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**FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
JAZZ IMPROVISATION SKILLS AMONG PIANISTS.
CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES**

ABSTRACT

of a dissertation for the award of the
educational and scientific degree of “Doctor”

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INTRODUCTION

Improvisation, particularly in the field of jazz music, is a skill that many pianists (and others) strive to master. Some achieve it with greater ease, as if *it came naturally*, while for others this skill is entirely absent and remains an unattainable or hard-to-reach ideal, associated with barriers that often stem not from a lack of knowledge, but from deficiencies in psychological preparation or appropriate pedagogical guidance and encouragement. Improvisation is one of the highest and most complex forms of musical expression, combining creativity, spontaneity, virtuoso technical skill, and a solid theoretical foundation. In traditional views, it is often shrouded in mysticism. In contemporary musicology, improvisation is not viewed solely as a technical and theoretical skill, but as a complex process involving the musician's personality, their psycho-emotional disposition, and their social environment.

This dissertation is based on the thesis that the ability to improvise in jazz does not depend primarily on innate talent, but rather on skills that develop in the appropriate environment and under the right conditions – musical, social, psychological, and everyday living.

Central to the study is an analysis of music education and training as a point of intersection between classical traditions and contemporary approaches and practices. The development of young pianists and improvisers is viewed as a holistic process comprising a combination of specific exercises, planning, strict discipline, and regular rehearsal (practice). The dissertation explores the balance between individual work and interaction with a teacher, as well as the importance of group rehearsals for building ensemble skills – synchronization, accompaniment, and effective communication among colleagues.

Beyond purely musical matters, the dissertation devotes significant attention to the musician's social capital: the formation of a motivational circle of peers and collective motivation, the development of leadership qualities, and the skills needed to cope with specific challenges on the musician's path, such as stage fright, among others. An innovative aspect of the study is the inclusion of factors from personal life – sleep patterns, diet, and overall physical and mental health – which form the foundation for sustained motivation and creative longevity.

In the age of digitalization, a contemporary approach to jazz is unthinkable without the aid of new technologies. This study analyzes the role of the most widely used digital tools and applications, online resources, and audio recording platforms, which, combined with the established schools of authors such as Jamey Abersold¹ and the Hal Leonard publishing house², make the learning process much more comprehensive and practically oriented, and support the training of highly qualified musicians. The choice of the aforementioned educational systems by Aebersold and Hal Leonard is not arbitrary; they lay the foundations for jazz education, provide clear practical guidance, are structured in accordance with the development of instrumentalists, and support the development of the skills necessary to reach the stage of free improvisation.

The aim of this study is to analyze the multifaceted factors (pedagogical, psychological, and technological) that influence the development of jazz improvisation skills in pianists, while proposing a holistic model based on the synthesis of the methodologies of pianists such as Barry Harris³ and Oscar Peterson⁴, and the interplay between the classical tradition, technical exercises,

¹ Jamey Aebersold (1939–) – American publisher, educator, and jazz saxophonist. <https://www.jazzbooks.com/jazz/jbio> (accessed June 3, 2026)

² Hal Leonard is an American music publishing and distribution company. <https://www.halleonard.com/> (accessed June 3, 2026)

³ Barry Harris (1929–2021) – a bebop pianist and educator, known for his master classes in harmony and improvisation in New York. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Barry-Harris> (accessed June 3, 2026)

and contemporary music psychology.

The focus of this work is on Harris and Peterson, as they are iconic figures in jazz who, at a certain point in their careers, dedicated themselves to teaching the next generations of musicians the fundamental elements of jazz interpretation and improvisation – Harris through his numerous lectures, seminars, and workshops in the United States and around the world, which are freely available online in the form of videos, collections of notated exercises prepared by his assistants and followers; and Peterson—through his instructional materials for young pianists, the interviews and practical guidance he provides, as well as collections of transcribed interpretations of various works for more advanced pianists.

The object of this study is the process of forming and developing jazz improvisation skills among pianists in the context of contemporary music education.

The subject of the study is the interplay between traditional music teaching methods, technical training, psychological constructs (flow theory, emotional intelligence, motivation, habits), the influence of the family environment, and digital technologies on the performance model of the jazz pianist.

The research methods are:

- Theoretical analysis – an interdisciplinary approach incorporating musicology, pedagogy, and psychology
- Comparative analysis – a comparison between classical approaches to improvisation from the past and contemporary jazz methodologies
- Empirical research – based on the author’s pedagogical practice and including:
 - 1). A survey (quantitative and qualitative) among young jazz improvisers (participants in Angel Zaberski’s⁵ debut master class at New Bulgarian University) to identify the key factors contributing to their development, as well as shortcomings and sources of discomfort in the learning process.
 - 2). Expert interviews with representatives of the three main pillars of jazz art – the performer, the composer, and the educator – with the aim of drawing on practical experience, providing guidance, and validating the proposed methods.

The research objectives are:

1. A retrospective overview of improvisation, tracing its roots to the Baroque era and following the historical thread through the early forms of jazz and beyond.
2. Stylistic differentiation and evolution – an analysis of key periods in jazz and a definition of their specific improvisational paradigms.
3. Psychological and cognitive profiling – an examination of the psychological factors that catalyze or hinder the improviser’s development.
4. Comparative analysis of methodologies – an explanation of the theoretical systems of Barry Harris and Oscar Peterson as an organic link between the classical tradition and jazz practice.
5. Technology and resource overview – an examination of the role of modern software and methodological tools in jazz education.
6. Empirical verification through a survey – an investigation of the subjective experiences of young improvisers.
7. Conducting interviews with established professionals to identify effective practical

⁴ Oscar Peterson (1925–2007) – a jazz pianist and composer of Canadian origin, known for his solos and improvisations. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oscar-Peterson> (accessed June 3, 2026)

⁵ Angel Angelov Zaberski (1969–) – Bulgarian jazz pianist, composer, and arranger; professor at New Bulgarian University. <https://www.angelzaberski.com/bg/biography.html> (accessed June 3, 2026)

models for greater success.

8. Synthesis and practical guidelines – identifying specific strategies for optimizing the learning process and stage performance.

Literature Review

Although jazz is a foreign and *distant* form of music, it managed to reach Bulgarian listeners and performers on stage as early as the last century, and it also found its place in Bulgarian literature, initially through translations of foreign authors – János Gonda⁶ with “Jazz: History, Theory, Practice” [1975] and André Asriel⁷ with “Jazz: Analyses and Aspects” [1982]. During the same period, André Hodeir’s⁸ scholarly work “Jazz: Evolution and Essence” [1983] was translated into Bulgarian and published in “Musical Horizons” magazine.

After 1990, Claire Levy⁹ published numerous scholarly texts on the various styles of jazz, as well as many articles and reviews of musical events and albums on the subject.

A number of books explore jazz music and its various aspects – “Ways of Improvising in Contemporary Music” by Angel Veznev¹⁰ [1994], “My Favorite Things. Sketches on Jazz” by Veselin Nikolov¹¹ [1989], “Jazz in Bulgaria. Bulgarians in Jazz” [2010], “When the West Meets the East. From Folk to Ethno-Jazz and World Music” [2012] and “Milcho Leviev – The Artist Is Not a Lonely Island” by Vladimir Gadzhev¹² [2019].

Biographical books have also been published that highlight the country’s jazz culture – “History in Syncopation” by Lyudmil Georgiev¹³ [2000], “Life in 33/16” by Milcho Leviev¹⁴ [2004], “Free Spirit: Memories of Alexander Vladigerov” by Velichka Chobanova-Vladigerova¹⁵ [2008], and others.

