

## Contemporary jazz, improvisation, skills

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**Abstract:** *The assimilation of different musical practices, idioms or aesthetics, is an expression that explains in detail the origins of some of the fusions of the significant creators of the jazz phenomenon, an active pursuit whose purpose is to create new, musically innovative, hybridized styles. It represents the modern view, a term for which researchers will suggest that it is a suitable description for the evolutionary compositional technique of certain artists adept at experimental practices of fusion of elements, the preferential ability to combine the structure of standard themes in a modern, original manner that takes on new forms, contrary to the traditional ways of tonal jazz. Musicians of the contemporary style articulate stylistically through unequal and variable musical combinations, which do not completely replace the previously known genre terms (jazz, rock, funk), but allow the emergence of other creative styles, which evolve, delight and continuously challenge the characteristics of the preceding categories. Modernism emphasizes the instability of all gender designations and highlights the creative fluidity, the structure of musical practices that gender names try to immortalize in order to give discussions about jazz, music in general a significant new starting point. Issuing the title of a musical genre (modernism) is a way of recognizing its existence and being able to distinguish it from other musical genres or styles. This (name) becomes a point of reference and easily allows the constitution of certain forms of interactive musical communication, control and specialization in the field, elaboration of templates, discussions, essentially a new evolutionary step.*

**Key-words:** *jazz, improvisational thinking, instrumental technique, stylistic skills, contemporary harmonic structures, elements.*

### 1. Introduction

The constantly moving character of the jazz phenomenon results (also) from the multitude of improvisational techniques applied, elaborated. In a previous phase, jazz was dominated by styles such as *Dixieland*, *Blues*, *Swing*, then *Bebop*, *Cool* and

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*Contemporary* current, chronologically we are talking about the period of the '20s and the end of the '60s, contemporary the '60s until 2000, modern current starting from 2000, until 2025.

## 2. Representatives of styles

Thelonious Monk (or so-called “main figure of discontinuity aesthetics”) is considered one a promoter of the *bebop* style, later his collaborations with Charlie Parker, Dizzie Gillespie, Charlie Christian and Miles Davis being edifying in this sense.

The creation, improvisations of Thelonious Monk present a musical discourse based on dissonances, with melodic lines in recurrence, harmonically tension, constitutive elements such as the diminished 5th or the minor 9th, multiple chromatisms, the bass line with a melodic structuring in the low register (contra/subcontra octave), with timbral coloratura, bursts of the piano in the technical or acoustic aspect, dense structure, percussive rhythmic configuration, with the implementation of pianistically silent moments, of „ empty spaces“ intended to increase musical tension. Many times the realization of the impression of interpretive “hesitate” is outlined, but this too of course is thought and analyzed previously and implemented millimetrically at the appropriate time. His improvisations perhaps deliberately deliberate certain technical deficiencies in order to deepen new sound results.

Andre Hodeir<sup>2</sup>, specialist critic issues the idea that, Thelonious Monk could be among the first instrumentalists to have a special psychological discontinuity and non-symmetry supported by a contemporary interpretive technique, which will later lead to a new evolutionary step of the next generations, to *free jazz*.

Improvising stylistics (Ex.1) represents a progressive dissolution of tonal references through solar constructs, phrase dislocations, rhythmic offsets, obsessive repetitions, unresolved dissonant constellations, dispersive layouts, frequent interpolations of pauses.



Ex.1. *Expression*<sup>3</sup> in Thelonious Monk style

<sup>2</sup> “Monk is to be hailed as the first musician who has a feeling for specially modern aesthetic values”.

Andre Hodeir, *Monk or Misunderstanding*, rev. Toward Jazz, New York, Ed. Da Capo, 1962, p.164.

<sup>3</sup> Eddie S. Meadows, *The musical Language of Thelonious Monk*, rev. *The african-american Experience*, Ed. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2013.

In most of his expressions there is a structuring of specific elements, the overall conformation is nevertheless a dynamic, vigorous one, due to the professional insight by which he still preserves the pulsation, the essential elements of the swing style.

