

Thesis of DLA Dissertation

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TWELVE TONE IMPROVISATION IN JAZZ
IN THE LIGHT OF JOHN O’GALLAGHER’S THE
ANTON WEBERN PROJECT

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I. Antecedents of the research

In spite of the twelve-note compositions of the Second Viennese School are well documented in musicology, not so many examples can be found in spontaneous improvisational practice. Jazz has been permeated by chromaticism and polytonality for decades. I wrote my thesis in 2009, *Polytonality in improvisation. Practical application of disjuncting and conjuncting triads and hexatones*. The later developed version of this, extended to twelve notes, the disjuncting triad systems, could already have a place in my dissertation. In order to improve my musical vocabulary I wanted to further expand the mathematical imbued but still experiential possibilities of connecting structures. I got acquainted with the basics of pitch set theory, and in 2013, John O’Gallagher’s book *Twelve-Tone Improvisation, A Method for Using Tone Rows in Jazz* was published, and his record called *The Anton Webern Project*, which was released at the same time, is almost the only example dedicated to twelve-tone jazz from the point of view of improvisation. (The other one is Alexander von Schlippenbach’s solo piano recording called *Twelve Tone Tales*). Since O’Gallagher’s method is “a possible method” as he called it in his book, I thought that by getting closer to Anton Webern and John O’Gallagher through these pieces, I have the chance to work on an

independent twelve-note method and the opportunity to instill my own style with this music.

II. Sources

Although the elements and methods of the twelve-tone or twelve-note music, which are also disputed in English terminology, appear among the compositions of jazz standards (for example, Bill Evans: Twelve Tone Tune and John Coltrane: Miles Mode, which is also attributed to Eric Dolphy under the title of Red Planet), in the improvisations, in addition to being difficult to detect, are extremely rare. In jazz practice recognizing structures in the moment of listening and playing shows pitch set-centric thinking. As chord signs, scales, that forms the basis of jazz methodology pitch set theory is necessary in education. Allen Forte's *The Structure of Atonal Music* with that fantastic summary table of pitch class sets is a leading work that outlines all possible pitch class sets and their complementary sets that can create all twelve-note-set in different variations. Using these sets in improvising practice needs elaboration of musical vocabulary in different musical environments.

III. Method

My method was to familiarize myself with the original Anton Webern pieces rearranged in jazz by John O'Gallagher. I gave a short overview analysis of them

supported by the available Webern literature. This could form the basis of the explanation of the jazz versions, that beneath the formal review reveals the often unknown environment of the improvisations. This required the aural method of making transcriptions. The results of this can be read in the voluminous appendix. After my interview with John O’Gallagher, I had the opportunity to receive scores of four of the eight pieces from the master himself, which helped me a lot in writing down the missing music. I made the sheet music of other pieces independently. These sheet music created the possibility of the comparative analysis.

IV. Results

The desire to increase my vocabulary and improve my teaching methods led me to define the dissertation of this topic. The concrete examples of the structural tendencies between the musical materials of Webern and O’Gallagher create an opportunity to develop a new method. Improvisations show strong connection to the tonality in the sound of New York–based modern mainstream jazz. The keyless sound is reached by fast changing tonal cells, but it is not the technique of playing outside, but still using specific polytonal methods. There is no act of tension and resolution like in the framework of tonal or modal jazz. The closer connection with the Webern music can be observed more strongly at the jazz orchestrations, arrangements and the

additional materials of the shout choruses and solo choruses. In the improvisations, the connection with the Webern text was presented on a more relaxed, smaller structural level, in the form of musical quotations. I did not discover any explicit twelve-note improvisation intention during the research. The lack of this intention was confirmed by John O'Gallagher himself.

Nevertheless, in one case I found an improvised melody that used all twelve notes, which supports my thesis, that musical solutions emerging from the subconscious during improvisation can show the same essence and musical power as the composition. This is true even if achieving the perfect brevity and design of Anton Webern's music in real time seems impossible in this moment.

V. Documentation of the activities relevant to the topic of the dissertation

My stage and pedagogic activities are one and the same: they are based on perception of music, the sounding of pitch sets rooted in my inner hearing, which is originally connected to the current musical environment. That can become the carrier material of my musical content that I want to express.

Education:

Polytonality in improvisation. Practical application of disjuncting and conjuncting triads and hexatones became part of the Hungarian jazz-theory education at intermediate and advanced level.

Teaching activity:

2008-2018 Etűd High School of Music: jazz saxophone, improvisation class, jazz theory, jazz solfège, jazz combo class.

From 2018 Béla Bartók Conservatory, Budapest: improvisation class, jazz combo class, jazz saxophone

From 2021, Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, Jazz Department, Budapest: jazz combo class.

Recordings:

János Ávéd – Márton Fenyvesi – Ákos Benkó: *Balance* (Budapest: BMC Records, 2016.) BMCCD227.

János Ávéd Quartet: *Have News*. (Budapest: Hunnia Records, 2016.) HRCD1603.

Modern Art Orchestra: *The Fruit of the Spirit. Modern Art Orchestra plays the music of János Ávéd* (Tom Tom Records, 2019.) TTCD 305.

Balance: *for we know in part*. (BMC Records, 2021.)
BMCCD298.

Gábor Gadó – János Ávéd: *Whispering Quiet Secrets into Hairy Ears*. (Budapest: BMC Records, 2022.)
BMCCD300.

Concerts:

Austro-Hungarian Jazz Night – curated by András Dés (HU-AT) (Vienna: Porgy and Bess, 26 September, 2022.).

Modern Art Orchestra: Liszt Via Crucis (Budapest: The Opening Concert of the Liszt Fest, St Stephen's Basilica: 7 October, 2022).

Twinning tour – French-Hungarian co production project (HU-FR) (Budapest and Szeged: 7–11 November, 2022).

Arts and Science II. Jazz Maths – lecture and performance with János Bali and Dániel Váczai (Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, 22 November 2022.).

Modern Art Orchestra plays Béla Bartók's Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs (Berlin and Cologne: 27–30 November, 2022.).

Modern Art Orchestra plays Miles Davis: Bitches Brew.
(Budapest: Opus Jazz Club, 14 December, 2022.).