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## Second Viennese Sax

Twelve-tone improvisation  
for jazz septet

By Bradley Bambarger

**THE EXCHANGE BETWEEN** classical music and jazz has been constant for over a century, from Duke Ellington digging Ravel and Bartók composing for Benny Goodman to Keith Jarrett playing Bach and Mark-Anthony Turnage channeling Miles Davis. Classical composers have been fascinated by the improvisational fecundity and sheer personality of jazz, while jazz musicians have been inspired by the formal depth of the classics and new horizons opened up by avant-garde composers.

Even with that, one might not think that the twelve-tone asceticism of Anton We-

bern — one of the disciples of Arnold Schoenberg who, along with Alban Berg, made up the Second Viennese School — would be the most fruitful ground for a jazz musician. Jazz is not an art of austerity, and Webern pursued a radical and graceful conciseness, such that his music often seems to end before it begins. And the serialist systems often followed by the postwar composers most influenced by the Austrian's example — Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono, Milton Babbitt, et al. — seem yet another world away from the expressive freedom that jazz embodies.

But saxophonist John O'Gallagher has turned that notion on its head. He has written a book titled *Twelve-Tone Improvisation: A Method for Using Tone Rows in Jazz* (Advance Music), and his recent album *The Anton Webern Project* (Whirlwind Recordings) brings the theory to kaleidoscopic life. In arranging Webern's music — or, more accurately, reimagining it — O'Gallagher's fanciful guiding concept was what would Webern's music sound like if he were a jazz musician living in New York City today.

Led by O'Gallagher on alto sax, his Webern Project band consists of virtuoso players on the New York jazz scene: Russ Lossing on piano, organ and Fender Rhodes; Pete McCann, electric and acoustic guitar; Matt Moran, vibraphone; Johannes Weidenmüller, double-bass; Tyshawn Sorey, drums; and Margret Grebowicz, voice. Performed by this color-rich septet, O'Gallagher's arrangements employ Webern pieces — including the Variations for Piano, Five Pieces for Orchestra, Quartet Op. 22, Cantata No. 2, various lieder and more — as frames for improvisations that are alternately hard-grooving and luminous.

"I've been captivated by Webern's music ever since I first heard it as a student at the Berklee College of Music in the late eighties," O'Gallagher says. "His music is so individual — the melodies unique, the harmonies so beautiful; then there's the transparency of the orchestrations, his use of space. In transporting Webern pieces into a modern jazz context, I wanted to bring out that lyricism I hear in his music, to highlight the song forms — not underscoring how 'out' or avant these pieces are but the beauty of

ELISEO CARDONA



**On the record.** Alto saxophonist and arranger John O’Gallagher’s band in the studio recording *The Anton Webern Project*, which reimagines the music of Anton Webern from a jazz angle.

them, the song in them. I also wanted to help show the kinship between what modernist classical composers were doing and some of what’s happening in jazz today. Ultimately, though, no one has to know a thing about Webern or the Second Viennese School to dig what we’re doing.”

Even today, Webern — who died in 1945 — is one of the more forbidding names on programs to mainstream classical listeners. In his biography of Webern, Malcolm

Hayes makes his own case for the composer: “Webern’s work has had such an assortment of critical, ideological and analytical Taj Mahals constructed around it — most of them conspicuously lacking the elegance of the original building — that many potential listeners have been put off approaching his music at all. . . . Its tendency to extreme concentration and brevity can seem bewildering at first, but in most other respects, Webern is a rather less difficult composer than many other leading

lights of the 20th century. . . . Each of his ultra-compressed works sets out its store with exceptional clarity and honesty. You always know where you stand with Webern. And he never wastes your time.”

O’Gallagher’s arrangements trade Webern’s fragility for earthiness, along with an element of surprise — like a musical rollercoaster. One can rarely guess where O’Gallagher and company are going, whether it’s the full band rocking a rhythmic, almost funky dynamism or just acoustic guitar creating a pool of limpid reflection over piano. For non-classical listeners, *The Webern Project* might be something of a gateway into the world of modernist concert music, but for

temporary, along with listening to everything from experimental chamber music to alt-folk to drone metal. *The Webern Project* made an immediate positive impression on him. “I could hear the links to the Webern pieces clearly,” Wilson says, “but John managed to absorb those ‘quotes’ into a strikingly personal approach, so that everything sounds organic. The playing — and singing — is terrific, and the instrumentation locks in the distinctive personality of the music. There’s a sense of freshness to it all, and I like the notion of using these fragments from a hundred years ago as launching points for new ideas and ways of expression.”

