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Abstract. Jazz improvisation is a complex and demanding art of on-the-fly composition and performance. We present *coJIVE*, a system that allows musically inexperienced people to improvise to jazz by substituting for musical knowledge and experience. Using well-established musical theory, it aids users in creating a harmonic performance, and also helps coordinate a collaborative session amongst the participants. Remarks from users during evaluation showed an overall positive response to the support provided by the system.

1 Introduction

Jazz is a complex musical genre, with a wider theoretical background than, for example, classical music; it can deter even well-educated classical musicians. Besides performing composed songs and melodies, improvisation, the art of creating performances on the fly, is a very influential part of jazz. Undoubtedly, improvisation requires a lot of experience and technical abilities: a musician needs to have precise control of his instrument and build up a personal repertoire of short melodic patterns to create new improvised melodies. Analysis of chord progressions that define a song structure allows jazz musicians to determine a musical scale for each of the chords in the progression. With this scale, they know which notes fit the underlying chords' harmonic context (i.e., the notes belonging to that scale), and what notes will be likely to cause dissonance (i.e., the *outside* notes). Additionally, jazz musicians need to coordinate with each other during a session to ensure a balanced performance. Usually, only one musician, the soloist, is improvising at a given time, while the other participants provide an accompaniment without disturbing the improvisation.

How computers can help inexperienced users to master such complex tasks has been explored previously by systems such as *WorldBeat*[2]. This system, amongst other things, allows its users to improvise over a blues song with computer support. Evaluation of this system with users showed that this type of computer-supported interaction can bring musically inexperienced people closer to this type of sophisticated performance. We identified several other previous systems supporting improvisation; their achievements and shortcomings will be discussed in subsequent sections. These findings motivated us to develop our own system to support collaborative jazz improvisation: the **co**llaborative **J**azz **I**mpro**v**isation **E**nvironment (*coJIVE*).

2 Related Work

A number of previous research projects have tried to tackle the different aspects of musical performances. In general, such systems address either harmony or collaboration.

A musician's performance "sounds good" if the notes that she plays fit the harmonic context at that particular position in the song structure. Jazz musicians determine the contexts of a song by conducting the aforementioned analysis of the song's chord structure. This analysis has been the topic of a few projects, several of which were conducted by François Pachet.

[12] describes how he used the Lempel-Ziv data compression method on chord changes to determine the level of surprise in a chord progression (i.e., how likely a chord change is). The resulting Lempel-Ziv tree also allows for the extraction of a grammar of chord production rules without the input of musical knowledge. In [13], a system is presented that is able to perform a hierarchical harmony analysis on chord progressions. This system uses *shapes* derived from short sequences of chords; larger shapes can be derived from a sequence of smaller ones. The deployed method, however, does not always choose interesting scales; it was not meant for scale selection. A different approach is described in [5]: the presented system, created by Andrew Choi, uses minimisation to choose scales for a chord sequence. Therefore, a global scale distance measure is deployed, which describes the difference in pitches between two scales. This rather mathematical approach, of course, is not concerned with musical rules; it often chooses different scales than a real jazz musician would.

Most systems concerned with harmony in human performances follow the design principle for new instruments described in [10]: unnecessary degrees of freedom (i.e., the number of available notes) are reduced and the interface is specialised for the song to be played (i.e., context-aware reduction of notes).

Two approaches for improvised performances using scales to determine harmony (similar to what jazz musicians do) are presented in Nishimoto et al.'s *RhyMe*[11], and the aforementioned *WorldBeat*[2]. While *WorldBeat* uses predefined scales to map gestures performed with digital batons to notes, *RhyMe* calculates the scales to use based on a given song structure, and maps the notes of the current scale to the white keys on a keyboard. *ism* [6], Ishida et al.'s improvisation supporting system, exhibits a more dynamic approach: *ism* uses a database of melodic patterns and an N-gram model to calculate the probability of the last notes based on the notes played before. A probability threshold is used to decide on the note's appropriateness and can be used to adjust the system's support to fit the abilities of a user.

