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The Sighing Motif (*Seufzermotiv*) and Related Stylistic Features in the Jazz Compositions of Brad Mehldau

ABSTRACT

Background

Since the Baroque, the *sighing motif* (or *sigh motif*, translated from *Seufzermotiv*) has been a frequently used device to express a broad range of human emotions. In this paper, I borrow the concept to denote the many ‘sighingly’ resolving appoggiaturas or suspensions found in the work of Brad Mehldau.

The augmented major 7th chord can be understood as the vertical crystallisation of two potential sighing motifs with both the augmented 5th and the major 7th ‘wanting’ to resolve to the 6th, the root of a minor triad in first inversion. Two beautiful examples can be found in Bach’s Chromatic Fantasy, BWV 903 (b. 36) and in Richard Strauss’ song ‘Morgen’ (b. 3). In both cases, a $C^{\Delta(\#5)}$ chord acts as an appoggiatura chord embellishing an ensuing Am/C.

For most jazz musicians, $C^{\Delta(\#5)}$ or E/C will be ‘just’ a root-position chord, be it as a (whether or not resolving) appoggiatura chord to add interest to an otherwise ‘straight’ C^{Δ} in a jazz standard, or as a static *slash chord*, used a lot in jazz originals in a harmonic idiom that could be defined as ‘free-tonal’. Kenny Wheeler’s ‘Ma Belle Hélène’ is a good example for that kind of use where the augmented major 7th chord G/E♭ is just one of a number of major triads with dissonant bass notes, e.g. E♭/D or C/F.

As a stylistic statement, the augmented major 7th chord is not without controversy among the jazz community. In Do the M@th (<<http://dothemath.typepad.com>>), a well read jazz blog, Ethan Iverson coined the sobriquet ‘girlfriend chord’. Endorsing a tweet by fellow jazz musician Nicholas Payton, he writes: ‘[The tweet] ‘If you overuse Major#5th chords in effort to give your compositions an instant ‘vibe’, f*** you [asteriks mine]’ is right up my alley. We call them ‘girlfriend chords’ on my block, because the amateur white jazz composer often titles those reflective polychord waltzes with the name of his girlfriend’. (The entry from 2001 has been removed from the blog.)

In the more ‘classical’ compositions of jazz pianist and composer Brad Mehldau, many ‘girlfriend chords’ can be found. They symbolise his eclectic style that is characterised by a refined tonal and stylistic ambiguity and a remarkably linear approach to harmony and voice leading, revealing influences by Bach, Chopin and Brahms. Therefore, they provide an interesting starting point to explore Mehldau’s compositional strategies and preferences.

In *Lament for Linus*, the ‘girlfriend chords’ are the dominating characters with no less than eight appearances in different disguises. Their influence reaches way further than the

‘instant vibe’ that they undeniably give to the composition. Being intrinsically ambivalent in their orientation ($C^{\Delta(\#5)}$ towards I^6 in A minor or I in C major), they act as pivot chords in almost all the modulations of the piece that traverses through a complete cycle of minor thirds, starting in G♯ minor and ending with a codetta in A♭ major (G♯m–B–Bm–D–Dm–F/Fm(?)–A♭).

The contrapuntal ‘behaviour’ of the augmented 5th chords changes gradually during the piece: initially the augmented 5th intervals resolve ‘classically’ upward to the 6th intervals, originating several *sighing motifs* in the middle voices that interact with the *sighing motifs* constituting the melody. Once the melody has reached its apex a₅, the supporting $F^{\Delta9(\#5)}$ and $B^{\Delta(\#5)}$ suddenly ‘freeze’, stopping the upward movement of the inner voices. A few bars later, the $B^{\Delta(\#5)}$ finds its augmented 5th resolving downward to the perfect 5th by means of a prolongational double *sighing motif* in parallel sixths. A similar device had been deployed earlier to add emphasis to an upward resolution (D–D♯) (Example 1).

Ex. 1. Mehldau, *Lament for Linus*.

This changing ‘behaviour’ is subtly analogous to the melodic development in that it follows the rise-apex-fall paradigm of the melody: the upward resolutions fuel the momentum, the static chords below the melodic peak mark the moment of hesitation, before the (chromatic) downward resolutions (e.g. F♯–F) throttle the romantic optimism even more by adding a sense of ‘disorientation’, that is amplified by the increasingly elusive harmony that ‘somehow’ finds its way back to (the dominant of) A♭[G♯] minor (A♭ major in the coda) (Example 2).

Ex. 2. Mehldau, *Lament for Linus*.

In which key are we in bb. 29–36? In B♭ minor turning towards its relative major or, following the logic of the mi-

nor-third related keys, in an F major/minor area, with G \flat /B \flat acting as ‘Neapolitan 6th chord’?

These and the many other drifting harmonic events in Mehldau’s are quite difficult to understand. Coming to terms with a considerable degree of tonal ambiguity, is one of the biggest challenges when analysing Mehldau’s compositions. To illustrate the dilemma, I’ll review a few points of view coming from different corners of the music theoretical discourse.