Structurally, from the point of view of the connection with the tradition of the genre, Thelonious Monk modernly conceives the manner of comping of the *stride* style of the left hand (previously found in the 19th century by James P. Johnson, or Fats Waller), ornamentally supplemented by modern improvisations of the right hand. Overall, the 2 plans (melodic and comping) during the improvisational moment are interspersed thoroughly and particularly ingeniously at the same time, the success of obtaining the original pianistic timbral effects being predictable.

The perfect intuition of symmetry between time and musical space fully gives that touch of freshness, dynamics, permanent musical suspense, welcomed and desired without intermittence by consumers of the genre, of the performer in this case.

Analyzing the improvisation (Ex.2.) of Thelonious Monk<sup>4</sup> in the play *Ba-lue Bolivar Ba-Lues-Are*, at the end of the 5th cycle and the beginning of the 6th, we encounter another element, close in terms of structuring the range (pentatony of the range) reduced, namely the range formed successively, only from tones (whole-ton scale).

BA-LUE (Monk Book)  
6th CHORUS

Ex.2. Structuring the range consisting of whole tone scale

<sup>4</sup> Collin Charles, *Thelonious Monk Piano Originals – The Genius of Jazz*, Moleskine Inc., New York, 2015, pp. 56-59.

The pianist Thelonius Monk (Ex.3), in turn promoter of the *bebop* style, uses in the piece *Functional*, the procedure of transient chromatic progressions replacing a classic turnaround, thus, at the end of the sentence on 4th beat, it being necessary to appear a chord on the 5th degree (with major 7th and raised 5th), to achieve the authentic V-I cadence (F+7 / B flat 7).

The musical score for Thelonius Monk's 'Functional' is shown in two systems. The first system features a C#m7 chord in the right hand and a Cm7 chord in the left hand. The second system features a Bbm7 chord in the right hand and a C#m7 chord in the left hand, which are highlighted with a red box. The third system features an F+7 chord in the right hand and a Bb7 chord in the left hand. The score is labeled '2nd CHORUS' and '13'.

Ex.3. Transient harmonies preceded by authentic cadence on the end of the theme

Which is why he was considered after Duke Ellington to be the best-selling jazz composer and instrumentalist in terms of discography, mainly in the United States (and beyond).

The style of Thelonius Monk makes numerous contributions to the (re)creative-inspirational jazz spring of pieces such as: *Round Midnight*, *Blue Monk*, *Stright no Cheaser*, *Ruby my Dear*, *In Walked Bud*, or *Well, You Needn't*, fully displaying the creative artistic qualities of the pianist.

### Bill Evans

Many of the specialist critics of American jazz consider Bill Evans<sup>5</sup> to be a promoter of the practicing instrumentalist of the style „piano-bar”. The interpretive manner structured less on the rhythmic pulsation, mainly the harmonic and improvisational aspects, being those that are exposed to the superlative. A refined, special and calm thinking of artistic expression, rich in harmonic elements and chains (“surprise”), unusual, which denotes the moment of exceptional spontaneous creativity. The accuracy and ease of natural use of the procedures for reharmonizing a work reveals the innovative spirit of the performer, which is why

<sup>5</sup> Reilly Jack, *The Harmony of Bill Evans*, Unchrom Ltd., Brooklyn, N.Y., 1992, pp.3.

the vast majority of his repertoire consists of jazz standards and by no means the modern repertoire. His influence, his contributions regarding the evolution of jazz are of particular relevance, a fairly high percentage of the elements of the interpretive expression of the current generation being due to his vision and expression.

Personally, I believe that sometimes we should not take specialist critics (entirely) seriously as jazz is essentially a spontaneous harmonic, melodic and rhythmic creation, Bill Evans being an elite representative of the phenomenon.

A harmonic and phrasing genius, follower of romantic-impressionist chords mixtures, Bill Evans recognizes the improvisational potential of Claude Debussy's work. It stands out for the finesse of the touch, formed within the academic musical study, a warm, cantabile, refined tone. In contrasted with Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans treats improvisation as a color element, so his pianistic style is delicate, non-percussive, with a specific articulation, jazz legato.

