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## LESTER YOUNG'S PERFORMANCE POETICS AND PERFORMANCE STYLE: THE EXPERIENCE OF ANALYSIS

*The research focuses on the system of performance resources of expression of a jazz musician, which received the title of “performance poetics” and “performance style”. L. Young's creative work has repeatedly been the subject of research, in particular, in publications by L. Porter (1981) and D. Daniels (1985; 2002; 2005), one of the outstanding biographers of the jazz master. D. Gelly (2007) includes L. Young into the pantheon of the most influential jazz performers reflecting the components of his performance style. J. P. De Lucia (2017) calls L. Young a key figure at the beginning of swing era. **The scientific novelty** of our study lies in the development of aspects of the analysis of the performance poetics of jazz musicians basing on L. Young's creativity. **The purpose of the article** is to identify the parameters of Lester Young's performance poetics. As the **research methods** the communicative-interpretative, systematic, stylistic approaches and the performance analysis are used. The analysis of performance poetics is based on the Kharkiv I. P. Kotlyarevsky National University of Arts musicologists' developments: by L. Shapovalova (2007) devoted to the “performance time-space” concept and Yu. Nikolaievskya's monograph (2020) on the performance interpretology.*

***The results** of the study are based on the analysis of L. Young's compositions the “Squabblin” and the “Blue Devils Blues”; on his work as a soloist-improviser in King Oliver's orchestra and in the band “Blue Devils”. **Conclusion** supports the idea of performance poetics as an artistic system, which is a “reflection of*

*the musician's interpretative thinking" (Nikolaievska, 2020) in such parameters as melody, metro-rhythm, tonality, harmony, texture and the corresponding "toponyms" – articulation, tempo-rhythm, dynamic score, and "toponymics" as performance reproduction of texture. It is articulated on such positions as unique timbre and sound production (specific position of the mouthpiece), expansion of harmonious thinking (melodic use of fourths and fifths, "horizontal" concept of phrasing). L. Young's unique performing style is based on the principles of "stretched sound", "horizontal" concept of improvisation, intense vibrato and the formation of a performance as a reflection act.*

**Key words:** *performance poetics, Lester Young's creative work, saxophone timbre, performance analysis, performance style, harmonious thinking, horizontal concept of jazz improvisation.*

**Introduction** (*the analysis of recent research and publications, statement of the problem*). The research focuses on the system of performance resources of expression of a jazz musician, which received the title of "performance poetics" and "performance style".

L. Young's creative work has repeatedly been the subject of research, as evidenced by a significant body of sources<sup>1</sup>. Many publications belong to L. Porter, in particular, in one of them the author analyses the components of L. Young's early style (Porter, 1981). One of the outstanding biographers of the master is D. H. Daniels, the author of a fundamental work (2002) that contains the most complete volume of information about the cultural roots of the jazz musician and his style, and a number of articles (Daniels, 1985; Daniels, 2005). D. Gelly (2007), while including L. Young into the pantheon of the most influential jazz performers, reflects on the components of his performance style and seeks to understand what this stylistic influence was on the art of jazz improvisation and the process of updating jazz style in general. J. P. De Lucia (De Lucia, 2017) considers L. Young a key figure at the beginning of swing development. On the example of the solo «Lester Leaps In», he

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<sup>1</sup> The name of L. Young is in all encyclopedic editions, dictionaries, books on the history and theory of jazz (Blesh, 1971; Büchmann-Møller, 1990; Evensmo, 1977; Martin, 2004) etc.

analyses the specific elements of improvisation that led to the creation of a new jazz dictionary.

All of the above makes the study of L. Young's work within the framework of modern jazz, in particular, such concepts as "performance style" and "performance poetic" are relevant. **The scientific novelty** of our study lies in the development of aspects of the analysis of the performance poetics of jazz musicians basing on L. Young's creativity.

