

REVIEW

by **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rositsa Dimitrova**

Becheva, New Bulgarian University,

on the dissertation by **Hristiana Hristova Stoykova**, field of study 08.03 Music and Dance Arts, Ph.D. candidate at New Bulgarian University, on the topic:

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

for the award of the educational and scientific degree
of “Doctor” Academic Advisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel
Zaberski

Biographical Information

Hristina Stoykova was born on June 24, 1997, in Sofia.

Education and Training: In 2015, she 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.

He earned a bachelor’s degree from New Bulgarian University in Sofia, majoring in “Pop and Jazz Piano” in the class of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Zaberski (2020). He also earned his master’s degree with honors in 2022.

Since 2022, he has been a full-time doctoral student at New Bulgarian University.

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

Even during her undergraduate studies, she began teaching – leading various music workshops for children in Vyara Pantaleeva’s “Mickey Mouse” Vocal Group until 2022. At the same time, she was involved in organizational work and served as a master of ceremonies at several editions of the “Morning Star” International Arts Festival “Morning Star.” Since 2022, he has been teaching private piano lessons to children and adults at the Highlight Singing Academy, managed by Iskra Milkova-Angelova.

Her musical experience includes several appearances and top placements in competitions for young instrumentalists; performances in various musical duets, trios, and other ensembles; collaborations with the “Orpheus” Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Raicho Hristov, in Pernik, as well as with the Pernik Wind Orchestra, conducted by Trifon Trifonov. In recent years, he has been performing on the music scene with the duo “Soul Connection,” formed together with singer Victoria Georgieva, as well as with the jazz trio “Suddenly” – flute, piano, and drums. He 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, among other events. Notable musical appearances include the International Competition for Young Performers of Classical Musical Instruments at the Palace of Culture in Pernik; the Kitariada Rock Festival in Pernik; the “July Morning,” Kamen Bryag village, Kavarna Municipality; the Night of the Samovodska Charshia, Veliko Tarnovo; the City Mark Art Center, Sofia; and others.

She has presented papers at academic conferences, published scholarly articles, and served as an expert on various committees.

Contents of the Dissertation

The dissertation is 180 pages long and is structured as follows: Introduction, Four Chapters, Conclusion, Contributions of the Dissertation Research, Sources Used and Bibliography (including 37 sources in Cyrillic, 43 sources in Latin script, and online sources), and Appendices (Appendix I – Interview with Angel Zaberski, Appendix II – Interview with Georgi Arnaudov).

The introduction provides an overview of the research topic, justifies the relevance of the topic, and formulates the research objectives and tasks: “*The objective of the 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 Harris and Oscar Peterson, the interaction between the classical tradition, technical exercises, and contemporary music psychology.” (cited from the dissertation, pp. 5–6)

The author of the study explains that “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.”

The subject 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 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 jazz pianist’s performance model.

The study is based on *the thesis* that: “The ability to improvise in jazz is not primarily based on innate talent, but rather on skills that develop in the appropriate environment and conditions – musical, social, psychological, and even everyday.”

The objectives of this study are:

- 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 improviser’s development.
- 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.

Research methodology: includes a combination of methods: theoretical analysis, comparative analysis, and empirical research – based on the author’s pedagogical practice and including: *a survey* (quantitative and qualitative) among young jazz improvisers (participants in Angel Zaberski’s inaugural master class at New Bulgarian University) to identify the key factors contributing to their development, as well as deficiencies and sources of discomfort in the learning process, *an expert interview* with representatives of the three main pillars of jazz art – the perspectives of the performer, the composer, and the educator – with the aim of drawing on practical experience, providing guidance, and validating the proposed methods.