Bill Evans is primarily an innovator of the harmonic concept in jazz and an accomplished improviser in that he enriches the jazz harmonic structure by making heavy use of polychords, specific elements inspired by the stylistics of musical impressionism. Along with Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Bill Evans is one of the most important modern pianists.

Bill Evans is like the previously mentioned practitioners of the *bebop* style, an analytical, deeply intellectualized nature that slightly highlights the importance of musical thinking, stating in interviews that: "if you<sup>6</sup> are going to try to teach jazz, you will have to extract those principles from music that are not related to the style, and this is extremely difficult: If you execute several structures at the same time, your whole approach will be undefined. You won't know what to keep and what to remove! To know exactly what you are doing and why you are interpreting much more economically, but with a clearer vision. It's much better to spend 30 hours on one theme than to perform 30 themes in one hour..."

Bill Evans is an integral master of block chords improvisation, who approaches this advanced manner of spontaneous musical construction like Bud Powell. The multitude of unprecedented subtleties of chromatic harmony, elaborated in the poetic manner, accredits the expression of the romantic "of the avant-garde" attributed to its interpretive style.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.billefans.nl/>

Example 4 of the final solo of *Waltz for Debbie*,<sup>7</sup> reflects the complex harmonic improvisational style practiced by Bill Evans:

Ex.4. *Exhibition, improvisational structuring by using block chords*

Bill Evans<sup>8</sup>, in the solo of Burt Bacharach's *Alfie*, implements the elements found in Chick Corea's expression (of course as with most other instrumentalists previously mentioned), with a small addition, or an evolved, expanded form. Following the general score (Ex.5), it is found that the harmonic foundation, through the altered chords (A alt7), especially the bass line (through the related harmonic constituent elements) in turn in a continuous movement, as well as the use of other steps instead of the tonic on strong principal beats, all this gives an extended improvisational tonal ambitus, that is dynamic, progressive, but still give stable sonority

<sup>7</sup> Long Jack, Bill Evans, *The essential new folio reflects the unique talent of an innovative and extraordinary gifted musician*, fourteen classics edited & transcribed by Jack Long Jazz Piano, Wise Publication, London, New York, Sydney, Copenhagen, Madrid, 1996, pp.54.

<sup>8</sup> Long Jack, *Bill Evans's Essential New Folio Jazz Piano*, Wise Publications, London, New York, Sydney, Copenhagen, Paris, 1996, p. 44.

Ex.5. Patterns with harmonic extension

Those inflections are supported for emphasis by rhythmic coloratura, the implementation of exceptional 6<sup>th</sup> (sextolets) subdivisions, being cataloged as hemiola (ternary division in a binary rhythm/meter).

In the song *My foolish Heart*, Bill Evans (Ex.6.), in turn implements this procedure. However, following the general score and especially the bass line in the 3rd line, the progression of a minor dominant (C minor7) is observed, in tonal-functional treatment as (overturning) 2, with double functional interpretation, as E flat (or C minor7 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion), moving towards E 7/9, chord that represents the double (secondary) dominant of the substitution (note b) with delay on the bass note (note B flat), and finally a (re)solution to B flat maj7 (maj 7th), a distribution similar to the chord 6/4 on the first beat of the measure.

Ex.6. Extended tritonic substitution

Embroidery is defined as a note of ornament, starting from a real note of a chord, to the adjacent step, immediately returning to the original note. It is also called an exchange note (*Cambiata*, *Wechselnote*). This may be:

- lower or upper
- single or double
- diatonic or chromatic

In example 7 (measures 1-2) we have the graphic representation of an embroidery in descending gradual march, structured on the 8th (note c – fundamental), 7th (note and natural), 7th (note B flat – subtonica) of the chord formed on the 2nd step of the range (C minor), with immediate resolution towards the grade considered the 6th step (lower median) of the previous agreement, respectively the 3rd step (upper median) of the agreement on the 5th step format of the range (f7, 9-, 11#). In measures 3 and 4, ascending chromatic embroidery (at half-tone) with sudden return to tonic is observed.