The Bulgarian academic sphere also features a number of dissertations examining various aspects of jazz music and improvisation – in 2018, Petar Koychev¹⁶ studied “Guitar Improvisation in Modern Jazz” [Koychev, 2018], while Zhelyazka Belchilova¹⁷ wrote about “Jazz in Bulgaria (the 1990s–early 21st century) – sociocultural aspects of the interaction between performers and the audience” [Belchilova, 2018]. Ivan Garbachev¹⁸ writes about the performance practices of jazz pianists and draws parallels between the performance techniques

⁶ János Gonda (1932–2021) was a Hungarian jazz pianist, composer, musicologist, and educator.

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0327225/> (accessed June 3, 2026)

⁷ André Asriel (1922–2019) – Austrian composer, theorist, and educator. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/asriel-andre> (accessed June 3, 2026)

⁸ André Hodeir (1921–2011) – French violinist, composer, arranger, and musicologist. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/biography/andre-hodeir> (accessed June 3, 2026)

⁹ Claire Levy is a Bulgarian musicologist, researcher, and music critic. She is a professor and holds a Ph.D. in art history.

¹⁰ Angel Veznev (1937–2020) – Bulgarian saxophonist and jazz musician.

¹¹ Veselin Nikolov (1938–) – Bulgarian jazz musician, saxophonist, and founder of the popular band “White, Green, and Red.”

¹² Vladimir Gadzhev (1944–) – a leading Bulgarian music critic, educator, and journalist, considered the most authoritative expert on the history and trends of Bulgarian jazz.

¹³ Lyudmil Georgiev (1930–2003) – Bulgarian jazz musician and saxophonist. Founder of Bulgaria’s first jazz orchestra, “Jazz of the Young,” in 1946. <https://old-news.bnr.bg/post/100875107> (accessed June 3, 2026)

¹⁴ Milcho Leviev (1937–2019) – Bulgarian jazz pianist, composer, and arranger who spent most of his life working in the United States. <https://milcholeviev.com/> (accessed June 3, 2026)

¹⁵ Velichka Chobanova-Vladigerova is a Bulgarian actress. She is the wife of Bulgarian pianist and composer Alexander Vladigerov.

¹⁶ Petar Koychev is a Bulgarian jazz guitarist and teacher of electric guitar. <https://musickoychev4.wixsite.com/petarkoychev/biografiya> (accessed June 16, 2026)

¹⁷ Zhelyazka Belchilova (1988–) – singer, vocal teacher and Ph.D. in musicology. <https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/lik/zhelyazka-belchilova> (accessed June 16, 2026)

¹⁸ Ivan Garbachev (1990–) – Bulgarian pianist, composer, and music educator.

and approaches of the piano and percussion instruments in jazz [Garbachev, 2020]¹⁹. Mihail Yosifov²⁰ examines “The Trumpet in Jazz: Ways of Interpretation and Stylistic Features. Figures Who Influenced Its Development” [Yosifov, 2021]. Gergana Kostadinova²¹ writes a thesis on “Between Classical and Jazz: Stylistic Interactions and Genre Transformations in Bulgarian Music at the End of the 20th and Beginning of the 21st Centuries” [Kostadinova, 2022], while Marina Gospodinova²² explores “The Connection Between the Bebop Idiom and Scat Improvisation in the Musical Language of Jazz Vocalists” [Gospodinova, 2023]. Miroslav Turiyski’s²³ work is on “The Relationship Between Improvisation and Composition, Arrangement, and the Lineup of the Contemporary Jazz Ensemble” [Turiyski, 2024], while Zornitsa Tsvetanova’s²⁴ work traces “The Development of the Solo Piano in Jazz and Its Contemporary Implications” [Tsvetanova, 2025]. In 2025, there were several other works on the subject, and specifically that of Zhoe Mung²⁵ “Theoretical Training in Musical Styles and Improvisation Techniques for Modern Jazz Pianists” [Mung, 2025]; “The Art of Interaction in Jazz and the Challenges It Poses for the Pianist in Duos and Trios” by Antoni Donchev²⁶ [Donchev, 2025] and “On Some Aspects of Contemporary Piano Interpretation in Jazz Music” by Leven Adrianov²⁷ [Adrianov, 2025].

These numerous works, books, and publications in Bulgarian demonstrate the community’s current interest in jazz music, improvisation, instruments characteristic of jazz, and other aspects related to this art form. For this reason, this literature review includes identified and accessible publications in Bulgarian that are directly relevant to the topic under study. In the course of this study, a significant amount of foreign academic literature was also utilized; however, it is not presented within the scope of this review, as its volume is extensive and exceeds the review’s objectives. Instead, the foreign sources have been integrated thematically into the relevant chapters of the dissertation and are listed in the attached bibliography. This work aims to supplement and enrich existing research on the topic by examining other factors in performing artistry, beyond the musical ones (although the focus is on the methodologies of some of the most popular artists in the genre) and to examine what other resources help musicians become better at what they do, more confident, and more successful.

Expected Contributions of the Dissertation

This dissertation proposes a new conceptual framework for the development of improvisational skills by synthesizing the fundamental principles of the Bulgarian piano school and the theoretical models of jazz music. The study analyzes the role of key psychophysiological factors that lie beyond the realm of music but could influence instrumentalists’ musical journey and growth, and proposes effective models for forming sustainable habits, as well as steps for

¹⁹ “*The Jazz Piano – A Different Approach. Expanding the Range of Expressive Means in the Performance Practice of Jazz Pianists. Common Performance Techniques and Methods Between the Piano and Percussion Instruments in Jazz Music.*”

²⁰ Mihail Yosifov (1976–) – Bulgarian jazz trumpeter, composer, arranger, and educator.

<https://web.archive.org/mihailyossifov.com/bg/> (accessed June 16, 2026)

²¹ Gergana Kostadinova – Bulgarian pianist, vocalist, and composer. <https://gerganakostadinova.com/about-me/> (accessed June 11, 2026)

²² Marina Gospodinova – Bulgarian jazz singer and vocal instructor. <https://www.marinagospodinova.com/biography> (accessed June 11, 2026)

²³ Miroslav Turiyski (1980–) – Bulgarian jazz pianist, arranger, and composer. He teaches jazz piano and improvisation at the Academy of Music and Dance Arts. <https://www.artacademyplovdiv.com/struktura/pedagogika/Miroslav%20Turiyski.html> (accessed June 5, 2026)

²⁴ Zornitsa Tsvetanova – Bulgarian pianist, actress, and music educator.

²⁵ Zhou Meng (1990–) – a jazz pianist and educator of Chinese descent.

²⁶ Antoni Donchev (1959–) – a Bulgarian jazz pianist and composer. He is the conductor of the Bulgarian National Radio Big Band. <https://lovejazz83.alle.bg/българските-имена-в-джаза/АНТОНИ-ДОНЧЕВ/> (accessed June 5, 2026)

²⁷ Leven Adrianov – Bulgarian multi-genre musician – bassoonist, saxophonist, composer, arranger, and teacher.

building greater resilience and confidence on stage. Thus, the study offers a comprehensive strategy that enables the contemporary pianist to strike a balance between technical discipline, the freedom of improvisation, emotional awareness (both on and off stage), and overall self-actualization.

Chapter ONE. Historical Origins and Theoretical Dimensions of Jazz Art

This chapter traces the historical genesis and evolution of jazz art, analyzing the sociocultural preconditions for its emergence and its subsequent stylistic diversification. Particular attention is paid to the terminological definition of jazz improvisation, and the key musical factors that form the foundation for instrumentalists are systematized.