Another important aspect of musical performance is collaboration. A balanced interaction renders a more varied, and thus more interesting performance for the audience. Most research projects concerned with collaboration have turned their attention to connecting distributed users with networks — the users are not supported in organising their collaboration. Since *coJIVE* is not concerned with the aspect of remote collaboration, these systems are not discussed here. William F. Walker's *ImprovisationBuilder* [14] tries to recreate the behaviour of a human participant in jazz sessions. While this system can create improvisation on its own, it also listens to the other participants in the session and acts accordingly; based on the range of pitches used and the amount of notes played, it can determine which player is currently soloing.

Thus, our system is unique in the following ways:

- The system looks at several aspects of musical performance (e.g., harmony, collaborative behaviour, handling of the interfaces) rather than focusing on a single one.
- There is no assumption that users know about jazz theory or how to handle the instruments correctly, and various types of errors in user input are accounted for.
- The system not only corrects, but also enriches a user's input in accordance with the musical structure of the piece.
- The system is not only aware of collaboration amongst the performers, but actively mediates and supports it.

3 Requirements

Our goal was to create a system to enable people with little or no training in jazz improvisation to participate in a typical collaborative jazz improvisation session. To accomplish this, our system corrects and enriches users' musical input, as depicted in Fig. 1.

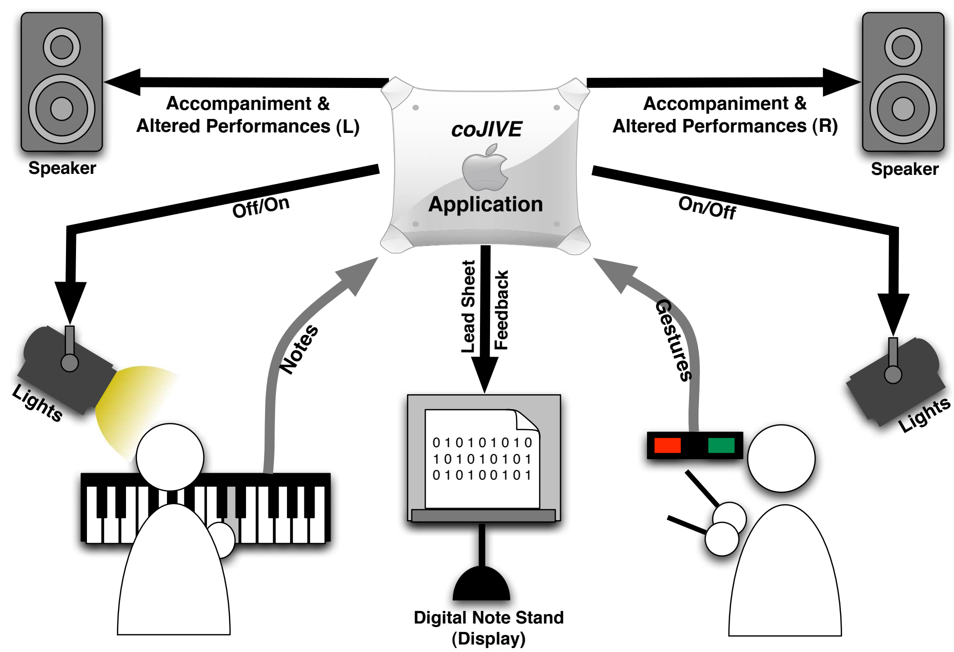

Fig. 1. Interaction between *coJIVE* and the users. The users create input with their interfaces, while the system plays an accompaniment and alters the given input. Information on the session and the input is provided for the users.

