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Beyond borders : broadening the artistic palette of (composing) improvisers in jazz

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The subject of this study

This study discusses the application of advanced compositional and improvisational techniques in the domain of contemporary jazz in order to help (composing) improvisers to extend their musical practices beyond functional harmony and beyond the conventional chord-scale approach. The first part contains comparative analyses of educational publications by five leading jazz artists on this subject: David Liebman, Jerry Bergonzi, George Garzone, Walt Weiskopf, and John O’Gallagher. In the second part, compositional techniques by two twentieth century composers are discussed: Peter Schat’s Tone Clock and Olivier Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition.

This exposition displays a variety of research methods. First, for all authors and composers, the content of their theories and techniques is summarized and illustrated with written parts and audio examples. Second, practical examples of applications by professional (composing) performers, including myself, are displayed and analyzed. Third, all models are evaluated, individually and in conjunction with one another. Finally, compendia of patterns constructed with the discussed models are presented to demonstrate how they add to the improviser’s artistic palette.

The emphasis in this study is predominantly on issues of pitch content. Although I am aware of the relevance of rhythmic phrasing, dynamics, texture, register, and form in creating the effects of playing “outside the chords”, I do not elaborate on these parameters. Yet, the practical applications of the actual techniques discussed throughout this study display adequate examples of operations exceeding the mere pitch content.

The techniques discussed in this study are none of them new, and not even all of them recent. What is new is their being connected as important bodies of knowledge that, among jazz practitioners, are generally known by hearsay, but that are often overlooked during the learning process that is so principally marked by its oral character. After all, jazz music is generally about playing on the ears, about allegedly spontaneous responding to musical impulses, and not so much about sitting down and working one’s way through weighty written bodies of knowledge, as I can attest from my personal experience as a longtime teacher of jazz improvisation and as an eternal student.

For impatient musicians who quickly want to experience the musical space that can be

created by the techniques discussed in this study, it will possibly suffice to stroll through the large collection of examples that are displayed throughout this exposition. They should feel free to approach these examples as a compendium of melodic lines, repeatedly playing and adding variations to adapt them to their musical ends.

The readers who want to gain insight into the coherence between the distinct techniques are advised to join my journey through blending these new elements with their existing playing techniques. They will, like me, experience the sensation of arriving at places that were undiscovered before undertaking this effort.

1.2 My motivation to undertake this study

Jazz musicians are usually esteemed for their spontaneity and expressive qualities, by which their music is appealing to general public and has a substantial influence on other music styles. This appreciation is witnessed by the large number of jazz festivals and jazz clubs, and by the large number of students in professional jazz programs at universities and conservatoires around the world.

The motivation to undertake this study is a consequence of my longtime experience as a jazz artist and educator. If I were asked to describe my ideal jazz band on the imaginary 'Music TripAdvisor', I would describe it as the ultimate 'all-inclusive'. In my opinion, jazz is supposed to act as a guesthouse in which elements from the surrounding musical world are welcomed with curiosity. For instance, as a sequel to my projects with musicians from Mali, Turkey, India and Lapland, in my recent works I rearranged sources of western classical music. The subject of the present study resulted from the latter and, more specifically, from the need I felt to re-examine musical sources that tended to be overlooked.

The focus of this study is upon the development of jazz as art music in which, rather than to please the audience, "the major challenge is to express oneself through sincerely felt musical means" (Liebman 2013, 78). The relationship between improvised lines and the underlying harmonic structures is considered a substantial part of these musical means. As a consequence of its aforementioned all-inclusive character, with the blending of traditional jazz forms with many other musical styles, the chord-scale approach needs reconsideration. More specifically, this study is based on the problem I share with colleagues and students that we tend to reach the limits of the traditional chord-scale approach and that, in order to develop jazz improvisation to keep track with recent developments, we need to exploit the alternative techniques discussed here.

I consider the advanced compositional and improvisational techniques elaborated upon in

this study as crucial elements for the development of today's jazz. At first sight they seem to operate in opposition to the conventional functional harmony on which the majority of jazz music is still based, but a closer look reveals that they can be applied alongside, or as an extension to conventional jazz languages. Needless to say, applying any of these techniques does not mean that important characteristics of straight ahead jazz such as swing, syncopated rhythms, and traditional melodic and harmonic embellishments are to be disqualified: on the contrary, they could become more worthy when considered from new perspectives.