1.1. Sociocultural Prerequisites for the Emergence of Jazz: New Orleans

The place where the first musical revolutions – which we would later call “jazz” – emerged is New Orleans. The city’s population is diverse – on the one hand, there were residents of Western European descent, and on the other, residents of African American descent. Nestled between the stark social contrast of wealthy white Americans and the freed poor Black people was the middle class—the Creoles (*Gens de couleur libres*²⁸).

In 1890, a radical shift occurred with the passage of a law that legally reclassified Creoles as people of color and subjected them to the same systemic restrictions as African Americans. The consequences of this change for music were far-reaching but highly significant. Before segregation, many Creole musicians had been trained in the European classical musical tradition, studying harmony, counterpoint, and instrumental technique at conservatories and in private lessons. Meanwhile, Black musicians of African descent, who had more limited access to formal education, developed musical practices rooted in the blues, spirituals, work songs, and African rhythmic traditions. The loss of Creole privileges forced these two communities into closer contact, and they began to collaborate more and more frequently in parades, clubs, and dance halls.

Jazz gained international popularity, and more and more musicians turned to the style, playing popular songs of the time while offering their own interpretations of the melody and free improvisations on the harmony. Record companies noticed the public’s interest in the style and began producing even more jazz artists.

1.2. Terminology and Evolution of Performance Approaches

In this paper, the term “*jazz improvisation*” refers to the process of synchronously generating and performing melodic lines in real time over a specific harmonic framework in the jazz style.

1.2.1. Key Musical Factors for the Development of Improvisational Skills

There are several key elements and musical approaches that are universally accepted as classic and fundamental in improvisation training; for a more comprehensive examination of the key musical factors for developing the relevant skills, each of these elements should be considered separately:

- The scale-chord relationship²⁹ – by mastering this skill, the improviser views the chord not as a static vertical structure, but as part of a horizontal pattern with an associated scale.

²⁸ *Gens de couleur libres* (Free people of color) – a term used in colonial Louisiana to refer to people of mixed ancestry (often called Creoles) who were born free or had obtained their freedom prior to the Civil War. <https://64parishes.org/entry/free-people-of-color-in-colonial-louisiana-adaptation> (accessed June 5, 2026)

²⁹ This refers to the notes of the scale that are inherent to the respective chord and the principle that the scale is expressed both vertically and horizontally.

- Transcription and musical analysis of solos, as well as learning and transposing phrases – this approach develops aural skills and a thorough understanding of musical elements and solfège. The musician must be able to reproduce the heard melody to verify that the notes are correct. The approach then involves an in-depth musical analysis of the foundation – the harmony – and the notes used in the solo over that harmony; it is beneficial for the musician’s thinking to be step-by-step oriented so that the transcription can be transposed into different keys.

- Rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic variations on short motifs and phrases – the musician takes a short motif and transforms it in their own individual way – through inversion, extension, rhythmic displacement, and dozens of other variations.

- Creating rhythmic variety – the use of polyrhythmic structures and the systematic accentuation of off-beats creates the tension specific to jazz, which is the basis of the physiological sensation of swing.

- Familiarity with the 12-bar blues progression and the AABA song form – these two structures are the most common among jazz standards, and knowing them allows the performer to navigate the piece while remaining focused on their improvisation.

- Aural development, knowledge of intervals and chord functions – these skills help with faster transcription of solos, easier orientation within a given musical piece, and the development of inner ear skills, which enable one to anticipate how a given note or phrase will sound before it is played.

- Altering notes and reharmonization (such as reharmonization or new harmonization) – reharmonization allows for a new interpretation of a familiar theme by changing its original harmony and enables a more varied and distinctive improvisational solo, since changing the original harmony automatically alters the approach to melodic lines for improvisation and their corresponding scales.

- Ensemble playing (duets, trios, bands, jam sessions) – reaching the point where one plays as part of a group is the true challenge for musicians. When performing in a duet with another instrument or vocals, the pianist is tasked with developing the arrangement of the piece in question, taking into account stylistic characteristics, selecting the appropriate accompaniment while the other performer solos, and assessing the improvisational techniques through which to partner in the improvisation.

1.3. Stylistic Diversity in the History of Jazz

An understanding of stylistic differences is essential – it helps the performer select the most appropriate “tools” from their toolbox so they can lead their listeners on the journey they have chosen to show them.

1.3.1. Early Jazz Traditions and Collective Improvisation

Before the rise of big bands, jazz was performed in a more intuitive and unstructured manner. There was no fixed score, which big bands later came to follow; the instrumentalists’ improvisation did not proceed sequentially in any particular order but was collective. They interact simultaneously, building various melodic lines in a polyphonic manner.

1.3.2. The Era of Large Ensembles: Big Band and Swing music

During the first half of the 20th century, big bands³⁰ took center stage in the music scenes of New York, Chicago, and Kansas City.

The most popular swing band was Duke Ellington’s³¹ – *the Duke Ellington Orchestra*³².

³⁰ Big band ensembles became popular during the first and second decades of the last century. Big bands typically consist of between 16 and 18 instruments. They have four instrumental sections: saxophones, trumpets, trombones, and a rhythm section. In the early days of their rise to popularity, they performed in theaters, dance halls, and later in radio and television studios. <https://www.britannica.com/article/big-band> (accessed June 8, 2026)

³¹ Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899–1974) – American pianist and composer.

The band was founded in 1923 by Duke, who led it until his death in 1974. In the 1930s, another band of great significance to jazz music was formed – the Count Basie³³, *Count Basie Orchestra*³⁴. The band's rhythm section is known as *the All-American Rhythm Section* and is distinguished by its active participation in the performance of the melody. Basie outlines the melodic lines in a minimalist manner, hinting at them through individual notes or chords and leaving the rest to the orchestra.

In the late 1930s, new, smaller ensembles known as combos began to emerge. In these groups, improvisation took place through a continuous alternation between soloing and accompaniment by the musicians. During this period, jazz musicians began holding informal gatherings among themselves to exchange experiences and play together for fun. This is how jam sessions came into being.

1.3.3. The Culture of the Jam Session – A Catalyst for Instrumental Mastery

While during the day the musicians played in big bands and prepared for their stage performances, their private gatherings took place late at night in small clubs, where they experimented and exchanged ideas.

The musicians engaged in musical duels, competing to see who knew more and richer harmonies, who could play in more difficult keys and at a faster tempo. It was precisely during these jam sessions that they began to diversify their playing by adding chromaticism, fast passages, and “foreign” notes – elements that Bud Powell³⁵ and Charlie Parker³⁶ would later transform into bebop.

1.3.4. Modern Jazz: The Intellectual Revolution of Bebop and Cool Jazz

The tempo of bebop is faster and is not intended for dancing, but rather for the auditory and intellectual enjoyment of virtuosity. Experiments in harmony include reharmonizations, cluster techniques, alterations, chromaticisms, sequential movements, the use of the tritone, and unpredictable rhythmic patterns. In a 1944 issue of *Collier's*³⁷, we read: “*You can't sing it. You can't dance to it. You probably can't even stand it. That's bebop.*”

1.3.5. Emancipation of Form: Avant-Garde Explorations and Free Jazz

Free jazz developed and gained popularity in the late 1950s and 1960s. In this style, musicians do not follow a specific structure or harmony, and the music is created in music without a predetermined key, tempo, order, etc. The participation of various musical instruments is encouraged, and their number is unlimited; improvisation is even given the freedom not to follow a specific tempo, key, or musical idea. Improvisers have the opportunity to fully realize their potential and ideas.