In a real jazz session, the musicians decide on a song to play, the order of the soloists, and the maximum length of a solo. The performance starts with the musicians playing the song's main melody, also called the *theme*. Thereafter, the musicians take turns soloing in the previously defined order, which can be dynamically changed using gestures. Another recitation of the main melody marks the end of the session. The left-hand side of Fig. 2 depicts the structure of such sessions.

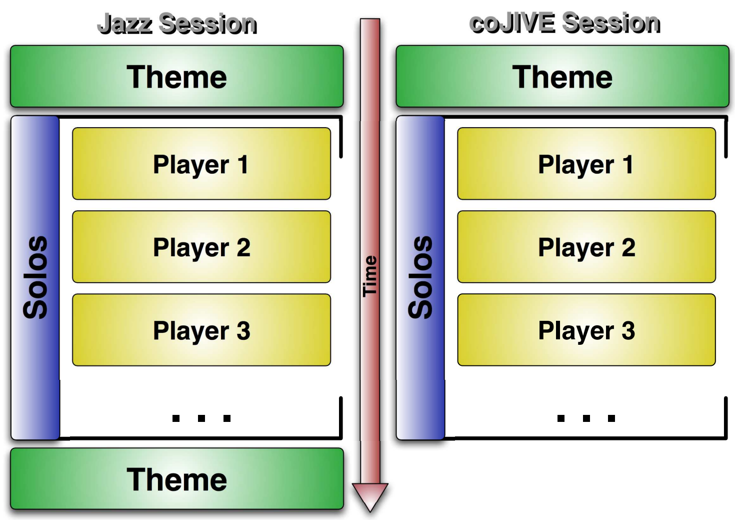

Fig. 2. The time flow of the different stages in a typical jazz session and a session created by *coJIVE*.

We envisioned a system that is able to recreate a simplified version of such sessions for its users. People can walk up to the system, choose an instrument, and agree on a song to perform to. Once the session is started, the system creates a drum rhythm and a bass-line to accompany the users. In addition, it recites the song's theme. The participants receive information on their current role in the session (i.e., whether it is their turn to solo or to accompany another soloist), and feedback on their performance. They are also informed about upcoming changes of their role. Furthermore, the system alters the participants' input to ensure a harmonic performance, and enriches it if necessary. The system does not repeat the current song's theme at the end of session to not leave the participants unoccupied. Fig. 2 shows the general session structure of this system on the right-hand side.

To facilitate a jazz session, the system has to provide:

- musical interfaces (instruments) and appropriate feedback;
- mechanisms to substitute for the users' lack of knowledge in jazz theory;
- musical support based on these mechanisms;
- a *lead sheet*[1], depicting the structure of the song to be performed as a sequence of chords;

[1] The lead sheet usually is a piece of paper showing important information about a song: name, composer, tempo, metre, as well as the song's chord structure and a notation of its main melody

– accompaniment defining the base tempo and harmony of the piece;
– mechanism(s) to faciliate collaboration.

4 Design

The final design of coJIVE was a result of a series of refined prototypes. The improvements and extensions made to these prototypes were based on opinions expressed by users who had tested earlier versions, and based on observations made during these tests.

4.1 Musical Interfaces

After preliminary design analyses and user interviews, we decided to pursue two musical interfaces with different characteristics and input methods for *coJIVE*, and explore different ways to facilitate performing with these interfaces:

Keyboard: The piano keyboard is often present in jazz sessions in the form of a piano or organ, and it allows the user accurate control over input timing and pitch. This interface, unsurprisingly, requires much practice to master. The precise one-to-one mapping of key to note also limits the range in which the input can be altered without aggravating the user.

Digital batons: These devices are played like a xylophone with hitting gestures, but without actual plates to hit. While users retain precise control over timing of their input, pitch control is less precise. For novice musicians, the batons have successfully been used in systems like *WorldBeat*[2].

