

## Pianistic Jazz Improvisation in the 21st Century

Florin BĂLAN<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *However, comparing the beginnings of jazz, where several established performers could stand out for each style, we now reach the stage where there are only a multitude of variations and not directly indisputably represented of a style, current, or a new direction of creativity!*

*The purpose of this study is to present a few world contemporary pianists, through their own interpretive manner, a particularly high level, regarding the technical, harmonic, inventive-interpretive, expressive aspect, etc., but suddenly none of them can be listed as a promoter of a new style namely, of a new era in the history of jazz!*

*It would certainly be a mistake to list a single performer, as superior to his other peers, decisive for the tie-breaker, in this case, it is certainly the degree of popularity, due to record sales, live or multimedia appearances, essentially this aspect having absolutely nothing in common with the value, musical, artistic substance, of the act issued (on stage)!*

**Keywords:** *improvisation; stylistics; standard procedures; contextual contemporary expression; creativity; artistic spontaneity;*

### Introduction – Structural elements of new language

The improvisational jazz of the XX century represents a combination of traditional stylistic elements (genre like swing, bebop, cool, fusion, free, atonal) in new contextual poses, with modern compiling valences and constellations. The essence of the phenomenon consists in the detection and classification of traditional jazz elements as well as the new general context created, the resulting modern color, perhaps a possible new starting point in the creative evolution.

An enumeration of new, current generation-specific elements are represented by:

- emergence of motives in the form of progressions on different steps,
- broadening, premeditated extension of improvisational tonal framework,
- emergence of exotic scales or ranges, as an improvisational constructive way<sup>2</sup>,
- broad harmonic unfolding, spanning 5/6 octaves (of the piano),
- implementation of transient harmonies (passing chords, modal interchange<sup>3</sup>),
- precipitation of melodic-harmonic cumulation<sup>4</sup>,
- precipitation of rhythmic cumulation.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. Harmonic, melodic and rhythmic analysis of the improvisational styles of the current generation

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Music, Transilvania University of Braşov, florin.balan@unitbv.ro.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Befumo. 2002. *Exotic Scales, New Horizons for Jazz Improvisations*. Superior Books. com, Inc., New Zealand, p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Stover. 2015. *Jazz Harmony, A Progress Report* in *The Journal of Jazz Studies*. Institute of Jazz Studies: The University of New Jersey, Vol.10, No.2, pp. 157-197.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Frost. 2004. *Improvisational Architecture*. University of Leeds: School of Music Press, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Magadini. 1993. *Polyrhythms The Musicians Guide*. London: Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, pp. 8-45.

JESUS MOLINA, a prominent representative of the current generation, young pianist born on 01.06.1996 in Sincelejo, Colombia, in the jam-session manner<sup>6</sup> (Sorin Zlat jamming with Jesus Molina), made on the Youtube platform (possibility agreed and often used especially during the pandemic period), has as a direct interlocutor the well-known and competent Romanian pianist,

SORIN ZLAT, born on 07.05.1985 in Bacău, Romania (own transcription).

For sure, the clarification regarding the harmonic constructive structural element of the dialogue, consisting of units of even measures (2) per tonic, followed by others (2) transposed at an ascending semitone interval, represents the basic structure identical to that of the jazz standard composed by Miles Davis, *So What*.

Analyzing measures 2-3, (Fig.1) structurally Jesus Molina's improvisational line contains, due to the correlation with the given harmonic structure (major 7th note b, raised 4th note f#), an applied melodic expression of the pentatonic B minor range (b,d,e,f#,a), in measures 4-5 a pentatonic ordering of the E major range (e, f#, g#, a, b), in ascending progress, is rediscovered starting from the 3rd step.

**JESUS MOLINA / SORIN ZLAT**

JAMMING

The musical score is titled "JESUS MOLINA / SORIN ZLAT" and "JAMMING". It is a transcription of a jamming session. The score is written for three parts: SYNTH, PIAN, and BAS. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The score shows measures 1 through 5. Measure 1 is labeled "1. JESUS MOLINA" and "Cmaj7add11#". Measure 2 is labeled "C#7(add11)". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and accidentals.

Fig.1. Jamm-session between Jesus Molina-Sorin Zlat the beginning

Sorin Zlat, in turn, responds to the improvisational challenge in measures 6-7, (Fig.2) through a similar melodic expression, based on the pentatonic construction of the G major range with movable step (g, a, b, d, f# instead of e, thus strengthening the harmonic extension 11# stipulated in the left hand) then returning in measure 7 to the official structure of the G major pentatonic range, by reimplenishing the note e.

Measure 8, depicts the structure of the natural minor C# range (c#, d#, e, f#, g#, a, b) starting from the 6th step, in cyclic unfolding in the form of arpeggio, by time parts, in subdivision of sixteenthths (a, c#, g#), (g#, e, b), (d#, g#, c#).

<sup>6</sup> Sorin Zlat *Jamming* with Jesus Molina. Retrieved April 17, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pKMjY-kaCU>.

