

WHAT HAS JAZZ TO DO WITH COMPOSITION?

By
Mickie D. Willis

Recently, while enjoying some outstanding performances at a local jazz club, a friend there with me commented that the music was hard to follow; that each of the pieces sounded very much like the other, with little distinction. She is quite a gifted and informed listener of traditional concert music, but not of jazz. So some of her difficulty with this music I attributed to lack of familiarity. I've heard the same or similar observations offered about many other styles and genres of music, including Renaissance, Baroque, and Twentieth Century serial music, by people less familiar with those particular styles. Since I'm a jazz player and have been a listener since Charlie Parker was still alive, I had little problem with hearing and appreciating the details and nuances of the solos. Still, I had to admit she had a point. Even to my ears, these tunes and performances seemed to stream along almost without distinguishing features for long minutes and tens of minutes. The entire first hour-and-a-half set featured five tunes - all up-tempo, with little respite or few balancing elements. And while the performances were stellar - technically - there was no sense of arch, or indeed any sense of beginning, middle and end. Of course, in traditional concert music, variations are often like this. And since jazz is, in essence, extemporized variations on a set of harmonic progressions, this shouldn't be surprising.

All of the tunes performed by the group - at least while I was there - contained only a few chords, and in some cases, essentially only one tonal center! This is the style of much contemporary jazz. The trend began in the late fifties, and has continued. I remember in the early sixties, a lot of discussion among players, and articles in jazz publications about this new "modal" style of playing. The chief virtue often stated was that it allowed the performers greater freedom to expand and explore linear expression, without the burdensome constraints of having to navigate through complex chord progressions. And indeed, that has been the effect. Limited harmonic underpinnings do facilitate and encourage the linear flight of the improviser. And in so doing, also extend the length of the solos and the overall performance time of the piece.

But is an expanse of detail, with little or no significant variation in tempo, dynamics, or tonal centers necessarily bad? Does it necessarily mean that such music has less artistic merit than compositions cast within the more usual (for most composers, anyway) Eurocentric forms? After all, lots of visual art from the East, particularly from the Moslem world, features this "cut-by-the-yard" quality. I'm not suggesting that contemporary jazz has the pattern repetition found in such visual art, but that superficially, the formal arrangement of this style of jazz often reminds one of these eastern motifs. Indeed, even jazz musicians themselves, often acknowledge the influence of eastern music, which is more modal than tonal, in their approaches to improvisation and composition.

But the real matter here is that of harmonic rhythm and complexity, and their relation to linear development. Harmonic sonorities, especially well-defined ones with tonal implications, establish vertical prominences that impose their own influence on the forward direction of melodic lines - and the more such vertical pillars there are in the fabric of the composition, the more such grates through which melodic lines must be woven. Jazz musicians have long recognized and understood this relationship. It is common for soloists, after the opening of the tune - the head, during which tempo, harmonic relationships, and general character of the piece is established, to expand far beyond the harmonic framework dictated by the original chords.

This is facilitated by accompaniments that often obscure the identity of the harmonies: Chords are seldom in root position, and very often, especially at faster tempos, the roots are omitted altogether, to further minimize their identity and stability. Pianists, during their own solos, frequently play only intervals, perhaps minor thirds (major triads with omitted roots), major seconds (as third inversion seventh chords without third and fifth), open fourths or fifths - in certain styles, or single pedal tones. This is done chiefly to relieve the solo line from the absolute need to adhere to a specific vertical arrangement, and in so doing, propel the forward motion.

