

OPINION

by Prof. Dr. Veselin Ivanov Koichev, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv,

on a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” in:
Field of Higher Education 8. Arts, professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Arts, scientific
specialty “Musicology and Musical Arts.”

Author: Hristiana Hristova Stoykova

Topic: “Factors in the Development of Jazz Improvisation Skills Among Pianists: Classical and Contemporary Approaches”

Advisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski, NBU.

The set of materials submitted by the doctoral candidate includes the following documents:

1. Order No. 3-RK-247 dated July 17, 2026, issued by the Rector of NBU, establishing the academic jury for the dissertation defense;
2. Curriculum vitae in European format;
3. Abstract;
4. List of scholarly publications on the dissertation topic;
5. Dissertation;
6. General creative biography;

Doctoral candidate Hristiana Stoykova graduated with honors from an 8-year program in piano, solfège, and music theory at the School of Arts at the Palace of Culture in Pernik. At the same time, she took lessons in classical, pop-rock, and jazz guitar at the same institution.

The documents provided show that she graduated from New Bulgarian University in 2020 with a bachelor’s degree and continued her studies with a master’s degree in “Pop and Jazz Piano” in the Department of Music at NBU, which she completed with honors in 2022.

From 2017 to 2023, she served as an accompanist for the university’s mixed choir “Folk Jazz Formation,” conducted by Prof. Dr. Georgi Petkov. Since 2020, she has been working as a lecturer and accompanist alongside Professor Emeritus Dr. Etienne Levy, Associate Professor Dr. Angel Zaberski, Dr. Alexander Baychev, and Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Ilian Paraskov.

In parallel with her academic studies, she teaches in music workshops for children at Vyara Pantaleeva’s “Mickey Mouse” Vocal Group and gives private piano lessons to children and adults at the Highlight Singing Academy, managed by Iskra Milkova-Angelova.

He has participated in and won awards at competitions for young instrumentalists; he is a member of musical duos and trios, and performs with the “Orpheus” Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Raicho Hristov, in Pernik, as well as with the Pernik Wind Orchestra, conducted by Trifon Trifonov. She is a member of the duo Soul Connection alongside singer Victoria Georgieva, as well as the jazz trio Suddenly (flute, piano, drums). He performs in clubs, piano bars, art festivals with open-air stages, galleries, and centers for children and adults with disabilities; he also participates in educational and charity concerts, among other events. He participated in the International Competition for Young Performers of Classical Music – Palace of Culture, Pernik; “Kitariada” Rock Festival, Pernik; July Morning Festival, Kamen Bryag; “Night of the Samovodska Charshia,” Veliko Tarnovo; City Mark Art Center, Sofia; and others.

From Hristiana Stoykova's biography, I get the impression that she is a diligent student, a skilled performer with extensive creative experience, and someone who is proactive and takes the initiative when collaborating with various musicians, whether participating in existing musical ensembles or forming new ones.

The dissertation is structured into an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, contributions, a bibliography, and two appendices. The total length is 179 pages, of which the main content spans 152 pages. A significant number of sources were used – 240 in total, including 37 in Cyrillic, 45 in Latin script, and 158 online sources. The formatting of the sources is clear and accurate. Appendix 1 – an interview with Angel Zaberski – and Appendix 2 – an interview with Georgi Arnaudov – are included.

The introduction clearly defines the object, subject, purpose, objectives, and hypothesis of the study.

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

The subject of the dissertation is the influence of traditional music teaching methods, technical training, psychological constructs, 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 teaching practice and involving a survey and expert interviews.

The chosen methodology allows for the achievement of the set goal and provides an adequate response to the research questions in the dissertation.

The aim of the study is to analyze the multifaceted factors that influence the development of jazz improvisation skills in pianists, while proposing a holistic model based on a synthesis of the methodologies of pianists Barry Harris and Oscar Peterson.

The main hypothesis is to demonstrate that the fundamental role of musical factors – technical training and theoretical knowledge, as the foundation upon which every improviser builds – may prove insufficient if not supported by specific psychophysiological and educational conditions that allow the performer to break free from restrictions and seek creative freedom.

The beginning of **Chapter 1** is devoted to a brief historical overview of the emergence of jazz as a style that unites and synthesizes "... West African and European music, which arose under American conditions." [Azriel, 1982:47].