Why does jazz, often characterized by its celebration of the moment, need these technical models to innovate? Firstly, through the years of its existence, jazz has always been based on models. Most obvious is the model of functional harmony that is largely based on the western European music tradition and translated to jazz improvisation as the chord-scale method of linear improvisation. Over the years, numerous variations and modifications of this model have been applied. When it was left behind, partially or totally, by some protagonists of the free form jazz in the 1960s, other musical parameters and game rules took its place. Once these parameters started serving as shared points of reference, they could be considered models alike.

Secondly, I address the innovation issue. Just like composers of symphonic and chamber music, jazz practitioners are continuously in search of ways to surprise their listeners with new tone colors, textures, and ways of manipulating tension and relaxation, to shed a different light on existing practices or to combine these with new musical elements. Besides, they share the experience that innovative techniques generally arise from processes of trial and error. Considered from this viewpoint, I dare to ask why jazz would not give these alternative models a try.

Thirdly is the educational subject. Through the years of its existence, professional jazz education has been criticized for its excessive focus on functional harmony and the related chord-scale approach. Models containing intervallic and serial techniques could offer a strategy to extend the improvisations beyond this traditional approach. By importing elements that are developed outside the functional harmonic fabric, jazz musicians can enrich their creative palette with new harmonic colors. However, an interesting paradox evolves here. Meaningful application of these alternative techniques demands a thorough knowledge of functional harmony and a broad expertise in chord-scale improvisation. From the perspective of the performers who started their journey with the acquisition of the conventional functional harmonic skills, the techniques discussed in this study should be considered an addition, alongside or on top of their existing skills, rather than replacing them.

1.3 The utility of this study

This study addresses in the first place those readers who endorse the need to move forward by continuously enriching their artistic palette. After studying this exposition, they hopefully agree that in order to keep the jazz practice alive, these skills open new doors to enhancing the practice of (composing) improvisers and jazz educators.

Those who question the utility of compositional techniques such as those of Schat and Messiaen that were originally introduced more than 70 years ago, should realize that the development of western art music over a period of roughly three centuries can be traced back in the first fifty years of the development of jazz music. Until the rise of free form jazz in the 1960s, the development of jazz harmony followed that of the European music tradition, roughly the Baroque, the Classical period, Romanticism and Impressionism. During the jazz-rock fusions of the 1970s, the renaissance of be-bop in the 1980s, and the crossovers with world music in the 1990s, functional and modal harmony remained the leading issue in terms of improvising on chords. The jazz of the twenty-first century roughly shows an ongoing hybridization by boundlessly merging improvisations in a wide range of jazz styles, non-western music, odd meters, and the rediscovered sounds of analogue electronic equipment from the sixties and seventies.

As an experienced composer and improviser, I embedded a number of these ingredients in my music, but through the years I felt the need to reassert an intellectual power in the field of jazz harmony. Considering the fact that, together with the blues and the work songs, the European music tradition was one of the fundamentals of jazz as a crossover music *avant la lettre*, I decided to refocus on harmonic issues in line with the historic development of classical music. The adaptation of twelve-tone and modal techniques by composers of twentieth-century music could provide a fruitful addition to the harmonic jazz toolkit.

Of course, it would be naive to assume that just offering new toolkits would be sufficient to innovate jazz music. Therefore I decided also to discuss five exemplary publications by leading jazz educators on playing beyond conventional functional harmony. I undertook this part of my research not only to provide a decent context of already existing advanced models: I was also curious how they would relate to the twelve-tone and modal techniques in the models of Schat and Messiaen.

But like getting acquainted with the chord-scale approach that underlies the conventional way of linear improvisation, mastering the applications of any new toolkit will result from a creative process of learning by trial and error. By going through this process, any (composing) improviser, however experienced, simply cannot avoid reconsidering his

overall potential as a music practitioner. Important aspects of form, texture, instrumental line-ups, and repertoire alike will have to be adapted, leading to a close relationship between composition and improvisation. The more mature the musician, the more effectively the model and its operations will be embodied and the better the meta-goal of this study will be achieved—to show how elements from outside one's musical space can be integrated to enhance one's personal sound.

But what about the next paradox that evolves, of working according to a model on the one hand and developing a personal sound on the other? Throughout this research, I provide insight into my own development as a composing performer. The examples of my personal applications of the techniques discussed in this study, such as the suggested embellishments of rows, scales, and modes, and improvisational patterns, are an essential quality of it. Together with the recordings of my compositions and improvisations, they are meant to motivate and help the interested reader to adapt these examples to his personal practice.