The only ‘girlfriend chord’ found in *Resignation* (E \flat /C \flat in b. 15) opens up the harmonic locks of the preceding 14 bars (G minor) and gives way to a more erratically modulating B-part (the whole song being a ‘standard’ 32-bar AABA form) (Example 3).

Ex. 3. Mehldau, *Resignation*.

In his reaction to a ‘newbie’s’ question on a jazz harmony forum, jazz guitarist Zakk Jones recommends the following: ‘As far as playing over it, try and always reduce changes to their core elements’ and to find out ‘what tonal center you are in’, (see https://www.reddit.com/r/Jazz/comments/4fqjx3/piano_improvising_overvoicing_some_pretty_funky/, accessed 13/06/2023). He analyses bb. 15–16 in B (C \flat) major with a ‘tritone sub to get to A major on the bridge’, interpreting the (in his eyes) stable major 7th as (local) tonic chords, perhaps thinking of a sequential chord progression like in *Early Autumn*. Regardless whether he is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ — I would rather analyse these bars as a (modally mixed) Phrygian half cadence in E \flat major, followed by a varied sequence in C \sharp minor —, the answer is representative for the harmonic thinking of many jazz musicians.

Catering to a similar ‘target group’, it remains to be seen to what extent the thorough reduction of the harmony and the analysis of E \flat /C \flat as appoggiatura chord by the (classically trained) transcriber in residence Wolfgang Wierzyk satisfied the needs of the readers of the (German) magazine *Keyboards* in their endeavour to learn the song. To those who want to know more about appoggiatura chords, Wierzyk recommends to check out Chopin’s E minor Prelude Op. 28 No. 4.

In his doctoral thesis *Reconstructing Tonal Principles in the Music of Brad Mehldau* (2011), Danny Arthurs, engages several of Mehldau’s compositions in Schenkerian analysis. He analyses the bb. 13–16 of *29 Palms* in C \flat major [B major] claiming to have found a 3–2–1 *Urlinie* that starts with the E \flat 5 in b. 13 before being transferred to the bass line in b. 15 (Example 4).

Ex. 4. Mehldau, *29 Palms*.

Does this (academic) analysis correspond to how we hear this progression? Do we really accept C \flat as the ‘legitimate’ tonic or did Mehldau play ‘musical chairs’ with us, stopping the music just before the G \flat could be reached? The melody, stripped of the chords, couldn’t be firmler rooted in

E \flat -minor/G \flat -major, appointing G \flat 4 as its tonic in bb. 15–16. Wouldn’t the chords G \flat –C \flat have sounded more ‘natural’ than the actual B \flat $^{\circ}$ /C \flat –C \flat in b. 16, B \flat $^{\circ}$ /C \flat pushing C \flat into ‘tonic position’?

My guess is that Mehldau seized hold of the C \flat (B) major triad as a welcome ‘approach chord’ to return to the *vamp* used for the intro, soloing and codetta (C–C/B | Cm/B \flat –F/A) at the point where the ‘rectangular’ framework of the phrase structure ‘told’ him to end his modulatory adventure?

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The aim of this paper is to present an approach to the analysis of Mehldau’s ‘classical’ compositions that wants to be complementary and conciliatory to the music theoretical discourse that takes place in online forums, jazz blogs and magazines at the one hand and the nascent musicological research at the other. It is the purpose of the analysis to shed light on how the pieces are constructed, which building blocks are used and how they interact with each other.

The repertoire under scrutiny is the catalogue of Mehldau’s lyrical compositions, notably *Lament for Linus*, *Resignation*, *29 Palms*, *Unrequited*, and *Ode (Number 19)*.

Methods

Following the path of a (20 minutes) associative stroll along some of Mehldau’s compositions, the underlying question is always how to analyse his music. Starting with the *sighing motif* and the augmented major 7th (or ‘girlfriend’) chord, the research is taken to a broader level by addressing modulating, tonally unstable and ambiguous passages.

Some of the analytical findings will be compared with other points of view, academic and non academic: the analysis of *29 Palms* will offer an alternative perspective to the Schenkerian analysis presented by Danny Arthurs in his doctoral thesis. In the discussion on the ‘girlfriend chord’, I will refer to ‘analyses’ found on an online jazz forum and in a jazz magazine respectively.

Implications

Combining the floating romanticism of Chopin and Schumann with the witty hipness of Gershwin and Porter in an extended jazz vernacular, gems like *Lament for Linus*, *Ode (Number 19)*, or *29 Palms* deserve to be appreciated as beautifully crafted compositions.

For the (teaching) music theorist, the loosely, but securely knit songs (without words) can serve as inspiring exemplars to all musicians, especially to those who want to play them, improvise on the *changes* — and (learn to) compose themselves.

Keywords

Brad Mehldau, Jazz, Modulation, Tonal Ambiguity, Harmonic Analysis.

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