

OPINION

by Prof. Milena Shushulova-Pavlova, Ph.D., New Bulgarian University, on
the dissertation of

Hristiana Hristova Stoykova, a full-time doctoral student at NBU

on the topic: **FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF JAZZ**

**IMPROVISATION SKILLS AMONG PIANISTS. CLASSICAL AND
CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES**

under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Angelov

Zaberski for the award of the academic and scientific degree of
“Doctor”

in the professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Arts

Biographical Information

Hristiana Stoykova was born in Sofia. In 2015, she graduated with honors from an 8-year program in piano, solfège, classical and pop-rock-jazz guitar, and music theory at the School of Arts at the Palace of Culture in Pernik. She continued her studies at New Bulgarian University. In 2020, she earned a bachelor’s degree from NBU, majoring in *Pop and Jazz Piano* in the class of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski, and in 2022, she completed her master’s degree with honors. She also studied *Pop and Jazz Guitar* in Valeri Gradinarski’s class. From 2017 to 2023, he served as accompanist for the university’s mixed choir “Folk Jazz Formation,” conducted by Prof. Dr. Georgi Petkov. Since 2020, he has worked as an instructor and accompanist alongside Professor Emeritus Dr. Etienne Levy, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski, Dr. Alexander Baychev, and Senior Assistant Prof. Dr. Ilian Paraskov. He leads various music workshops for children. He has organized several editions of the “Morning Star” International Arts Festival. Since 2022, he has been teaching piano at the Highlight Singing Academy. He has participated in competitions for young instrumentalists; he has collaborated with the “Orpheus” Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Raicho Hristov, in Pernik; and with the Pernik Wind Orchestra, conducted by Trifon Trifonov. He performs with the duo “Soul Connection” alongside singer Victoria Georgieva; and with the jazz trio “Suddenly” – flute, piano, and drums. She performs on various stages—clubs, piano bars, art festivals with open-air stages, galleries, and centers for children and adults with disabilities—and also participates in educational and charity concerts.

Contents of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of a total of 179 pages, including an introduction, four chapters¹, a conclusion, contributions, a bibliography, and a list of scientific publications. The bibliography consists of 80 sources: 43 in English and 37 in Cyrillic, as well as numerous online sources (given the nature of the research). The dissertation also includes two appendices: an interview with

¹ **Chapter ONE. Historical Origins and Theoretical Dimensions of Jazz Art** (Sociocultural Prerequisites for the Emergence of Jazz: New Orleans; Terminology and Evolution of Performance Approaches; Key Musical Factors in the Development of Improvisational Skills; Stylistic Diversity in Jazz History; Early Traditions in Jazz and Collective Improvisation; The Era of Large Ensembles: Big Band and Swing Music; The Culture of the Jam Session – A Generator of Instrumental Mastery; Modern Jazz: The Intellectual Revolution of Bebop and Cool Jazz; Emancipation of Form: Avant-Garde Explorations and Free Jazz; Exotic Influences: Bossa Nova and Latin American Rhythmic Structures (samba, guajira). **Chapter TWO. Methodological Parallels: From Baroque Practice to Contemporary Educational Systems** (Improvisation Before Jazz: Basso continuo in the Baroque, Ornamentation, and Improvisational Lines; Theoretical Systems in Jazz; Oscar Peterson’s Approach; Jazz as an Evolution of Classical Harmony: Barry Harris’s Model; Contemporary Resources and Technological Tools). **Chapter THREE. Psychological Aspects and Cognitive Strategies in (Jazz) Piano Instruction** (Cognitive and Emotional Discomfort in the Initial Stage of Learning; Physiological Discomfort; Psychological and Cognitive Discomfort; The Bulgarian Piano School as a Factor in the Development of Pianists; Cognitive Foundations of Improvisation: Emotional Intelligence and the State of Flow; Emotional Intelligence as a Tool; Flow theory in support of the creative musical process; Pedagogical applications of these theories in the music education process). **Chapter FOUR: Stylistic Analyses and Empirical Research** (Comparative stylistic analysis of iconic performances and improvised solos; Swing – “C-Jam Blues”; The bebop revolution and linear thinking: “Anthropology”; Lyrical Modernism and Psychological Introspection: “Waltz for Debby”; Bossa Nova and Structural Contrast: “Chega de Saudade”; Empirical Study of the Improvisational Process: Methodology, Context, and Objectives; General Conclusions from the Study).