It should be noted that, compared to traditional jazz education, this study takes the opposite direction. Nowadays it is still common practice that jazz freshmen scrutinize the canon of exemplary jazz solos in the process of building their improvisational idioms. Derek Bailey already concluded that in the learning method “the three stages —choosing a master, absorbing his skills through practical imitation, developing an individual style and attitude from that foundation—have a tendency, very often, to be reduced to two stages with the hardest step, the last one, omitted” (Bailey 1993, 53). Imitating the style of a famous virtuoso is hard work and the result affords the musicians satisfaction and the admiration of their peers. From the early years during which I performed as a jazz soloist, I remember peers, bandleaders, and journalists asking me who was my absolute favorite artist, because they found it hard to identify ‘whom I was sounding like’. This was how I experienced Bailey's observation that “in jazz, to say that someone ‘sounds just like’ a well-known somebody is usually meant as a compliment” (Bailey 1993, 53). Even today some young musicians tend to find themselves in a vicious circle in which their personal development is only possible by copying examples of the fashionable jazz artists of the moment.

In my opinion, the integration of *extra muros* materials—with few exemplary solos yet available—as done in this study, might stimulate students to find alternative ways to build their personal jazz idioms. Therefore, rather than just presenting a compendium of ready-made melodic patterns, this study demonstrates various operations that might help musicians to generate those patterns themselves. How to apply these to either a conventional or an innovative jazz repertoire is up to the individual's learning attitude,

artistic taste, and technical abilities.

From my experience as a jazz educator, I know that the stronger the motivation of students to be inspired by any information offered during their studies, the more effectively they can develop a personal sound. This observation is in line with recent developments in professional music education to relate directly to the interest of the individual students by motivating them, even during the early stages of their development, to actively consider and discuss their artistic choices. This imposes an obligation on the jazz educator to emphasize reflective processes rather than offering mere historical examples in the form of ready-made models, patterns, or sequences.

Just as in (foreign) language acquisition, enriching one's jazz idioms results from being overwhelmed by live concerts, recordings, videos, and talks from inspiring artists. Part of the new information is distilled intuitively 'at first sight'. Another part results from repeated listening and analysis, and hopefully results in an individual interpretation of how it was achieved and in storing this in a continuously extending personal backpack.

The utility of the methods and techniques discussed here largely depends on the attitude of the student. He should agree to consider these alternative techniques as an appropriate extension, or as a useful addition alongside his already existing skills. Referring to Liebman's characteristics of a musician's individual qualities, a good ear is required to distinguish intervals, rhythmic and harmonic aspects, and to recognize the form of a piece and the entire sequence of actual events taking place during a performance (Liebman 2013, 77). I agree with his image of improvising in a band as an informal conversation among a small number of people, where the attention may shift momentarily from one person to another, or from one topic to another. The richer the collection of skills in his backpack, the better the individual musician will be able to discern all these threads of communication and to participate at any time with his own, personal sound.

1.4 Developing my personal sound

In subchapters 1.1–1.3 I discussed the urgency of my study in general terms of subjects, motivation, and utility. In the following sections, I will illustrate this with examples of how my personal development and motivation directed me toward undertaking this study. Three characteristic elements in the development of my personal sound are discussed: improvising outside the chords, the construction of contrafacts, and pushing the boundaries of styles.

1.4.1 Improvising outside the chords

Just like any other musician, I have spent a lot of time defining and enhancing my personal sound, a simple term for a complex body of skills. First of all it implies the “body works”, the physical production of a good sound and the mastering of the basic scales and chords in all tempos over the whole range of the instrument. Besides, and more importantly, it implies developing individual interpretations and phrasings of melodies, harmonies, and rhythms. Most of the initial body works take place in a dynamic and unordered process of observing jazz soloists during live performances, listening to their recordings, and trying to imitate their gestures and phrasings in the practice room. The next step on my way to a personal sound was to transcribe recordings of improvisations by exemplary soloists and to slowly transmit their idioms into my own.

I started building my jazz vocabulary by scrutinizing recordings by Miles Davis, Chet Baker, Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Joe Henderson, Warne Marsh, and other legendary jazz icons. This showed me that, although a high level of technical command of the instrument is crucial, the proof of a personal sound finds its roots in the individual employment of melody, harmony, and rhythm. By exploring the basic repertoire of the Great American Songbook and the canon of original compositions that professional jazz musicians are considered to know by heart, I became familiar with the traditional melodies, forms, and chord changes of these bodies of reference.