4.2 Harmony Analysis

The analysis of a song's chord structure mentioned above is one of the key abilities necessary for improvisation. This procedure tries to identify *patterns*[7] of short sequences indicating a tonality. In accordance, one scale for each of the chords in the progression can be determined, providing a musician with a pool of notes to use. As this analysis is a complex ability to learn, novice users can not be expected to perform this analysis on their own. Therefore, *coJIVE* was provided with a mechanism to conduct this technique, often referred to as *Roman Numeral Analysis*, by itself.

This mechanism works in two phases. In the first phase, the chord sequence is scanned for known patterns. For each pattern known to the system, a rule is present and applied to each position. On finding a candidate sequence of chords for its pattern, a rule will label the chords with the Roman Numerals corresponding to their harmonic functions in the pattern. If a chord is labelled already, it depends on the behaviour of the pattern whether the rule overwrites the label; some patterns depend on other patterns being identified first. All rules are repeatedly applied to the whole chord sequence until no chord is relabelled anymore.

In the second phase, each chord is assigned a scale based on the roman numeral it is labelled with. For each roman numeral, only a small number of scales are available; the final decision is then based on the characteristics of the chord itself (e.g., root note, major, melodic minor). With a given scale, a distribution of note probabilities can be calculated.

As an additional aspect, the note played last by the user is used to further modify the probability distribution. We integrated this feature to allow advanced users to play chromatic sequences of notes, including notes from outside the current scale.

4.3 Musical Support

The system was designed to adjust its assistance not only based on the instrument, but also based on the user's specific abilities and needs. We created a user level scheme to estimate a user's skills based on four self-rated parameters: knowledge of musical theory, knowledge of jazz theory, experience with the piano keyboard, and experience in group performances. Support is adjusted based on how users rate themselves in each of these parameters.

Since the batons provide no physical targets to hit, the system needs to calculate *virtual targets* for the available notes. The "fuzzy" nature of the control over the batons allows for the system to adjust the size and amount of virtual targets based on the note probabilities derived from the analysis described in the previous section. Jazz musicians conduct a similar analysis during their own performances. Therefore, a target's width reflects its note's suitability based on the current harmonic context of the song — more harmonic notes are also more likely to be hit. Fig. 3 shows a mock-up visualisation of the virtual targets. A skill-based threshold is used to rule out less probable notes for novice users; notes with a probability below this threshold are not represented by a virtual target.

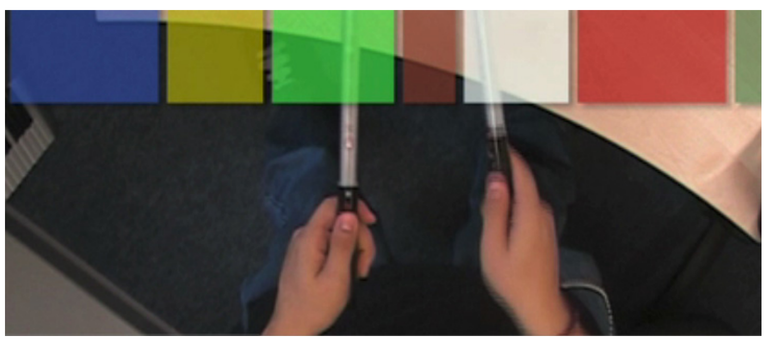

Fig. 3. The batons with a mock-up visualisation of the virtual targets calculated by the system. Each target represents a note and its width reflects that note's probability.

The more accurate control implied by the keyboard resulted in a more varied set of supporting mechanisms. Novices may not know what notes to play, but they can also not be expected to properly handle this sophisticated instrument. In addition, their performance is expected to be not as rich as the performances of seasoned jazz musicians. The rest of this subsection therefore describes the mechanisms deployed for the keyboard.

To preserve a general harmony in the keyboard performance, the user's input needs to be checked in terms of harmony. Therefore, each note is compared to its direct neighbours in terms of their probabilities; the most probable of these notes is then played. To enable adjustment of this mechanism to a user's skills, another threshold is used. The substitution of a note by a more probable neighbour only takes place if its probability is lower than the threshold.

