

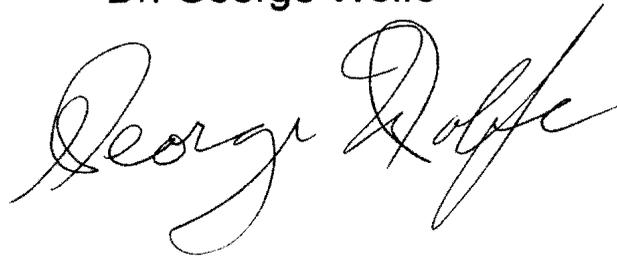
IMPROVISATION

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Ryan Thomson

Dr. George Wolfe

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "George Wolfe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping "G" and a long, sweeping "W".

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

November 2007

Date of Graduation: May 3, 2008

9/6/01
1/25/02
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1/28/02
1/29/02
1/30/02
1/31/02
2/1/02
2/2/02
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HONORS THESIS PROPOSAL

Ryan Thomson

1. This project will signify the culmination of four years of study of the saxophone with my various professors and other teachers here at Ball State University. Through research and dedicated practice and study, this undertaking will add to my knowledge and develop my musical talents quite extensively.
2. I am signing up for HONRS 499 in the Spring of 2008.
3. The outcome of this project will be my Senior Recital, featuring pieces from the classical and jazz idioms – both of which I have studied extensively. This recital will feature other musicians as well as myself, and will be approximately one hour in length.
4. The purpose of this recital is to gain a greater knowledge of, skill in playing, and to present improvisation in saxophone music. The target audience is general, but the topic will be of particular interest to musicians and music enthusiasts.
5. This creative project will take the form of a musical recital. This recital will explore the rich and diverse types of improvisation in classical saxophone music and in jazz. The saxophone, invented in the 1840s, is relatively new on the instrumental scene, and has a wide repertoire of contemporary music that explores various types of improvisation. The saxophone also has a wide range of etudes, suites, concertos and other types of soloistic literature that incorporate improvisation in a more traditional sense. Both of these very general categories will be sampled, as well as four different styles of jazz: bebop, latin, swing and contemporary, spanning the 20th century.
The first half of this recital will feature classical music. I will play a variety of pieces, two that I will be accompanied on piano, two that will be me alone or with a pre-recorded accompaniment, and one that will feature another saxophonist. The second half will contain the four jazz pieces, and I will be performing with a small combo of my peers. The combo will be comprised of a piano, a drum set, and a double bass.
6. The importance of this project is again to showcase my study of the saxophone over the last four years. I expect to learn a great deal about the art of improvisation, as well as more about the many styles of music of which I will be sampling. I hope that this creative project will expose those listening and reading to a wider array of improvisation within the saxophone repertoire, ranging across many styles and genres.

ABSTRACT

Improvisation is a musical art form that has existed in music for hundreds of years.

Improvisation, while often thought of as limited to jazz music alone, is often incorporated into several different genres of music. Since the fifteenth century, improvisation has been an integral part of Western music, dating back to compositional practices such as fauxbourdon and polyphony (Hubbs-Gaines, 2003). From here through the exploratory and varied techniques in jazz, improvisation has had a profound impact on how we compose, perform, and listen to music.

This recital will explore the rich and diverse types of improvisation in classical saxophone music and in jazz. The saxophone, invented in the 1840s, is relatively new on the instrumental scene, and has a wide repertoire of contemporary music that explores various types of improvisation. The saxophone also has a wide range of etudes, suites, concertos and other types of soloistic literature that incorporate improvisation in a more traditional sense. Both of these very general categories will be sampled, as well as four different styles of jazz: bebop, latin, swing and contemporary, spanning the 20th century.

I hope that this creative project will expose those listening and reading to a wider array of improvisation within the saxophone repertoire, ranging across many styles and genres.

ANALYSIS

This recital signifies the culmination of four years of study of classical and jazz saxophone. I wanted to incorporate both idioms because both have been such a large part of my musical life. I knew from the beginning of my college career that I wanted to perform a full recital at the end, but it did not take shape or have a theme until the last year. Many music students will put together a recital of strictly classical or jazz music, choosing instead to focus on only one idiom. My goal for this project from the beginning was to find a common thread between the two of which I could create a theme – and therefore my thesis.