Ex.7.How to make embroidery

The first procedure of the embroidery is found again in the song *My foolish heart*, by Bill Evans, through the harmonic progression of the first stage, with added sound (nona) G minor 9, then with the major 7<sup>th</sup>, G minor 7<sup>#</sup>, further with the minor 7<sup>th</sup> G minor 7/C, with the 4th in the bass line, this representing the anticipation of the bass, for the next chord of the 4th step of the range (C minor 7 with note added, again 9th). Also to be followed (Ex.8) complex expression of the harmonic structure through the chordal constellation consisting of 4-5 concurrent sounds, attributed to the left hand and completed vertically by the right hand.



Ex.8. *Embroidery, musical context, general connotation*

### Chick Corea

The influence of the ingenious Chick Corea is one of particular importance. The pianist brings to his creation<sup>9</sup> new elements such as pentatonic interpretation, in ascending or descending progression, preserving the harmonic (static) structure. Example 9 shows the pentatonic F major range (f, g, a, c, d), harmonically supported by chords with added sounds (2th, 6th, 9th), with specific voice distributions structured on 4th and 2th, which contribute to increasing tension and tonal widening of the improvisational framework. Also relevant is the modal, lidic improvisational touch, due to the consecutive appearance of the note A natural, the raised 4th of the chord of step I.

Ex.9. *New harmonic and melodic elements in the improvisational context*

<sup>9</sup> Chick Corea -Omnibook. *Piano Solo, for piano transcribed exactly from his recorded solos*, Hal Leonard, 2022, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Another interpretive procedure, typical of Chick Corea (Ex.10.), taken unanimously by jazz instrumentalists, consists in the double chromaticization transitive to the semitone, both of the melodic line and of the harmonic background (*side-slipping riff*). A bitonality that paradoxically still preserves the tonic.

To carry out this procedure, modal chords (lower/upper structure), 3th and 5th elliptical, elaborated from overlapping 4th, are used, chords that later take over the harmonic structural completion of the right hand (upper structure). (see *So What*, jazz masterpiece by the great trumpeter and composer Miles Davis).

Ex.10. *Upward chromatisation on adjoining step with return to tonic*

Another specific element, treated by Chick Corea, consists in merging the use of the pentatonic range, consistent with the tritonius substitution, or supported by another harmonic support, compared to that of the basic range.

In example 11 apart from the ii-V-I progression, the tritonic substitution is observed in measures 3 and between the two hands, by improvisation on the E minor pentatonic range, in measure 4 with harmonic support of the A7 (altered) chord improvisation in E flat minor no 4th, no 6th. We thus encounter atypical elements such as the minor 3th (C natural), the diminished 5th (note E flat), the minor 7th (note G natural), the minor 9th (in enharmonic expression note B flat) or the minor 13th (note F natural). In measure 5, a new improvisational moment appears, in the structure of the pentatonic E range, with support on D 6/9/11#.

Ex.11. Combination between tritonic substitution and pentatonia

Certainly, the aspect of the provenance of the ii-V-I progression must be debated from the point of view of its musical relevance. In classical music among the first users we can list Johann Sebastian Bach again by collecting *Wohltemperiertes Klavier in Präludium I*, (Ex.12 a) and *Prälude in D dur* (Ex.12 b). This procedure is later extended both in jazz (pieces such as Fats Waller's *Honeysuckle Rose* composition from 1923, or *Satin Doll* and *If I Fell* composed by Duke Ellington, from 1953) and also in *R&B*, *pop*, *rock* or *country*.

Bach - *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I, Prelude I, opening: I-ii  $\frac{3}{2}$ -V  $\frac{6}{5}$ -I.<sup>[11]</sup> ▶

Ex.12a. ii-V-I progression in classical music

ii-V-I in Bach's WTC I, Prelude in D Major.<sup>[2]</sup> ▶ Play Wikipedia:Media

Ex.12b. Classical progression ii-V-I

From Chick Corea's arsenal of ingenuity, we must also mention the repetitive patterns, structured on the diminished range, successively repeated in progression, at fixed distances (intervals). In example 13, one finds these patterns of the reduced B-flat range, reworked (enharmonically) into small descending thirds (C, A, G-flat, E-flat), both in the right and left hand (G, E, D-flat), representation by modal chords, formed by overlapping 4th, or bipolar chords.



