

## Finding Source Material In The Classical World

There was a time when many people considered jazz and classical music to be irreconcilable foes. The truth is, both these traditions have always had much to offer each other. Early jazz absorbed the harmonies of Ravel and Debussy, and the beboppers often cited the influence of Bartok, Hindemith, Stefan Wolpe, and Igor Stravinsky. Gunther Schuller coined the phrase “Third Stream” to denote an overt combining of the two traditions. Though plenty of critics maligned the Third Stream movement in its day, the perspective of time shows us that Schuller was prescient.

Many of today’s jazz musicians find source material in the classical world. One of the great things about jazz is that it can be enriched by information from any corner. Let’s examine the work of several classical titans and discuss how their thinking can broaden our minds.

Oliver Messiaen created a harmonic system based on what he called the “seven modes of limited transposition.” These scales are distinct from diatonic modes in that they all have a circularity that defies the more typical cadential behavior associated with standard harmony. Three of these modes are well known to jazz musicians: the whole-tone, diminished and augmented scales. Take Mode 5, however, which is less familiar (see Example 1). There are a number of wonderful shapes to be drawn from this scale, some of which can sound a bit like Thelonious Monk. If C is your tonic, you can look at this scale as two chromatic ropes of four notes separated by a minor third, one starting on B, the other on F. Try using this scale to write an up-tempo melody for sax with a contrapuntal line on trumpet. I’ve written a piece called “All The Previous Pages Are Gone” that is based on this scale for my upcoming Sunnyside release *Search*, excerpted here (see Example 2).

Messiaen took inspiration from non-Western music and created a rhythmic language that, like Carnatic music, uses additive structures that create an unearthly sense of levitation. Odd groups of phrases create a dynamic sense of pulse that brings drama in a wholly unpredictable way. Next time you improvise in 4/4 time, try dividing your phrasing into asymmetrical patterns. For instance, a four-bar phrase of 32 notes could be divided as such: 2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. Alternately, create linked phrases without a time signature that keep expanding from a small cell, growing, contracting and growing further.

Example 1



Example 2

Gyorgy Ligeti created music of stunning originality. One of his piano etudes is dedicated to Bill Evans, while other works owe a debt to Pygmy and mbira music. His connection to the jazz world is quite visible to me. “Micropolyphony” is a term he coined where the musical parts are so dense and intertwined that no individual line is apparent and a cloud-like texture results. This process is more practical in large ensemble writing, or on piano, as its success depends on much information from a fast delivery system. What if in your next big band composition you were to write a quiet midrange five-note pattern that the woodwinds all play as quickly as possible with each instrument displacing the phrase by an eighth-note. The trombones and trumpets play slow, close-

ly voiced chords with mutes and occasional sforzandos. Perhaps the trombones play four quarter-notes to a bar and the trumpets play five quarter-notes, creating a kind of “hocket.” Meanwhile, the bass and drums could be laying down a simple funk groove. You might write 12 bars of material and ask the players to develop the sound in a like manner.

John Adams has accumulated an expansive body of work rich in lyricism. He is an ingenious orchestrator, but I think there is even more to digest in his approach to rhythm. Adams creates strong pulses that he disguises in subtle ways so that one feels a simultaneous sense of forward movement and circularity. He’ll superimpose 4 over 3, throw in bars of odd times, create lines that move at differ-



ent speeds, and yet you still feel as if you are hurtling through space. A great rhythm section does the same thing, creating energy and drive while continually subverting expectation.

Morton Feldman wrote many long pieces based on tiny increments of material, developed very slowly, almost always pianissimo. I'll admit that some of his music makes me quiver with impatience, but two pieces especially inspire: *Rothko Chapel* and *Piece For Bass Clarinet And Percussion*. There is no clutter in this music—it shimmers with silence and mysterious introspection; the orchestration is singular. Another living master of this

parsimonious ethos is Alvin Singleton, whose link to jazz is quite overt. “Do much with little” is Singleton’s mantra. It is too easy to forget this elemental lesson. Even if you are writing purely tonal music, check out Feldman’s radical approach.

Bach, the grandfather of all Western music, is almost too obvious to mention; however, there is no end to what arrangers and composers can learn from his genius. Much jazz music contains only one melodic line. Bach shows us how we can create multiple strands of melody that all connect like a huge jigsaw puzzle. Study his use of “figured bass,” which has a correlation to jazz, as well as his two- and three-part inventions for piano.

Style is a tired word, and genre wars are over. Exposure to brilliant music of any stripe can allow us to overcome habitual behavior. Classical music can help our jazz lines, chord voicings, rhythms, forms and orchestration to become more intriguing and varied. Other living composers to add to your playbook are Terry Riley, Arvo Pärt, Per Nørgård, Gunther Schuller, Tania Leon, Derek Bermel and Elliott Carter. There is much to learn by stepping into their worlds.

#### Suggested Listening

- Oliver Messiaen: *Quartet For The End Of Time, O Sacrum Convivium*
- Gyorgy Ligeti: *Six Bagatelles, Chamber Concerto, Piano Etudes*
- John Adams: *Harmoniellehre, Naïve And Sentimental Music, The Dharmia At Big Sur*
- Morton Feldman: *Rothko Chapel, Piece For Bass Clarinet And Percussion*
- Gunther Schuller & John Lewis: *Jazz Abstractions* (“Variants On A Theme By Thelonious Monk”)
- Alvin Singleton: *Shadows*
- Carman Moore: *Concerto For Ornette*
- Alan Hovhaness: *Mysterious Mountain*
- Johann Sebastian Bach: virtually everything

JOEL HARRISON IS A GUITARIST, COMPOSER, ARRANGER, VOCALIST, SONGWRITER AND BANDLEADER WHO DRAWS UPON DIVERSE INFLUENCES RANGING FROM JAZZ AND CLASSICAL MUSIC TO COUNTRY, ROCK, WORLD MUSIC AND MORE. HIS LATEST PROJECT, *SEARCH* (WHICH WILL BE RELEASED ON THE SUNNYSIDE LABEL IN FEBRUARY), UTILIZES TECHNIQUES OF CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL COMPOSERS IN COMPOSITIONS FOR A SEPTET OF MODERN JAZZ'S FINEST INSTRUMENTALISTS. HARRISON WAS NAMED A GUGGENHEIM FELLOW IN 2010 AND HAS RECEIVED SUPPORT FROM CHAMBER MUSIC AMERICA, MEET THE COMPOSER AND THE JEROME FUND FOR HIS COMPOSITIONS. VISIT HIM ONLINE AT JOELHARRISON.COM.

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