1.3.6. Exotic Influences: Bossa Nova³⁸ and Latin American Rhythmic Structures (samba,

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Duke-Ellington> (accessed June 8, 2026)

³² The Duke Ellington Orchestra is one of the most popular and influential jazz ensembles in history, led by Duke Ellington for half a century (1923–1974). The orchestra continues to carry on the traditions of jazz to this day. (see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Duke-Ellington> (accessed June 8, 2026))

³³ William “Count” Basie (1904–1984) – American jazz pianist and composer. He led his own orchestra, the Count Basie Orchestra, for nearly half a century. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Count-Basie> (accessed June 8, 2026)

³⁴ The Count Basie Orchestra is Count Basie's big band, founded before 1935 and still performing today. It is one of the most popular big bands in the world. (see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Count-Basie> (accessed June 8, 2026))

³⁵ Bud Powell (1924–1966) – American bebop jazz pianist and composer. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bud-Powell> (accessed June 8, 2026)

³⁶ Charlie Parker (1920–1955) – American jazz saxophonist and composer. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charlie-Parker> (accessed June 8, 2026)

³⁷ *Collier's* was an American magazine published from 1888 to 1957. It was a leading source of in-depth journalism, social analysis, and literature in the United States. <https://colliersmagazine.com/> (accessed June 3, 2026)

³⁸ According to Britannica, the bossa nova style is a form of Brazilian popular music, a fusion of samba and cool jazz. <https://www.britannica.com/art/bossa-nova> (accessed June 11, 2026)

guajira)

In the 1960s, bossa nova (“*new feeling*”) arrived in the United States. The word *bossa* was first mentioned in the 1930s in the popular samba “*São Coisas Nossas*”³⁹ (“These Are Our Things”) by Noel Rosa. Composer Antônio Carlos Jobim⁴⁰ (Tom Jobim) and guitarist João Gilberto⁴¹, who created it as a joke on the tropical beaches of Rio de Janeiro while searching for a new sound.

Chapter TWO. Methodological Parallels: From Baroque Practice to Contemporary Educational Systems

Chapter Two examines the methodological parallels and continuity in the art of improvisation from Baroque practices to contemporary educational systems and technological resources, presenting and analyzing the pedagogical approaches of Oscar Peterson and Barry Harris, as well as the systems of Abersold, Hal Leonard, and the iReal Pro mobile app.

2.1. Improvisation Before Jazz: Basso Continuo in the Baroque Era, Ornamentation, and Improvisational Lines

The foundation of Baroque improvisational thinking is rooted in classical approaches from the past related to various forms of improvisation among keyboard performers, such as the concept of *basso continuo*. During this period, keyboard instrumentalists were expected to improvise over a predetermined bass line, which required in-depth knowledge of harmony, voice leading, and counterpoint

Another parallel between basso continuo and jazz is that the basso continuo serves the same function as the modern way of notating jazz standards and compositions (*lead sheets*)—with a predetermined harmonic structure, a notated theme, and room for improvisation. In both cases, the composer provides the harmony, while the specific texture, rhythmic figures, and voice leading are left to the performer’s creative intuition and expertise.

Partimento and the Gallant Style

The tradition originated in Naples. In the 18th century, musicians were trained in the so-called *partimento* – a method in which performers were given a bass line and expected to construct a complete harmonic structure and melodic improvisational lines.

Cadenzas and Improvisational Ornaments

Composers such as Mozart⁴², Beethoven⁴³, and Chopin⁴⁴ often left space in their concertos for cadenzas, in which pianists could introduce their own virtuosic improvisational passages. Subsequently, many of these improvisations became formalized, but originally, they were spontaneous creations intended to showcase the performer’s artistic sensibility.

2.2. Theoretical Systems in Jazz:

2.2.1. Oscar Peterson’s Approach

³⁹ “These Are Our Things” is a 1931 composition by Noel Rosa, inspired by the musical Our Things.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUdNt3EvMyw> (accessed June 11, 2026)

⁴⁰ Antonio Carlos Jobim (1927–1994) – Brazilian composer, songwriter, pianist, guitarist, and singer.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antonio-Carlos-Jobim> (accessed June 11, 2026)

⁴¹ João Gilberto do Prado Pereira de Oliveira (1931–2019) – Brazilian singer and guitarist, considered the founder of bossa nova. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/music-popular-and-jazz-biographies/joao-gilberto> (accessed June 11, 2026)

⁴² Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) – Austrian composer. He is recognized as one of the greatest composers of Western music. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wolfgang-Amadeus-Mozart> (accessed on 06/11/26)

⁴³ Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) – German composer, also regarded as the greatest composer of all time. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ludwig-van-Beethoven> (June 11, 2026)

⁴⁴ Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849) – a Romantic-era composer and pianist of Polish-French descent. He is known for his piano pieces and concertos. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederic-Chopin> (accessed June 11, 2026)

Oscar Peterson remains known to the general public as one of the most prominent jazz pianists and improvisers of the 20th century. His playing incorporates elements of bebop, blues, and swing. Despite his Canadian origins, he deeply appreciates and pays tribute to classical Western European music. The speed and agility of his playing, as well as his clear and precise phrasing, are precisely due to this influence.

He published a collection of exercises, minuets, and pieces for young jazz pianists. The exercises focus on strength, agility, and balancing strength across all fingers of both hands; they also introduce blues-style harmony, *walking bass* lines in the left hand, boogie-woogie⁴⁵, doubling the melody in both hands, and more. According to Oscar, the collection offers pianists a completely new way of practicing and new technical challenges compared to classical music. His technical and improvisational methodology provides clear guidance for pianists, helping them build a solid foundation in their playing.

2.2.2. Jazz as an Evolution of Classical Harmony: The Barry Harris Model

Pianist and instructor of jazz improvisation and harmony, Barry Harris, has established a systematic approach to music education based on the interrelationship between the chromatic scale, diminished seventh chords, and their derived chord functions, as well as the scales formed by their combination.

Rhythmic Movement and Phrasing

Harris conveys his central idea, which involves the overlapping of beats during performance – that is, dividing and counting in sixths within a four-beat measure. Phrasing has its “opening” and “closing,” and it is important for improvisers to have the musical concept behind this. Barry encourages them to sing their improvisational ideas before playing them, which shortens the distance between the musical concept and the physical execution of the phrase.

The Creation of the “World”

Given Harris’s religious beliefs, he metaphorically bases his understanding of harmony and his approach to it on God’s creation of the world. He draws an analogy between the twelve tones of the chromatic scale and the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ.

Harris thoroughly explores the harmonic relationships between diminished four-note chords, their common tones, and experiments with altering the degrees of the four-note chords in various ways, arriving at different results—for example, the major scale with a lowered sixth, constructed from common tones between major sixth chords and diminished seventh chords.

2.3. Contemporary resources and technological tools

Some of the most popular instructional materials are those by Jamie Abersold and Hal Leonard. These are collections of jazz standards accompanied by instrumental audio recordings. They serve as a backing band that accompanies the soloist while he or she performs their interpretation of the piece’s melody. The recordings also include a specific section where soloists have the opportunity to improvise.

The mobile app that borrows the idea of backing tracks, digitizes it, and modernizes it is **iReal Pro**.

The app offers various playback tempos across several different musical styles, transposition into all keys, tempo adjustment, volume control for the accompanying instruments, and the ability to change the instruments themselves.

Using the app serves as a valuable tool for learners in the rehearsal process, as well as a motivational tool, since it allows them to play “along” with other musical instruments, play in different keys, explore various styles and their distinctive features, and more.