Evaluation of an early prototype showed that novice users made several mistakes in handling the instrument: they often pressed two neighbouring keys with one finger by accident, or they pressed too many keys at once in a specific area (i.e., by pressing a flat hand on the keyboard). A timer was introduced to find out if such groups of notes belong together. The system checks for each pressed key whether one of its *physically* neighbouring keys — two white keys, for example, can physically be neighbours although they are separated by a black key — has been pressed within the last 100 milliseconds. If this is the case, the last key pressed is deemed to be played by mistake, and left out by the system. To prevent users from pressing too many keys at once in a specific area, a weighting function is used: for a key pressed by a user, the system accumulates the weights of all other keys currently held down in this key's neighbourhood. A key's weight corresponds to its distance to the key that initiated the scan. If the accumulated weights surpass another threshold, which again is based on the user's skills, the *density* in that neighbourhood is deemed too high and the initial key is discarded.

To enrich a user's input, we followed the idea that jazz musicians often use chord *voicings* (a specific arrangement of the chords' notes) to acquire richer performances. Commercially available keyboards sometimes allow playing selected chords at the push of a single key. We adapted this mechanism for *coJIVE* adding two additional modes for different user groups. While the one-key chord triggering is meant for novice users, classically educated musicians can trigger a chord voicing with three keys. The latter mode is based on the idea that chords in classical music usually have less notes (i.e., three) than jazz chords (i.e., four or five). On recognising a three-note chord played by a classical musician, the system will add an appropriate fourth note. The third mode, meant for intermediate users (i.e., musicians in training), looks for two appropriate keys pressed at the same time, adding two keys to form a jazz chord voicing. To allow the different user groups to benefit from these modes without making them mandatory, we split the keyboard into two sections below middle C ($C5$) and distributed the different modes over the two sections based on the user's skills (this distribution is depicted in Fig. 4). The voicings are acquired for each chord in the song structure individually, making the mechanism context-aware.

To allow users to interpret and perhaps even learn to anticipate the reaction of the system to their input, they are provided with feedback. The form of this feedback is closely tied to the instruments: the keyboard is recreated by the system and the system's output is shown on that keyboard along with the user's input. For the batons, a more fuzzy type of feedback was selected to reflect their inherent imprecision. The hitting gestures are represented as green circles on a black background with only one mark showing the middle C ($C5$) to provide a rough orientation. The size of a circle shows the gestures velocity.

4.4 Accompaniment

Although not the primary focus of this work, some type of accompaniment was nonetheless a necessary part of the system, to provide a rhythmic and harmonic foundation for the users' interaction with *coJIVE*.

