

THE JAZZ LANGUAGE OF WESTERN EUROPE:
TRANSCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF FOUR SELECTED JAZZ SOLOS BY
SAXOPHONIST MAX IONATA

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I. Introduction & Literature Review

Although jazz music is known as an American musical art form, the genre itself has developed a strong international following, particularly in regions such as Western Europe. Since the early twentieth century following both World Wars, jazz music, and its respective performers, listeners, advocates, and scholars were known to emigrate to Western European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and the Netherlands seeking new opportunities and artistic liberties that were not available in the United States.^{1,2} But while this trend of North American jazz musicians relocating to Western European countries throughout the twentieth century has been thoroughly researched, the same cannot be said regarding the domestic jazz scenes and musicians of the same region, especially in the twenty-first century. Yet, the visibility of Western European jazz musicians and culture has improved in recent years due to social media and the rise of prominent musicians such as Baptiste Herbin, Seamus Blake, and Max Ionata. It is the purpose of this thesis project to further expand on the Western European jazz lexicon as well as provide more visibility to these musicians and scenes in the academic sphere.

As mentioned previously, the emigration of North American jazz musicians and audiences to Western Europe is a topic that has been covered by many scholars. These readings range from amateur blog posts by musicians such as David Leibman comparing and contrasting American and European jazz scenes, to memoirs and biographies of American icons such as Chet Baker, Dexter Gordon, and Gerry Mulligan, all of which touch on their own experiences in

¹ Primack, Bret. "Why Did so Many Jazz Musicians Move to Europe - Sonny Rollins." [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFU5yAS5yrA), June 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFU5yAS5yrA>.

² Ostendorf, Berndt. "Subversive Reeducation? Jazz as a Liberating Force in Germany and Europe." *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, 2001, 53–71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20874822>.

Europe.^{3,4,5} The American perspective of Western European jazz has been a topic that many have covered, almost to a point of detriment, one could argue.

Since jazz music itself is an American art form, musicians, audiences, and scholars alike have, more often than not, judged the musical value and purpose of any jazz music through an American lens.⁶ It is due to this inherent perspective that several biases have developed, such as the neglect of European jazz ensembles such as the Clarke/Boland Big Band, who at the time of their existence in the mid-twentieth century, were condemned to only performing in Europe due to their ensemble not following the current American jazz trends at the time. Other Western European jazz musicians, such as Tomasz Stanko and Jan Garbarek also failed to gain the same level of recognition as other American-based musicians. Despite this, the twenty-first century has seen an increase in the visibility of Western European jazz musicians and culture. According to writers such as Enzo Capua, this increase is due to the “dramatic growth of skill and creativity” of European jazz musicians as well as the popularization of social media, which has helped smaller European artists generate strong international followings.⁷

Out of these twenty-first-century Western European jazz musicians, Max Ionata has grown a strong international following as one of the leading Italian jazz tenor saxophonists of the contemporary scene. Born in 1972 in Italy, Ionata started playing the saxophone at the age of ten,

³ Baker, Chet. *As Though I Had Wings: The Lost Memoir*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

⁴ Gordon, Maxine. *Sophisticated Giant: The Life and Legacy of Dexter Gordon*. University of California Press, 2018.

⁵ Josephson, Sanford. *Jeru's Journey: The Life and Music of Gerry Mulligan*. United States: Hal Leonard, 2015.

⁶ Gourse, Leslie. “Jazz Liberates Paris.” *AMERICAN HERITAGE*, April 2000.
<https://www.americanheritage.com/jazz-liberates-paris#1>.

⁷ Capua, Enzo. “Introducing the Italian Side of Jazz Music.” *iItaly.org*, May 1, 2013.
<https://www.iitaly.org/magazine/events/reports/article/introducing-italian-side-jazz-music>.

eventually choosing to pursue jazz as a professional career in the late 1990s.⁸ Since then, Ionata has won various outstanding soloist and artist awards throughout Europe and abroad while also appearing in over seventy albums as a leader or sideman.⁹ Apart from his professional accolades, Ionata has accumulated a large international following on social media and video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, with posts featuring his playing or transcriptions of his solos regularly generating hundreds of thousands of views and interactions. As an epitome of the twenty-first-century Western European jazz musician, Ionata has successfully defined his career outside of the American jazz lens while also honoring the tradition of the musical art form as it has been practiced throughout different regions of the world.

II. Research Question

Given that Max Ionata has been able to lead a successful career as a Western European jazz tenor saxophonist, what are the musical tropes and/or influences that define Max Ionata's improvisational sound?

III. Methodology

To determine any potential tropes or influences that define Max Ionata's improvisational sound, this project will feature the analysis of four original transcriptions of Ionata performing in a variety of settings: unaccompanied, piano accompaniment, and a trio setting (both swing and Latin styles). The preliminary analysis of these solo transcriptions will attempt to identify the following musical tropes and influences unique to Ionata's improvisatory style: motivic usage

⁸ Ionata, Max. Q & A with the Soulful and Swinging Saxman Everyone Needs to Hear, Max Ionata. Interview by Zach Sollitto. Best Saxophone Website Ever, August 12, 2019. <https://www.bestsaxophonewebsiteever.com/q-a-with-the-soulful-and-swinging-saxman-everyone-needs-to-hear-max-ionata/>.