Precisely Formulated Objectives and Tasks of the Dissertation

The aim of the study is to analyze the factors (pedagogical, psychological, and technological) that influence the development of jazz improvisation skills in pianists, while proposing a holistic model based on a synthesis of the methodologies of pianists such as Barry Harris and Oscar Peterson (interaction between the classical tradition, technical exercises, and contemporary music psychology) – who are iconic jazz musicians and teachers of jazz interpretation and improvisation. Harris, through numerous lectures and seminars in the U.S. and around the world (freely available online in the form of videos and collections of notated exercises prepared by his assistants and followers), Peterson – through his teaching materials for young pianists, interviews, practical guidance, and collections of transcribed interpretations of various works for more advanced pianists.

The subject 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 encompassing 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's² debut master class at New Bulgarian University) to identify the main factors contributing to their development, as well as deficiencies 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 as follows: 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. Stylistic differentiation and evolution – an analysis of key periods in jazz and a definition of their specific improvisational paradigms. Psychological and cognitive profiling – an examination of the psychological factors that catalyze or hinder the development of the improviser. 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. Technology and resource overview – an examination of the role of modern software and methodological tools in jazz education. Empirical verification through a survey – an investigation of the subjective experiences of young improvisers. Conducting interviews with established professionals to identify effective practical models for greater success. Synthesis and practical guidelines – deriving specific strategies for optimizing the learning process and stage performance.

Significance of the Research Problem from a Scientific and Applied Perspective

Numerous scientific studies, monographs, and publications in Bulgarian and around the world demonstrate the current interest in jazz music, improvisation, and instruments. Due to the specific nature of jazz (free musical storytelling in the moment of performance), it is believed that few are capable of mastering this art. In the evolution of musical piano mastery – from the Baroque and Classical periods to the present day – strict requirements often hinder (or limit) young talents from being more creative and spontaneous. The step-by-step techniques proposed in this dissertation could open up new possibilities in piano pedagogy.

This dissertation is based on the thesis that jazz improvisation is not based solely on innate talent, but also on skills that develop in the appropriate environment and conditions – musical, social, and psychological. 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

² 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)

development of young pianists is viewed as a holistic process – a combination of specific exercises, planning, strict discipline, and regular exercises. The study examines the balance between individual work and work with an instructor, as well as the importance of group rehearsals for developing high-quality ensemble skills – synchronization, accompaniment, and effective communication among colleagues. The dissertation highlights the need to build a motivational framework for musicians, to develop leadership qualities and skills, and to foster sustained motivation and creative discipline. The doctoral candidate also examines contemporary technological approaches to jazz that support education and the training of young talents. The thesis analyzes the role of the most widely used digital applications, online resources, and audio recording platforms, which make the learning process more comprehensive and practically oriented. The selection of the educational systems outlined by Abersold and Hal Leonard is not arbitrary; they provide clear guidelines and are well-structured.

General Conclusions in the Thesis's Conclusion

This dissertation offers a contemporary perspective on the various factors that influence the development of pianists and their musical skills, demonstrating that these factors represent an integration of musical literacy, technical training, musical taste and affinity for jazz, cognitive flexibility, and emotional resilience. The survey conducted confirms the role of technical training and theoretical knowledge, which form the foundation for every improviser. The results of the scientific study support and prove the thesis of the dissertation that these factors also require specific psychophysiological and educational conditions that allow the performer to exercise creative freedom.