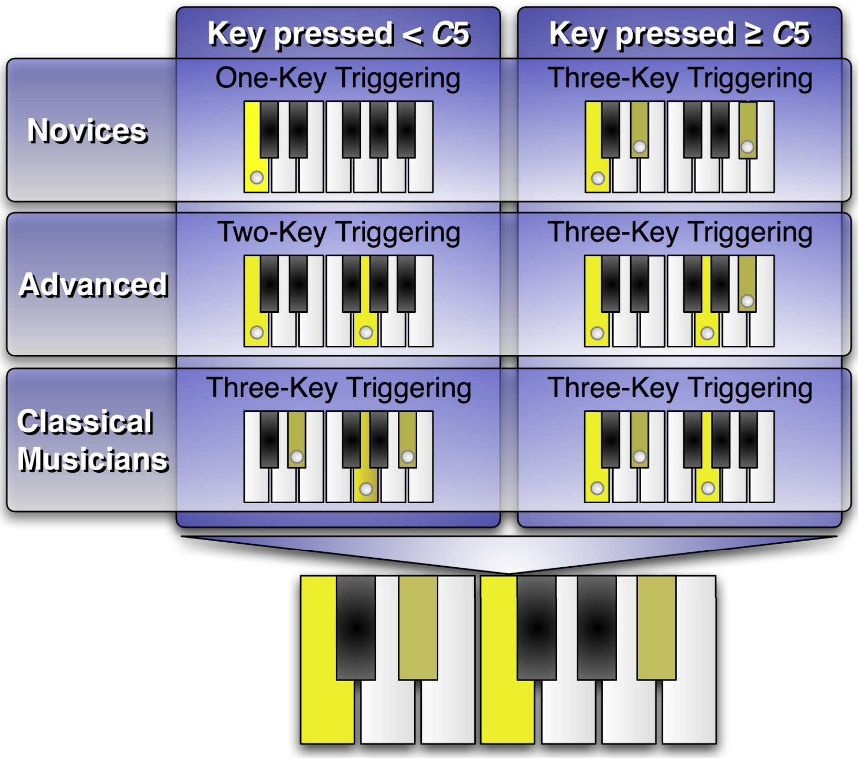

Fig. 4. Deployment scheme for the three different modes of chord triggering. The combinations of keys shown lead to the triggering of the same chord voicing.

We chose to automatically generate a simple swing pattern for the drum rhythm, repeated throughout the entire performance. The bass was provided as either an automatically generated walking bass up and down the current scale, or read from a pre-recorded file.

4.5 Collaboration Support

One of the primary goals of *coJIVE* is to assist users participating in a collaborative jazz improvisation session. In preliminary user interviews, we determined that many of our users had never participated in such a session; therefore, it was important for *coJIVE* to more explicitly expose and support the structure of a jazz improvisation session. For simplicity, we limited ourselves to *Solo & Comping*[3], where the musicians take turns soloing and the soloist is accompanied by the musicians.

In jazz sessions, the order of the soloists, and length of each solo, are typically determined beforehand and, possibly, decided on-the-fly during the session. To assist users, *coJIVE* instead takes over this leading role by dictating the order of soloists and the length of each solo.

Each solo has a length between 30 and 60 seconds, allowing the soloist ample time to create an improvised solo, but not boring the other players. The exact length of the solo was determined using a scheme inspired by Walker's *ImprovisationBuilder*[14], where a solo's temporal density and the dynamics (i.e., velocity) affect the length of the solo.

The system communicates to a particular user that he is soloing by shining a spotlight on them, and a change of roles is indicated using a countdown timer.

Finally, *coJIVE* analyzes the temporal density of an accompanying user's input. If it is found to be too interfering with the soloist, the dynamics of the accompanying player's input is modified such that it is more "difficult" for them to play loud notes, via a *velocity curve* (see Fig. reffig:VeloCurve).

5 Implementation

Our implementation of *coJIVE* consists of two parts: the *coJIVE* front-end[4] is responsible for reading and responding to user input, and the *coJIVE* back-end is a software framework encapsulating the musical knowledge necessary for analysing and augmenting the user input[8].

The system was developed in a user-centred, iterative process: several prototypes were designed, implemented, and subsequently evaluated in user studies. The results of an evaluation were then fed back into the design process to improve subsequent prototypes. With this process, the users' needs could be identified, and the system could be altered to satisfy them.

5.1 The Back-End

The back-end's main task is to perform the analysis of the chord progression and calculate the note probabilities. In addition, the back-end maintains a database of chord voicings for the aforementioned chord triggering assistance and accompaniment generation, and it allows dynamic loading of songs. The latter aspect was rendered possible by defining an XML format that describes the different

