

REVIEW

by **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nadezhda Kozma Kuzmanova** – piano and organ instructor at the Prof. Asen Diamandiev Academy of Music, Theatre, and Fine Arts, Plovdiv regarding a dissertation for the award of **the academic and scientific degree of “DOCTOR,”** submitted by **Hristiana Stoykova**, a self-directed doctoral candidate in the Department of Music at New Bulgarian University, Sofia on the topic **“Factors in the Development of Jazz Improvisation Skills in Pianists: Classical and Contemporary Approaches.”**
Academic Advisor: **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski**

1. General overview of the procedure and the materials received for review

By Order No. Z-RK-247 dated July 17, 2026, issued by the Rector of NBU, Prof. Plamen Doynov, Ph.D., a procedure was initiated for the public defense of a dissertation on the topic **“Factors in the Development of Jazz Improvisation Skills Among Pianists. Classical and Contemporary Approaches”** by **Hristiana Hristova Stoykova**. Submitted for review are the doctoral candidate’s curriculum vitae, a dissertation comprising 179 pages, including 4 chapters, contributions, a bibliography, 2 appendices, and an abstract.

2. Brief biographical information about the doctoral candidate.

Hristiana Stoykova was born in 1997 in Sofia. Her musical education began at the School of Arts at the Palace of Culture in Pernik, where she studied piano, classical, pop-rock, and jazz guitar, solfège, and music theory for 8 years. In 2015, she began her studies at New Bulgarian University (NBU), majoring in Pop and Jazz Guitar in Valeri Gradinarski’s class, and later in the piano class of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski. In 2020, she earned her bachelor’s degree, and in 2022, she completed her master’s degree in Pop and Jazz Piano. Meanwhile, she has worked as an accompanist and instructor alongside leading Bulgarian musicians in the pop and jazz genres. Her active creative work includes participation and prize-winning performances in competitions for young instrumentalists, as well as numerous concert appearances. I would like to highlight the following: the “Art Without Borders” concert with the jazz trio Suddenly (2022), the 20th-anniversary concert of the Folk-Jazz Ensemble at NBU (2022), a performance with the “Folk-Jazz Ensemble” University Choir at the Youth Jazz Fest in Sofia, Grand Prix Award (2023), participation with the NBU Folk-Jazz Ensemble at the Bansko Jazz Festival (2023), participation in a production by students from the Pop and Jazz Piano class of Honorary Prof. Dr. Etienne Levy and Dr. Alexander Baychev (2024), and others.

3. Relevance of the Topic

This dissertation addresses a timely and practically significant issue – the development of jazz improvisation skills among pianists and the possibilities for improving the educational process by combining classical and contemporary approaches. The relevance of the topic stems both from the growing interest in jazz art and improvisation and from the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape free and compelling improvisational thinking. The author thoughtfully expands the scope of the study beyond purely musical and technical training to include psychological and performance-related aspects – emotional awareness, inner resilience, creative confidence, and the ability for musical interaction. This interdisciplinary approach lends the study a contemporary perspective and practical applicability.

The relevance of the work is further supported by the interest in the issues of jazz

improvisation, pedagogy, and performance practices in the Bulgarian music scene, as outlined in the literature review. The author notes the existence of a number of contemporary publications and dissertation studies, but at the same time draws attention to the need to integrate them into a more comprehensive methodological framework.

4. Appropriateness of the Research Methods for Achieving the Set Goals The chosen methodology is appropriate for the goals and objectives of the dissertation. The doctoral candidate applies a combination of theoretical, comparative, and empirical approaches, which corresponds to the interdisciplinary nature of the research and allows for the examination of jazz improvisation simultaneously from musical-pedagogical, psychological, and performance perspectives.

Particularly appropriate is the inclusion of quantitative and qualitative survey studies among young jazz improvisers, as well as expert interviews with professionals – a performer, a composer, and an educator. This empirical component complements the theoretical analysis and provides an opportunity to compare academic theories with the real-world experience of jazz musicians in both training and practice.