**The purpose of the article** is to identify the parameters of Lester Young's performance poetics.

**The research methodology.** As the research methods the communicative-interpretative, systematic, stylistic approaches and the performance analysis are used. The analysis of performance poetics is based on the scientific developments of musicologists of the Kharkiv I. P. Kotlyarevsky National University of Arts: by Yu. Vakhraniov (1994), L. Shapovalova (2007), Yu. Nikolaievskaya (2020). In particular, on those by the Department of Interpretology and Analysis of Music, which develop positions relevant to the modern description of the performance processes. This is L. Shapovalova's research (2007) devoted to the concept of "performing time-space", Yu. Nikolaievskaya's monograph on the performance interpretology, where the author formulates the concept of "performance poetics" as an artistic system that is "a reflection of the interpretative thinking of a musician" (Nikolaievskaya, 2020: 217). She names its constant elements ("performing style"), such as melody, metro-rhythm, mode harmony, texture, denotes the corresponding "toponyms" (articulation, tempo-rhythm of the composition, dynamic score) and "toponymics" as a performance reproduction of texture [ibid.]. Focusing on the proposed positions as an algorithm for analysing the performance poetics of a musician, let us turn to the analysis of L. Young's creative activity and compositions.

**Presentation of the main material.** Douglas Daniels, one of Lester Young's biographers, in his fundamental work «Lester Leaps In: The Life and Times of Lester "Pres" Young», quotes the saxophonist Eddie Barfield, a contemporary of Lester Young, on

his performance style: «He played the tenor in the viola performing style» (Daniels, 2002: 107). The trumpeter Leroy White said that «Lester...played what no one else thought. He was full of ideas» (Daniels, 2002: 133).

During the improvisation, the musicians relied mostly on the melody and notes of the chord. In the 1930s musicians of a more advanced level, such as Duke Ellington or Lester Young, began experimenting with further chord expansion, such as the  $D_7$  chord, where they could play a ninth, an eleventh, and a thirteenth. Another performance means of expression in L. Young's legacy is the use of a scale of four sounds. It consists of notes of minor triads scales with an additional sixth. Despite the fact that such a scale contains the prime, third, fifth and sixth of the scale of the melodic minor, on which the chord is based, it can also be played on chords of major and minor scales.

Traditionally, the prime, third, fifth and seventh are considered as chord sounds. That is, with the help of these sounds it is possible to determine the quality of the chord: whether it is major, minor or dominant. This definition had existed for several centuries in classical music, and until the 1940s in jazz. But in the case of some more modern chords, the traditional understanding of chord sounds is not relevant. For example, the sounds that determine the quality of *sus* chord are a prime, fourth, and seventh. Thus, jazz pianists and guitarists play these sounds to build the harmony of the *Csus* chord. Similarly, the *susb9* chord consists of the prime, fourth, and actually the reduced ninth.

In the swing era, pentatonic scales became popular among jazz musicians. Lester Young also used pentatonics during improvisational solos in many compositions.

For jazz, as an improvisational, oral culture, the massiveness of the musical process has always been of considerable benefit. It formed ensembles of the playing type, but not the performance one. The musical themes of their repertoire were based on certain general harmonic and structural principles, the musicians made the arrangements orally; they were not recorded in the musical text,

and were created on stage at the very moment of performance. Each time the compositions had a different sounding, and they appeared instantly and had to act on the listeners at a specific time. Lester Young tried to play the saxophone playing of his idol, Frankie Trumbauer. He repeated his style of sound production and phrasing. In the annotation to L. Young's album, O. Batashev (1989) touches on several important stylistic peculiarities of the performer. For example, the story of the formation of Young's sound qualities is interesting. In 1936, Count Basie invited two saxophonists, Lester Young and Herschel Evans, to join his ensemble. The latter was a tenor who played in the manner of Coleman Hawkins, with a three-dimensional, full, laryngeal "hot" sounding of the instrument. Young's sounding was concise and transparent, "cool", with unique, new at the time musical syntax and punctuation. Evans' swing was more straightforward, open, and Young's was thinner, more secretive, and more profound.