Drawing attention to the scholarly literature on the subject both globally and in Bulgaria, the doctoral candidate explains: “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 has also found its place in Bulgarian literary discourse, initially through translations of foreign authors – János Gonda with “Jazz: History, Theory, Practice” [1975] and André Azriel with “Jazz: Analyses and Aspects” [1982]. During the same period, André Oder’s scholarly work was translated into Bulgarian “Jazz—Evolution and Essence” [1983], published in “Musical Horizons”. It is also explained that after 1990, Claire Levy – a Bulgarian musicologist and researcher – published numerous scholarly texts on the various styles of jazz, as well as numerous articles and reviews of musical events and albums on the subject, while books by Bulgarian authors such as Angel Veznev, Veselin Nikolov, Vladimir Gadzhev, Lyudmil Georgiev, Petar Koychev, Ivan Garbichev, and others, have examined jazz music in its various aspects, the culture of jazz in the country, jazz improvisation, as well as the fact. In addition, there are a number of dissertations in the Bulgarian academic sphere.

In connection with the analysis of the state of the field presented in the introduction, the author of this study emphasizes that the dissertation “aims to supplement and enrich existing research on the topic by examining other factors in performing mastery, beyond the musical ones (although the focus is on the methodologies of some of the most popular ones in the genre) and to examine what other resources help musicians become better at what they do, more confident, and more successful. 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 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 (on and off stage), and overall self-actualization.” (*cited in Diss., p. 12*)

Chapter ONE, “Historical Genesis and Theoretical Dimensions of Jazz Art,” provides a historical overview of the origins and evolution of jazz art, the sociocultural prerequisites for its emergence, the stylistic diversity in jazz history, the early traditions in jazz and collective improvisation, the era of big bands: big band and swing music, the culture of the jam session – a catalyst for instrumental mastery, modern jazz, the intellectual revolution of bebop and cool jazz, the emancipation of form: avant-garde explorations and free jazz, exotic influences: bossa nova and Latin American rhythmic structures (samba, guajira), the evolution of performance approaches, and key musical factors in the development of improvisational skills.

The terminological definition of jazz improvisation is clarified.

It is explained that: “In this work, the term ‘jazz improvisation’ refers to the process of synchronous generation and real-time reproduction of melodic lines within a specific harmonic framework in the jazz style.”

An examination of stylistic diversity in the history of jazz reveals how the specifics of the use of certain expressive means have dynamically changed over the years – in connection with the evolving musical and technological environment. In order to more fully explore the key musical factors in the development of improvisational skills, the musical approaches that are universally accepted as classical and foundational in improvisation instruction are examined individually.

Chapter TWO, “Methodological Parallels: From Baroque Practice to Contemporary Educational Systems,” examines pedagogical approaches and practices in the art of improvisation from the Baroque period to the present day, focusing on practices that have endured over time and the continuity of these approaches. The subjects of analysis in this chapter are: basso continuo in the Baroque period, ornamentation and improvisational lines, the approaches of Oscar Peterson and Barry Harris – their technical and improvisational methodologies – and the systems of Abersold and Hal Leonard. The correlation between approach and forms of improvisation.

This chapter also analyzes contemporary resources and technological tools, including the iReal Pro mobile app and its functional features.

Chapter THREE, “Psychological Aspects and Cognitive Strategies in (Jazz) Piano

Instruction,” explores the psychological aspects and strategies in piano and improvisation instruction, as well as the cognitive and emotional discomfort experienced during the initial stage of learning: physiological discomfort. The Bulgarian Piano School is also presented as a factor in the development of pianists, along with the cognitive foundations of improvisation, theories of emotional intelligence and the state of flow, emotional intelligence as a tool, the theory of flow in support of the creative musical process, pedagogical applications of these theories in the music education process.

Findings and conclusions are summarized as follows:

“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.” “The connection between elementary music education and improvisation in jazz 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 notes to a mode of great creative freedom, in which he or she generates what comes next in the musical sound.” “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 like jazz, which is culturally foreign.”

The research also focuses on fundamental works in the field of piano pedagogy and their authors’ concepts regarding the teaching process and the psychology of performance.