⁹ Ionata, Max. "About – Max Ionata," n.d. <https://maxionata.com/about/>.

and development, harmonic complexity, rhythmic tendencies, and quotations of notable jazz language.

Once the analysis has been completed, an interview between Max Ionata and myself will be held in order to confirm and/or clarify any determinations that were made during the preliminary analysis. The questions in this interview will also cover Ionata's personal upbringing, musical influences, practice routines, and other factors that might influence improvisatory style. Based on the information that is gathered during this interview, a secondary analysis of the transcriptions will take place, taking into account the information that was gathered during the interview to create definite conclusions.

IV. Potential Conclusions

Since jazz is a musical genre that is exposed to the subjective tastes of individual listeners, there are many different ways that Max Ionata's solos can be interpreted. But, through research into Ionata's personal and professional background and musical development, it can be expected that Ionata takes great inspiration from musicians such as Steve Grossman, Bob Mintzer, and Joel Frahm, as these are some of the musicians that Ionata has performed and/or studied with during this career. Based on these inspirations, it could be determined that Ionata's improvisational sound is characterized by his emphasis on blues and bebop vocabulary, use of two to seven-note cells, and substitutions over common harmonic progressions. The results from this project will aid in providing more visibility to Western European jazz musicians as well as the culture in American musical academia; a field which is only beginning to develop following the American-centric perspectives of the twentieth century.

V. Annotated Bibliography

Baker, Chet. *As Though I Had Wings: The Lost Memoir*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Published by his estate, these entries give the reader an in-depth look into the West Coast jazz scene in the mid-twentieth century. These first-hand accounts from Chet Baker illustrate how jazz musicians and the music as a whole were treated as well as what that touring/gigging lifestyle would have been like during that time. The content covers topics ranging from drug use, car chases, births, and deaths, to the founding of the first pianoless quartet with the baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan. Most importantly, for this project, the memoir covers Chet Baker's personal and professional experiences while living in Europe during the 1980s.

Capua, Enzo. "Introducing the Italian Side of Jazz Music." iItaly.org, May 1, 2013.
<https://www.iitaly.org/magazine/events/reports/article/introducing-italian-side-jazz-music>.

One of the few articles that covers the modern European jazz scene, Capua discusses the growth of the Italian jazz scene in particular due to the dramatic growth of skill and creativity of European musicians in recent decades and the use of social media to advertise Italian jazz artists and events. The article mentions prominent Italian jazz musicians such as Enrico Rava, Stefano Bollani, Paolo Fresu, Enrico Pieranunzi, Danilo Rea, Dado Moroni, Francesco Cafiso, and Roberta Gambarini as well as their contributions to the international jazz scene. Lastly, Capua briefly discusses the Umbria Jazz Festival, which has grown in popularity and musical/cultural importance in recent years.

Gordon, Maxine. *Sophisticated Giant: The Life and Legacy of Dexter Gordon*. University of California Press, 2018.

This book covers the career and lasting influence of tenor saxophonist, Dexter Gordon, who was known to tour Western European cities with his album, *Our Man in Paris* being a must-listen for any jazz enthusiast. This text compares and contrasts how the performing arts were received in North America and Western Europe during the mid-20th century. *Sophisticated Giant* will aid in developing an understanding of the Western European jazz scene during the mid-to late-twentieth century.

Course, Leslie. "Jazz Liberates Paris." AMERICAN HERITAGE, April 2000.
<https://www.americanheritage.com/jazz-liberates-paris#1>.

This journal focuses on the jazz scene in Paris, France, and its lasting influence on the city as a whole throughout the mid-to-late 20th century. The author provides some explanations for why certain musicians were drawn to France, suggesting that after World War II the "Americans returned in force, some of them to live for a while, some to stay forever." He also describes the living conditions of the musicians who lived there at the time, saying that the overall experience was not great, as many performers from the United States still had to compete for gigs in the area. This journal helps to describe the varying reasons why musicians in different decades were drawn to France and why some ended up staying permanently.

Henri Selmer Paris. "Max Ionata." Henri SELMER Paris. <https://www.selmer.fr/en/blogs/artistes/max-ionata>.

Unfortunately, despite being one of Europe and Italy's most prominent jazz tenor saxophonists, little is known about Max Ionata on a personal or professional level. According to his artistic profile developed by Henri Selmer Paris, one of the brands that Ionata endorses, he was born in 1972 in Italy. During his professional career, Ionata has appeared in more than 70 albums, with many of them being on international labels. Additionally, the profile mentions several European artists that Ionata has performed with as well as some of the countries that he has performed in, including Japan, China, Netherlands, England, France, the United States, and many others.

Ionata, Max. "About – Max Ionata," n.d. <https://maxionata.com/about/>.