⁴⁵ Boogie-woogie – a style of blues and jazz piano characterized by a pronounced rhythmic drive. The left hand energetically plays a repeating bass line in eighth notes, while the right hand plays distinctive, syncopated, repeating melodic phrases.
<https://www.britannica.com/art/boogie-woogie> (accessed June 3, 2026)

In the practice of improvisation, Kratus (1991) defines a model with seven successive levels of acquired improvisational skills to distinguish the stages of development among beginners, advanced, and professional performers. The levels include free improvisation for the sake of discovery, improvisation to get into the groove, the search for a specific sound, melodiousness, logical sequence, stylistic diversity, and the search for an individual style. The iReal Pro app can be useful in most of these developmental stages in different ways and for the purpose of developing various qualities in the musician.

Chapter THREE: Psychological Aspects and Cognitive Strategies in (Jazz) Piano Instruction

This chapter explores the psychological dimensions and strategies in piano and improvisation instruction, examining the role of physiological and psychological discomfort in the early stages of development. It also examines the traditions of the Bulgarian piano school, as well as the application of theories of emotional intelligence and the theory of flow.

3.1. Cognitive and Emotional Discomfort in the Early Stages of Learning

The development of improvisational skills does not begin with the first technical exercise or piece, but with the establishment of a comprehensive psychophysiological foundation as early as childhood. For a pianist to be confident on stage, to compose in real time, and to feel uninhibited, they must have successfully overcome the various barriers that sometimes remain invisible during the early stages of training.

The text begins chronologically with early childhood, because that is when each student's musical personality is formed, which will subsequently help (or hinder) their further development, regardless of the field of music in which they pursue their career.

3.1.1. Physiological discomfort

The connection between elementary music education and jazz improvisation lies in the quality of automation. Technical training in the early stages aims to achieve a level of freedom, overcoming discomfort, and automating the process – which will later allow the pianist to switch from playing by the book to a mode of great creative freedom, in which they themselves generate what comes next in the musical sound.

3.1.2. Psychological and Cognitive Discomfort

Playing the piano involves a range of cognitive skills and their further development in order to carry out the act of performance itself. As each cognitive function develops, it is normal to experience discomfort stemming from the difficulty of performing a task, a lack of patience, the expectation of quick results, and the desire to master new material rapidly.

Temporary setbacks and delayed gratification are an inevitable part of musical development. Drops in motivation, other tasks that take temporary priority, and doubts about one's own qualities and abilities are just some of the difficulties that every musician, regardless of age, goes through sooner or later. Delayed gratification – that is, putting in effort that does not pay off immediately, but rather involves going through ups and downs before a final satisfactory result is achieved – is also a factor in the discomfort that musicians are likely to encounter.

Performing in front of an audience – whether made up of acquaintances or strangers – is a major source of anxiety for many musicians. Mental resilience, realistic self-assessment, thorough preparation, self-confidence, and taking action despite anxiety are among the factors that help overcome stage fright. Cognitive-behavioral therapy employs a proven approach called exposure therapy, which involves the gradual presentation of *stimuli*⁴⁶ with the aim of gradual desensitization.

⁴⁶ This term is borrowed from psychology, but in this text it is applied to support piano pedagogy.

3.1.3. The Bulgarian Piano School as a Factor in the Development of Pianists

The foundation of the Bulgarian piano school is of key importance for the development of artists in the country, as it lays the groundwork for the fundamental pedagogical approaches, technical training, and all other key factors necessary for young musicians to develop their skills, especially in a genre such as jazz, which is culturally foreign.

In “Methods of Piano Instruction” [1957], Andrey Stoyanov raises the question of the musical and artistic value of the teaching repertoire, which should comprehensively develop musicality and aid in the mastery of all types of technique as early as the initial stages of piano instruction; the cultivation of this musical sensitivity will subsequently be of great benefit to the young improviser.

Milena Kurteva, Tamara Yankova before her, and other colleagues of theirs attach great importance not only to the purely technical and communicative aspects of the teaching process but also to the psychology and components of performance – to the connection between thought, feeling, the act of self-expression through the piece, personal interpretation, and the recreation of the composer’s idea. Tamara Yankova highlights several important conditions for successful work with young musicians—*understanding the inner world; musical and intellectual development; the musician’s inner listening and auditory control, which builds the habit of focusing on the musical image and on the tasks at hand during performance* – what we would today call *mindfulness*⁴⁷ in music-making. Through the development of these concentration skills, the young person will gradually move toward achieving *complete inner concentration*, which Stanislavski⁴⁸ calls the “small circle” – the elusive mental state in which, during a stage performance, the performer is not distracted by extraneous thoughts, but is fully focused on the musical work and its performance. And the next important factor for successful work with young musicians, which Tamara Yankova mentions, is precisely *the creative will* that helps overcome distractions and supports stage performances.

3.2. Cognitive Foundations of Improvisation: Emotional Intelligence and the State of Flow

Some of the key aspects of psychology that are deeply connected to music-making are emotional intelligence and the theory of flow. These will be examined separately, but also in the context of Quincy Jones’s⁴⁹ book “12 Notes: On Life and Creativity”.

Jazz is an intellectual form of music that, in our time, requires in-depth theoretical training, which provides a solid foundation for young musicians. But playing jazz is not merely an intellectual exercise – it is an emotional dialogue, a sharing of experiences, inner resilience, emotional awareness, and intuitive presence; thus, the integration of the concept of emotional intelligence and flow theory as supportive strategies in improvisation training is significant.

3.2.1. Emotional Intelligence as a Tool

According to Goleman (1995) [Goleman, 2011]⁵⁰ emotional intelligence is based on five core components: emotional self-awareness, emotional regulation, motivation and productive use of emotions, empathy, and social skills.

⁴⁷ Mindfulness is a Buddhist concept in which an individual strives for sustained focus and awareness of their bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, and emotions, without attempting to change them.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/mindfulness> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁴⁸ Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski (1863–1938) – an actor, director, teacher, and theater theorist of Russian origin.

Contemporary theater is built upon the theory he developed. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Konstantin-Stanislavsky> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁴⁹ Quincy Jones (1933–2024) – an American performer, producer, arranger, and composer who worked with some of the biggest names in jazz, rock, pop, hip-hop, and R&B. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quincy-Jones> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁵⁰ The book *Emotional Intelligence* was published in 1995. This work draws on the Bulgarian translation from 2011.

By developing skills in self-regulation and emotional recognition, performers can transform stage fright and pre-performance anxiety into focused energy, give the event the importance it deserves, and channel their energy into a performance rich in emotion, in order to have a greater impact on the audience.

3.2.2. The Theory of Flow in Support of the Creative Musical Process

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi⁵¹ introduced the concept of flow in 1990 and described it as follows: “*Flow is the state in which a person is so immersed in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that the person is willing to make enormous efforts simply to experience it again*” [Csikszentmihalyi, 1990:4].

The psychologist found that regardless of individuals’ culture, education, and social status, there are nine universal conditions that must be present to achieve the state of flow, namely: clear goals for each stage of the process; immediate feedback from one’s actions and recognition of success in one’s work; a balance between challenges and skills; concentration and focus on the task at hand; distraction is eliminated; the fear of failure is absent; a loss of reflective self-awareness – a temporary “*self-forgetfulness*”; the sense of time is distorted; the activity becomes *autotelic* (literally, “*self-directed*” in Greek).

In jazz, this state of flow manifests when improvisation proceeds spontaneously, without tension, and ideas develop naturally. In education, teachers should provide a pedagogical environment in which learners can strike a balance between challenging themselves beyond their current capabilities and utilizing the skills they have acquired so far.

