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INSIGHTS IN JAZZ

By John A. Elliott

Print edition: www.jazzwise.com, £25

E-book edition: www.dropback.co.uk, £12

In 1985 Conrad Cork first published his method for improvisation *Harmony With LEGO Bricks*, and since then has successively revised it.

Cork's method rationalised the intuitive approach of reflective jazz improvisers, isolating the elements of standard songs to enable the player to perform them in any key, and to learn new songs through their common elements with songs they already know.

Cork grouped chords into common 'bricks' of functional harmony connected by 'joins', making up intelligible and easily-memorisable structures. Songs share quite large sections with each other, and the method allows you to see, for instance, how *There'll Never Be Another You*, *Weaver Of Dreams* and *Confirmation* have a common opening.

Similarly, there is an immense amount in common between *Laura* and *How High the Moon* – both start with a string of cadences connected by the join that Cork calls a 'new horizon', though *Moon* starts resolved and *Laura* doesn't. That such disparate songs are so structurally similar enables the performer to rapidly accumulate an understanding of songs through the LEGO method.

Insights In Jazz by John A. Elliott develops and refines Cork's method, applying it to over 230 standard songs. Elliott – who is based in Edinburgh and not to be confused with John Elliott the jazz educator in Kansas City – presents Cork's "bricks" and defines new ones. He provides reliable chord progressions for a body of songs, analysing them as bricks and joins in visual roadmap charts.

The songs appear on a pdf file on the CD enclosed in the print edition, or just as part of the e-book, allowing players to search electronically for common features, and rapidly

make the associations that facilitate memorising. Audio tracks of 55 bricks used are available so the player can hear how they sound.

Elliott argues that songs are most easily learned when presented in a simple, logical, and visual manner, and uses a 'brick wall' based on the grid introduced by Lionel Grigson, which relates bricks and joins to the chord progression and clearly outlining the shape of the song.

It's not necessary to have worked through *Harmony with LEGO Bricks* already. Elliott provides a highly readable opening section, and a flow chart to illustrate progress through the method. Each brick and join is analysed, explained, illustrated with examples of songs where it occurs, and cross-referred to other songs.

One of Elliott's most important refinements of Cork's system is a more rigorous definition of a 'join', which Elliott describes as connecting 'resolved' and 'dominant' functional harmony areas. Not all bricks end up resolved, however, and so he describes a category of 'non-join' joins that connect these.

I'd hesitate to say that Elliott's book supplants the original, but it shows the benefit of three years' work devoted to Cork's system, and lengthy discussion with its inventor and with others on the LEGO Bricks discussion group: <http://groups.google.com/group/LEGO-bricks>.

The book is very clear and concise, and any aspiring jazz improviser would be well-advised to have it, learn it – and join the discussion group. There's more information on the book at www.dropback.co.uk along with free downloads and podcasts.)

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