

# Ways of improvising.

Insights from recording sessions and  
surveys with young jazz musicians

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*Second International Research Workshop 2016*  
23rd-24th September 2016, University of Music Franz Liszt Weimar

# Overview

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1. Introducing the approach of *Talking Analysis*
2. Method
3. Case study: solo and comments on „Impressions“
4. Further observations
5. Summary

# Goals

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- We want to examine: What do jazz musicians have in mind while improvising and which specific playing decisions are made during the improvisational process?
  - We want to compare these findings with more global training strategies and ways of improvisation – probably bound to explicit concepts or role models – of young musicians at different levels of mastery and playing experience
- [- Additionally, we want to evaluate the IFA model and the mid-level annotation method (MLA)]

# Method

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- Three young jazz musicians from Weimar and Berlin
- Sessions lasted about 3 hours
- Expense allowance of 80 €
- The session:
  - Introduction and sound-check | recording (one take for each of the three tunes) | interview after every recording (general and phrase-by-phrase-listening)
  - general interview (biography, general approaches to improvisation)
  - mid-level analysis (MLA): introduction into the nine main categories of and segmentation and categorization of one of his solos
- recordings and interviews were transcribed by a staff member and explored by the authors

# The tunes

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Three tunes with different chord changes:

“Freddie Freeloader”, a mid-tempo blues, four choruses

“Good Bait” by Tadd Dameron, mid-tempo , AABA-form (32 measures), functional harmony, two choruses

“Impressions” by John Coltrane, mid-tempo, AABA-form (32 measures), modal harmony, three choruses

# The musicians

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A – mid-20s, just finished his bachelor degree in Weimar; tenor saxophone

B – early 20s, studies at the Jazz Institute Berlin, 4<sup>th</sup> semester; tenor saxophone

C – mid-30s, alumni since 2011, saxophone teacher and freelance musician in Weimar; tenor saxophone

## CASE STUDY : Solo and comments of musician A on „Impressions“

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- Last of the three recordings
- He started with comments on how he felt in general: overall good and positive, “relaxed”
- improvisational strategies that he remembered:
  - side stepping/slipping, like playing the B-section-chord over the A-section
  - using the whole range of the saxophone
  - concepts of reharmonization, that change the harmony
    - playing minor with a major seven
    - playing Aeolian minor rather than Dorian minor

# Case study: A on "Impressions"

introduction, simple rhythmic idea

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The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of three staves. The first staff begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 225 and a key signature of one flat (D-7). It starts with a first ending bracket over measures 1-4, followed by a sixteenth-note triplet in measure 5. The second staff continues the melody, featuring a double bar line in measure 10 and a key signature change to two flats (B-flat) in measure 11. The third staff concludes the introduction with a final cadence in measure 12.



# Case study: A on "Impressions"

several lines related to each other, counterpart to the beginning

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The image displays two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff begins at measure 10 and contains a melodic line with various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. It features a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and includes a triplet of eighth notes in the fourth measure. The second staff begins at measure 14 and continues the melodic line with similar rhythmic patterns, including a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure and another triplet in the sixth measure. The key signature remains one flat. The notation includes slurs, ties, and dynamic markings such as accents and slurs.



# Case study: A on "Impressions"

"Coltrane quote"

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The image displays two staves of musical notation. The upper staff is a single line of music in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note B-flat, and then a triplet of eighth notes: B-flat, A, and G. This is followed by a sixteenth-note triplet: B-flat, A, and G. The line continues with a quarter note F, a quarter note E, a quarter note D, and a quarter note C. The lower staff starts at measure 23, marked with an '8' below the staff. It begins with a quarter note B-flat, followed by a triplet of eighth notes: A, G, and F. The melody continues with a quarter note E, a quarter note D, and a quarter note C. A triplet of eighth notes follows: B-flat, A, and G. The line concludes with a quarter note F, a quarter note E, a quarter note D, and a quarter note C. A double bar line is present after the eighth measure of the lower staff, with a D-7 chord symbol above it. The final measure of the lower staff contains a quarter note B-flat, a quarter note A, and a quarter note G.