Russ Lossing, the keyboardist in *The*

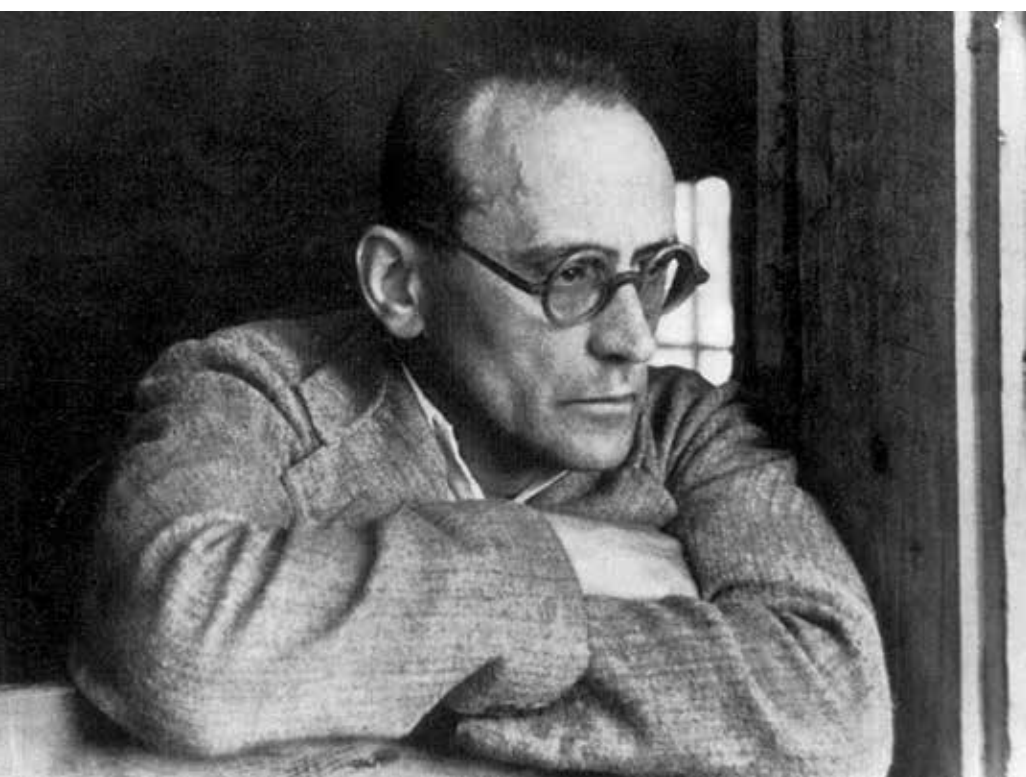
*Webern Project* band, has created his own album featuring jazz treatments of classical material: *Change of Time* (OmniTone), a 2001 release that saw him freely improvise on selections from Bartók’s folk-accented collection of piano pieces, *Mikrokosmos*, with bassist John Hébert and saxophonist–clarinetist Adam Kolker. Lossing also played in the all-star quintet for bassist Michael Bates’s 2011 album *Acrobat: Music for, and by, Shostakovich* (Sunnyside), another irresistible gem of twentieth-century classical meets twenty-first-century jazz.

“Jazzed-up classical music can be really terrible — contrived and cutesy,” Lossing says. “You have to bring a lot of imagination

to the music and keep its original edge. I had played those Bartók pieces starting when I was about six years old. Maybe because they were inspired by improvised folk music, they’re really malleable. We played wide open, composing the forms as we went. With the Webern, though, John never lets the band play completely free. He created these grooves for us to follow, but left enough room in the arrangements for us to improvise on the material. The rhythmic and melodic puzzles of the Webern are fascinating, but a challenge to play in a musical way, to put across with real feeling.

“The raw material in Webern’s music, as with that of Bartók and Shostakovich, is so broad and so deep that you can reshape it almost like a sculpture,” Lossing adds. “But to create something new and fresh from something old and great like that, you really do have to know the source from the inside out.”

For many, experiencing Webern can be “like watching Telemundo without knowing how to speak Spanish,” O’Gallagher says. “But take his Op. 31, the Cantata No. 2, his last work: it’s his most complex piece, but it’s also his most lush and melodic, not sounding out or atonal at all, to my ears. The delicacy of his orchestration is one of the most beautiful aspects of Webern, I think, but I hope the sonority and energy of the way we play these pieces help people new to his music get into it. And I hope people who do know their Webern hear our record and realize that there’s always more to discover in great music.” ■



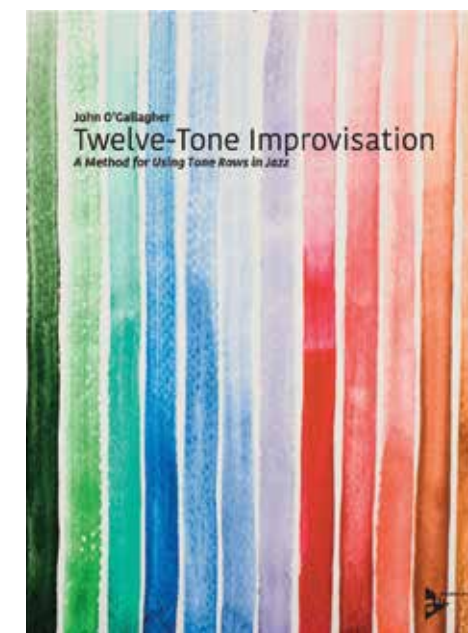
*‘You always know where  
you stand with Webern.  
And he never wastes your time.’*

contemporary-music aficionados, the album would be an ideal entry into modern jazz. That isn’t to say that O’Gallagher’s propositions haven’t left doctrinaire types on either side of the classical/jazz divide scratching their heads. But those who have actually listened to the album or heard the band live tend to have a different attitude.

Ian Wilson, an Irish composer in the classical realm, has “big ears,” being a keen fan of adventurous jazz, both vintage and con-

HULTON ARCHIVE/BETTY

DON MOUNT



**A fine pairing.** New York saxophonist John O’Gallagher has written a book about using tone rows in jazz and has released *The Webern Project* album (Whirlwind Recordings). Opposite: Anton Webern (1883–1945).