Another significant advantage is the comparative analysis of classical and contemporary methodologies for improvisation, as well as the application of a music-analytical approach when examining specific jazz performances. The methods used in this way provide the necessary foundation for achieving the study's objective – to identify the factors that support the development of improvisational skills, as well as the barriers that hinder it.

5. Evaluation of the Dissertation.

Chapter One serves an important introductory and theoretical-conceptual function within the structure of the dissertation. In it, the author traces the sociocultural preconditions for the emergence of jazz, the evolution of performance approaches, and the main stages in the development of jazz stylistics – from the early forms of collective improvisation through swing and the jam session to bebop, cool and free jazz, as well as the influences of bossa nova and Latin American rhythmic structures.

Central to the overall concept of the thesis is an examination of the key musical factors in the development of improvisational skills. The doctoral candidate specifies the role of the relationship between scale and chord, the transcription and analysis of established jazz solos, the internalization of stylistic techniques, as well as working with rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic variations. In this way, the historical and stylistic overview naturally transitions to the pedagogical issues that form the core of the dissertation's research.

Also impressive is the effort to clarify the very concept of “jazz improvisation.” The author defines it as a process of “synchronous generation and real-time reproduction of melodic lines over a specific harmonic framework in a jazz style” (p. 17). This formulation is essential for the subsequent research, as it views improvisation not as a completely spontaneous act, but as the result of internalized musical models, technical training, stylistic knowledge, and interaction among the performers.

The second chapter is essential to the conceptual framework of the dissertation, as it places the issue of jazz improvisation within a broader historical and methodological context. The doctoral candidate convincingly argues for the need to seek the roots of improvisational music-making beyond the boundaries of the jazz tradition, tracing the connection between Baroque practice, classical musical training, and contemporary methods of jazz instruction.

In subsection 2.1, the focus is on the basso continuo, ornamentation, and improvisational practices in the Baroque period. The author emphasizes that “improvisation was not merely a

supplement, but an essential skill for every professional musician” (p. 41). This perspective is directly relevant to the central theme of the work, as it broadens the understanding of improvisation as a historically developed musical competence rather than as a specific skill unique to the jazz style.

A significant portion of the chapter is devoted to the methodological systems of Oscar Peterson, Barry Harris, and Jamey Abersold. These are presented as distinct yet mutually complementary paths toward building a foundation in technique, harmony, melody, and improvisation. Particularly useful is the doctoral candidate’s effort to derive from these systems specific pedagogical principles applicable to the training of pianists, rather than limiting herself to their historical or biographical presentation.

Also worthy of note is the discussion of contemporary technological tools in subsection 2.3, which explores the potential of the iReal Pro app as a tool for individual preparation, practicing harmonic progressions, and developing improvisational skills. In this way, traditional methodological models are placed in dialogue with contemporary technologies.

Chapter Three expands the discussion beyond the traditionally examined technical and theoretical prerequisites for the development of jazz improvisation and directs attention toward psychological and cognitive factors. In the first part of the chapter, the author examines the physiological, psychological, and cognitive discomfort that can accompany piano instruction from its earliest stages. The doctoral candidate emphasizes that “The development of improvisational skills does not begin with the first technical standard or piece, but with the establishment of a comprehensive psychophysiological foundation as early as childhood” (p. 79). This perspective is particularly significant, as it links the initial stages of piano instruction to the musician’s later ability to perform freely and confidently.

Significant attention is devoted to stage anxiety, self-criticism, concentration, and mechanisms for coping with psychological stress. The author does not examine these in isolation but relates them to the quality of musical performance and the ability to respond creatively in real time. The introduction of the concept of internal concentration – presented through the idea of the “small circle,” which is directly linked to jazz improvisation – is particularly compelling, as the pianist must simultaneously keep track of the form, harmony, style, and development of his own improvisational line.

Also of interest is the connection the doctoral candidate draws between the tradition of the Bulgarian piano school and the training of future improvisers. In this way, classical piano training is presented not as the opposite of jazz improvisation, but as a potential foundation for developing technical discipline, aural skills, concentration, and endurance.

