in an historic fortress.

As I said before, an inescapable part of this story is Siena—and Tuscany. “The Italian aspect is a huge draw. I would’ve come here to drive a dump truck!” says Heller. “But that I can come here and relax and play and talk to people about music is really exciting.”

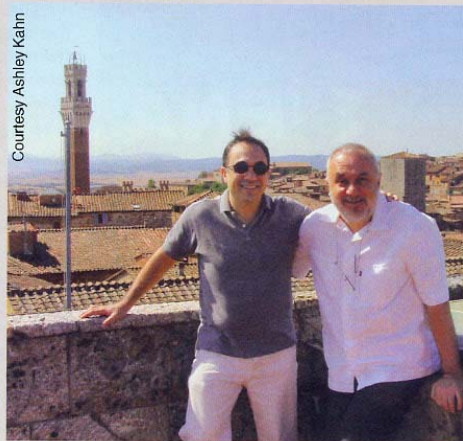
In one voice, various school administrators admit a desire to see more American students—and musicians—traveling to Siena. Says Zenni:

“I would like to see more Americans, because I feel they have a lot to offer us that we don’t have here. At the same time I think we have stuff for them that they don’t have.”

While in Siena I had made it a point to ask every instructor with educational experience on both sides of the Atlantic to compare the approaches they encountered. Perhaps Claudio Fasoli shared the most revealing answer. “It’s not that the American system is better than the Siena idea,” he smiled, adding what could be construed as the essential philosophy of the Fondazione Siena jazz: “I insist to my students that they do not adopt my approach as the only one, rather there are all possible paths to the same end of jazz education—producing better, more creative, more individual jazz players.”

For more information visit www.sienajazz.it.

Courtesy Ashley Kahn



Author Ashley Kahn (left) with Siena Jazz School Librarian and History of Jazz instructor Francesco Martinelli.



Ashley Kahn is an author, music journalist, and radio essayist. His voice is often heard on National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition,” and his recent titles include *The House That Trane Built: The Story of*

Impulse Records, A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane’s Signature Album, and Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece. He has served as a music editor at VH1, as the primary editor of Rolling Stone: The Seventies, and has traveled with such artists as Paul Simon, Henry Threadgill, Peter Gabriel, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Cassandra Wilson, and Debbie Harry & The Jazz Passengers.