

Reviews

Jazz Theory Texts: An Overview

Reviewed by Gary Potter

The arrival on the market of a new jazz theory text prompted this review of several recent publications with potential usefulness for theory teachers interested in jazz. *Jazz Theory and Practice* by Richard J. Lawn and Jeffrey L. Hellmer was published in 1993.¹ According to a publisher's spokesperson, it was intended to compete with *Jazz Improvisation in Theory and Practice* by Bruce Benward and Joan Wildman.² The many similarities in approach and content between the two similarly-titled texts suggested a comparative review, perhaps adding another jazz text, *Jazz Theory* by Andrew Jaffe,³ for a three-way comparison. Unfortunately, both Benward/Wildman and Jaffe are in the process of going out of print, leaving Lawn/Hellmer without a direct competitor. Fortunately, however, Lawn/Hellmer is the best of the three, clearly building on and surpassing its predecessors in most (not all) respects.

This article concentrates on this newest entry into the dwindling jazz theory textbook area. Shorter sections then review several other recent books that, while not covering exactly the same material, can be compared usefully with Lawn/Hellmer and might provide additional resources for teachers. The article is aimed at theory teachers who: (1) want to incorporate some jazz theory into a traditional theory curriculum; (2) want to offer a separate jazz theory course, either as an elective for students who have completed the theory requirements or in place of one of the required courses; or (3) want to expand their own knowledge of jazz theory.

¹Richard J. Lawn and Jeffrey L. Hellmer, *Jazz Theory and Practice* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993).

²Bruce Benward and Joan Wildman, *Jazz Improvisation in Theory and Practice* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1984).

³Andrew Jaffe, *Jazz Theory* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1983).

Jazz Theory and Practice (Lawn/Hellmer) is not intended only for improvising performers trying to learn the craft of jazz improvisation. Many books *are* so intended, and the range of coverage of these “how-to” books is usually narrower. Lawn/Hellmer is potentially useful for jazz performers, arrangers, and knowledgeable listeners alike. “This book is intended for use in the college classroom by students who have completed one year or more of traditional theory. . . . It can also be successfully used independently by individuals outside the classroom setting” (p. xiv). The first two chapters covering intervals, scales, and modes would be largely review for students with a year of traditional theory behind them, although the topics are presented with occasional references to jazz, thus laying the foundation for specific jazz applications of these fundamentals. A section on interval recognition, for example, includes a list of jazz tunes that begin with all the various ascending and descending intervals.

Beginning in chapter 3, in which virtually all jazz chords and associated jazz symbols are introduced, the book becomes more specifically a jazz theory text. The topics of chapters 4 and 5, “Symmetrical, Synthetic, and Hybrid Scales” and “Chord/Scale Relations and Applications,” have been the primary focus of jazz improvisation methods for decades. Many books, in fact, never get past these topics, restricting the books’ usefulness to only the budding improviser trying to learn to choose the “right” pitches to play with given chord symbols.

There is, however, much more to jazz theory. After presenting the chord/scale correlation information concisely and well, Lawn/Hellmer follow it with chapter 6 entitled “Principles of Melodic Construction and Development,” in which motivic development is presented as an important part of improvisation. The student quickly learns that there is more to improvising than hitting all the right notes. Also in chapter 6, non-harmonic tones are introduced using traditional theoretical terms, but illustrated by jazz melodies. Unfortunately, some of the definitions are misleading or poorly expressed. Also problematic is Lawn/Hellmer’s arbitrary assumption that root, third, fifth, and seventh are chord tones while all others are non-harmonic tones of some variety; in some jazz styles where 9th, 11th, and 13th chords are the norm it seems awkward to view

these "upper extensions" as non-harmonic tones. In contrast, the section on melodic manipulation and development presents a valuable motivic approach to improvisation for both the improviser and the analyst. Two annotated transcriptions at the end of the chapter illustrate non-harmonic tones and motivic development in improvisation.

