

The Classical Tinge

Part 4: Schumann, Sonny, Ludwig and Louis

DAVE JONES continues his series on the relationship between classical music and jazz

This time, I'll be looking at the improvisational connections in terms of cadenzas between jazz and music of the classical and romantic periods, the motivic phrase development of Ludwig van Beethoven and Sonny Rollins, and also Clara Schumann's solo improvised romantic preluding at the piano, alongside solo piano introductions to standards in jazz.

Pianist Robert Levin (2009) says: "Mozart's performances were designed to display his talents as improviser, pianist, and composer (that is the order his contemporaries assigned to his gifts). His piano concertos contain contrived chasms – pauses he bridged with impulsive audacity, the so-called cadenzas and lead-ins . . . Furthermore, Mozart left many passages in sketched or schematic form, relying on the whims of live performance to fill in the specific expressive content anew at each performance."

The extent and type of improvisation in Mozart's performances of his piano concertos ranged from motivic development to completely free improvisation. Take, for example, his A major concerto K.488. Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett have both performed solo and concerto works by Mozart, and have also recorded Mozart piano duets together. In their interpretation of the cadenzas Jarrett is more conservative in approach, staying closer to what the original might have sounded like, whereas Corea is more adventurous and treats Mozart's themes in a more jazz-orientated style with extended harmonies and bop-like phrases.

William Kinderman (2009) says: "Beethoven's ability to improvise at the keyboard was



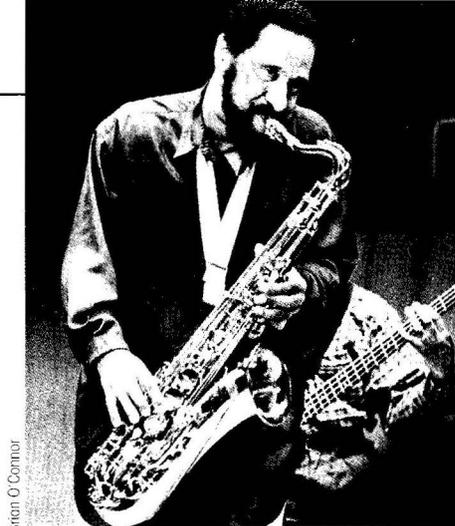
Clara Schumann: "I would like to write out the preludes that I play . . . but it is so difficult because I do it differently every time, just as it occurs to me at the piano"

regarded as extraordinary and was much commented on by his contemporaries." In the earlier part of his musical career, Beethoven preferred to conduct and improvise ("fantasieren" as he called it) rather than perform his published works. "Eyewitness reports of Beethoven's improvisations stress his capacity for developing much out of little," which is also typical of his compositions, e.g. his Fifth Symphony, where he generates a sizeable work from one original four-note musical phrase. There's a distinct similarity here with the improvisational style of Sonny Rollins, who employs extensive motivic phrase development in his lengthy solos, and this also applies to numerous other jazz musicians.

Unlike the traditional image of Beethoven as the serious, scoring composer with quill pen in hand, he was apparently often quite reluctant about fully scoring his works. In 1803, Ignaz Seyfried, who acted as page turner for Beethoven's performance of his C minor piano concerto, said of the piano score, ". . . at the most . . . a few Egyptian hieroglyphs wholly unintelligible to me, scribbled down to serve as clues for him." However, in later years, largely owing to ill health and fewer public performances, improvisation played a lesser part in Beethoven's music.

In the romantic period Clara Schumann was acclaimed by the virtuosic pianist and innovative composer Franz Liszt (himself a great improviser) as one of the greatest improvisers of her time. Goertzen (1998) says: "The young Clara did not learn to read music in her first year of study. Her father sought instead to develop her touch and tone together with her knowledge of harmony and rhythm without the distraction of written notes. She played by rote the small pieces he taught her, learned to play cadential progressions in all the keys and to transpose, and began to improvise." Clara also utilised Carl Czerny's 1830 *Systematic Introduction To Improvisation On The Pianoforte* (Czerny was a pupil of Beethoven), which enabled her to develop her improvisa-

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tion on given themes, and she says of her improvised preludes, "I would like to write out the preludes that I play . . . but it is so difficult because I do it differently every time, just as it occurs to me at the piano." Her intentions in these preludes were partly to set the mood and the key and to hint at the identity of the forthcoming melody, which is for the most part similar to what a jazz pianist would do in a solo piano introduction for a standard.

Louis Armstrong compared his opening trumpet cadenza on *West End Blues* with the New Orleans clarinetists he liked to imitate, and Gunther Schuller (1968) sees this introduction ". . . as the perfect jazz counterpart to the hundreds of popular cornet cadenzas that were such an integral aspect of the American musical tradition." That might well be the case, but it's difficult to argue against the case that any cadenza in jazz must ultimately derive from those in European classical music, where they had been commonplace for centuries in performance terms, and by Armstrong's era were also available in recorded form. Terry Teachout (2009), in response to Armstrong's above claim says: "[It] has at least as much in common with the florid bel canto cadenzas he had heard in the operatic recordings of Amelita Galli-Curci and Luisa Tetrazzini."

At the time of writing, British pianist/composer Gwilym Simcock has a new album due for release entitled *Reverie At Schloss Elmau*, with Yuri Goloubev on bass. It demonstrates Simcock's affinity with music of the romantic period, and in early January 2014 he performed interpretations of J.S. Bach with his jazz quartet as part of a series of "Bach Unwrapped" concerts in London. Unfortunately, these were too late for much discussion here, but Simcock may well feature later in this series of articles, as no doubt will the Polish pianist/composer Leszek Możdżer, whose *Impressions* recordings of his variations and improvisations on themes by Chopin are among his most famous.

These two pianists meet for a duet performance this month at London's Steinway Festival and in April 2014 Simcock will release another new album entitled *Instrumentation*, which sees him occupying the territory between classical and jazz (where he is most comfortable) but this time with much larger forces as he's joined by The City of London Sinfonia plus Goloubev on bass and Martin France on drums.