Soon after I had reached a basic ability in linear improvisation, I became interested in manipulating tension and release by alternately playing inside and outside the chords. Playing inside the chords means playing the notes of a scale that correctly match the underlying chord. Playing outside the chords means playing notes that do not match the underlying chord exactly, but which still evoke a feeling of relationship with it. I discovered that enlarging my potential to play outside the traditional chord changes helped me to develop an individual approach to the standard jazz repertoire. Pushing the harmonic boundaries of the traditional repertoire appeared to be an effective technique to enhance this aspect of my personal sound.

1.4.2 Constructing contrafacts

Another characteristic element in the development of my personal sound was the construction of contrafacts. I recomposed existing jazz tunes by taking the harmonic and rhythmic structures apart, rearranging them, and putting new melodies on top. These operations were frequently put in practice by the early be-bop jazz artists as a way of disguising a melody to avoid copyright claims by the composers of the original tunes.

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17

1.4.3 Pushing boundaries of style

In 1987, I started a septet that became my musical laboratory for almost 15 years. With an (in those days) unconventional line-up of violin, tenor saxophone, trombone, electric guitar, piano, bass, and drums, it combined seven musicians with distinct musical backgrounds in traditional and modern jazz, European improvised music, blues, and Latin jazz. The repertoire consisted of arrangements of jazz and blues tunes and of original compositions in an amalgam of musical styles. For instance, the title track of the septet's CD *Polder* (1991) shows the various textures I could create with this band by alternating between simple and complex melody lines, by arranging rhythmic diversity in suite-like compositions, and by writing edgy voicings in the riffs that were played behind the soloists. The hybridity of the repertoire and the distinct musical texture of this septet also have contributed to the development of my personal sound.

[Example 1.4.3.1 "Polder"]

From 1997 onward, I widened my musical horizon by initiating a series of crossover projects with musicians from Mali, India, Lapland, Curacao, and Turkey. Although, as a producer, I succeeded in entertaining my audiences with a catchy mix of folkloric sounds, swinging rhythms, and vivacious melodies, as an improviser I deeply missed a sense of mutual musical interaction and, more specifically, the intentions and abilities of jazz improvisers to push the limits of the harmonic content. For instance, as the producer of the CD *Les Sofas De Bamako* (2000), I was happy to play a few saxophone solos with some young musicians in Salif Keita's studio in Bamako, Mali. My improvisation over the Gm, Bb and F chords on this tune sounds inspired by their energetic and genuine rhythms, but at the same time it lacks the question-and-answer type of interaction between the soloist and the rhythm section that is so common in conventional jazz ensembles as well as in lots of African music.

[Example 1.4.3.2 "Gné Mufo"]

Another example is the jam session-type track of my composition "Summer Breeze" on the CD *Fo4r Winds* (2002). After singer Inga Juuso's improvised "yoik", steelpan player Konkie Halmeijer plays an inspired improvisation at the edges of the two chords Am and F. Next, kora player Mamadou Diabaté plays a virtuoso solo and uses his large rhythmic capacities to build up some rhythmic energy for my own solo. At the beginning of this solo I respond to the final lines that Diabaté played on the kora and then I try to start a question-and-answer interaction with the rhythm section. But my attempts unfortunately remain unanswered and I decide to guide the band to the final theme.

[Example 1.4.3.3 "Summer Breeze"]

Because of the lack of mutual interactions I experienced in my crossover projects, I decided to keep my focus on western European music and I initiated two crossover projects with rock and classical music. In 1998 I had already arranged a number of Jimi Hendrix' songs for my own septet. The forms and the modal harmonic structures of Hendrix' songs, as recorded on the CD *The Burning of the Midnight Lamp* (1999), appeared to be fertile ground for jazz interpretations, such as in our version of "Angel".

[Example 1.4.3.4 "Angel"]

Quite different from the Hendrix project, but no less pushing the boundaries of conventional jazz (and classical music), was the project I released on the CD *Schubert Impressions for Jazz Quintet* in 2003. In "Shaking Hands", a re-composition of the "Allegro ma non troppo" of Franz Schubert's *String Quintet in C major*, the form, harmonies, and dynamics of this movement transferred to a line-up of tenor saxophone, cello, piano, bass, and drums happened to serve well as vehicles for intense and interactive improvisations.

[Example 1.4.3.5 "Shaking Hands"]

1.4.4 The need for innovative harmonic issues

Despite my belief that with all these crossover projects I developed a distinct personal sound, as to the variety of repertoire and musical textures, I still felt the need for innovative harmonic issues. I considered my arrangements and improvisations as too much inside the traditional harmonic jazz fabric, as a continuous filling in and ornamenting of already existing forms. And although the musical examples I collected through the years kept inspiring me through their individual concepts and artistries, they did not satisfy my needs for alternative directions to the beaten tracks of functional harmony. They rather showed variations of diatonic superimpositions that overlapped operations I was already performing; or they appeared to be hermetic sound patterns with no apparent underlying systems. I was looking for something in between, for techniques that could generate autonomic melodic patterns that would connect well to a large variety of situations within and beyond functional harmony.