Measure 9, renders a hexatonal sound structure of the melodic F# minor range (f#, g#, a, b, c#, d#), merged with the exceptional rhythmic division, represented by triplets.

Fig.2. Molina/Zlat measures 6-9

Measure 10,(Fig.3) represents an upward ordering of the pentatonic B minor range (b, d, e, f#, g, a), starting from the 5th step, with added note (6th, note g), in measure 11 observing an incomplete structuring (hexatonic line, elliptical of the 6th step, note d) of the natural F# minor range (f#, g#, a, b, c#, e) starting from 5th degree (c#). In measures 12-13, one finds the pentatonic structure of the range of C# natural minor (c#, d#, e, f#, b) elliptical of the 5th (g#) and 6th (a) steps.

Fig.3. Molina/Zlat measures 10-13



Fig.4. Molina/Zlat measures 14-17

Measures 14-15, (Fig.4) are rendered by the systematized unfolding of the pentatonic B minor range (b,d,e,f#,a), with added transient note (g, step VI), in measures 16-17 we find in the form complete, official, unfolding of the pentatonic C# minor range (c#, e, f#, g#, b).

## 2. New era of (very) young players, skills and visions

Justin Lee Schulz, another particularly well-rated representative of the current generation, at a (very) young age, born on 08.02.2007 in Johannesburg/South Africa, currently settled with his family in Los Angeles, California. Here's a transcript<sup>7</sup>, (directed by himself), at one of his recent appearances (09/04/2022) at the Jazz in Creek Festival in San Diego, California:

**VIBING OUT**

0.19.21 JUSTIN LEE SCHULZ

re m 7/9 Si bemol maj 7 La 7/6-

<sup>7</sup> *Vibing Out*, Jazz in Creek Festival, San Diego. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9LnQQBVNgk>.

Fig.5. J.L.Schulz the beginning

The improvisational moment, Fig.5. (starting with min. 0.19.21) begins with a calm expression, (especially important as a structural-conceptual element, typical of famous instrumentalists who completely master, the art of thorough grading of the expression of the improvisational moment), followed later by a (minimum) rhythmic precipitation, values of sixteenthths per part of time (offbeat), or sextolet per value of seconds. After the partial sonic completion of the initial moment, in measures 4-5, we observe chromatic developments (based on the notes c, a, f, d) in an ornamental context of the specific phrasing of the bebop style, supported by the sequence of the harmonic relationship of the steps iv/VI-v-I.

Measures 7-9, (Fig.6), render a summe of the classical ways of implementing motifs (notes a, e, d, supplemented contextually then, with notes f and g) in different rhythmic-melodic unfolds, ostinati formulas, with the same previous harmonic support of steps iv/VI-v-I, of the basic tonality D minor.

Harmonically, the left hand creates dynamism, both through rhythmic evolution (emphasis on time parts/subdivisions, offbeat) and through voice distributions in standard (elliptical fundamental) positions 7-3/3-7, or modal variants.

Measure 10, is based in expression (to begin with, after an interval elaboration of quartets in consecutive ascending ordering) the range A major, with a structuring of the moving steps (6th-f natural, and 7th-g natural) followed by a following tonal-melodic establishment, in measure 11, on the sound d, followed on times 3-4 (again) by chromatic unfolds of the bebop style.



Fig.6. Schulz improvisation, measures 7-11

In measures 12-13, (Fig.7), there is a return to pentatonic ordering (d, e, f, g, a), followed by a bebop chromaticism of the range D minor harmonic, elliptical of the 6th step (we have here, however, taken into account the alteration-and flat-stipulated to the armour, for the consolidation of the statement relating to the establishment of the structure).

Measure 14, anticipates a motivic, melodico-chromatic precipitation of the notes g and a, starting from the note f# (minor descending second) on 1st beat and g# (minor ascending

second) on beat 3 and 4. This aspect has (more) previously been treated as a contemporary/current improvisational feature.

In measure 15, we encounter the continuation of the same procedure mentioned on the notes c and d.



Fig.7. Schluz expression measures 12-15

Measure 16, (Fig.8) continues the previous procedure, further keeping the sound d on the first half of the measure, in the second, fixing the sound at as melodic tonal center.



Fig.8. Schulz ideas measure 16

### 3. Players from (old) Eastern Europe, stylistic, new structures, compilations

Valeriy Stepanov, born in 1996, in Irkutsk-Oblast, Russian Federation, is another established protagonist of the current generation, the same age as Jesus Molina.