3.2.3. Pedagogical Applications of These Theories in the Music Education Process

The integration of emotional intelligence skills as they relate to music can be implemented through various forms and practices. For example, through musical analysis of works, focusing on the emotional character of the repertoire and the psychological impact of various compositional choices; improvisation on a given emotional theme – expressing joy, warmth, sadness, anger, calmness, and so on. Such practices build emotional literacy and skills for musical thinking through emotions and feelings. Other practices that educators can use to encourage states of flow include: creating a flexible lesson structure – alternating between technical and intuitive tasks to encourage students’ creative skills; improvisational dialogues (between a student and an instructor, or among students only), with an emphasis on listening and responding; mindful preparation before a performance – a brief breathing exercise for concentration and body awareness aimed at focus, calmness, and channeling energy toward the musical performance.

CHAPTER FOUR: Stylistic Analyses and Empirical Research

This chapter combines stylistic and structural analyses of iconic performances of popular standards with an empirical study conducted among young Bulgarian performers. By comparing the creative techniques of legendary instrumentalists with the results of a survey of participants in a master class on improvisation, the study sheds light on the actual psychological and methodological dimensions of the improvisational process.

4.1. A Comparative Stylistic Analysis of Iconic Performances and Improvised Solos

4.1.1. Swing – “C-Jam Blues.” Historical and Stylistic Context

In the overview of the various jazz styles, swing was mentioned as one of the older styles,

⁵¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1934–2021) – a professor of psychology of Hungarian origin and dean at the University of Chicago. A leading researcher with significant scientific contributions in the field of positive psychology.
<https://positivepsychology.com/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi> (accessed June 16, 2026)

with Duke Ellington as its most prominent representative. The jazz standard “C-Jam Blues” is a composition he wrote in 1942. A notable performance of the standard is featured in the American short film *Jam Session*⁵², directed by Joseph Bern⁵³ in what is known as a *soundie*⁵⁴. Oscar Peterson’s interpretation (particularly on the album *Night Train*⁵⁵) became the benchmark for jazz pianists.

Harmonic and Structural Analysis

“C-Jam Blues” is in the key of C major and is written in a characteristic blues form. The standard has a typical swing rhythm, which must be performed very precisely through the alternating use of legato and staccato articulation, as well as by emphasizing the notes that fall on the off-beats of the measures.

Characteristic Performance Techniques

The performance begins with an 8-measure introduction by the bass and drums, after which Oscar plays the theme twice, followed by a piano improvisation that spans ten repetitions of the song’s entire blues progression.

An interesting technique Oscar uses is that before the first, second, third, and fourth *choruses* of the improvisation, he adds an extra four measures – the so-called “*Break*”, as an introduction to the next improvisational round, thereby creating the illusion that another (different) section is about to follow and breaking the traditional form of the 12-bar blues structure.

In his solo, he uses notes from the blues scale, including notes “foreign” to the major scale, such as the raised fourth and the lowered seventh. The melodic line in his solos is varied – it consists of eighth notes, but with frequent pauses, alternating ascending and descending runs, triplets, sixteenth notes, and double notes at intervals such as minor and major thirds, fourths, and octaves. After the ten improvisational rounds are over, he employs the technique characteristic of George Shearing⁵⁶, in which both hands play melody and harmony simultaneously (the chords are often four-note chords), with the melody being the highest note in the right hand so that it stands out against the other notes, while the left hand duplicates it an octave lower. This creates a rich and full sound.

Comparative Analysis

In the short film *Jam Session*⁵⁷, the performance features the musicians Duke Ellington – piano, Ray Nance⁵⁸ – violin, Rex Stewart⁵⁹ on trumpet, Ben Webster⁶⁰ on tenor saxophone, Joe Nanton⁶¹ on trombone, Barney Bigard⁶² on clarinet, and Sonny Greer⁶³ on drums. There, Duke

⁵² *Jam Session* (1942) – a short American film directed by Joseph Bern. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0304225/> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁵³ Joseph Bern (1904–1964) – an American director, screenwriter, and producer of Russian descent.

⁵⁴ *Soundies* were short films featuring musical performances with audio and video and were popular before the middle of the last century. They are considered the precursors to music videos.

⁵⁵ *Night Train* – an album by the Oscar Peterson Trio, released in 1963. <https://www.allmusic.com/album/night-train-mw0000871247> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁵⁶ George Shearing (1919–2011) – a popular jazz pianist of British origin. <https://jazz.com/encyclopedia/shearing-george-albert> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁵⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOlpcJhNyDI> (accessed on June 3, 2026)

⁵⁸ Ray Nance (1913–1976) – American jazz trumpeter, violinist, and singer. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/ray-nance-mn0000408531> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁵⁹ Rex Stewart (1907–1967) – American jazz cornetist and trumpeter. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rex-Stewart> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁶⁰ Benjamin Francis Webster (1909–1973) – American jazz tenor saxophonist. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ben-Webster> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁶¹ Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton (1904–1946) – American trombonist, known for his distinctive wah-wah effect. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joe-Nanton> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁶² Albany Leon “Barney” Bigard (1906–1980) – American jazz clarinetist and saxophonist.

acts as the host of the standard – he begins at the start and plays the theme, then steps back into an accompanying role to make way for the soloists (violin, clarinet, trombone). He marks the main accents rhythmically and through the harmony, but accompanies in a balanced way and gives way to the horn section, whose task is improvisation. The tempo is several times slower than Oscar's and conveys a sense of nonchalance and joy in making music together, while the rhythm is *laid-back*.

The choice of these two specific performances of the same standard (one of which is by the composer himself) is because they demonstrate how entirely different musical results can be achieved through different techniques, and these results illustrate some of the possible approaches a musician might take with this type of standard.

4.1.2 The Bebop Revolution and Linear Thinking: “Anthropology”

Historical and Stylistic Context

The jazz standard “Anthropology” is a composition by Charlie Parker based on the harmony of the song “I Got Rhythm”⁶⁴, or what is known as its *contrafactum*⁶⁵. Initially, the standard was titled “Thriving from a Riff,” but the title was later changed.

Harmonic and Structural Analysis

The standard is in the key of B-flat major and follows the 32-measure AABA form typical of most jazz standards.

In the first, “A,” section, one of the most characteristic harmonic progressions in jazz reappears – a sequence of II–V–I and I–IV–II–V–I progressions.

In the second, “B,” section, we have a descending circle of fifths consisting of dominant chords, or an ascending circle of fourths, typical of ragtime pieces. It “thins out” the harmonic build-up that has occurred up to that point, with each degree lasting a full two measures without change, unlike the “A” section, where the harmony is very dense and the functions change every two beats of the measure.

Characteristic performance techniques

A significant interpretation of the standard – and one that laid the foundation for the style – is that of Bud Powell. His most widely known performance is from 1962 at the Montmartre jazz club in Copenhagen, accompanied by musicians Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen⁶⁶ – bass, and Jørn Elniff⁶⁷ – drums. At the time, they were said to be “the best jazz trio in Europe.”

In this performance, the trio plays in B-flat major, which is the key in which Charlie Parker originally wrote the piece. The tempo is fast, typical of the style, and the piano is the primary solo instrument. Bud plays seven rounds of improvisation over the entire song form, and in the eighth round, he and the drummer alternate their improvisations in a “question-and-answer” style every four measures, after which they return to the final theme to conclude.