In **Chapter FOUR, “Stylistic Analyses and Empirical Research,”** which has a strong theoretical and practical focus, a comparative stylistic analysis is conducted of iconic performances of popular standards and improvised solos (Swing – “C-Jam Blues”) – in a historical and stylistic context, including harmonic and structural analysis, characteristic performance techniques, and comparative analysis.

In this context, the bebop revolution and linear thinking are also analyzed:

“Anthropology,” lyrical modernism, and psychological introspection: “Waltz for Debby,” bossa nova and structural contrast: “Chega de Saudade.”

For me, the texts presenting an empirical study of the improvisational process – methodology, context, and objectives – are of particular importance in this chapter, as they contribute to revealing the psychological and methodological dimensions of the improvisational process.

Regarding the objectives of the empirical study, the author explains: “The goal is to verify the theoretical hypotheses through a direct examination of the subjective experiences, musical education, habits, and barriers faced by contemporary young jazz performers in Bulgaria.” The study is based on a questionnaire (structured into 22 questions divided into four main categories: demographic and professional profile, psychological framework, methodological and technical aspects, bio-psychological factors), conducted among participants in Angel Zaberski’s debut master class, “**Privileged to Improvise** Jazz,” at New Bulgarian University from February 2 to 12, 2026. The author of the study emphasizes: “The selection of this particular group of respondents is not random; it 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.” (*cited in the dissertation, pp. 142–143*)

For the purposes of the dissertation research, two interviews – presented as Appendix I and Appendix II in the dissertation – outline the views and opinions of two prominent musicians regarding the art of jazz and improvisation: Angel Zaberski (pianist, arranger, and composer of jazz and classical music, Associate Professor, Ph.D., lecturer in the Department of Music at New Bulgarian University) and Georgi Arnaudov (Bulgarian composer, musician, and musicologist, professor of composition and harmony at New Bulgarian University, Ph.D. in musicology and musical arts).

The Conclusion summarizes the most significant findings of the study.

Significance of the Research Problem in Scientific and Applied Terms

- the author shares personal experience – both theoretical and practical;
- the holistic model proposed in the thesis is not limited to teaching specific jazz techniques but offers a new pedagogical model that treats the performer as a unified psychophysical whole.

Level of understanding of the state of the research and relevance of the literature used – The doctoral candidate draws on a wide range of information sources, which are cited correctly.

Assessment of the abstract’s consistency with the main provisions and contributions of the dissertation – The 25-page abstract has been prepared in accordance with the requirements.

Publications on the topic of the dissertation – A sufficient number of publications related to the doctoral thesis have been presented.

Contributions of the Dissertation

I accept the contributions to the thesis identified by the doctoral candidate, including:

- A historical overview of jazz has been provided, 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 explored.
- 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.
- 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.
- The main supporting tools that contribute to the development of jazz improvisation skills are identified and analyzed, as well as the primary barriers hindering free improvisation among young musicians.
- 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.
- The musical analysis of selected performances in this work provides guidance for educational practices focused on important details of the given performance.

This dissertation is an in-depth study. It is notable for the author’s thorough knowledge of the subject matter and the systematic presentation. The musical analyses presented are characterized by a high degree of detail and are precisely illustrated. The conclusions drawn are scientifically sound.

The analysis of the research results confirms the working hypothesis.

This dissertation makes both scientific-theoretical and practical-applied contributions.

The research results can serve as a basis for further studies in the field under consideration.

The above factors determine the contributory nature of the dissertation.

Opinions, Recommendations, and Comments

I would recommend that Hristina Stoykova publish this work so that it may reach a wider audience.

In conclusion:

I give a positive evaluation of the dissertation by **Hristiana Hristova Stoykova: “FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF JAZZ IMPROVISATION SKILLS AMONG PIANISTS. CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES,”** in light of its scientific and applied contributions. I consider that the doctoral candidate’s dissertation fully meets the requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” in the professional field 8.3. “Music and Dance Arts” under the Law on the Development of Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria, and I

propose to the esteemed academic jury that it be awarded to her.

September 6, 2026, Sofia

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