Chapters on harmonic progression (including cadential patterns, II-V-I's, and turnarounds) and on harmonic substitution and embellishment follow. Both jazz letter symbols and Roman numeral labels are used in appropriate contexts. These chapters are excellent; the explanation of chord substitution principles is particularly good and well illustrated.

Two chapters add considerably to the usefulness of *Lawn/Hellmer* for students of jazz theory. "Introduction to Jazz Keyboard Voicings" presents a concise summary of the keyboard's role in jazz and of basic techniques for simple but effective realizations of chord symbols in three to five voices. The basic voicings can and should be learned immediately and then applied in subsequent chapters. "Rhythm and Meter" presents a welcome departure from the pitch domain. Topics include African, Afro-Cuban, and Afro-Latin influences, meter, and the phenomenon of "swing," examined from the perspective of the rhythm section and the improvising soloist. A brief history of the swing eighth note is actually a concise overview of rhythmic evolution in jazz from the early days through recent styles.

Chapters 11 through 13 focus on common "forms": the blues, modal structures, and "rhythm changes." Based on musical examples, each is discussed historically, standard and elaborated versions are illustrated, and transcribed solos are analyzed using tools developed throughout the book. Chapter 14, similar in format, deals with the various topics of "contemporary jazz composition." Compositions by Ornette Coleman and Herbie Hancock are analyzed.

The final chapter, "Solving the Improvisation Myth," discusses issues of creativity in improvisation. Clichés, quotes, and patterns are presented as an integral part of most jazz improvisation, which is not "the result of some divine inspiration but rather a learned language" (p. 244). Four transcriptions and analyses comprise the bulk of the chapter and sum up very well the material presented

throughout the book. The four illustrate each of the four types of pieces presented in chapters 11 through 14. The transcribed solos, by Cannonball Adderley, Clark Terry, Don Byas, and Miles Davis, are excellent as are the analyses themselves.

The strengths of Lawn/Hellmer are numerous. The book goes farther than standard chord-scale correlation explanations of many jazz how-to texts, bringing in rhythmic issues, motivic development, jazz forms, and complete analyses. The analyses in turn go beyond simply relating chord symbols to pitches chosen by the improvisor. Keyboard voicings are presented early enough that the student can use the keyboard as a way of hearing the chord progressions presented later. Almost every chapter has "Suggested Exercises and Activities," including written exercises, suggestions for application to keyboard and/or the student's own instrument, and ear-training suggestions and drills. Adding greatly to the value for the theory student, software for ear-training tutorials and mastery tests is included with the book. The student needs a Macintosh computer with MIDI tone generator and Hypercard 1.2.5 or later to access a variety of exercises, ranging from simple interval recognition to identification of longer progressions.

However, Lawn/Hellmer is not problem-free by any means. Especially in the early chapters, some errors appear that careful editing should have eliminated and, worse, many written examples are (at best) inelegant or (at worst) incorrect. Particularly in sections reviewing basic theoretical topics, traditional theory teachers will squirm; the following are a few samples.

(1) Interval inversion is "explained" as follows: "Any interval may be inverted to achieve a similar consonant or dissonant sound. Whether the interval is expanded or contracted, it still represents the initial consonant or dissonant quality"(p. 4).

(2) "Tonality" loses its standard meaning in the following: "When played side by side, these two scales [Eb pentatonic and C Dorian] communicate a similar tonality or musical, aural identity" (p. 18).

(3) From the following, one might conclude that inverting diminished triads yields no aural difference: "A combination of two major 3rds completes the augmented triad which is, like the diminished triad, a symmetrical chord. Because of this symmetrical arrangement of intervals, there is no real difference achieved through

inversion" (p. 23).

(4) Consider the theory student's confusion at the following: "*Anticipation* (ANT.) is created when a change of harmony is actually foreshadowed by a melody note that creates a form of suspension" (p. 77).