In the second part of the chapter, the author focuses on emotional intelligence and flow theory as factors in the creative musical process. Improvisation is viewed not merely as a collection of acquired musical knowledge and technical skills, but as a complex psycho-emotional process. The theoretical concepts are linked to pedagogical practice, and their potential applications in teaching are explored.

Chapter Four is of particular importance to the overall concept of the dissertation, as it applies the theoretical frameworks from the preceding chapters to specific musical material and to empirical testing. The first section presents a comparative stylistic analysis of four landmark works and performances representing different stages and trends in the development of jazz improvisation – swing, bebop, lyrical modernism, and bossa nova. In this way, the author traces various models of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic thinking and demonstrates their significance for the construction of the language of improvisation. These analyses are directly relevant to the pedagogical focus of the dissertation, as they draw attention to specific improvisational techniques and the possibilities for interpreting and applying them in

teaching. In this way, stylistic analysis serves as a practical bridge between theoretical knowledge and the actual development of improvisational thinking.

A significant portion of the chapter is devoted to the empirical study of the improvisational process. The author conducted a structured survey among participants in Angel Zaberski's master class "Privileged to Improvise Jazz" at NBU in February 2026. The sample consists of young musicians who are in the process of actively developing their improvisational skills, and the 22-question survey covers demographic and professional characteristics, psychological factors, musical training, and habits. The summarized results support the main conceptual framework of the study. A connection has been established between early musical education, the educational environment, psychophysiological resilience, and the ability to improvise and enter a state of flow. At the same time, an important paradox emerges: classical education provides the necessary technical training, but under certain conditions it can foster perfectionist attitudes, which subsequently become a psychological barrier to free improvisation.

In this sense, the conclusion that instruction in jazz improvisation should not be limited to the accumulation of technical and theoretical knowledge is particularly significant. The need for a more holistic pedagogical approach is highlighted, one that includes emotional awareness, self-discipline, physical and mental balance, the ability to interact within an ensemble, and the development of creative confidence.

Chapter Four successfully fulfills its summarizing function. It links the stylistic and music-analytical aspects of jazz improvisation with its psychological and pedagogical dimensions and transforms the research findings into practice-oriented conclusions.

6. Contributions and Significance of the Research.

I accept the contributions formulated by the doctoral candidate, which I summarize as follows: An interdisciplinary conceptual framework for the development of jazz improvisation skills has been established, integrating musical-pedagogical, psychological, cognitive, and performance aspects; A systematic review and analysis has been conducted of the historical development of improvisational practice, established jazz teaching methodologies, and contemporary technological tools, with a view to their application in the training of pianists; The factors that support the development of improvisational skills have been identified and analyzed, as well as the psychological and pedagogical barriers that may limit the free creative expression of young musicians; Practical guidelines have been formulated for instructors and students, aimed at combining technical and theoretical training with the development of improvisational thinking, psychological resilience, and creative autonomy; Through musical-analytical and empirical research, the practical applicability of the developed approaches has been substantiated, allowing this work to serve as a methodological foundation for both independent study and pedagogical practice.

8. Critical remarks and recommendations.

The dissertation leaves a very good overall impression with its coherent structure, rich factual basis, and in-depth analytical approach, which systematically leads to the conclusions drawn and, consequently, to the fully substantiated contributions. The bibliography is comprehensive, and the abstract fully and accurately reflects the content of the work.

I congratulate Hristiana Stoykova and her academic advisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski, on their comprehensive and well-executed work!

9. Conclusion.

Based on everything stated in my presentation and the quality of the dissertation and its author, **I express my positive opinion and propose that the esteemed academic jury award the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” to Hristiana Stoykova** in professional field 8.3, “Music and Dance Arts,” doctoral program “Musicology and Musical Arts,” with **the dissertation topic “Factors in the Development of Jazz Improvisation Skills in Pianists: Classical and Contemporary Approaches.”**

August 12, 2026

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