During his collaboration with the jazz vocalist Billy Holiday, Lester Young paid a lot of attention to the lyrics component. He knew the words of all the songs, which were performed, and focused on them during improvisations. Speech component also influenced the formation of Young's performance style, due to which his contemporaries claimed that "Young's saxophone could 'talk' " (Batashev, 1989).

Lester Young's performance style originated in King Oliver's orchestra, the repertoire foundation of which was blues. It is a simple, emotional and soulful playing that demonstrates deep penetrate in the aesthetics of the blues. During improvisational solos, Lester Young relied not only on "blues" notes and harmony, but also on pauses, exchange of musical phrases and remarks, patterns with other members of the ensemble. Critics associate such musical techniques with King Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton. At the same time, according to D. Daniels (2002), when creating new melodies, Young did not deviate from the melodies of the main themes and followed the jazz traditions of the corresponding era,

which (the tradition) was introduced by Jelly Roll Morton and the famous jazz clarinetist Sidney Bechet – never lose the focus on the melody and follow its development. Keeping the melody simple, combining notes in both pitch and rhythm, Young maintained blues traditions that originated with the unique source sites of the blues, the Mississippi and Southern Louisiana deltas, adapting the same techniques of playing that were used by King Oliver on the trumpet, and by Robert Johnson on the guitar. Lester Young projected it on the tenor saxophone. D. Daniels notes that King Oliver’s influence on Young was also in eccentric behaviour, habits and manners, as well as a tendency to tell interesting stories. The *“narrative” style of performance has become one of the dominant features of Lester Young’s style*. Thus, it is possible to make assumptions about the projection of the text on the musical performance of L. Young, the *formation of musical narrative as a component of performance poetics*, that in Young’s music making there is a flow of awareness, “automatic” writing. Interestingly, it was in the early 1920s that the same style emerged in the literature, the founder of which is considered J. Joyce. The creative work of writers – representatives of the next generation, “beatniks”, in turn, was formed under the influence of improvisations of jazz musicians of the “bop” era, which included Lester Young. This relationship – the flow of awareness in text format – in music format (jazz improvisation) – automatic writing of “beatniks” in a new round, rethinking the flow of awareness in both formats. While working in orchestras in the Southwest, Lester Young’s own style of music making was greatly influenced by arrangements. This period of Young’s creativity is associated with the work with the band of “Blue Devils”. D. Daniels singles out Buster Smith as one of the first arrangers, along with Jesse Stone and T. Terence Holder, who in their compositions took into account the individual characteristics of the band’s musicians. Smith arranged in such a way so as to emphasize Young’s unique talent as a “subversive” but full of mental feelings soloist. Leroy White explained: “Buster’s arrangements were different because he knew the possibilities and expressive potential of his

musicians and wrote personally for each” (as site Daniels, 2002: 138)<sup>2</sup>.

Following the example of Duke Ellington, Buster Smith began to add seventh and ninth chords to the harmony. He began experimenting with adding a sixth sound to the ninth chords, extending the harmony to all of the instruments of the band. Smith’s arrangements also caused some controversy. As one member of the ensemble noted, “white bands did not use [chords of seventh and ninth] because they heard it as false” (Daniels, 2002: 138). When Smith and other bold arrangers began to add fifth and sixth sounds to the chords, the sound of the chords changed completely. They no longer used harmony based on triads. The most outstanding songs recorded with “Blue Devils” – “Squabblin” and “Blue Devils Blues” – in both of them Lester Young participated.