The entire process was really 12 years in the making, as that is how long I have been playing the saxophone. The intensive study did not begin until college of course, but my previous knowledge of the music that I gained in the first 8 years served as the basis for my studies at Ball State. Dr. George Wolfe and I began the process by selecting the thesis for the recital, as I knew while we were planning that the recital would double as my creative project. We came to the conclusion that “Improvisation” would serve as a great thesis, as this is a creative technique used in nearly every idiom of music. From there, Dr. Wolfe and I began selecting the pieces I would study. We did this mostly through our combined knowledge of saxophone and jazz literature, and also through listening to many different pieces and performances thereof.

In the end, we selected the pieces we did based off their musical integrity, the challenges they would present to me, and how they fit within the scope of the thesis. Some of them, such as “Suite for Saxophone in Eb,” are pieces that I always wanted to study and perform, but could not for one reason or another until now. I wanted to showcase as wide of a variety of improvisatory styles as I could within the time allowed (about 1 hour for a full recital). The jazz pieces were

selected based off of this general idea as well. Some are favorite standards of mine, and others, such as “Sing a Song of Song,” are contemporary jazz pieces from musicians who are current influences of mine (Kenny Garrett, in this case). Please see the program notes following this analysis for a more in-depth look at each piece.

Following the selection of music, I was fortunate enough to find fantastic musicians with which to perform. From there I then spent countless hours researching, practicing, and collaborating with various people. The final product was showcased on November 30, 2007, in the Choral Hall of the Music Instruction Building at Ball State.

Several of these pieces will sound very odd or strange to non-musicians and musicians alike. I encourage all listeners to listen and draw conclusions with an open mind, as these pieces were chosen for their educational merit. Each of these pieces have something to offer in the study of musical improvisation, and I encourage anyone curious about any of these pieces to conduct further research on their own, using my cited resources as a starting point.

I sincerely hope that listeners and readers will learn even a fraction of what I did during this process. I have grown inexplicably as a musician and student throughout this project, and have reached new musical heights in my personal playing then I ever dreamed I could. I truly enjoyed this very rewarding experience, and am very grateful to the honors professors, music professors, and peers that helped to make this possible.

RYAN THOMSON
Saxophone

In a
Senior Recital

IMPROVISATION
Program Notes

Improvisation is a musical art form that has existed in music for hundreds of years.

Improvisation, while often thought of as limited to jazz music alone, is often incorporated into several different genres of music. Since the fifteenth century, improvisation has been an integral part of Western music, dating back to compositional practices such as fauxbourdon and polyphony (Hubbs-Gaines, 2003). From here through the exploratory and varied techniques in jazz, improvisation has had a profound impact on how we compose, perform, and listen to music.

This recital will explore the rich and diverse types of improvisation in classical saxophone music and in jazz. The saxophone, invented in the 1840s, is relatively new on the instrumental scene, and has a wide repertoire of contemporary music that explores various types of improvisation. The saxophone also has a wide range of etudes, suites, concertos and other types of soloistic literature that incorporate improvisation in a more traditional sense. Both of these very general categories will be sampled, as well as four different styles of jazz: bebop, latin, swing and contemporary, spanning the 20th century. Additionally, we find that the emergence of jazz helped to bring the “spontaneous art back into practice” in the classical genre.

Holly Hubbs-Gaines explains how improvisation in the two styles are closely related:

“While there is a dichotomy between what many view as improvisation in the ‘classical’ idiom and the art of improvisation in jazz, the gap between these two stylistic applications is hardly as wide as some perceive. In each case, the musical realization is based on a pre-existing entity: the form and/or harmonic progression identify the piece in either case. Whether performing jazz or classical improvisation, the player can

remain close to, or stray far from, that original framework” (Hubbs-Gains, 2003).

I hope that this creative project will expose those listening and reading to a wider array of improvisation within the saxophone repertoire, ranging across many styles and genres.

Bonneau’s Suite for Saxophone

The first movement of Bonneau’s Suite is entitled “Improvisation.” While not improvisatory in the sense of spontaneous creation or composition, it is a written improvisation. The beginning tempo translates from French to “at will” or “freely”, indicating that the first phrase is to be played without strict time and much rubato. The movement then travels through various tempos and styles, ranging from *vif* (“lively”) to *modere* (“moderately”). These various tempo changes and freedom of time add to its improvisatory feel.

The saxophone and piano trade elegant phrases of flowing notes that move, in general, through the key of $f\#/g\flat$ minor. The piano blends the use of odd rhythms such as 5 and 6 note groupings against more common sixteenth notes, adding ambiguity to the time and rhythmic feel in lieu of any rhythmic strictness.