Here, an improvisational stylistic rendering of one's own manner (since 2017), in the (re)modeling of the song Jujū<sup>8</sup>, composition by saxophonist Wayne Shorter (1965), (re)harmonized previously in turn by bassist Marcus Miller (2014). (own transcription, starting at minute 4.43)

**JUJU**  
**VALERJI STEPANOV SOLO**

4.43 Gm<sup>9</sup> MARCUS MILLER / WAYNE SHORTER

PIAN

BAS

Fig.9. Stepanov solo beginning

The debut of the piano solo of the piece, (Fig.9), consists of a smooth, quiet melodic expression, introductory gradation supported against the background of the G minor chord (9), with tight, compact, typically jazz distribution, followed by the pentatonic-chromatic melodic unfolding of the 2nd measure (pentatonic G minor), the bass line having a relatively airy introductory structure, punctuating only the beginning and the end of the measure.

Measures 3-5, Fig.10, melodically reproduce the characteristics of the blues style, but here, ingeniously combined with the pentatonic scales of steps I, III, VI (respectively G minor, B flat or E flat major), the common sounds (of them) being supported by the chords on the mentioned steps (I, III, VI), with the related sounds added (9, 13, 7maj), in the configuration of the bass line, a slight increase in the intensity of the speech is noted.

3 Bb<sup>13</sup> Eb<sup>maj7</sup>

PIAN

BAS

Fig.10. Stepanov improvisation measures 3-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Juju*, Valery Stepanov feat. Vladimir Lebedev. Retrieved November 13, 2019, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jpt2l9MOlt4>.

Measure 6, (Fig.11), renders one of the patterns typical of the bebop style, used by most current instrumentalists in improvisational expression, continued in the following measure (7th) similar to the previous melodic expression, a blues-bebop stylistic combination, the characteristic elements being illustrated on times 1 and 2, respectively 3 and 4. Harmonically, we encounter concise casts, with diatonic/chromatic extensions of the left hand (5<sup>#</sup>,7,9), the bass line being stipulated by the same rhythmic-melodic accumulation.



Fig.11. Stepanov solo measures 6-7.

Measure 8, (Fig.12), imagines motivic sequences, in upward unfolding of times 1 and 2, (characteristic already mentioned), typical of contemporary jazz, or current. Beat 3, sketches a descending line, on a hexatonic structure (e-flat, g-flat, b-flat, c, d-flat/enharmonic c<sup>#</sup>,d), beat 4 rendering the incomplete structure (definiteness through elements), of the blues scale, G minor range (g, b-flat, c, d-flat, 5th-stage elliptic natural note d and 7th, note f). The harmonic tension, due to the increased chord of the dominant 7th, being in motion, with the tendency of harmonic resolution towards the minor tonic, in the authentic relationship V7-i, with (again) tense, typical, jazz distribution.



Fig.12. Stepanov line measures 8-9.

#### 4. Conclusions

Unlike classical music, in which the performer is strictly related to the score, not being able to modify or implement new elements in the writing dating back several hundred years, when it comes to jazz, the performer enjoys freedom of creative expression, the material subject



to processing not having the obligation of an exclusively jazz origin, but can be borrowed from a pop music hit, it can be a classic theme or even a folk inspiration.

The late saxophonist and composer Ștefan Berindei<sup>9</sup> stated that „improvisation is the cake of jazz, the place where you are a composer for a few moments”. Thus, in jazz, the theme is only a pretext of the instrumentalist members (of the band), for the improvisational processing reflected in a series of spontaneous, unique and perhaps unrepeatable variations.

The true jazz musician from this point of view considers himself to be a co-author with the composer of that piece. The fact that he instantly reshapes it gives it a new form, a diversification initially started from the harmony of the piece preserved as such, over which he superimposes a new appropriated melodic line, ad hoc created, the result being without a doubt the vitality of jazz music. The creative interpreter, not only cannot, but also does not want to retain what he interpreted (created) a few minutes ago. Through the improvisational moment, he consolidates his status as a creator, in continuous compositional activity.

Jazz is a music of contradictions, in which spontaneity and constructivism are superimposed. Often, improvisational concepts or composition are treated as two generative types, diametrically opposed, neglecting here the fact that motivational or formal development techniques are taken from academic composition. Gilles Mouëllic<sup>10</sup> says that, “*to limit jazz to non-concerting music, is to make forgotten the importance or existence of a score. Hazard does not play a role, except in clearly established rhythmic-harmonic structures.*”

Modern jazz is essentially structured by the fusion of the styles of the 30s and 40s, between swing and bebop), with the 60s by atonal, freejazz. As we could see in the analyzes of the current pianist instrumentalists of the last 10 years, the characteristic elements of the four styles mentioned above are still applied, in the independent classical version, or in combinative situations.

## 5. References

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### ○ YouTube video clips (for comparison)

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<sup>9</sup> Interview taken in August 1998 at Radio Romania Muzical, Romanian Jazz Connection. Retrieved December 13, 2022, from <http://www.romania-muzical.ro/emisiuni/esp.htm?sh=18&ed=37091&arh=1&y=2012>.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Mouëllic. 2003. *Jazz an aesthetic of the 21st Century*, [Jazzul o estetică a secolului XX]. Roland Szekely. Cluj-Napoca: Edition Grinta, p. 39.

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