# Case study: A on "Impressions"

first time playing outside, chain of 8<sup>th</sup>'s

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# Case study: A on "Impressions"

"gap filler"

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# Case study: A on “Impressions”

climax leading into the B-section

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# Case study: A on “Impressions”

rhythmic idea, “drumming”

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# Case study: A on "Impressions"

inside-outside-inside, interrelation of the phrase-parts

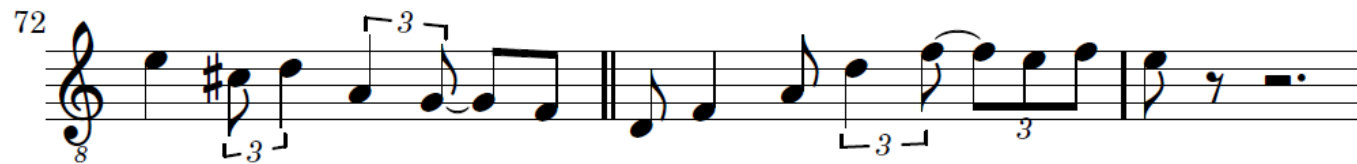
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The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Impressions". It consists of three staves of music in treble clef. The first staff begins at measure 62 and ends with a double bar line. The second staff begins at measure 65 and contains a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3' in a box. The third staff is a short fragment of music. The notation includes various note values, accidentals (flats and sharps), and phrasing slurs.

# Case study: A on "Impressions"

minor triads with grace notes

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# Case study: A on “Impressions”

ending phrase, “sneaking out”

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The image displays two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff, labeled with measure numbers 91 and 8, contains a sequence of notes starting with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, and then a series of eighth and sixteenth notes with various accidentals (sharps and naturals). The second staff, labeled with measure numbers 95 and 8, continues the sequence, featuring a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, and a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. A boxed number '4' is placed above a group of four notes, and a number '3' is placed above a group of three notes, indicating specific rhythmic or fingering patterns. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

## *Case study: A on “Impressions”*

### observations

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*In the general appreciation of his solo he speaks about*

- his feeling and his satisfaction with the solo
- reflects on the overall shape and dramaturgy of the solo
- and names several ideas he remembered.

*During the detailed comments*

- A often just describes and analyses what he’s listening to and, then, tries to name the idea either with musical terms or with associations and metaphors, on the one hand, or
- he sometimes recalls a concrete decision he made during the course of improvisation, on the other hand
- and sometimes he questions himself: Was that an unconscious decision? Was it involuntary? Do I play like that?

## *Case study: A On "Impressions"*

### observations

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Ideas he could name:

rhythm | contrast | relation of motifs | quoting | chains of 8<sup>th</sup>'s as "conversation" |

springboard | energy | overtone idea | overtones, outside and inside again |

grace-notes | minor-chord and reharmonisation | Triads | fade-out

→ problematic: discrepancy of conscious reflection in language vs. pre-/semi-conscious thinking in the moment („I think harmony in colours“)

→ importance of the ear and hearing abilities

# *Musician B*

## observations and summary

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B didn't feel so comfortable with his solos and is very critical about his playing ("noodling").

He plays rather automatically or unconsciously: "Keine Ahnung, das haben meine Finger irgendwie gemacht, weiß nicht" (bei Freddie Freeloader) or "das war einfach nur: uahh, ich muss irgendwas spielen"

He continuously monitors his playing for ideas (or "a story", "a statement"), but often feels not capable to perform what he has in mind

Ideas:

- stable phrase target tones,
- repetition of patterns, sequencing
- call and response, playing bluesy
- harmonic ideas, to play certain intervals (e.g. the major 7<sup>th</sup> in Impressions)
- rhythm
- quote of the theme, varying the theme
- expressive ideas: ghost notes



# Musician C

## observations and summary

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C rather evaluates than describes his playing.

He criticizes that he sometimes plays half-consciously:

“Das sind so - immer so semi-bewusst Pläne bei mir oft. Also ich erinnere mich: okay, hier spiele ich jetzt mal diese Quart-Geschichte, und dann denke ich aber nur so halb mit. Und wahrscheinlich ist das dann auch der Punkt, äh, wo's mich raushaut (lacht).“

Ideas:

- using the whole register
- playing with motives, motivic relations (“netter Sinnzusammenhang”)
- playing bluesy
- quote of earlier playing
- harmonic ideas, e.g., not to end on a chord root, to play patterns of fourths and strategies of outside-playing
- a certain energy level
- repeating tones within a line
- rhythmic ideas (variation between 8ths and double time / 16ths)

# Summary

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1. Musicians improvise and talk about their improvising in different ways – according to their peculiar training biography, their stylistic and aesthetic preferences, and their level of mastery (in regard to instrumental virtuosity, inventiveness etc.).
2. Some of the processes during improvisation are unconscious, other are conscious or deliberate decisions.
3. Many musical aspects could be identified and evaluated by the musicians – while improvising, or afterwards. However, there are personal differences, too.
4. *Talking Analysis* could be a helpful method to examine improvisational processes – and could be used for teaching and practicing, too!

# Thank you for your attention!

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