(5) The term "inversion" already has too many confusing meanings in theory. Lawn/Hellmer adds yet another: two scales with the same pitches but starting and ending on different degrees are termed "inversions" of one another (p. 36). The topic is treated inconsistently, however; in a section on modal scales, D Dorian is referred to as the "reordered" modal scale of C-major (p. 13).

(6) There are also many relatively minor editorial lapses, such as referring to CDEF and GABC as the lower and upper tetrachords in Example 2.1 where an F-major scale appears (pp. 9-10).

Unfortunately, the ear-training software is similarly problematic. Like the text itself, it covers all the right territory; one wishes it could have done it a little better. For example, there is a great exercise in which the student is to choose from a list of chords the ones heard in a brief progression. Ideally, one could "click" on chords in the given list. Instead one must click once in the answer box and then type the multi-character chord symbols, along with slashes for repeated beats and dashes for barlines. Multiple-choice clicking would be faster, allowing less elapsed time between answering and rehearing the aural stimulus.

As in the text, occasional errors occur in the software as well. A dominant-seventh chord is incorrectly identified as a minor-seventh, for example. A more vexing problem, however, is inconsistency. In one valuable exercise, students both see and hear a complex chord which they are to identify. The basic seventh is to be typed first followed by any "upper extensions" in parentheses listed from highest to lowest. But just when students learn, for example, to respond "D7(13,#11,9)" for a D-F#-A-C-E-G#-B chord, that chord appears and the "right" answer turns out to be D13(#11). Again, multiple-choice clicking would be easier. If typing out the answer is considered a valuable exercise, either the symbol usage must be consistent or multiple "right" answers must be accepted.

Lawn/Hellmer covers an impressive range of materials rather well. In spite of casual application of theoretical terms, a frequently

clumsy writing style, and ear-training exercises that are stimulating but frustrating, the book can be recommended. The information presented is usually accurate and comprehensive. Students who work through the exercises, listen through the software, and study (visually and aurally) the transcriptions with their analyses will have a thorough and broad-based understanding of jazz. I hope that theory teachers will all order this book, making it so successful that a REVISED edition can appear soon.

Other recent jazz books also deserve consideration. All are less comprehensive than Lawn/Hellmer and none could stand alone as *the* text for a jazz theory course as could Lawn/Hellmer. They have, however, potential applications for theory teachers in specific curricular situations.

The Jazz Theory Workbook by Mark E. Boling,⁴ designed as a jazz theory primer leading to advanced work in improvisation, arrangement, and composition, is a smaller book (125 pp.) focusing exclusively on pitch materials. Four chapters present information on music theory fundamentals, jazz chord structures, chord/scale relationships, and jazz progressions. Chapter 5, "Sources of Chromaticism," is far too brief to be useful, "covering" chromatic non-harmonic tones, harmonic substitution, and playing "outside the changes" in fewer than five pages! A final chapter provides brief suggestions for further study.

The one strength of this book is its concise presentation (74 pages) of basic chords, scales, and progressions. Written exercises are included, the answers to which are found in the appendix, so interested students could work through important aspects of elementary jazz theory on their own. There are no transcriptions or analyses, and there is no ear-training component. "Playing Exercises" are included, but, as in many books, they consist merely of patterns that students are urged to practice in all twelve keys.

Creative Jazz Improvisation by Scott D. Reeves⁵ is aimed at the improvising performer, and it deals almost exclusively with pitch. A four-page chapter pays lip service to rhythm, but the primary

⁴Mark E. Boling, *The Jazz Theory Workbook* (Rottenburg, Germany: Advance Music, 1990).