In his improvisation, he uses fast passages of eighth notes and triplets that alternate between ascending and descending directions. He begins on off-beats and uses frequent but brief pauses to emphasize the pulsation. His solo also includes arpeggios, chromatic runs, and the doubling of certain notes an octave higher in the right hand. He also employs a technique

<https://www.allmusic.com/artist/barney-bigard-mn0000785522> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁶³ Sonny Greer (1895–1982) – American jazz drummer and vocalist. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/sonny-greer-mn0000037251> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁶⁴ “I Got Rhythm” (1930) – a composition by George Gershwin from the musical *Girl Crazy*. It later became a jazz standard.

⁶⁵ A contrafactum is a composition based on a pre-existing musical work. <https://grokipedia.com/page/Contrafact> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁶⁶ Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen (1946–2005) – a jazz bassist of Danish origin. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/niels-henning-orsted-pedersen> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁶⁷ Jørn Elniff (1938–1991) – a jazz drummer of Danish origin. <https://www.discogs.com/artist/Jorn-Elniff> (accessed June 16, 2026)

characteristic of bebop, namely “*enclosures*”⁶⁸, using this technique to surround a note from the respective mode/scale/chord with nearby chromatic notes; he also uses “*approaching*”⁶⁹ notes. The left hand either duplicates the melody of the right hand (especially at the beginning of the theme) or simply marks the harmony through so-called “*shell voicings*”⁷⁰.

The Life of Bud Powell and Influences on His Music

In Bud’s early years, he was considered a child prodigy, and his technical skill was compared to that of Art Tatum. In 1945, however, he was beaten by police officers while trying to defend his friend Thelonious Monk, which led to serious injuries and lasting consequences – severe headaches, hallucinations, and mental breakdowns. From that point on, his life became a cycle of musical and stage performances interspersed with stays in psychiatric hospitals. He underwent numerous courses of electroconvulsive therapy (electroshock), which is known to impair short-term memory and fine motor skills. Contrary to medical expectations, when he sat down at the piano, he *came alive*, even though the rest of the time he was uncommunicative and withdrawn.

Bud’s bandmate, drummer Max Roach, also recounts that Bud sometimes played with such ferocity that his hands bled, but he didn’t even notice. He draws a connection to his mental health, saying, “*Bud wasn’t just playing music; he was fighting for his life on that keyboard.*” [Paduras, 1998]

4.1.3. Lyrical Modernism and Psychological Introspection: “Waltz for Debby” Historical and Stylistic Context

The composer of this standard is Bill Evans, who dedicated the waltz to his niece, Debby Evans; the first recording of “Waltz for Debby” dates from 1956. He worked on the album in the format for a trio. The standard is part of the cool jazz movement, which gained popularity as a conscious aesthetic reaction against the aggressive and chaotic energy of bebop.

Harmonic and Structural Analysis

The jazz standard follows an extended 32-measure form, most commonly defined as A-A’-B-A’. The first “A” section is built upon a gentle, almost childlike melody in F major, and the accompanying harmony consists largely of two- or three-note chords. Evans uses *shell voicings*. The theme and the standard’s main time signature are in ¾, but the time signature changes to 4/4 and the rhythm shifts to a faster swing when the improvisational section begins, as this allows the musicians greater freedom for their solos.

Characteristic Performance Techniques

One iconic performance took place on June 25, 1961, at the popular New York jazz club, *the Village Vanguard*. Bill Evans performed with musicians Scott LaFaro⁷¹ on bass and Paul Motian on drums. This turned out to be the trio’s final performance in this lineup.

Evans is known for the melodic quality of his improvisational lines. He emphasizes tone production and a lyrical sound. A clear melodic line stands out in his passages; in *the first chorus* of the improvisation, for example, he uses the theme but through various variations – incorporating more passing tones leading to the main notes of the theme, altering it rhythmically, and modifying or substituting some of the phrases.

⁶⁸ Enclosures – an approach (bypass) to a given note by passing through the chromatic notes adjacent to it (below or above it) or through a note from the scale of the phrase. <https://antonjazz.com/2019/07/approaches-enclosures/> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁶⁹ Approaching tones – approaching a given note by passing through notes from the scale or chromatic notes. <https://antonjazz.com/2019/07/approaches-enclosures/> (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁷⁰ Shell voicings – chords that consist only of the root, third, and seventh. https://www.thejazzresource.com/shell_voicings.html (accessed June 16, 2026)

⁷¹ Scott LaFaro (1936–1961) – an American jazz double bassist, known for his work with the Bill Evans Trio. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/scott-lafaro-mn0000258090> (accessed June 16, 2026)

The Music of Bill Evans: Biographical Determinism

In Evans's early years, he was described as a musician of exceptional academic discipline. In addition to his modesty and introverted nature, his life was marked by a series of losses that left a lasting imprint on his subsequent choices, as well as on his music. He lost one of his closest friends – bassist Scott LaFaro – who died in a car accident. Later, he also lost his longtime partner Elaine and his brother Harry, plunging Evans into cycles of severe depression and years of substance abuse and addiction, described by critics as “*the longest suicide in history*”.

4.1.4. A New Approach and Structural Contrast: “Chega de Saudade.” Historical and Stylistic Context

“Chega de Saudade” was written by Tom Jobim (music) and Vinicius de Moraes (lyrics) and was originally performed by João Gilberto and his daughter Bebel Gilberto. The lyricist skillfully capitalizes on the song's dual nature, using sadder lyrics that speak of the absence of a loved one in the minor section, while the major section optimistically tells of his return.

Harmonic and Structural Analysis

The standard features a large-scale two-part form of 64 measures, unlike jazz standards, which are usually 32 measures long. The form is divided into two main contrasting sections, A and B, each consisting of 32 measures – the first is in D minor, and the second in the eponymous D major. This is an uncommon technique for the bossa nova style and borrows the idea of key changes from Brazilian choro music, whose form is most often the ABACA rondo.

Characteristic Performance Techniques

A few years after the song's release on João Gilberto's album, American jazz musicians became very intrigued by the bossa nova style and invited Gilberto and Jobim to collaborate on a project that went on to become one of the best-selling jazz albums of all albums, namely Getz/Gilberto. The album featuring previously unreleased recordings from May 1976 – Getz/Gilberto '76 – also includes “Chega de Saudade”. The recording begins without an introduction, launching directly into the first verse (A) with vocals and guitar accompaniment by João Gilberto. The vocal performance continues through the entire song form once, after which Stan Getz enters with his tenor saxophone for an improvisational section during one chorus of the song. He skillfully incorporates the theme into his solo and performs it very melodically, but includes many *approaching* and *enclosing* phrases. In the “*three times*”⁷² at the end, he and Gilberto complement each other and conclude the song together.

4.2. An Empirical Study of the Improvisational Process: Methodology, Context, and Objectives

Following a detailed theoretical analysis of the historical parallels and psychological determinants of the creative process, the present study moves on to its empirical phase. The goal is to verify the theoretical hypotheses through a direct study of the subjective experiences, musical education, habits, and barriers of contemporary young jazz performers in Bulgaria.

Context and Sample of the Study

The study is based on a survey conducted among participants in Angel Zaberski's debut master class, “*Privileged to Improvise Jazz,*” held at New Bulgarian University in February 2026. This group of respondents includes performers who are actively developing their musical skills and training under the guidance of one of the leading authorities in contemporary jazz practice and pedagogy in Bulgaria.

Methodology and Structure of the Survey

The research instrument consists of a structured questionnaire with 22 questions, organized into four main categories: demographic and professional profile (age, musical

⁷² “*The Three Times*” is a colloquial expression meaning the repetition of the final phrase in a given standard three times, with slight variations in the melody and/or harmony each time, to conclude the performance of the standard.

experience), psychological framework (stage anxiety, emotional intelligence, flow, and the influence of the early educational and upbringing environment), methodological and technical aspects (educational systems, classical training, and modern technologies), and biopsychological factors (physical health, sleep, and discipline).

