Piano & Keyboard

Classical Piano Music and the Jazz Vocabulary

By Ted Rosenthal

PIANO & KEYBOARD
MAY/JUNE 1998

Many jazz greats have not only mastered the jazz vernacular, but have also been interested in, and incorporated, aspects of European classical music. Among pianists, you can hear the influence of Debussy and the impressionists on Bill Evans and Herbie Hancock. You can also detect a strong connection between Bartók and the music of McCoy Tyner and Chick Corea. The runs of Art Tatum can be related to Chopin and Liszt, and Tatum also played his own arrangements of some classical pieces, including Dvorák's *Humoresque* and Rubinstein's *Melody in F.*

By listening, transcribing, analyzing, and playing along with improvised solos, the jazz pianist becomes conversant in jazz language and styles. As an improviser, however, the jazz pianist must also think and work like a composer, looking for musical material to modify, develop, and make part of an individual style. Quite often these sources are—rightly—the music of the great jazz soloists and improvisers. But there are other musical sources to mine.

One area often overlooked is the use of passages, or other musical material, from the classical piano repertoire, which can be adapted and used as part of the jazz pianist's vocabulary. Although the classical repertoire for most standard jazz instruments (bass, drums, saxophone, and trumpet) is limited, pianists have a huge repertoire—an encyclopedia of music—to draw from to enhance their jazz vocabulary and technique.

Most jazz pianists begin their musical education studying classical piano, and they should not think of these studies as a vacuum. With a good understanding of chord-scale relationships, and by applying creative alterations to rhythm and harmony, the classical repertoire can be an endless source of material and inspiration. Classical pianists can also benefit from understanding these musical connections. Applying knowledge of chords and jazz harmony to passages that classical pianists already know can serve as a good jumping-off point and a big headstart to learning how to improvise in a jazz context.

For the jazz pianist, one of the most obvious and fruitful areas of investigation is harmony. The music of the early 1900's, particularly Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin, and Bartók, contains a wealth of interesting harmonies, progressions, and voicings that jazz pianists can add to their vocabulary. Even some of the harmony in Schoenberg's pre-12-tone works has found its way into the language of modern jazz harmony. Twentieth century harmonic concepts have been, and continue to be, developed within the jazz vernacular. A good example of this cross-cultural mingling can be found in the popularity (in the jazz world) of an influential classical harmonic treatise, *Contemporary Harmony—Romanticism through the Twelve-Tone Row,* by Ludmila Ulehla of the Manhattan School of Music. This book, long out of print, has been republished by Advance Music, a jazz-music publisher, due, no doubt, to jazz musicians' interest in this work.

Jazz pianists often function as harmonic arrangers in creating chord voicings and reharmonizing standards (such as Gershwin, Porter, and Kern) or their own original compositions. The piano music of Debussy, for instance, reveals many interesting voicings and harmonic progressions. Debussy often abandoned traditional functional harmony by using modes in his melodies and harmony. It is also common in jazz harmony to think of a chord not just as a group of intervals, but as part of a larger mode or chord-scale.

In the excerpt from "Clair de lune" (see example 1), we see not only a basic E-flat-minor chord, but all the notes (except A-flat) in the E-flat dorian mode. These voicings could be applied to a jazz harmony on E-flat minor, the half-step "rub" between F and G-flat being particularly characteristic of a jazz voicing.

To incorporate these voicings into your own musical vocabulary, there are a number of approaches. To learn the chords thoroughly and be able to instantly call on them within a performance, take one voicing at a time and transpose

Tempo rubato

Example 1: Debussy: Clair de lune, Mm. 15-18

C Whole Tone Scale

C7 #11 #5

Example 2: The wholetone scale and its implied harmony

dim. p pp pp

Example 3: Debussy: Soirée dans Grenade, Mm. 23-29

it through all the keys. Or, take the whole passage and transpose it through all the keys. You can also experiment with different registers, as well as thicken (add notes) or thin (leave out notes in) the voicing. In addition to treating the chords as individual voicings, try putting the passage into a rhythmic context. A new rhythmic approach, one that applies to jazz, might be to think of the triplet eighth-notes in terms of 12/8, perhaps with an Afro-Cuban feel!

The signature harmony of impressionism is the wholetone scale. Debussy's prelude, "Voiles," is one of many examples that demonstrate his interest in this scale color (see example 2). The implied harmony for the wholetone scale is a dominant 7th chord with a sharp 5 and sharp 4 (or sharp 11). In "Soirée dans Grenade," from *Estampes* (see example 3), we see a C-sharp dominant 7th, with a sharp 4 and sharp 5 floating through the entire wholetone scale, finally resolving functionally to F-sharp. In my own recorded arrangement of this piece, this harmony—which is also very common in jazz—is prominent in the arrangement, as well as in the improvising chord progression. The wholetone scale can often be heard in be-bop, both in melodic ideas (for instance, Thelonious Monk's signature descending wholetone runs), and in the chords of Bud Powell.

Another common way to explore reharmonization is to try different chords (both roots and chord-types) under the same melody note or phrase. In "Des pas sur la neige," Debussy harmonizes the recurring D-E, E-F motive in a variety of ways (see examples 4A and 4B). This type of harmonic variation can also be very useful in reharmonizing standard tunes, where the structure (aaba) has the same melodies repeated a number of times.

5 m.d.

