

50. Miles Davis Quintet Four (opening) (For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background Information and Performance Circumstances

Biography

- The trumpeter and composer Miles Davis (1926-91) is widely regarded as the leading figure in American jazz in the second half of the 20th Century.
- Like Stravinsky in the world of 20th Century classical music, Miles Davis constantly explored new, often radically different styles.
- As a young man he worked with Charlie Parker and others to develop the beginnings of modern jazz in what came to be known as the Bebop style with its often fast speeds, advanced harmonies, complex syncopation, altered chords and chord substitution.
- In the late 50s he helped develop the 'Cool Jazz' style with more relaxed tempos and Debussy- influenced modal harmonies.
- It was in this period that he recorded the best selling jazz album of all time, Kind of Blue, honoured by the United States House of Representatives in 2009 as the perfect example of the 'national treasure' that is jazz.
- In the early 60s he changed to a more extreme version of the earlier bebop style, with very fast tempi and a new, free style of improvisation.
- The recording of *Four* used with the anthology is taken from a live recording in 1964.
- It is interesting to compare it with the original version from 1954 with its much slower speed, more sustained harmonies and restrained improvisatory approach:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPyJLRFk_UY
- Finally, from the late 60s, he experimented with a variety of jazz/rock fusion styles, adding electronic instruments to his band.

Performing Forces and Their Handling

Though Davis did occasionally experiment with big band performances, particularly during the classically influenced 'Cool Jazz' period, most of his recordings and live performances feature a small jazz combo. The minimum group until his later electric period consisted of a rhythm section of piano, bass and drums, together with himself on trumpet. The lead solo players often included at least one saxophone as well, forming a quintet. In the quintet recording of *Four* there is one tenor saxophone player.

Some features of the instrumental style of the piece are:

- Fast 'walking' bass line, played pizzicato (plucked) on double bass
- 'Comping' chord playing on the piano. The pianist has a more melodic solo later on in the complete 6 minute recording.
- The drum player keeps the tempo with a rapid rhythm on the ride cymbal, with occasional fills on the snare drum. The playing features occasional 'rim shots', where the drummer hits the rim of the drum at the same time as the skin.
- Miles Davis uses a number of special techniques in his playing:
 - First of all his improvised music is highly virtuosic (ie. demonstrates considerable skill in music of immense difficulty)
 - High, sometimes very high registers are a distinct feature, e.g. the beginning of the third chorus.
 - Fall offs, a kind of glissando, where the player 'falls off' the note, descending in pitch to nothing (eg. end of 1.15).
 - Ghost note – a very quiet note that hardly exists, e.g. the second note of the second chorus
 - Pitch bend – using the lips to slide the pitch, eg. 1.19-1.20
 - Half valving – pushing the valve part of the way down, altering the tone and slightly lowering the pitch of the note

Texture

- In the head, the trumpet and tenor sax play in octaves over piano chords which are synchronised with the double bass – effectively a melody dominated homophony texture.
- The break before the first improvised solo (two bars before 1.1) is monophonic for solo trumpet.
- Sometimes, as at the beginning of the first ‘chorus’, the piano is silent, leaving a bare two part texture for trumpet and bass, with drum accompaniment.
- A feature of the texture of the individual parts is the very high tessitura for trumpet and double bass, and the walking bass line.

Structure

The music is a ‘head arrangement’ with the 32 bar tune stated at the beginning, after a drum solo introduction. There is then a series of solo, improvised 32 bar ‘choruses’. The extract only contains the three choruses for trumpet, but later in the full recording, there are solos for tenor sax and piano. The same chord changes (chord sequences) are used for the head as well as all the choruses.

The head itself contains a 16 bar theme, repeated with an altered ending, leading to a solo ‘break’ which links the head and the first chorus.

Tonality

The whole piece is in Eb major, though the style is so chromatic in the choruses that this tonality is not always evident. The melody of the head itself is more diatonic, though the harmony is chromatic even there.

Harmony

The underlying chord progressions are relatively straightforward. At the most harmonically basic level, it is easy to imagine the first four bars on the tonic, and then the next four might be on the subdominant A flat – though they are replaced by the supertonic 7th. The last bar in each 4-bar phrase moves to a minor 7th chord with a flat 3rd.

There are then four bars with chromatically descending harmony ($Gm^{(7)}-F\#m^{(7)}-Fm^{(7)}$ leading to the dominant 7th $Bb^{(7)}$), which are then repeated, the dominant 7th acting as the ideal chord to lead back to the tonic for the start of the tune again. The progression of Fm^7 to Bb^7 (ii^7-V^7) is a standard 'turnaround' progression in jazz, used to lead back to the beginning.

Because this music is in bebop style, the harmony is much more complex and dissonant. The supertonic 7th harmony of H5 has a G in the melody, becoming the 9th of the chord. Meanwhile, the printed transcription of the performance shows the range of chords used by the pianist. Every chord is an extended chord. The first is a 9th, the third is a diminished 7th and the fourth is a 9th chord in 1st inversion, while the bass rises chromatically. The concentration on the upper extensions of chords is an important element of the bebop style. Note the 11th in H6.

Other features include:

- the circle of 5ths in bars 1.26-1.29
- the frequent use of substitution chords, eg. bar 1.25, which has an Eb chord, instead of the expected Gm7.

Melody

The head melody features short, three-note, scalic phrases, repeated and then inverted (bar H2). The first four-bar phrase is then repeated in sequence, down a perfect 5th. The next two bars are more chromatic, and have occasional larger leaps, like the 6th at the end of the second time bar. The range is relatively narrow (only a 9th from low Eb to high F).

The choruses have a much wider pitch range. The scalic idea of the head is retained, as in the break, which descends in gapped chromatic fashion from high concert C (D on a B

flat trumpet). The second chorus features some very low pitches (eg. concert G in 2.24) as well as the highest 'screaming' notes at the beginning of the third chorus.

Repeated notes are a distinctive feature of the overlap into the fourth chorus.

Sometimes Davis develops short motifs, which are repeated, as in the 2nd and 6th bars of the third chorus.

It is important to note that despite the scalar nature of much of this music, the improvisations are based on the chordal material of the head, rather than its tune.

Wide leaps are a feature of the third chorus, including the major 7th leaps in 3.21-24.

The various special techniques described earlier all have an effect on the melodic line.

Rhythm and metre

The main rhythm is continuous groups of quavers, sometimes extending for up to three bars, e.g. bars 2.20-22. This is combined in the choruses with a continuous crotchet fast walking bass. The quavers tend to be slightly swung.

Longer note values tend to be kept for passages where Davis is using special techniques like fall offs (bar 1.15).

The head is very syncopated, with the first beat of the bar often avoided. Almost every piano chord is 'pushed' - played just before the beat.

Triplets are found occasionally in the choruses, eg. 2.5-6.