

**Literature Review of Jazz Improvisation Pedagogy**

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Can creativity be taught? That question is at the core of a debate between musicians and music educators about which of the current methods (if any) to teach jazz improvisation is the most effective. (Alperson, 1987)

This review of jazz pedagogical literature will analyze the methods used to teach jazz improvisation. Journal articles that study the effectiveness of these methods for teaching jazz improvisation will also be reviewed. Finally, recommendations for future research in these areas will be summarized.

The method for choosing materials to review here was an attempt to review popular material used and discussed in the jazz community at large that focuses on teaching improvisation. Works chosen for review include general jazz pedagogy books that comprehensively discuss the task of improvising jazz along with literature with more specific topics: jazz theory, patterns or pianists from a certain era. What brings these works together is not only their focus on teaching improvisation but also the methods employed to do so (Witmer & Robbins, 1988).

There are five general instructional methods that jazz texts have adopted to teach jazz improvisation. Each of these five approaches provides a framework upon which the student would base their improvisational ideas. These five methods can be further split into two schools: one classical and another that could be considered modern. The classical school would base improvisation

on the harmony of a piece or a scale while the modern school would employ patterns and example transcriptions. Perhaps the most effective texts offer multiple approaches from both schools.

Including the words classical and improvisation in the same sentence can prove to be difficult for musical academia. “Techniques of improvisation are found infrequently within the western art music curriculum, and classical music’s legacy of improvisation often appears as a mystery to many novice musicians.” Having grown up outside the world of academia, jazz has had a difficult time finding acceptance within the academic community (Prouty, 2008).

The scalar approach is one of the most popular methods for framing the topic of jazz improvisation. Historically important jazz texts from Baker, Coker and Slonimsky focus on scales and modes to examine improvisation (Baker, 2006a; Coker, 1987; Slonimsky, 1975). The framework of scales and modes is also employed by Erquiaga, Diorio and Middlebrook (Diorio, 1978; Erquiaga, 1986; Middlebrook, 1982).

Another mode of discussing improvisation that is classical in nature is to follow a harmonic or chordal approach. This method utilizes the chord progression to create a structure for improvisational ideas. Russell’s jazz theory text was one of the first jazz books to focus on harmony and the work

exclusively focuses on harmony derived from the lydian mode to generate ideas (Russell, 1959). In a review of jazz improvisation courses offered at over one hundred colleges in 1971, many of the professors interviewed were using the Coker book for the first semester and the Russell text for the second semester (Tanner, 1971).

Other texts to utilize harmony as the basis for creating improvisations would include the popular Aebersold Play-A-Long about the II-V-I chord progression, Diorio's guitar-oriented study of chordal harmonies and the Coker text (Coker, 1987; Diorio, 1978; Jamey Aebersold Play-A-Long Series, 2000). Each of Aebersold's popular Play-A-Long Series reinforces his reliance on classic approaches to improvisation: "The basic ingredients in music are SCALES and CHORDS (Jamey Aebersold Play-A-Long Series, 2000)."

Ferrara's work with note palettes is particularly interesting. "The key to this is finding a SCALE that a chord is based on." The author's term "note palette" combines both of the classical approaches to improvisation using chord tones and connecting scale tones to provide a platform to improvise from.

Another interesting feature of Ferrara's text is his study of melodic embellishment. The classification of improvisation techniques can generally be split between classical and modern techniques. An example of a classical improvisational technique is "theme and variations", termed "call-and-

response” in blues and gospel music. Melodic embellishment has been used in both modern and classical improvisations, although Ferrara was the only author to utilize this pedagogical technique in this review (Ferrara, 2000).

A focus on patterns as a mode for framing jazz improvisational ideas is a more modern concept. “The late-sixties saw the emergence of published jazz pedagogical materials stressing, above all else, the mastery of patterns. Prominent among these were publications of David Baker and Jamey Aebersold, the two most prolific producers of jazz study materials to date (Witmer & Robbins, 1988).”

Baker, Coker, LaVerne and Slonimsky’s works are compendiums of patterns with scant text. These collections provide the improviser with a vocabulary of learned patterns to utilize in their improvisations. They are generally organized by scale type or chord progression, further obscuring the lines between the classical and modern approaches (Baker, 2006b; Coker, 1982; LaVerne, 1999; Slonimsky, 1975).

Combining methods of teaching improvisation provides the student with more options for improvisatory ideas. An effective trend in recent jazz literature is to combine at least three of four of the defined methods. For example, Levine’s short work on Drop 2 piano voicings manages to utilize patterns, scales and harmony to discuss improvisation (Levine, 2007).

“While jazz certainly has its formulaic elements, the pedagogues who emphasize patterns and chord/scale recipes imply, by this very emphasis, that jazz is essentially a centónate music: a patchwork of preexisting elements. And students who are taught to negotiate chord changes by practicing scales are likely to end up mainly playing scales - as opposed to melodies - when they improvise (Witmer & Robbins, 1988).”