Although Ionata's own website does not offer any additional information about the saxophonist's personal life, it does list some international awards that he has won dating back to 2000, including the "Massimo Urbani" prize for the wind section (2000), the public prize at the international "Tramplin Jazz D'Avignon" competition in France (2002), and the "JazzIt Award" award as the best Italian tenor saxophonist.

Ionata, Max. Q & A with the Soulful and Swinging Saxman Everyone Needs to Hear, Max Ionata. Interview by Zach Sollitto. *Best Saxophone Website Ever*, August 12, 2019. <https://www.bestsaxophonewebsiteever.com/q-a-with-the-soulful-and-swinging-saxman-everyone-needs-to-hear-max-ionata/>.

One of the more lengthy sources regarding Max Ionata's playing style and influences, this interview, conducted by Sollitto in 2019, begins with Ionata explaining why he chose to play the saxophone as well as how music became his life-long passion. The interview also covers various other topics, such as Ionata's practicing habits, thoughts on the current European and international jazz scene, and musical equipment. All of this information will be very important during the process of analyzing transcriptions of Ionata's solos.

Josephson, Sanford. *Jeru's Journey: The Life and Music of Gerry Mulligan*. United States: Hal Leonard, 2015.

Like Dexter Gordon's edited memoirs, Sanford's writings describe the upbringing, career, and legacy of baritone saxophonist, Gerry Mulligan who was one of the founders of West Coast Cool Jazz and the pianoless quartet. During his career, Mulligan was known to tour with pianist Dave Brubeck in Europe during the mid-to-late 20th century. This book does go into Mulligan's discography and covers the album *If You Can't Beat 'Em, Join 'Em!*, which was his response to the decline in the popularity of jazz as a whole in the mid-1960s. This decline in popularity, relevance, and performance opportunities gives some insight into why Mulligan, like many others, was interested in exploring foreign markets.

Liebman, David. "Europe and Its Role in Jazz | David Liebman." Davidliebman.com, 1990.
https://davidliebman.com/home/ed_articles/europe-and-its-role-in-jazz/.

In an article on his official website, Dave Liebman describes his own experiences in Europe as a jazz musician as well as how the jazz culture there has grown over the past half-century. He goes over specific countries such as Italy, France, Germany, and Spain in great detail, describing each of the different scenes that one can find and how they contrast with one another.

Ostendorf, Berndt. "Subversive Reeducation? Jazz as a Liberating Force in Germany and Europe." *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, 2001, 53–71.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20874822>.

This journal describes the introduction of jazz to Europe in what Ostendorf describes as the "two waves" following both World Wars. In this reading, Ostendorf argues that the introduction of jazz-derived music included a radical break concerning the rules of performance and habits of reception in Western musical culture during its conception which led to the opinion of the public being divided for decades to come in not just in the United States, but Europe as well. While this might have been true in the past, other sources have indicated that many Western European jazz musicians have taken up a contrary position, instead preferring to perform jazz standards of the twentieth century.

Primack, Bret. "Why Did so Many Jazz Musicians Move to Europe - Sonny Rollins."
 www.youtube.com, June 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFU5yAS5yrA>.

In this interview, Sonny Rollins discusses why so many of his fellow musicians left to move to Europe in the 20th century with many of the reasons carrying over to the 21st century. He mentions how the arts, jazz specifically, has never gotten the attention and recognition that it deserves in the United States and that many went to Europe in search of people who would appreciate their work for what they saw it as. Rollins describes the history of jazz in Europe from its initial, formal introduction during World War I to the turn of the century with musicians such as Seamus Blake and Brad Mehldau. While this interview does feature a strong historical perspective, Rollins does discuss some contemporary European jazz trends that are relevant to this project.

VI. Appendix

1. Max Ionata Interview Questions
2. All The Things You Are - Max Ionata (Solo Transcription by Thomas Wieland)
3. The End of a Love Affair - Max Ionata (Solo Transcription by Thomas Wieland)
4. Without a Song (Solo Transcription by Thomas Wieland)
5. Bolivia - Max Ionata (Solo Transcription by Thomas Wieland)

Max Ionata Interview Questions

1. What was your musical upbringing like during your childhood?
 - a. Were any of your parents musically inclined?
 - b. Did you grow up in a musical household?
 - c. What music recordings and/or experiences influenced your development as a musician the most during your childhood?
 - d. What made you want to play the saxophone?
2. Describe your early career as a jazz musician.
 - a. How did you decide to become a jazz musician?
 - b. What mentors did you have that helped you along during the early stages of your career, and are these people the same or different now?
 - c. Describe the European jazz scene (how does it compare to other countries?)
3. How would you define your approach to jazz improvisation?
 - a. What are your practice routines?
 - b. What have been some of your influences (who do you listen to)?
 - c. How do you attempt to emulate or expand upon established jazz vocabulary?
 - d. How would you compare American and Italian jazz improvisation?
4. Questions specific to each transcription...
 - a. More questions to come following the preliminary analysis.