Ex.13. *Modal patterns in downward movement*

After developing the consolidated patterns on the elements of the reduced range, in the next step of the synthesis, new reductions or pentatons of the range are reacted. These specific elements often applied in Chick Corea's musical expression created a broad, unmistakable personal sound, which leads to a creative musical consolidation of the great instrumentalist, unanimously recognized and accepted by the performers of keyboard instruments (and not only).

In example 14, it is interesting to analyze the dynamism, created by the opposite movement of the two hands: the left hand in the downward movement of the chords in third intervals, while in the right hand, ascending pentatonic structures are highlighted, successive, (marked by braces), on the notes C, D#, F#, B natural).



Ex.14. *Pentatonics resulting from the reduced range*

Another thought-specific element, Chick Corea's inventiveness, is the repetitive implementation of patterns in the right hand, using different steps as a starting point (Ex.15.), here at an ascending 4th interval, while the left hand has a contrary, descending, regressive movement.



Ex.15. Progressive improvisational riff

**Michel Petrucciani**

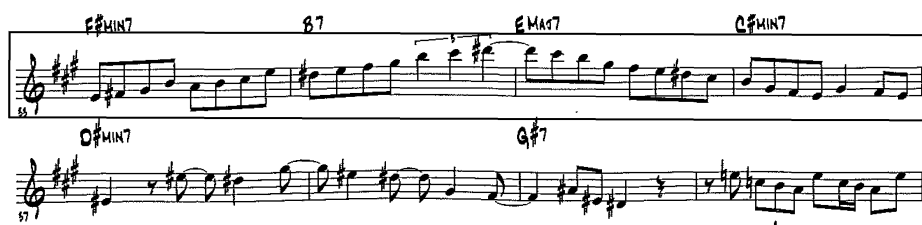
The pianist (as part of the concert held in Stuttgart, 1993), in turn (re)harmonizes the „B“ part of Duke Ellington's *In a sentimental Mood* in its own special, complex, creative-stimulating vision<sup>10</sup>. It represents an important evolutionary step, in terms of the (re)interpretation/configuration of laws, harmonic relations. (Jeremy Fleury transcription)



Ex.16. Reharmonization of a jazz standard

Also Michel Petrucciani, in the solo of the song *Looking Up*, (Ex.17a, 17b) builds the improvisational line, through melodic patterns in downward, upward progression, having different tonal centers, a process analyzed later in volume and noted at Chick Corea.

<sup>10</sup> Petrucciani. *Original Transcription Piano*, Edition Paul Besucher, Arpège, Hal Leonard Corporation, 1992, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Ex.17a. *Improvising patterns*Ex.17b. *Successive pentatonic improvisatory deployment*

Petruciani prepares in advance that moment of tritonic substitution (G#7/D7) through the simple, preparatory application of successive pentatonies, through harmonization to the semitone, with return (G#7-A7-G#7).

Ex.18. *Improvising grading, pentatonics, pentatonics with substitution*

Similar to Chick corea, the same Michel Petrucciani, in the solo of the song *Rachid*, (Ex.19) a piece recorded on the *Conference de Presse* disc, in measures 25-29, highlights through the imitation of the reduced range, a modern jazz rhetorical modality, taken over by the pianists of the genre.

Ex.19. *Contemporary improvisational expression*

Michel Petrucciani, in turn, elaborates, in the piece *Looking Up* (Ex.20), his own manner, contrary to cadences with a wide extent, namely those static patterns of virtuosity, the variable elements being here, only the successive harmonic cadences. Thus, a slightly adjusted ostinati figure is born, harmonically supported on different steps within the mother tonality (I, V, IV, VII natural, III).