As for the sound of Lester Young’s saxophone, D. Gelly (2007) notes that Young used about half the dynamic potential of his instrument when playing in Count Basie’s orchestra. However, he always placed the instrument at a close distance from the microphone. Some examples of his solo contain a real whisper. Despite Young’s dynamic range within the averages, his improvisational line always sounds tense, is clearly articulated and moves elegantly and logically. In Lester Young’s solo there is always “every second adjustment of tonal weight, ornamentation and balancing of note to note and phrase to phrase” (Gelly, 2007: 66). It is in this context that one can understand all his originality, which becomes all the more interesting when the simplicity of the means of expression is appreciated. For example, analysing Young’s solo in the first double of “Way Down Yonder”, D. Gelly draws attention to the unpretentious flow of arpeggios and fragments of scales, consisting of “trembling” eighths. All this is done according to a simple harmonic scheme, which the popular composition of 1922 has.

Lester Young’s performance style was an innovation in jazz in the 1930s and remains unsurpassed even today. He achieves the effect

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<sup>2</sup> Following the example of Duke Ellington, Buster Smith began to add chords of seventh and ninth to the harmony.

by combining graceful sounding, micro-intonations and exquisite selection of notes. They can be simple, minimalistic, but not obvious. Young's phrases tend not to be based on stable chord sounds such as tonic, third and fifth, but on less stable ones such as sixth and ninth. The complex chromatic substitutions used by Coleman Hawkins were not in Young's sphere of interest. However, in the solo song "Way Down Yonder" one can see chromatic moves. In measure 20, Lester Young plays the descending arpeggio of the  $F_7$  chord and raises the fifth by a semitone. This alteration adds a specific colour to the chord. It reminds of incompleteness, uncertainty – the mood that Lester Young liked to embody. In this case, the solo sounds calm, smooth, but Young used the techniques of altered chords in other compositions to achieve the effect of strong emotional impact.

Some examples of the best compositions recorded by Lester Young can be heard on the tracks of Columbia 1939–40. For example, the song "Twelfth Street Rag" was recorded in April 1939. It has an interesting approach to the tonal plan. According to D. Gelly (2007), the listener may, at first glance, have the impression that the melody is hopeless, especially during the remarks of C. Basie and J. Jones in the introductory chorus. However, next there follows a light second chorus by C. Basie with an unexpected change of key from C to  $E \flat$  (C – E-flat), and Lester Young conducts two unsurpassed choruses. In this composition, his mastery of rhythm stands out, as he transforms slow, delayed phrases into energetic moving and motor improvisational line. In the second chorus there is a variety of sound, which is presented as short "portions" of passages with auxiliary fingering, owing to which there is a change in the timbre colour of individual sounds of the saxophone. At the same time, C. Basie's accompaniment is restrained but attentive, follows every movement of sound patterns and every nuance. D. Gelly sees the final part of the composition as confusing and vague. Despite this, the composition "Twelfth Street Rag" is a striking example of the embodiment of Lester Young's performance style.

Also noteworthy is the song "Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie!", which was recorded in August 1939. According to its parameters, it

can be considered as a proto-bop, its super-fast tempo of performance is impressive – 288 beats per minute, the rapid and active beginning of the composition immediately creates the effect of tension, virtuosity, and accuracy. L. Young's solo in "Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie!" at the same time, according to D. Gelly, is a model of balance and technical skill.

Other songs of the band from this period with Lester Young's outstanding solos include "Pound Cake", "I Never Knew", "Broadway", "Easy Does It", and "Louisiana". But one of them should be singled out especially – the song "Tickle Toe", the author of which is actually Lester Young. Although he is considered a co-author of several compositions by C. Basie (Lester made a significant contribution to them through riffs in numerous arrangements of heads, improvisational solos, which are also full of creative ideas). The composition "Tickle Toe" contains a theme of complex construction, written by Lester Young, but the orchestration belongs to Andy Gibson. Immediately after the exposition of the theme, a solo saxophone sounds, lasting 32 measures. It "sprouts" from the theme naturally and symmetrically, preserving certain logic of thematic development, so the solo forms one whole with the theme, and is perceived as one whole. When the theme is conducted at the end of the composition, it sounds changed. The change is in the use of an exact quote from Bix Biederbeck's solo from the song "When?" (its recording was made with Paul Whitman's Orchestra in 1928). This is a wonderful example of Lester Young's phenomenal musical memory, which was the subject of legend among musicians.