In order to facilitate the act of improvisation - of weaving melodic lines that are compatible with harmonies of various character, jazz musicians develop a mindset and operating procedure that treats each new chord in a piece as a new tonal center, above which is a set of available pitches consistent with that particular chord construction. Of course this is no different from how composers must work as well. In certain matters music is music, and the considerations are the same. But what is often different about the way improvisers must work, is the need for speed. Chords are rushing by, with no time for detailed, conscious thinking about the pitch content of every chord. So improvisers often use a kind of thought shorthand, a convention, or contrivance, if you will, that allows them to work more speedily. For example, a major seventh chord would make the notes of that particular **major diatonic scale** available as pitch content for melodic construction above that chord. A dominant seventh (in the vernacular of popular music, any chord with the construction of a major-minor seventh chord, regardless of its function in the key) would carry with it the implication of **Mixolydian mode** scale structure for melodic purposes, a minor seventh chord (minor-minor seventh) would imply **Dorian mode** scale structure, and so on, for every kind of chord in the piece, regardless of the overall key of the piece. And it matters not, whether the improviser imagines these specific modes, or whether they have memorized the harmonic pitch classes and adjacent intermediate tones through their understanding of the harmonic structure of various chords. The results are the same: the player is instantly aware of aurally acceptable pitches to incorporate into the linear construction. This being the case, clearly it is less problematic to solo with fewer, and simpler chords in a piece.

The acceptability of tones perceived as foreign or as wrong notes is chiefly a matter of cultural conditioning, musical style, relative tonal environment, and rate of pitch turnover (tempo may influence this, of course, but pitch turnover may be quite rapid even in slow tempos). The more specific the harmony, the more confining to melodic construction. And the less specific the harmony, and faster the tempo and/or pitch turnover, the more different pitches there are that will be perceived as acceptable. Combine this increased acceptability, or expanded palate of available tones at faster tempos, especially if over minimal harmonic requirements, with the increased difficulty of improvisation at faster tempos, and it's easy to understand why many of the jazz pieces I first mentioned were up-tempo had few and simple chords. So it shouldn't be surprising that jazz, a relatively young art form, after all, is developing in that direction. The question of whether this is progress or retrogression, I will leave for others to consider.

But this matter of harmonic rhythm and complexity also affects melodic development in composed music. Of course, composition permits time for consideration - not the pressing need of improvisers to immediately find appropriate pitches. But ultimately the same need for the linear to agree with the vertical is true of all music, whether composed or improvised. Baroque music, when contrasted with Classical period composition, had significantly faster harmonic rhythm. Yet, melodic complexity clearly was not lacking. The Baroque period saw the full development of perhaps the most sophisticated contrapuntal and variation forms and techniques in music. Especially with regard to the coordination of the melodic line with the tonal/harmonic structure. So the transition to a simpler style in the Classical period was not driven by the needs of improvisers.

Or was it? While we acknowledge that performers improvised - perhaps more during the Baroque than any time since (excepting jazz), we usually think of most of the music as composed, and indeed, we think of this time as ushering in many of the major forms of composition. However, all the improvised music has been lost. Perhaps there was more than we know. Perhaps the demands of realizing figured bass - an act not unlike improvising on chord progressions - was a contributing factor. But figured bass disappeared with the Classical period. Of course, this kind of speculation is outside the scope of this brief article. The chief consideration is the implications of the interconnectedness of vertical sonorities and their complexity to melodic movement. The more complex and frequent vertical harmonies are, the more specific must be the pitch content available for melodic invention, whether it improvised or composed. And the fewer and less specific the vertical sonorities, the less stringent the constraints on melodic development. Could it have been the increasing sophistication of the late Romantic period, with harmonies increasingly complex and frequently changing, that drove the atonality, serial and nonserial, of the early twentieth century, and along with it, a rediscovery of the contrapuntal techniques of the renaissance and Baroque? Could it have been the demands placed on those techniques which, after all, are linear techniques mostly developed during the Renaissance, by the increased harmonic rhythms of the Baroque, that also were constituents of the trend toward the Classical period?

These are all far reaching and highly speculative musings, of course. And again, far beyond the scope of this article. But as composers, it is useful for us to look at various ways music can be created, other than being methodically crafted, and consider the influence different processes have on the resulting work, and what we can learn and adapt to our methodology.