

## OPINION

by Prof. Dr. Borislav Alexandrov Yasenov, “Prof.  
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I submit this statement in my capacity as a member of the academic jury appointed by Order No. Z-RK-247 of July 17, 2026, issued by the Rector of the New Bulgarian University, Sofia, regarding the defense of a dissertation on the topic: “Factors in the Development of Jazz Improvisation Skills in Pianists: Classical and Contemporary Approaches,” for the award of the educational and scientific degree of “**Doctor**” in the field of higher education 8. Arts, professional field

8.3. Music and Dance Arts, doctoral program “Musicology and Musical Arts.” The author of the dissertation is Hristiana Hristova Stoykova – a doctoral student enrolled in an independent study program at the Department of Music at New Bulgarian University, Sofia, under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski.

The set of materials provided to me includes the following documents: a curriculum vitae, the dissertation, an abstract, a list of scholarly publications, and a list of creative achievements.

Hristiana Stoykova began her musical education at the School of Arts at the Palace of Culture in Pernik, where she studied piano, classical and pop-rock-jazz guitar, solfège, and music theory. After eight years of study, she graduated from the school with honors in 2015. That same year, she enrolled at New Bulgarian University (NBU) in Sofia, majoring in Pop and Jazz Guitar in Valeri Gradinarski’s class, and later transferred to the Pop and Jazz Piano program in the class of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski. In 2020, she completed her bachelor’s degree, and in 2022, she graduated with honors, earning a Master’s degree in Pop and Jazz Piano. As part of her professional development, she has participated in numerous competitions for young instrumentalists, where she has placed in the top ranks.

The doctoral student’s artistic and creative activity is exceptionally active. She performs in various chamber ensembles, works with the “Orpheus” Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Raicho Hristov, in Pernik, as well as with the Pernik Wind Orchestra, conducted by Trifon Trifonov. She performs with the duo “Soul Connection” and the jazz trio “Suddenly,” and participates in numerous festivals, club performances, and public events. From 2017 to 2023, he served as accompanist for the university mixed choir “Folk Jazz Formation,” conducted by Prof. Dr. Georgi Petkov.

The dissertation author’s teaching work is very active. Even while still a student, he led various music workshops for children in Vyara Pantaleeva’s “Mickey Mouse” vocal group until 2022. Since that same year, he has been teaching private piano lessons at the Highlight Singing Academy. From 2020 to the present, she has worked as a lecturer and accompanist alongside Professor Emeritus Dr. E. Levi, Associate Professor Dr. A. Zaberski, Dr. A. Baychev, and Senior Assistant Professor Dr. I. Paraskov.

The author’s affinity for jazz and his professional interests prompted him to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth study on improvisation and its application in piano instruction.

The study employs a theoretical approach centered on the chronology of jazz’s development from historical and stylistic perspectives; it presents various systems and approaches used by iconic pianists, as well as analyses of representative works in different styles, all of which contribute to a clearer understanding of the subject matter. This lays the groundwork for expanding knowledge regarding various perspectives on the creative process, the phenomena and trends that have given rise to innovations in the evolution of the improvisational process, as well as for enriching the emotional and aesthetic worldview and knowledge of style. A comprehensive approach is applied. All of this will lead to the enrichment of theoretical and practical skills among young performers and will contribute to the formation of a creative-performance model. It will broaden the competencies of music educators. The above-stated factors underpin the contributory nature of the dissertation.

The doctoral candidate convincingly defends the thesis that jazz improvisation is not merely the product of innate talent, but rather the result of acquiring skills that develop theoretically and practically over time, influenced by the appropriate environment – musical, social, and psychological.

Of particular importance is the emphasis on analyzing music education and training as a point of intersection between classical traditions and contemporary approaches, as well as the holistic method, which is fundamental to the development of young improvisational pianists. The study also

takes into account digitalization and its impact on contemporary pedagogical and performance practices. The aim of the study is to analyze the factors – pedagogical, psychological, and technological – that influence the development of jazz improvisation skills in pianists.

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

The subject of the study is the collaboration between traditional teaching methods, technical training, and psychological factors – flow theory, emotional intelligence, motivation, and habits – as well as the influence of the family environment and digital technologies on the development of emerging jazz pianists.

The methods used by the doctoral candidate include a theoretical approach based on an interdisciplinary framework encompassing musicology, pedagogy, and psychology; comparative analysis – a comparison between classical approaches to improvisation and contemporary jazz methodologies; and an empirical approach – based on the author's pedagogical practice, as well as a survey and interviews.

The tasks the dissertation author sets to achieve these objectives are related to: a retrospective overview of improvisation from the Baroque era and a tracing of its development in jazz; the specifics of improvisation – stylistic analysis and periodization; the influence of psychological factors on the development of the improviser; a comparative analysis of methodologies (Barry Harris and Oscar Peterson – the connection between the classical tradition and jazz practice); an examination of the role of contemporary software and teaching aids in jazz education, a survey – an investigation of the subjective experiences of young improvisers, interviews with established professionals to shed light on practical models that foster successful creative growth, and the identification of specific strategies for optimizing the teaching process and stage performance.