Glazunov’s Concerto in Eb

This piece is one of the most well-known saxophone concertos. Written in a rhapsodic concerto style, it features a beautiful and dazzling cadenza section. This improvisatory section of a concerto is written out, and features the soloist without the accompanying player(s). Free of strict time, it is often based on previous harmonic and melodic elements in the piece. The cadenza typically features greater complexity and technique.

For this particular piece, I have composed my own cadenza (See figure 1). In my composition, music theorists will find various elements and influences from the rest of the piece. In attempting to retain the integrity of the original composition, I reference the original cadenza,

as well as other motives and elements that both reference previous material and foreshadow coming material.

Noda's *Improvisation 1*

Ryo Noda was born in Amagasaki, Japan in 1948, and is a leading component of new Japanese music for the saxophone. Noda is noted among saxophonists for his powerful avant-garde improvisations and technically innovative compositions.

Improvisation 1, the first of three such pieces, most assuredly falls into the avant-garde style of classical saxophone music for which Noda is known. Based on the sounds of the shakuhachi flute, a traditional Japanese instrument, the three different *Improvisations* are unaccompanied solos that incorporate many extended saxophone techniques. These techniques include portamenti, quartertones, flutter tongue, various vibrato techniques (diaphragmatic and jaw-based), and alternate fingerings designed to emulate the authentic sound of the shakuhachi.

The middle of this piece features an ad-lib section in which the performer is given a set of pitches (see Figure 3) and instructed to compose an improvised section on this pitch array. The goal of the performer-composed section is to retain the integrity of the piece by incorporating similar techniques and styles into the composition. See Figure 2 for my composition of these pitches.

Andrews's *Shir Avel*

Shir Avel is a truly unique piece on this program. Of all of the works featured, this one deviates from the traditional performance to the greatest degree. This work calls for solo alto saxophone with electronic accompaniment. The electronic accompaniment is a pre-recorded set of three CD tracks that are to be played as the accompanying music to the solo saxophone.

An Indiana native and Ball State alumnus, Paul Andrews composed this piece in 2000 using a technique known as *motivic improvisation*. This concept is a key component to my studies and to the final two pieces in the first half of this recital. According to Hubbs-Gaines (2003), “motivic improvisation is an approach whereby the composer designates motivic material to be used by the performer to create a stylistically appropriate melodic realization.” Andrews provides a total of 7 motives and a scale for the performer to utilize at different points throughout the piece, calling for specific motives at certain times. The idea, as Hubbs-Gaines describes, is to improvise a melodic line on the given motivic material in very much the same way as jazz, only adhering more closely to the motives themselves. Performers are encouraged to use various compositional techniques when improvising on these motives, such as transposition, augmentation, diminution, inversion, retrograde, fragmentation and others in order to increase their available vocabulary and add interest to their performance. George Wolfe (2002) states that motivic improvisation “provides a means through which a performer can use motives and other points of reference to realize melodies in a contemporary classical style.”

The piece is set to a “mournful” tempo, and moves through various effects (known in the piece as “FX”). While there is no true sense of “strict” time, the performer is provided with various time markings throughout the piece so that he or she can align his or herself with the CD tracks at various points. The soloist moves through written material and two main motivic improvisation sections, and the three CD tracks create the “movements” of the piece. See Figure 4 for the motives in this piece.

Macy’s *Sometimes A Waltz*

Sometimes A Waltz is a duet for alto and baritone saxophones, and is a motivic improvisation as well. This composition was written for George Wolfe, saxophone professor at

Ball State University. Throughout the piece, both instruments improvise, alone and together, in the motivic style. While either instrument is soloing alone, the other is typically playing an obligato or ostinato figure.

Macy provides three basic motives for the piece, with directions for how to play each one as they occur. Each of the three motives is a thematic element at each of the three points for improvisation in the piece, respectively. The first section of improvisation features the alto, with instructions to play Motive A with long notes, grace note figures, and octaves, sixths and thirds in motivic units. The second section of improvisation features the baritone, who is instructed to play Motive B with falling figures and scales, and tremolo figures. The alto joins the baritone in improvisation at the end of this section. Finally, the third section of improvisation features the alto again using Motive C with single long tones and pairs of long tones. An obligato continues between the two instruments and diminishes in volume to the end. See Figure 5 for the motives in this composition and for Macy's performance descriptions.

Monk's *Straight, No Chaser*

Thelonious Monk was one of the most influential jazz figures of the 20th century. Known for his rhythmic creativity, he has composed tunes that are staples to jazz musicians the world over.