Research Objectives

The study aims to answer the questions: “What are the actual cognitive and emotional barriers that hinder free musical expression, and how do established educational models interact with the musician’s psychological resilience?” and “What are the most useful tools, according to the musicians themselves, that they have developed so far?”

Results of the Empirical Study: Analysis and Interpretations

In the first part of the survey, the data show that most respondents are between the ages of 15 and 20, several are between 21 and 25, and the remaining smaller portion are between 25 and 30.

Most of the participants play the piano as their primary instrument; there is one participant each who plays the bass guitar/double bass, saxophone, guitar, drums, and alto saxophone. Nine of them report having played their primary instrument for more than 10 years, one for between five and ten years, and one for less than five years. Jazz is the style in which most of them perform; other styles mentioned include pop, rock, metal, soul, classical, and original music (eclectic). All of them indicated that they engage in improvisation – ten of them actively, and one – occasionally.

Analysis of the data shows that the majority of the master class participants have a solid foundation in classical music education. A classical background ensures high technical precision and well-developed motor skills, but it also creates the first potential barriers to jazz music – the transition from strictly following the written score to spontaneously generating musical material in real time is often accompanied by a sense of uncertainty *about what* to play, there is also an excess of discipline that limits relaxation, the fear of technical error, social judgment, as well as a combination of all of these. This is also the question whose answers are the most diverse.

An analysis of the next three questions reveals a recurring pattern in the participants’ responses. The questions explore whether music in early childhood was perceived as a source of pleasure, whether parents exerted strong pressure for high achievement, and to what extent the early musical environment encouraged creativity and free experimentation. Comparing these responses with data on stage anxiety and emotional awareness and regulation reveals a tendency for participants who reported higher parental pressure and less encouragement of creative initiative to also report greater difficulty in managing uncomfortable emotions before going on stage, as well as experiencing more difficulties with playing music and free improvisation.

In contrast to these responses, musicians who noted that music was associated with pleasure for them; that they did not experience strong parental pressure; and that the musical environment encouraged creativity and experimentation, claim that they are able to recognize and manage uncomfortable emotions immediately before a concert more easily, and that stage fright does not hinder them at all, or hinders them only to a small extent.

These responses do not rule out the presence of other factors in the instrumentalists’ personalities, situational causes, and so on, which may also contribute to the experience of stage anxiety and the like, even in the absence of the illustrated potential root causes.

The majority of participants report that they always or almost always manage to enter a state of flow while playing and improvising, to become fully immersed and lose track of time, and it is precisely these same participants who report fewer barriers to their free musical expression. These results suggest that an early educational environment, which often punishes mistakes, may foster a higher level of perfectionism in young performers and create expectations regarding their performance that make it difficult for them to relax and immerse themselves in

improvisation.

These findings do not imply that this perfectionist tendency cannot be changed through deliberate effort and the accumulation of experience, but they do indicate a connection between the environment and future musical development.

The next two questions concern emotionality as a tool in improvisation – the participants unanimously assert that empathy directly influences the quality of interpretation/improvisation, and that chemistry and emotional communication with the other members are extremely important.

In the next section of the survey, participants list a number of improvisational approaches, methods, and technological tools they use to develop their musical skills, which are included in this study as some of the most important and fundamental; however, regarding the maintenance of discipline – the responses are varied. This study proposes several strategies for maintaining musical discipline precisely because adhering to a regular schedule and rehearsals is a challenge for some, and such strategies can make it easier for them and help incorporate the habit more smoothly into their daily lives.

The data in the final section of the survey unequivocally confirm that sleep and overall physical condition are important factors for the respondents and are directly linked to full concentration during performance.

4.3. Summary Findings from the Study

Analysis of the data from the surveyed musicians reveals a clear correlation between early musical training and educational environment, psychophysiological resilience, and the creative capacity for improvisation and flow. The results suggest that while classical education provides the necessary technical training, it can be accompanied by perfectionist attitudes, which may subsequently prove to be a barrier to the musician's musical liberation in improvisation and in entering a state of flow. Another key finding is the potential link between restrictions in childhood music education and increased levels of stage anxiety in later life.

This survey also highlights the need for a new pedagogical focus: not only on technical and theoretical training, but also on fostering the musician's overall well-being – from maintaining a healthy balance between physical health and creativity, through emotional awareness, to the implementation of effective self-discipline strategies. The data convincingly illustrate that the path to free musical expression requires not only the technical means to do so but also the overcoming of cognitive and emotional barriers, established in the early stages of development, thereby providing an empirical basis for the need for a more integrative and holistically oriented approach to jazz education.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation offers a contemporary perspective on the various factors that influence the development of pianists and their musical skills and demonstrates that this development is not merely a technical process, but rather a complex integration of musical literacy, technical training, musical taste and affinity for this musical style, cognitive flexibility, and emotional resilience. The survey confirmed the fundamental role of musical factors – namely, technical training and theoretical knowledge – which remain the foundation upon which every improviser builds. The results also supported the thesis that these factors may prove insufficient if they are not supported by specific psychophysiological and educational conditions that allow the performer to break free from restrictions and pursue creative freedom.

The empirical analysis showed that an early educational environment that encourages creativity and experimentation is a good indicator and predictor of successful adaptation to jazz

idioms. Musicians who have better-developed skills for perceiving, recognizing, and expressing emotions (emotional intelligence) and who have learned to accept discomfort as an integral part of the creative (and indeed, everyday) process, demonstrate lower levels of stage anxiety and a greater ability to enter a state of flow. The study offers strategies for maintaining creative form in the long term, including effective models related to discipline and the development of sustainable habits, as well as suggestions for visualization and other approaches from cognitive-behavioral therapy that can serve as tools for reducing anxiety levels.

The study emphasizes that overall physical health, sleep, and a harmonious balance between personal life and musical development are also key factors in maintaining a creative spirit and creative longevity, while emotionality and sensitivity are reframed not as obstacles but as essential tools for authentic communication through music.

Thus, the holistic model proposed in this work is not limited to teaching specific jazz techniques but offers a new pedagogical model that treats the performer as a unified psycho-physical whole. The methodologies of Oscar Peterson, Barry Harris, and Jamie Abersold, included as foundational approaches, offer complementary strategies for developing the musical skills necessary for the jazz style. These approaches provide students with the necessary theoretical and technical foundation for free improvisation; the rest depends on the student's initiative, interest, and the work they are willing to put in.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION

1. A historical overview of jazz has been conducted, focusing on various stylistic characteristics, and the connection between early forms of musical improvisation, the African American tradition, and contemporary pedagogical approaches to jazz education has been traced.
2. For the purposes of the study, an attempt was made to develop an interdisciplinary framework that brings together a wide range of disciplines – music education, psychological, and performance aspects – that examines the interrelationship between technical training, cognitive processes, emotional regulation, and creative expression.
3. Contemporary pedagogical and technological tools for teaching jazz and improvisation are analyzed, and the potential of digital applications and practical methods for developing students' improvisational skills, independent practice, and creative confidence is evaluated.
4. The study identifies and analyzes the key resources that contribute to the development of jazz improvisation skills, as well as the main barriers hindering free improvisation among young musicians.
5. Practical recommendations are formulated for jazz educators and students, aimed at developing technical skills, a theoretical foundation, improvisational thinking, psychological resilience, and creative autonomy.
6. The musical analysis of selected performances in this work provides guidance for educational practices focused on important details of the given performance.
7. The study has both theoretical and practical applications, serving as a methodological guide for independent use or as a pedagogical handbook.