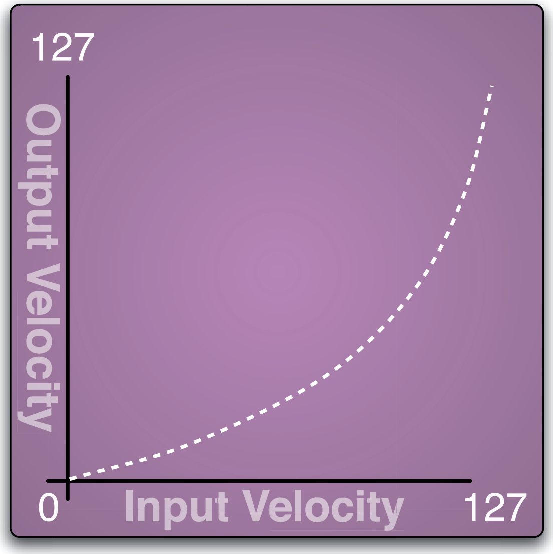

Fig. 5. A modified velocity curve. Velocity values of incoming notes are dampened, but higher values are not ruled out. With this mechanism, it gets harder to reach higher velocity values.

pieces of information of a song (name, tempo, metre, chord structure, etc.). The back-end was implemented in the form of a Mac OS X framework to allow for an easy integration with the front-end.

5.2 The Front-End

The front-end was implemented as a Cocoa[1] application in Mac OS X ; it provides the users with a graphical user interface, establishes connections to the instruments via MIDI, and implements the behaviour described in the design section. The structure of a song loaded into the system is displayed in the main window (*coJIVE*'s version of the lead sheet shown in Fig. 6), the current chord is highlighted by an orange backdrop, and a cursor marks the current position in the song for orientation.

For each player added to the system, a player field is created in a drawer beneath the window. Player-specific information and options are collected in this field: the player's role and the feedback mentioned above are depicted, and additional buttons are added to access the user's settings (MIDI ports and skill settings). The player field can also be detached from the main window (e.g., to make use of multiple screens). The LEDs, used for the aforementioned light signal mediating roles in collaboration, are controlled with a Teleo module[9]: the soloist's LED is lit, and the countdown to the next solo is accompanied by blinking of the affected users' LEDs.