Another trend in modern jazz pedagogical literature is a reliance on example transcriptions. A second text from Levine features a heavy emphasis on example transcriptions throughout, illustrating concepts with actual transcriptions from important jazz musicians and recordings. Example transcriptions instantly validate concepts and provide the student with a firm foundation on which to base their improvisatory ideas. Levine’s book utilizes four of the five approaches to frame improvisation: scales, patterns, harmony and example transcriptions (Levine, 2005).

Reeves’ work is a popular textbook for college-level jazz improvisation classes that places even more importance on example transcriptions to reinforce concepts. Entire solos from major jazz artists like Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Lester Young, Clifford Brown, Milt Jackson, Wayne Shorter, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk and many others reinforce the concepts of each chapter. Merging the concepts of scales, patterns and

harmony with specifically chosen example transcriptions illustrating these concepts, Reeves gives the student of jazz improvisation a lot to think about. Combining instructional methods to frame improvisational ideas offers the improviser more options and perhaps the ability or awareness to be able to consider them simultaneously (Reeves, 2007).

The final piece of jazz improvisation instructional literature to be reviewed is the work of Valerio. This is the only book in this review that manages to combine all five of the approaches to improvisation: scales, patterns, harmony, melodic embellishment and example transcriptions.

What also makes this book unique is that Valerio chooses five modern jazz pianists to study in detail: Bill Evans, McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett. Each pianist has an entire chapter where their style is analyzed in ways very similar to the different approaches to framing improvisation: scales and modes, patterns, harmony and chordal ideas, melodic embellishments (especially in the Keith Jarrett chapter with regards to Thematic Reference) and example transcriptions. Valerio also includes his own original compositions that feature “characteristic voicings and improvisational techniques of each featured pianist” offering his own compositions in the artists’ style (Valerio, 2005).

In addition to reviewing popular literature that teaches jazz improvisation we will review articles that assess the effectiveness of the various pedagogical methods. Although a bit dated, Wittmore and Robbins brief history and practical evaluations of jazz improvisation materials is thorough and informative. While this journal article came up with more approaches to analyzing the materials their conclusions match those presented here. The authors encourage the inclusion of phrasing, melody, rhythm and information about how to listen – topics that would have made our short list of five methods of instruction had there been any evidence them in our literature review sample (Witmer & Robbins, 1988).

Bash and Kuzmich come to similar conclusions urging future researchers to gauge the effectiveness of “improvisational instruction treatments.” The work agrees with the conclusions presented here, pointing to research that suggests “combining multiple approaches to improvisation instruction was superior to the more traditional approach emphasizing technical concerns (Bash & Kuzmich, 1985).”

A rather critical review of doctoral research relating to jazz improvisation pedagogy has more reserved interpretations of the reviewed research than other documents reviewed here. At times this article reads more like a critique of dissertations than a review of literature. Bowman essentially throws out the conclusions of each of the dissertations he reviews while



finally conceding that recommendations could be made to enhance our understanding of teaching jazz improvisation if the research done was held to higher standards than those projects he reviewed. “Further exploration of subskills associated with jazz improvisation thus remains a crucial and exciting prospect. The respective influences of imitation, singing, listening, analysis, and transcription deserve further investigation (Bowman, 1988).”

Rhythm should play a bigger role in jazz improvisation pedagogy according to celebrated bassist Dave Holland in an article by Schroder. Popular saxophonist Joe Lovano also agreed with the assessment of the benefits of blending approaches from classic and modern schools of thought to jazz improvisation pedagogy. Lovano suggests that teaching should “amalgamate patterns grounded in traditional tonal harmonic approaches with more contemporary melodic and rhythmic ideas, overlaying more experimental and nontraditional ideas on a ‘skeleton’ of traditional material (Schroeder, 2006).”

Niermeier’s research study included working with jazz improvisation teachers who all agreed when interviewed that “traditional teaching of improvisation which has tended to focus on theory is inadequate (Niermeier, 2010).” His work also points to the need for further research with jazz improvisation and Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI).

## **Conclusion**

There is a growing library of excellent pedagogical resources for teaching jazz improvisation. Most sources agree that instruction that combines classical and modern approaches will be the most effective although there is little research to support this claim. More research should be done in this area to determine what are the optimal techniques for teaching jazz improvisation.

In addition to researching the effectiveness of teaching techniques, I recommend the solicitation of feedback from both prominent and local jazz musicians. Interviews should be conducted with jazz musicians to gain insight into which pedagogical techniques provided the biggest gains to their own improvisation skills.

Finally, the age of including Computer Assisted Instruction in jazz improvisation pedagogy is upon us. This CAI should implement a combined presentation of the various techniques outlined in this review. Further research needs to be conducted to explore the effectiveness of the combination of technique and CAI.

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