The empirical analysis showed that an early educational environment that encourages creativity and experimentation facilitates a smoother transition into the specific nature of jazz. Musicians who possess well-developed emotional intelligence and are accustomed to discomfort as an integral part of the creative process demonstrate a greater ability to enter a state of improvisational flow. The study includes effective models for building sustainable habits and cognitive-behavioral approaches that can serve as tools for reducing anxiety and stress levels on stage.

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

Accuracy in citing a representative number of authors

Hristiana Stoykova is accurate in her citations.

Contributions of the Dissertation

I fully accept the contributions of the dissertation. They are formulated as follows:

1. A historical connection has been explored between the early forms of musical improvisation (Baroque, Classical) and the various stylistic characteristics of jazz, with a focus on contemporary pedagogical approaches to teaching.
2. An attempt has been made to develop an interdisciplinary framework (system) that unites a wide range of disciplines – music education, psychology, and performance. The interrelationship between technical training, cognitive processes, emotional regulation, and the quality of creative expression is examined.
3. The study analyzes some contemporary pedagogical and technological tools for teaching jazz and improvisation. It assesses the potential of digital applications and practical methods for developing improvisational skills that can support students' independent practice and creative confidence.
4. Certain auxiliary tools are identified and analyzed as factors in the development of jazz improvisation skills, as well as the main barriers hindering free improvisation among young musicians.
5. Practical recommendations have been formulated for jazz instructors 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

piano practices focused on important details of the given performance.

7. The study has both theoretical and practical applicability, serving as a methodological guide for independent use or as a pedagogical handbook.

Assessment of the abstract's consistency with the main provisions and contributions of the dissertation.

The abstract corresponds to the dissertation.

Personal qualities of the author (if known to the reviewer)

I have known Hristiana Stoykova since her first year of study at NBU. She was my piano student, and step by step I guided her toward Assoc. Prof. Zaberski. Hristiana boldly continued her development as a jazz and pop pianist and teacher. She is intelligent, ambitious, and hardworking. She is consistent and analytical. I believe that these qualities, combined with her talent, will yield excellent results for the future development of the modern piano school in Bulgaria.

Publications Related to the Dissertation Topic

The doctoral candidate presents four publications related to the topic of her dissertation:

1. **Stoykova, H.** *Building Discipline, Habits, and Resilience to Overcome Difficulties Among Beginning Pianists*. 18th Young Scholars' Forum on Music and Dance. New Bulgarian University, 2024
2. **Stoykova, H.** *Barry Harris's Methodology as a Contemporary Approach to Teaching Jazz Improvisation and Harmony*. Art and Context. Institute for Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2025
3. **Stoykova, H.** *The Applicability of the iReal Pro Music Mobile App in Pedagogical Practice Based on John Kratus's Seven-Step Model for Learning Improvisation*. 19th Young Scholars' Forum on Music and Dance. New Bulgarian University, 2025
4. **Stoykova, H.** *The Integration of Emotional Intelligence and Flow Theory in Jazz Improvisation Instruction Based on Quincy Jones's "The Twelve Notes."* 20th Young Scholars' Forum on Music and Dance. New Bulgarian University, 2026

Hristiana Stoykova has also supplemented her publications with 16 creative performances.

In conclusion to this OPINION, I will conclude with the following assessment:

I consider Hristiana Stoykova's dissertation to be substantial and important. It contributes to the understanding of piano jazz improvisation and enriches piano pedagogy.

Hristiana Stoykova's work meets the scientometric criteria for the award of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor," in accordance with the Law on the Development of Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria.

The dissertation by Hristiana Stoykova, a full-time doctoral student at NBU, on the topic: **FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF JAZZ IMPROVISATION SKILLS AMONG PIANISTS: CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES**, together with the scientific and applied contributions it contains, her publications on the topic, and her creative activities, I consider fully sufficient to offer my wholehearted positive assessment and to propose to the esteemed academic jury that it award the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Arts to Hristiana Stoykova, in accordance with the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

September 9, 2026, Sofia

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