

# Jazzman Sets Tin Ears Ringing

By ROBBIE WOLIVER

**S**OME people think that they have tin ears and that there is nothing they can do about that. But Robert Hinz does not believe in the condition. He says students can be taught to hear, understand and intelligently reproduce any musical phrase.

Dr. Hinz, 47, is a pianist, music teacher and music theorist who received his master of music degree from the Eastman School of Music and his doctorate in piano performance from New York University.

When he is not writing articles or books ("The George Shearing Songbook" and "The Artistry of Bill Evans, Vol. 2," both published by Warner Brothers) or recording (he has released two CD's, "Instead of Words" and "Flying Colors"), he is composing music, performing or practicing. He spends at least 12 hours a day immersed in music. And he is spending extra time preparing for an afternoon trio recital at the Long Beach Public Library Nov. 19.

One of his main interests is improvisation, and he just completed his latest manuscript, "The Improviser's Guide to Melodic Embellishment." His goal is to teach improvisation, a technique many thought was impossible to learn.

Dan Faulk, a professor of music at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and a jazz historian and researcher, says that Dr. Hinz is right on the mark. "I completely agree that the ear can be trained in that way," he said. In fact, Mr. Faulk claimed that he had met only one student who was unable to improve what many call tone deafness.

"Those people have just not trained the voice and ear to react, and that can be changed," Mr. Faulk said.

Dr. Hinz compares it to children learning language by listening to their parents speak. "It gives them the skills to speak spontaneously later on," he said. "In order to say something, you have to learn grammar and vocabulary. It's the same with music."

In melodic improvisation — which according to Dr. Hinz is "the cornerstone of jazz" — the musician goes through the process by working out different approaches to a music composition over the harmonic structure or chord changes.

"Through the years I had a sense that it was a common misconception that you cannot learn improvisation," he said. "It's kind of a belief, a



Phil Marino for The New York Times

Robert Hinz, pianist, music teacher and music theorist, says that contrary to popular belief, improvisation can be taught.

subject that was never approached." But Dr. Hinz felt so strongly about the ability of people "to improve their ear," he has made it his life's work. He teaches about 25 private students, from advanced jazz players to beginner classical pianists.

"On a very important level, a big part of hearing what's there in the music is knowing what to listen for," he said. "And knowing what to listen for is based on your knowledge of the melodic or harmonic vocabulary of the musical style."

He supports the fundamental premise that it is not one's ear that is strong or weak, but rather knowledge of the music.

In his studio apartment, the Plainview native spends his off hours playing his 25-year-old black Yamaha studio upright, an instrument he calls his "prized possession."

"It's a great instrument," he said, "Beyond belief. Even my tuner is blown away every time he works on it."

At first, he said, he never played an instrument quite like it, "nothing as clear or beautiful," but then he remembered the time he played Arthur Rubinstein's piano, after returning to a recital hall the day after the pianist performed.

He credits "the Keiths" with his love for music — the jazz pianist Keith Jarrett and the jazz-rock musician Keith Emerson. "From them, I learned the unlimited places a keyboardist can go."

Dr. Hinz's work ranges from pop mainstream jazz (a little edgier than what you would hear on CD-109) to more traditional, or what he calls "straight-ahead" jazz, similar to Mr. Corea and Mr. Jarrett. He performs with trios and quartets in clubs, libraries and recital halls. If he gets the chance to play, he's happy.

Another reason for him to be cheerful nowadays is the sudden burst of interest from overseas. He has begun receiving "substantial royalties from Japan, out of the blue." He knows it's derived from "Fashion Statement," a track off "Flying Colors" and he thinks it has been picked up as some television theme, because his royalty payment would indicate a long-term rather than one-time project.

While he has been satisfied making a simple living from performing, recording and teaching, he has recently decided to test the waters of academia, investigating a few potential university positions.

Much of what Dr. Hinz is concerned with revolves around the ability to transcribe music, and he says that is important for two reasons: "You listen to a piece and say: 'What's going on? I want to play that.' And then there's just the sheer beauty involved with the intricate details of the music." ■

Robert Hinz will be performing Sunday at Ragtimes, 235 Roslyn Road, Roslyn Heights, (516) 625-5553.