Important musical factors for the development of improvisational skills are examined, such as: the scale-chord relationship, transcription and musical analysis of solos, learning and transposing phrases, rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic variations on short motifs and phrases, creating rhythmic variety, familiarity with the 12-bar harmonic blues progression and the AABA song form, the development of harmonic and melodic sensibility, alteration and reharmonization, as well as interaction—that is, spontaneous real-time musical dialogue among the members of a jazz group, i.e., group work.

The chapter also examines historical periods characterized by different ways of making music and their stylistic features, such as Dixieland, big band and swing, bebop, cool jazz, free jazz, bossa nova, and samba.

The second chapter provides interesting information on 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.

Hristiana Stoykova draws attention to an interesting parallel between the approaches to music-making in basso continuo and in jazz. She notes that the basso continuo performs a function identical to the modern way of notating jazz standards (lead sheets) – with a predetermined harmonic structure.

The third chapter is devoted to overcoming the potential psychological, cognitive, and physiological discomfort that pianists may encounter during the process of improvisation, through appropriate and individually tailored habits for building discipline and resilience. Special attention is given to sharing the pedagogical and scientific experience of prominent representatives of the Bulgarian piano school, with a view to the proper psychological, cognitive, and physiological development of young pianists.

Emotional intelligence and the theory of flow, developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, are examined as aspects of psychology related to music-making. The doctoral candidate proposes pedagogical approaches for applying these theories in the music education process, such as the analysis of musical material, the expression of emotion through improvisation, reflective discussions, improvisational dialogues, and the alternation of technical and intuitive tasks, among others.

In **Chapter 4**, doctoral candidate Hristina Stoykova conducts a comparative stylistic analysis of iconic performances and improvised solos of jazz pieces in various styles, including swing, bebop, cool jazz, and bossa nova. Here, the focus is on the significance of emotions in the musical process and the psychological mindset that leads the improviser to two extremes: from being part of a collective experience, like Duke Ellington, to being a central figure filling the entire space, like Oscar Peterson. The expressiveness in Bud Powell's performance can be interpreted as a sublimation of his intense inner emotionality; it could be just as original as Bill Evans's psychological introspection – a form of self-observation and exploration of his own thoughts, emotions, motives, and mental states.

A thorough empirical study of the improvisational process was conducted based on a survey administered to performers currently engaged in an active creative process and training under the guidance of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski, a leading authority in contemporary jazz practice and pedagogy. The survey results suggest that the early educational environment fosters a higher level of perfectionism, and that such expectations regarding their performance hinder their ability to relax and immerse themselves in the improvisational process.

The dissertation is well-structured from a technical standpoint and contains compiled and systematized information that supports the arguments. Thus, the holistic model proposed in the thesis is not limited to teaching specific jazz techniques, but offers a pedagogical model that treats the performer as a unified psychophysical whole, minimizes cognitive strain, and paves the way for conscious emotional expressiveness in performance.

Publications related to the dissertation: three papers presented at the international conference “Young Scientific Forum on Music and Dance,” NBU, 2024, 2026, and 2026, and an article in the journal *Art and Context*. Institute for Art Studies, BAS, 2025, are related to the research topic, complementing and further developing it.

This study makes significant contributions. Among the contributions described, I would highlight the following: contemporary pedagogical and technological tools for teaching in the field of jazz and improvisation; the main supporting tools that serve as factors in the development of jazz improvisation skills have been identified and analyzed, as well as the main barriers hindering free improvisation among young musicians; practical recommendations were formulated aimed at developing technical skills, a theoretical foundation, improvisational thinking, psychological resilience, and creative autonomy.

The abstract is prepared in accordance with the requirements of the relevant regulations and reflects the main results achieved in the dissertation, providing an accurate picture of the quality and level of scientific thinking.

Hristiana Stoykova's dissertation represents a new research endeavor aimed at conducting systematic studies in the field of jazz improvisation. In this sense, the research enriches knowledge in this niche area of musicology.

Based on my overall positive assessment of the research conducted on the topic “Factors in the Development of Jazz Improvisation Skills Among Pianists. Classical and Contemporary Approaches,” the abstract, the results achieved, and the contributions made, **I propose that the distinguished academic jury award the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” to Hristiana Hristova Stoykova** in the field of higher education 8. Arts, professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Arts, doctoral program in Musicology and Musical Arts.

September 6, 2026

Opinion prepared by:

Prof. Dr. Veselin Koychev