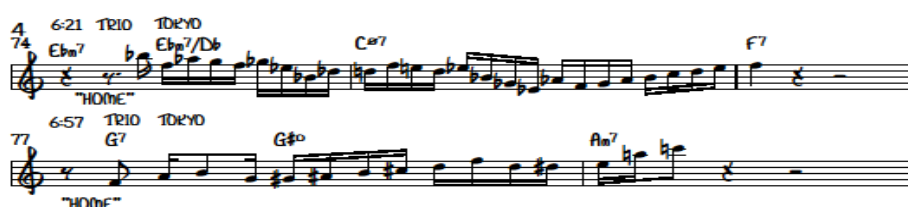
Typical stylistic figure of Michel Petrucciani, later taken up in improvisational expression by other established pianists such as George Duke, Keith Jarrett, or Chick Corea, serving as a source of creative inspiration.

Ex.20. *Stylistic way of expression contrary to cadence*

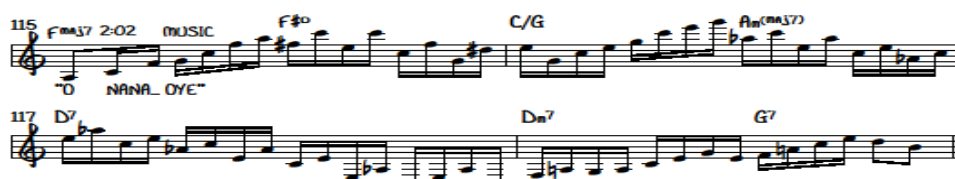
The phenomenon of chromaticization, chromatic progression (Ex.21), constellation ii7-II#7diminished-I, from measure 2 (D minor7, dim D#, C6-sextacord) is taken over and implemented transiently, according to the stylistic manner of the swing era, the composer and the great pianist Duke Ellington, being the promoter, the follower of harmonic chains of this type. Michel Petrucciani takes this process that he implements in 2 own pieces, as in the following examples:



Ex.21. *Transient chromatic progressions*



Ex.22. *Michel Petrucciani solo in the bebop manner in the song Home, chromatic progressions*



Ex.23. *Michel Petrucciani solo in bebop style, Nana Oye song, chromatic progressions*

In conclusion, the findings presented can be treated as possible tendential evidence, in a phase preceding the expansion, elaboration of unconventional harmonic coloring, since the years 1963. Certainly, these visions stimulated, later incited harmonic thinking, constituting a challenge continued by contemporary jazz enthusiasts (after the year 2000, after the death of Michel Petrucciani, a subject treated analytically in one of the next chapters).



### 3. Conclusions

The weight, the importance of the improvisational moment, was by no means equivalent to that (/a) of today. The moment was previously conceived, like a possibility of *respiro*, for the conductor/orchestrator, a situation in which the space was reserved for the performance of dancers, animators. Later, the improvised phenomenon becomes a platform conducive to the brief display of skills, creativity, spontaneous artistic originality.

Starting in the middle of the 20th century, after the sure display of *bebop*, modernism (modernism) highlights abstract melodic lines, based on modal or scalar thinking, most of the time, melody and harmony representing separate, independent elements. Thus, paradoxically, each chord can be treated as a tonic or constitutive part of the harmonic progression, also the solo has the possibility of simultaneous unfolding with the structure of the harmonic cycle (*hronos protos*). Everything is new<sup>11</sup>, focused on the transition from the overall complementary attention, to the direct, individual attention, the improvisational line or the melodic line of the theme, still remaining a basic element in the expression, the audience, being fully captivated by the virtuosity of the instrumentalists.

Contemporary jazz, delineated in the early 1980s, develops styles such as free, avant-garde, fusion, smooth and more. As a consequence, there is a (re)modeling of the improvisational form, sketched by the tendency towards complex, abstract harmonic-rhythmic forms, unconvergent with the theme. Thus, the performers experiment, force the boundaries of harmonic relations and tonality, this sound evolution, having a large-scale use of the procedure within the instrumentalist.

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<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Siskind, *Playing Solo Jazz Piano, A new approach for creative pianists*, Second Edition, Jeremy Siskind Music Publishing, Jazz Education Abroad, 2022, Fullerton College California.

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