In the introduction to this comprehensive study, the doctoral candidate presents the subject, the objective, the tasks, and sets forth his research hypothesis.

In Chapter One, the doctoral candidate provides a retrospective overview, a unique historical and stylistic periodization – arranged chronologically. He presents the sociocultural prerequisites for the emergence of jazz, examines the terminology and evolution of performance approaches, the fundamental musical factors for the development of improvisational skills, the stylistic diversity in jazz history, the traditions in jazz related to collective improvisation, the era of swing and the big band, the innovations and elitism of modern jazz, avant-garde explorations, and free jazz.

In Chapter Two, the author analyzes the role of improvisation in Baroque music – ornamentation and improvisational lines – and examines theoretical systems in jazz, the approaches of Oscar Peterson and Barry Harris, as well as contemporary prerequisites and technological tools.

In Chapter Three, Stoykova examines the problems that arise in the process of piano instruction, as well as the cognitive and emotional discomfort experienced in the early stages. She focuses on: the Bulgarian piano school as a factor in the development of pianists, the foundations of improvisation – emotional intelligence as a tool, and the practical application of theories in teaching practice.

Chapter Four presents a comparative stylistic analysis of iconic performances and improvisations: swing – “C-Jam Blues,” “Anthropology” – the bebop style and linear thinking, “Waltz for Debby” – lyrical modernism and the innovation of the bossa nova style in “Chega de Saudade.” The improvisational process was empirically examined, with attention focused on three aspects: methodology, context, and objectives. General conclusions were drawn from the study.

The relevance of the dissertation topic “Factors in the Development of Jazz Improvisation Skills Among Pianists: Classical and Contemporary Approaches” stems from the dynamics in the development of contemporary musical art, which has achieved new emotional and aesthetic parameters thanks to the evolution of improvisation – driven by diverse stylistic premises and the need to examine, analyze, and renew creative potential, approaches to interpretation, and teaching methodologies, as well as their practical application.

The scope of the subject matter and the results achieved demonstrate the author's strong interest and professional commitment, as well as his personal perspective and innovative approach to the issues under consideration.

The list of scientific publications shows that there are four of them, all closely related to the subject under study.

The work compiles, organizes, and analyzes a large volume of information presented across 179 pages, 159 of which consist of the main text. It includes an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The explanations are supported by appropriate examples – musical notation, harmonic symbols, tables, and graphs (43 in total) – which help create an even clearer understanding of the subject matter. The bibliography includes 80 titles, of which 37 are in Cyrillic, 43 in Latin, and 143 are online sources.

The abstract is prepared in accordance with the requirements and provides a clear overview of the content and the main results achieved in the dissertation.

The contributions of this work are as follows:

- the historical development of jazz is presented – including its stylistic characteristics – and the connection between early forms of improvisation and contemporary pedagogical approaches is traced;

- an attempt is made to develop an interdisciplinary framework that integrates musical-pedagogical, psychological, and performance aspects, examining the interrelationship between technical training, cognitive processes, emotional regulation, and creative expression;

- Contemporary pedagogical and technological tools for teaching jazz and improvisation – including digital applications and practical methods for developing improvisational skills – have been analyzed;

- the main supporting factors in the development of jazz improvisation skills are identified and analyzed, as well as the main barriers hindering free improvisation among young musicians;

- practical recommendations have been formulated to facilitate the development of technical skills, a theoretical foundation, improvisational thinking, psychological resilience, and creative autonomy;

- The analyses of selected performances in this work provide guidance for educational practices focused on important details from the work in question.

The study has a practical and applied nature, which underscores its significance as a methodological guide that enriches knowledge and creates the conditions for growth in improvisation and the development of a performance-creative model among young musicians in training.

The clear exposition and scientifically grounded analyses in the dissertation make a strong impression. Every issue examined is theoretically substantiated and clearly explained. The vocabulary is rich, abounding in professional terms that reveal the subtext and essence of the work.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that Hristiana Stoykova's dissertation on the topic "Factors in the Development of Jazz Improvisation Skills Among Pianists. Classical and Contemporary Approaches" impressed me with the depth and breadth of the subject matter, the analyses, and the scientific and theoretical rationale, written in professional language and supported by appropriate examples that facilitate an even clearer understanding of the research. It is evident from the content of the thesis that Stoykova is a musician with a rich background in music theory and professional practice. I believe that this theoretical work meets the requirements set forth by the ZRASRB and the Regulations for its implementation for the award of the educational and scientific degree *of "Doctor."* This gives me grounds to propose to the esteemed academic jury that it award Hristiana Stoykova the educational and scientific degree *of "Doctor."*

September 2, 2026

Prepared by: .....

(Prof. Dr. Borislav Yassenov)