Example 4A: Debussy: Des pas sur la neige, Mm. 5, 6

26 pp

Example 4B: Debussy: Des pas sur la neige, Mm. 26-28

167

Example 5: A passage from Mozart's Piano Concerto K466

Other harmonic approaches are also prevalent in jazz. The harmonic styles of Chick Corea and McCoy Tyner make frequent use of melodic fourths, fourth chords, and pentatonic scales. Many of these devices can be traced to the music of Bartók, who has influenced many jazz musicians.

Example 6: The "Mozart figure" combined with jazz harmonies

Harmonic progressions, voicings, and scales are also of interest in music before the 20th century. A composer such as Schubert, for example, can provide novel ways of linking keys through modulations that still sound strikingly fresh today. The way Schubert moves to a remote key through a common tone is another area to investigate when reharmonizing a standard tune.

As improvisers, jazz pianists must be able to create melodies instantaneously. The classical repertoire contains countless melodies and figurations, many passages that the jazz pianist can re-mold and incorporate. By excerpting a small passage and making a sequence, the jazz pianist can adapt the phrase to a jazz framework with a few modifications. You can alter some notes chromatically to make them less diatonic or triadic, shift the rhythmic emphasis to make it less square and more syncopated, or change the underlying harmony to take advantage of more complex harmonic concepts. One or all of these basic modifications can turn a "straight" classical passage into a usable jazz phrase.

Example 7: The "Mozart figure" treated as triplets, with jazz harmony

Example : The "Mozart figure" with left-hand punctuation

A number of years ago I was playing through a Mozart piano concerto with a friend. I noticed that Mozart's runs and figurations turn out to be very adaptable to jazz piano improvisation! In the Piano Concerto, K 466 (see example 5), Mozart simply outlines an F triad, and the underlying harmony is F-Major in second inversion. By creatively manipulating this phrase, it can become part of the jazz language. If the F triad is used over a different harmony as an upper structure triad—a triad formed not from the root of the chord, but from the upper extensions of the chord—then the arpeggiated run will fit over quite a number of chords in a jazz harmonic context (see example 6). Next alter the rhythm to make it less square. Treat the four-note grouping as triplets (see example 7), or use left-hand punctuation to break up the pattern's rhythmic regularity (see example 8). Both of these methods give the pattern syncopation, and they are less downbeat-oriented or square-sounding. It is also useful to think of these runs as eighth-notes in the context of medium to fast tempos. The original sixteenth-notes could only realistically be used in slow and moderate tempos.

When you repeat a motive within a figuration more than two times, it usually sounds either like an embellishing run or filigree. Worse yet, in an improvised context, it may sound more like a practiced pattern than an improvised melody. In order to avoid this problem, I suggest you interpolate other melodic material into the phrase, or finish the phrase with new

D 7♯9 G 13 G 7♭13 Cm 6/9

Example 9: The "Mozart figure" with alterations and a "tail"

Larghetto (♩ = 116)

p espress.

Example 10: Chopin: Nocturne, op. 9/1

material. I call this latter process adding a "tail." Finishing a pattern with a convincing melodic tail helps to make music of what started out as a pattern. Also, the end of a phrase is often what is most striking, and what the listener remembers. Example 9 shows the basic Mozart pattern with chromatic alterations and rhythmic variations (on beat 2), transposition (on beat 3), and a tail at the end.

Jazz pianists often solo using a common formula—improvised, single-note lines in the right hand, accompanied by short, punctuated small voicings in the left. The classical repertoire contains many other types of passage work and resources that can broaden a jazz pianist's vocabulary and perspective, or suggests devices to help achieve a wider textural and sonic palette. Some of these include left-hand patterns, two-hand figurations, melodies and patterns that cross between the hands, octaves, and chord techniques.

The Chopin nocturnes have a number of beautiful and adaptable left-hand patterns that can be applied to a solo piano ballad style. In Chopin's Nocturne op. 9/1 (see example 10), the left-hand pattern can be used as is (in 3/4 or 6/4), or adapted in a variety of ways. Example 11 modifies the basic pattern by not using the pedal point (changing the root for the new harmony), and the intervals span a shorter distance. The pattern is also adapted as eighth-note triplets in 4/4.

The music of Liszt and Rachmaninoff is full of two-hand figurations that can help the jazz pianist get out of the single-line solo rut. In Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto (see example 12), there is just such an adaptable two-hand figuration. The original harmony is C-Major. In example 13, I enrich and "jazz up" the harmony from C-Major to C7 (with sharp 11 and sharp 5)—the same whole-tone harmony from example 2. Four-note voicings are used in the left hand. This kind of triplet pattern crossing between the hands has become a common jazz-piano device that can produce many rhythmic variations.

There is no end to the experimentation and variation that can be applied to these kinds of excerpts. More traditionally, they can be practiced as a single device or motive that can be transposed and worked through the harmonic changes of a standard tune. Another approach would be to practice using an excerpt as a jumping-off point for free improvisation, exploring textures, colors, and sounds.

You will find passages that lend themselves to many different musical situations: accompaniments, runs, arpeggios, voicings, and material for melodic improvisation. When explored imaginatively, all of these devices can expand your approach to the instrument, enhance your sound palette, and build technique. Keep trying different variations on a phrase. A completely new phrase or musical idea can be the result of clever development, or manipulation of a classical phrase. You may find the end result quite surprising! You may also find that you will come up with different ideas and approaches than if you studied only the standard jazz vocabulary. ❋

B♭m F7

Example 11: Chopin left-hand pattern without the pedal point

Più vivo (♩ = 80)

ff

Example 12: A passage from Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2

C 7♯11♯5

Example 13: The Rachmaninoff pattern "jazzed-up"