Straight, No Chaser is a bebop blues chart from the mid 1960s. A straight-ahead blues, with no drastic chord alterations, the tune is one of the more common blues heads performed by jazz players. The melodic line is very unique and characteristic of Monk. The melody is very repetitious, and contains phrases that overlap each other. The tune used rhythmic displacement of the same notes placing emphasis on syncopation. Despite the potential pitfalls due to the

melody's chromaticism, the melodic line fits over all of the chords in a blues progression (I-IV-V). This speaks to Monk's compositional prowess.

Gillespie's *Con Alma*

Like Monk, John "Dizzy" Gillespie (or simply, "Diz") was a very influential figurehead in the evolution of jazz music. Gillespie, along with saxophonist Charlie Parker, was a leading pioneer in the development of bebop.

Con Alma is a latin chart with an AABA form. The tune is typically performed with an Afro-Cuban 12/8 feel, alternating with a swing feel in the B section. *Con Alma* is a very difficult tune for a performer to improvise over because of its atypical harmonic structure. In spite of a simple melody, the chord structure is very complicated. The first 8 measures of the A section ends in an Eb Major chord, with a ii-V progression into the second 8 measures which end in C Major, a minor third lower. The B section states its part of the melodic content, and then restates it up a minor third.

Ellington's *Sophisticated Lady*

Duke Ellington was arguably the most prolific and skilled composer of big band jazz music in history, not to mention one of America's finest composers in general. Composing over 2,000 pieces in his lifetime, Ellington lead one of the most well-known orchestras in the history of jazz.

Sophisticated Lady, while later turned into a vocal piece, was originally composed as an instrumental piece. Written to feature the great baritone saxophonist Harry Carney, the composition is one of Ellington's most popular swing ballads. Ellington composed the bridge in a different key than the A section, and employs the use of many chromatically moving chords. This ballad is both harmonically complex and beautiful to hear and perform.

Garrett's *Sing A Song Of Song*

Kenny Garrett is a contemporary jazz saxophonist currently playing and recording. One of my main influences, Garrett's characteristic and unique sound is known throughout the modern jazz world.

Sing a Song of Song fits well within the idiom of contemporary jazz music. Recorded in 1997, the main phrases and melodies contain only three chords: E, C, and D. This piece contains this and other contemporary pop elements that are uniquely performed by Garrett to make them jazz. Both his sound and improvisation help to create a contemporary jazz feel and character. This piece utilizes melodies and scales that also help to define its character, such as the whole-tone scale and the harmonic minor scale with a lowered second degree. For this performance, I have transcribed and will perform a significant portion of Garrett's original improvised solo, along with my own improvisation.

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RYAN THOMSON
saxophone

SENIOR HONORS RECITAL

assisted by

Liz Seidel and Matt Corral, piano
Freddie Bledsoe, double bass
Tim Stephenson, drums
Stephen Driscoll, alto saxophone

Suite for Alto Saxophone and Piano..... Paul Bonneau
I. Improvisation (1918-1995)

Concerto in E-flatAlexander Glazunov
(1865-1936)

Improvisation 1.....Ryo Noda
(b.1948)

Shir Avel: A Mourner's SongPaul Andrews
(b.1978)

Sometimes A Waltz.....Carleton Macy
(b.1944)

... Intermission ...

Straight, No Chaser..... Thelonious Monk
(1917-1982)

Con Alma John "Dizzy" Gillespie
(1917-1993)

Sophisticated Lady.....Duke Ellington
(1899-1974)

Sing a Song of Song Kenny Garrett
(b.1960)

Ryan Thomson is a student of George Wolfe and Frank Puzzullo,
and a member of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Fraternity
for men in the field of music.

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Honors Program at Ball State University.

CHORAL HALL
Friday, November 30, 2007
5:30 p.m.

Series LXII
Number 94

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. George Wolfe for advising me throughout this project, and indeed over the last four years as a mentor, teacher, and friend. Thanks to his knowledge, dedication, and support, my recital was a huge success.

I would like to thank Mr. Frank Puzzullo, a jazz professor at Ball State, with whom I studied for the jazz portion of this project.

I also want to thank each of the musicians who performed in this recital with me: Liz Seidel, Matt Corral, Freddie Bledsoe, Tim Stephenson, and Stephen Driscoll. Without them, none of the music would have been possible.

Finally, I would like to thank God, my family, and my friends for their continued support and inspiration.