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Wayne Meets World: Compositional Methods in Three Wayne Shorter Pieces

ABSTRACT

Many of Wayne Shorter's mid-1960s compositions have become part of the core jazz repertoire. Commonly, these compositions are seen as a blend of traditional hard bop elements and highly personal and original, if not idiosyncratic, innovations. Elements that are not in conformity with hard bop practice, like asymmetrical phrases, atypical form schemes and 'non-functional' progressions, are often attributed to Shorter's 'genius', an assessment that is reinforced by Shorter's enigmatic public persona. In this way, Shorter is cast as a true 'jazz classic': the heir to a tradition, which he subsequently transforms in a 'highly original way', in line with overly familiar and persistent jazz narratives of the Promethean hero, who shapes and transforms jazz from within. For one thing, such a view prohibits looking at jazz in the broader cultural-historical context in which it is created. In the case of Shorter, this is all the more problematic since his technical procedures do get viewed as essential in the development of jazz, and are brought into close connection with central aesthetic jazz notions such as 'freedom' and 'collectivity', also as a result of his role in the highly influential Miles Davis Quintet of the 1960s.

A few exceptions aside (Strunk, Julien, Waters), accounts of Shorter's compositions and innovations have largely remained vague and nonspecific. Especially his dealings with harmony are seen as central to his writing, but these are described in rather open-ended terms: the harmony is complex, non-tonal, abstract, tonally extended, 'open', ambiguous and so on. Although such labels aren't necessarily wrong, they leave unclear what they exactly mean.

The core of this paper consists of an analytical discussion of three iconic compositions from the 1960s, 'Infant Eyes', 'E.S.P.', and 'Virgo', focusing on the overall compositional construction of these pieces. In contrast to Shorter's public image, the design of these pieces turns out to be clear and straightforward. Although each piece is unique, it will be argued that the compositions share a *type* of design: a 'basic idea' shapes their configuration, from the background organization to the foreground details. This basic idea has technical, architectural, and aesthetic dimensions. Based on the analytical evidence, I will furthermore argue that Shorter not only drew on jazz traditions but also on other contemporary repertoires, to which the cultural environment of New York City — the modernist capital of the world at the time — and Shorter's college music education would have provided easy access. Moreover, although Shorter is notorious for being woefully cryptic in general and for not making any *concrete* technical statements about his music, over time Shorter has consistently alluded to this kind of musical influence.

The first piece to be discussed is 'Infant Eyes'. It will be shown that the 'basic idea' of this piece is closely connected to the blues: properties commonly associated with the blues, such as archetypical melodic gestures, blue notes, and specific harmonic progressions determine the composition on all structural levels. In addition to that, the way in which the background structure is veiled in the foreground by certain melodic and harmonic choices, and aesthetic issues concerning the reference to the blues in this piece will be discussed. The basis of the construction of the second piece, 'E.S.P.', is formed by an 'unfolding series' of perfect fourths. It will be shown how this series determines the melody and the harmony, the latter with respect to the choice of the key centres and to the specific chords. 'Virgo' combines a melodic cell of a perfect fifth with harmonic movement in major thirds. I will focus on how the asymmetry of the basic pattern brings about the relocation of certain chords, and how this accounts for some of the more unusual chord progressions.

The analyses will shed light on Shorter's compositional practice in several respects. From a technical point of view, the pieces show craftsmanship and a lucid overall approach. In addition to this, the analyses will offer a new perspective on Shorter's harmonic practice, by showing the connection between the employment of multiple key centres, the choice for seemingly non-functional chords and progressions in the foreground, and the background construction of the pieces. These compositional techniques should also be taken into account in order to make valid statements pertaining to the aesthetics of the music. For one thing, the rather tight and specific musical organization of 'E.S.P.' is not easily reconciled with its status as a milestone in a movement towards more 'freedom'. Finally, it can also be concluded that Shorter draws on techniques associated with repertoires outside of jazz. Hence, this paper offers a more balanced view on the cultural heritage that Shorter saw as his own, and, by extension, on sources that fed jazz as a whole in a period that shaped so much of jazz to come.

Keywords

Wayne Shorter, Jazz Music.

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