Jazz melodies with the word "Dream" in the title are mostly performed in minor keys and usually contain chords with a minor sixth (minor triad with the addition of a major sixth step). This chord is often used by Lester Young to create the effect of harmonic ambiguity in his solos.

The song "Lester Leaps In", the riff of which is based on the theme of J. Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" is interesting, because it is considered as Young's "business card". His solo in this composition deserves attention for two reasons. First, it has a logically structured

construction, with a few offset phrases. Secondly, according to D. Gelly (2007), in this record C. Basie mistakenly enters at the beginning of the second chorus of Young, which creates a certain collision. Lester continues confidently until Basie stops to orient himself, and the order returns after eight measures. The second double was recorded, but Young's solo did not correspond to the creative idea of the composition, so the first double containing the collision got into the record. Also interesting is the case of a session recording at the Savoy studio, during the period when L. Young was the only soloist accompanied by C. Basie and the usual rhythm section. This is about a song called "Ghost of a Chance", with a continuous solo, even without a piano introduction, lasting 48 measures in a tempo of 56 beats per minute.

This material differed significantly from that which Lester Young played with Count Basie, so this new performance approach was not accidental. The uniqueness and beauty of Young's performance style lies in the individuality of his musical expression. He conveyed not only a blues mood, but also a precise state of mind. Not only sadness or longing, but such a mood, more like "tired obedience" (Gelly, 2007). One should also note the harmonious peculiarities of this composition: it is dominated by a chord with an altered fifth (#5), which can be observed 5 times during the chorus of 32 measures. This chord has always occupied an important place among the stylistic components of Lester Young's performance. The performer emphasized the chord by making short stops. Sometimes the chord needs to be expanded by adding a ninth. The centre of gravity is in the low register, only sometimes Young uses the upper range of the instrument, but without the enthusiasm, with which many other saxophonists (and wind instruments performers in general) play in the high register. In some cases, the improvisational line briefly features notes that are perceived as chromatic chord substitutions introduced by young bebop representatives. However, in these episodes, when the melodic line sounds semitone lower than expected, the effect of melancholic yawning is created. In addition to "Ghost of a Chance", which is performed in a slow tempo, other songs – "Blue Lester",

“Indiana” and “Jump, Lester, Jump” – are more mobile and energetic. Lester Young’s technicality and virtuosity, sharpened by instinctive understanding between him and C. Basie in these compositions is the most expressive.

At a deeper level, it can be argued that the stylistic features of Lester Young’s performance skills are one of the main factors influencing the formation and creative pursuits of Miles Davis. It follows that Young’s experiments also gave rise to the modal jazz of the 1960s, where improvisations were built by way of using various modes (folk music modes).

D. Gelly emphasizes the fact of mutual respect and creative interests between Lester Young and Miles Davis. In his autobiography, M. Davis claims that he learned the “moving style of playing” from Lester Young (Gelly, 2007: 144). This style is characterized by a gentle approach and concept and emphasizes one note, it based on the meaning of one note and its accentuation. He contrasts this with the bebop style of C. Parker and D. Gillespie, to which the credo “probably more than less” was attributed, and which used “too many fast notes and chord changes” (Gelly, 2007: 144).

On the other hand, Lester Young was looking for opposites, to some extent, of long sounds. It has been noted before that he did not want to perform fast chromatic sequences and chord changes. Instead, he tried to find his way through numerous chord structures, while emphasizing the melodic line. Young’s recordings with John Lewis show just such trends. As Gunther Schuler (1968) aptly points out, Young’s music making was mostly diatonic.

Conclusions. Despite the dominance of Hawkins on the jazz scene of the tenor saxophone, around 1930–1931, Lester Young formed his own style. He has never been an imitator, he has only been an innovator. Innovative features based on the analysis of compositions are marked by the parameters of performance poetics, which ultimately affects the formation of personal performance style. As the main ones, we single out the following toponyms.