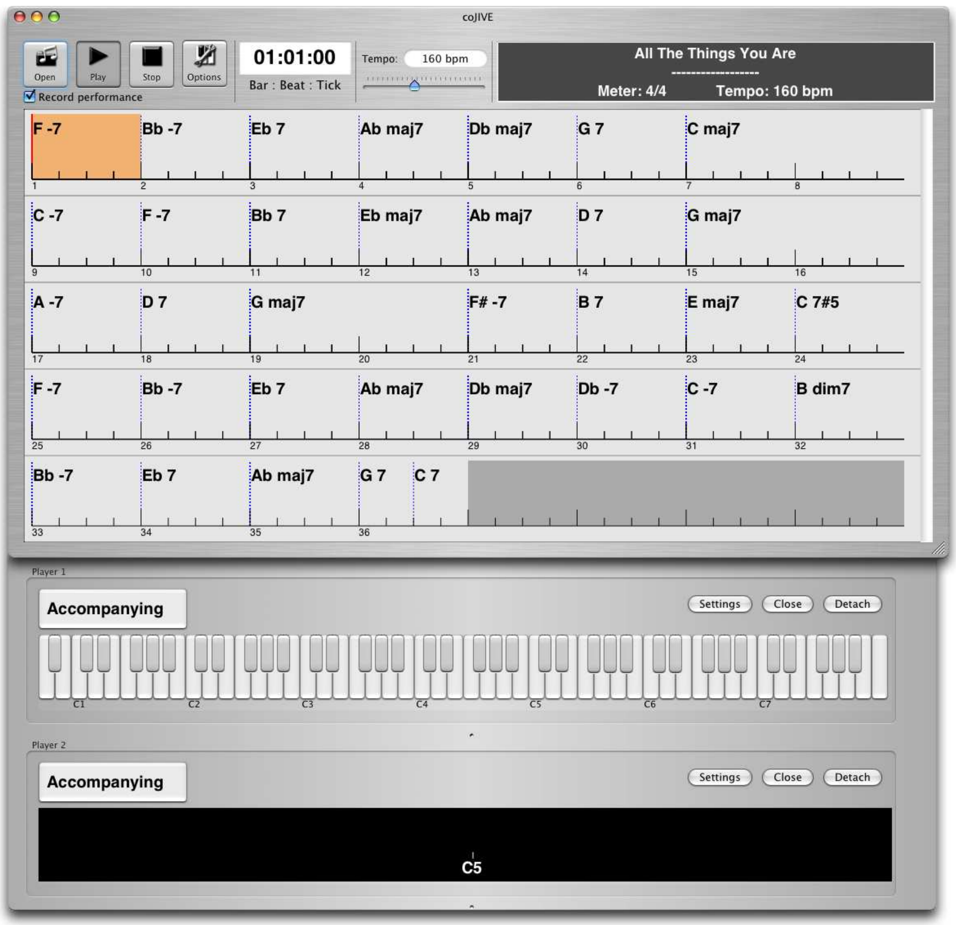

Fig. 6. The main application window of coJIVE with additional fields for a keyboard player and a baton player.

6 Evaluation

Besides the user tests during the development of *coJIVE*, we conducted a final study. The test subjects performed with the system in pairs of two; one subject played the keyboard, the other one used the batons to perform. Additionally they were asked to use two different versions of the system. They were not told that they were going to use the same system with full support in one pass, and without any support in the other pass. We collected data after the tests by means of questionnaires.

In this questionnaire, the subjects were asked to point out the differences between the two passes, and rate the two "versions" of the system concerning different aspects of musical support and collaboration support. They also had the opportunity to give comments, remarks, or simply write down their opinion.

7 Discussion

The qualitative part of the evaluation (i.e., comments, remarks, and opinions) offered some positive feedback: some of the subjects stated that the system's support offered an entertaining experience, a few even mentioned to have been more motivated by it during the tests.

Unfortunately, the ratings of the different aspects of the system's support did not show any clear results. We compared the ratings of the first and the second pass for all aspects, but we could not find any statistically significant difference.

Additionally, we observed differing reactions to the system during the tests. While some subjects started experimenting with their instrument almost instantly, exploring and exploiting the support, others were hesitant and only cautiously used their instrument.

8 Future Work

The results obtained from the last user study clearly showed that the support *coJIVE* currently provides is not sufficient for some users. One can imagine several improvements of the system to better support the users.

To allow for a more hands-on experience with the system, a new graphical design could be more appropriate. A layout that presents the task of improvising in the form and fashion of a game might help people to lose their reservation. The formerly "serious musical task" could then be perceived as entertainment rather than a chore.

Since the inexperienced subjects hardly created recognisable melodies, more guidance in that respect might be of help. Beside the scales, a database with melodic patterns could be used to determine the note probabilities. If the last sequence of notes resembled a pattern stored in the system, the subsequent note in that pattern would be rated more probable. Thus, a player would be directed towards a melody.

Beside the harmony of the notes played, their timing in respect to the rhythm is an important expressive parameter. A cautious real-time quantisation could be used to delay notes to rhythmically significant positions (e.g., on a beat or a swing note). We are currently conducting a separate study to examine the effect of such "timing corrections" on users.

Finally, it would be interesting to explore additional musical interfaces that often appear in jazz sessions: the guitar, the trumpet, the saxophone, etc. With the different characteristics of such instruments, new supporting mechanisms would be needed, but at the same time, new possibilities might emerge.

9 Conclusions

We presented *coJIVE*, a software system for computer-aided jazz improvisation. Our user-centred design of the system was aimed at identifying the users' needs in terms of musical performances and improvisation using the interfaces provided. Based on the results, we implemented and iteratively improved a set of mechanisms to substitute for the users' lack of knowledge and experience.

Our experiments have indicated that, although the performances novices can create with the system are far from what real jazz musicians are able to do, *coJIVE* can be effective in facilitating jazz improvisation, and that such research helps further interaction between humans and technology.

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