⁵Scott D. Reeves, *Creative Jazz Improvisation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989).

topic is scales and modes, typical of improvisation method books.⁶ There are almost no written exercises or ear-training materials. The book's interest for theory students and teachers lies in the number and variety of transcribed solos. Almost every chapter ends with a transcription of a solo which more or less illustrates the chapter's topic—generally the use of a particular scale. Included are solos by Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Lester Young, Clifford Brown, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, Chick Corea, and others. Brief analytical comments accompany each transcription; while these comments focus on chord-scale correlation, other aspects of improvisation are sometimes mentioned. All of the transcriptions are written out four times: for C, B $\flat$, and E $\flat$ treble-clef instruments and for untransposed bass-clef instruments. The author intends for students to learn the solo using their instruments, preferably by playing along with the original recorded solo. This book can be recommended for the improvisation student who is (or who the teacher thinks *should* be) interested in studying a wide range of improvised solos as well as the usual chord-scale patterns. For the theory student, the book's transcriptions amount to an improvisation anthology through which the stylistic development of improvised jazz by some of its best practitioners can be studied.

⁶ Improvisation method books abound. Some could be used as jazz theory books, especially in situations where performance is integrated into the theory classroom. An excellent improvisation method is Jerry Coker's *Complete Method for Improvisation* (Lebanon, IN: Studio P/R, 1980), which presents six "vehicles" for improvisation: be-bop and standard, modal, blues, contemporary, ballad, and free form. Each vehicle demands a different approach and mastery of certain concepts presented as they become necessary to improvising on a specific kind of piece.

Another author of improvisation method books is David Baker. His outstanding *Jazz Improvisation: A Comprehensive Method of Study for All Players*, revised ed. (Bloomington, IN: Frangipani Press, 1983) is far more than a chord/scale compendium as the following sample of chapter titles makes clear: "The Use of Dramatic Devices," "Developing a Feel for Swing," "Constructing a Jazz Chorus," and "A Psychological Approach to Communicating Through an Improvised Solo." Baker has also authored a series of monographs presenting transcriptions and analyses of various players: *The Jazz Style of Cannonball Adderley* (Lebanon, IN: Studio P/R, 1980); other volumes deal with Clifford Brown, Fats Navarro, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Sonny Rollins.

The Jazz Sound by Dan Haerle⁷ is the most recent improvisation book (an 88-page booklet). This is exclusively a chord/scale correlation study guide, but it surpasses others in that the improvisor is provided with alternative scale choices for given chord symbols and then provided with tools to make intelligent and musical choices among them. The improvisor is urged to become aware of the context of chords and to move beyond merely realizing chord symbols. Haerle suggests that consideration should be given to the piece's original melody and to each chord's function within a broader progression.

Although *The Jazz Sound* is probably too narrow in focus for a typical theory teacher's use, an earlier, even smaller (58-page) book by Haerle might work as a text for a jazz unit within a theory course where Lawn/Hellmer might be more than needed. In very concise form, *The Jazz Language*⁸ covers the usual chords and scales plus chord substitution, voicing, and connection. Each brief chapter ends with study questions to verify that the material has been assimilated, as well as written, keyboard, and ear-training exercises. The layout of the book is unattractive; maximum information is presented in minimum space. But it is *well*-presented and accurate. This book is recommended for consideration as an inexpensive supplementary book to include some jazz study in a traditional theory course.

In summary, a definitive jazz theory text has yet to be written. The Benward/Wildman and Jaffe texts, both fairly good, have gone out of print and have been replaced with Lawn and Hellmer's *Jazz Theory and Practice*, a better text not without its own problems. Perhaps insufficient demand for a jazz theory book geared to theory students has discouraged competition. On the other hand, perhaps the arrival of a really fine book would spark demand. In the meantime, books intended for improvisation students might be valuable supplements in theory classes. The Lawn/Hellmer book is certainly worth considering where a full jazz theory text is needed or where theory teachers want to add to their own knowledge of jazz.

⁷ Dan Haerle, *The Jazz Sound* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 1989).

⁸ Dan Haerle, *The Jazz Language* (Lebanon, IN: Studio P/R, 1980).