1. *Unique timbre and sound production.* So, in order to add unique colouring to his instrument’s sounding, Lester Young turned

the mouthpiece so that the saxophone's bell was aimed at him (the performer). Given the acoustic nature of wind instruments and the acoustic perception of the performer's own sound on a wind instrument (which differs from the listener's perception of the same sound), this interesting and unusual invention helps of the musician to control and hear his own instrument better and more objectively. That is, it can be a question of *performance as a reflection act*.

2. *Expanding harmonious thinking*. Yes, his emphasis on both the melodic use of fourths and fifths and the harmonious use of the sixth and ninth steps in the coexistence with a linear, horizontal concept of phrasing leads to a "stretched sound" that matches Miles Davis' creative pursuits. Miles realized this during the recording of the album "Kind of Blue", which gained a reputation of the brightest example of modal improvisation.

3. *Unique performance style*. One of the important trends set by Young is the *horizontal concept of improvisation*, when the melodic line is chosen as the material for improvisation. Later, such a principle was adopted by prominent jazz musicians Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman. Another important component of the sonorous individuality of jazz saxophonists is the use of vibrato. According to G. Schuler, the technique of vibrato – its specificity, frequency, amplitude, intensity – is a fundamental method used by jazz musicians-wind instrument performers to colour their individual sound (Schuller, 1968: 32), which can be heard, for example, in the composition of "Dickie's Dream" (1939), performed by Count Basie's Orchestra.

Concluding the research, we shall emphasize once again the importance of studying the performance poetics of Lester Young as a basis for the professional development of a modern performer-improviser. We also note the perspective of the concepts of "performance stylistic" and "performance poetics" for modern jazz, focused on the personalities of artists who create jazz in the XXI century.

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### ВИКОНАВСЬКА ПОЕТИКА ТА ВИКОНАВСЬКИЙ СТИЛЬ ЛЕСТЕРА ЯНГА: ДОСВІД АНАЛІЗУ

У фокусі дослідження – система виконавських засобів виразності джазового музиканта, що отримала назву «виконавська поетика». **Наукова новизна** роботи полягає у напрацюванні аспектів аналізу виконавської поетики джазових музикантів. **Мета статті** – виявити параметри виконавської поетики Лестера Янга, якого дослідники його творчої діяльності відносять до пантеону найбільш впливових джазових виконавців – ключових постатей початку епохи свінгу. Серед **методів дослідження** використані комунікативний, інтерпретативний, системний підходи, стилістичний та виконавський аналіз. Розгляд виконавської поетики спирається на наукові розробки музикознавців харківської школи, зокрема Л. Шаповалової (2007) та Ю. Ніколаєвської (2020) в царині виконавської інтерпретології.

**Результати** дослідження базуються на аналізі композицій Л. Янга «Squabblin» і «Blue Devils Blues» та діяльності музиканта як соліста-імпрровізатора.

**Висновки** підтримують ідею про виконавську поетику як художню систему, що є «віддзеркаленням інтерпретаційного мислення музиканта» (Ніколаєвська, 2020) в таких параметрах, як мелос, метроритм, ладогармонія, фактура та відповідні «топоніми» – артикуляція, темпоритм, динамічна партитура твору. Наголошено на таких позиціях, як унікальний тембр та звукотворення (специфічне положення мундштука), розширення гармонічного мислення (мелодійне використання кварт та квінт, горизонтальна концепція фразування). Унікальна виконавська манера Л. Янга базується на принципі «розтягнутого звуку», «горизонтальної» концепції імпрровізації, інтенсивного вібрато та формування виконання як акту рефлексії.

**Ключові слова:** виконавська поетика, творчість Лестера Янга, тембр саксофону, виконавський аналіз, виконавський стиль, гармонічне мислення, горизонтальна концепція джазової імпрровізації.

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