The idea of Dutch bassist and composer Theo Hoogstins to use twelve-tone concepts in jazz composition and improvisation served as a wake-up call. In his online article "[Peter Schat's Tone Clock in Jazz and Improvised Music](#)", he brought me back on the track of the compositional model of the Tone Clock as introduced by Schat (1993). After reading Schat's essay about this analytical model shortly after its first publication in the Dutch

language in 1984, I had discussed its possible adaptation to improvised music with some of my peers, but, drowned out by the sounds of everyday life, I had left it behind. At this time, Hoogstins' argumentation of introducing a modern compositional technique to create a style based on the chromatic scale, but with sufficient clues for musicians who are trained in jazz that is largely based on diatonicism, became a source of inspiration for me to undertake this research project.

While I was searching for more examples of composing performers combining twelve-tone techniques with their jazz, pianist and composer Frank Carlberg introduced me to the work of alto saxophonist John O'Gallagher who was about to finish a comprehensive method on twelve-tone improvisation (2013) that was firmly based on the Tone Clock.

Beside the ideas of Hoogstins and O'Gallagher, Liebman's (2013) treatise on chromatic improvisation and the parallels between the historic development of classical music and jazz also gave rise to the idea of importing musical elements of twentieth-century composed music that had not become commonplace in jazz. What other compositional techniques besides the Tone Clock could work to systematically enrich the artistic palette with colors off the beaten track of diatonic harmony?

A recording of a master class by guitarist Nelson Veras at the Amsterdam Conservatory in which he illustrated the adaptation of three of Messiaen's modes of limited transposition into his playing came to my mind as a possible answer to this question. Just as I remembered from practicing the technical saxophone exercises by Guy Lacour (1972), Veras' operations with Messiaen's modes managed to create the hybrid harmonic colors that I was looking for. This technical element of Messiaen's musical language thus became another part of my research. But, at the same time, I realized that a number of well-respected jazz educators during the last fifteen years had bothered to publish their individual systems designed to create alternatives to chord-scale improvisations and functional harmony. Since jazz improvisation is at the core of this study, I decided to start this research with an exploration of its context in the publications of the jazz educators introduced in the following paragraph.

1.5 Design of this study

1.5.1 Improvising with jazz models

The first part of this study contains a comparative analysis of improvisational models in jazz education that specifically deal with “alternative” jazz languages. Beside the works of Liebman and O’Gallagher, educational publications by composing performers—and saxophonists just like Liebman and O’Gallagher—Jerry Bergonzi (2000 and 2006), George Garzone (2009), and Walt Weiskopf (2009) are summarized in order to map and compare the systems and operations they designed in order to enrich the artistic palette beyond functional harmony. Examples of practical applications of all five methods are displayed and analyzed in order to evaluate their utility in jazz practice.

1.5.2 Improvising with the Tone Clock

The second part of this study discusses the transfer of Schat’s theory of the Tone Clock into a model to generate and enrich jazz. After discussing applications in compositions and improvisations by a number of protagonists of this system, three movements of my saxophone quartet *Carillon* are analyzed. This work demonstrates my personal application of the Tone Clock both as a compositional device and as a source for improvisations. Its analysis is followed by a compendium of patterns serving as deep structures for improvisational uses.

1.5.3 Improvising with Messiaen’s modes

The subject in the third part of this study was found in the theory and techniques of another twentieth-century composer whose techniques already appeared to inspire (composing) improvisers to advanced operations beyond tonality: Messiaen. This chapter starts with a summary of the seven modes of limited transposition as presented in Messiaen’s *La technique de mon langage musical* (1944), along with examples of melodic patterns that can be created with embellishments of these modes. Then jazz applications by guitarist Veras, by baritone saxophonist Bo van der Werff, by tenor saxophonist Jasper Blom, and by myself will be compared and evaluated. What serial aspects can be defined in Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition, in the works by the artists mentioned above, and in my own works? And how do these relate to the techniques and elements of the tone clock? This section also contains a compendium of patterns for improvisation.

1.5.4 CODA

In order to express the musical meaning of the results of my study, I conclude this research exposition with a coda in the form of a number of recent recordings of my compositions and improvisations in the context of this research project.