

Third Stream Music

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“Third stream” is a term coined by musicologist Gunther Schuller to describe music produced through a blending of the first stream (classical music) and the second stream (jazz): “Third Stream is a concept of composing, improvising, and performing which seeks to fuse, creatively, jazz (and other vernacular musics) with contemporary classical concepts and techniques” (12, fn13). This style of music raises many problems and challenges for the improvising musician. The apparently rigid scores and orchestrations of classical music would seem to leave little room for individual improvisation; yet that same individualistic, improvisational spirit so strongly associated with jazz may be interpreted as akin to the spirit of classical music from past centuries before its canon had been fixed and codified. Thus third stream music may constitute both a new musical genre and a recombination of once familiar elements severed by centuries of Western musical tradition. Such recombination requires not only a highly skilled synthesis of musical styles and traditions on the part of the improvising musician, but also an innovative synthesis of authorship. The third stream highlights the creative powers of both the classical composer/arranger and the jazz soloist/improviser and thus embodies a uniquely collaborative form of musical expression.

An excellent example of such musical collaboration can be found in three albums produced through Columbia Records in the late 1950s by arranger Gil Evans and trumpet player Miles Davis: *Miles Ahead*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *Sketches of Spain*. *Miles Ahead* was released in 1957 to great critical acclaim and robust record sales: according to Larry

Hicock, “It solidified the emergence of Miles Davis as the foremost jazz voice of his time. And it brought Gil Evans into the limelight for the first time in his career” (92). Much of the album’s popularity may be attributed to its creative exploration of jazz improvisation within a classical music context. Miles Davis is featured on flugelhorn backed by a nineteen-piece orchestra composed of many instruments uncommon in jazz, including French horn, tuba, flute, and bass clarinet. The album is designed as a suite, with ten pieces connected together without breaks so as to highlight Davis in a variety of different moods and settings, providing a continuous portrait of him as a soloist (Horricks 29). Much praise has also been directed at the combined artistic force of the Evans/Davis duo. Hicock outlines a process whereby “Gil, the writer, toiled endlessly over each and every note, whereas the genius of Miles, the performer, lay in his spontaneous choices and interpretation of those notes” (89), resulting in a “balance and blending of Gil’s orchestral voice with Miles’ solo voice [that] was the crowning touch for *Miles Ahead* and would become the hallmark of the Davis-Evans partnership” (88). Jack Chambers similarly describes a musical product that “went well beyond the concerns of the third stream movement, melding the styles of Davis and Evans so forcibly and so compatibly as to create an individuality all its own” (257).¹

This hybridization of both musical genre and authorship is amply demonstrated on the track “Blues for Pablo,” a piece that foreshadows Evans and Davis’ later work on *Sketches of Spain*. The song opens with Davis soloing in a lonely and mournful style over a flamenco rhythm; however, the tempo quickly shifts into a slow swing with Davis accompanied by a bass ostinato. This blues theme in a major key conflicts with Davis’

flamenco solo in a minor one, establishing a stylistic and rhythmic tension that will continue through the piece. This track is emblematic of Evans' efforts to challenge the improvisational range of his soloist. In his liner notes to *Miles Ahead*, Andre Hodeir observes that in "Blues for Pablo," "Evans breaks away here at a few points from the four-bar unit of construction and thus destroys the symmetrical form of the traditional blues, which is something that very few arrangers would dare to do" (13). Raymond Horricks similarly credits Evans with encouraging Davis to move beyond the limits of song form and 12-bar blues in his solos (36). For his part, Davis answers and surpasses Evans' challenge, adapting his playing so smoothly to this complex musical mimesis that his improvisations are virtually indistinguishable from the written arrangements.

Evans and Davis progressed from the dual composition of *Miles Ahead* to what might be described as a trio composition. *Porgy and Bess* was first an American opera composed by George Gershwin in 1935. Gershwin viewed jazz as American folk music, and by mixing it with classical and Broadway music was said to have "made a lady out of jazz" (Smith 5). In 1958, Columbia commissioned Evans and Davis to produce a jazz version of this opera, hoping to capitalize on "the brouhaha that was certain to surround the release of the movie in 1959" (Chambers 290). Evans, however, took great liberties in his arrangements of the opera. Some pieces, such as "Summertime," retain their melodic lines, but with "their melodies 'sung' by Davis" (Chambers 292); others bear little resemblance to the original score, such as "I Loves You Porgy," where "Gil scored long passages using just two sustained chords for the orchestra and, for Miles, a single scale" (Hicock 103), emphasizing melodic rather than harmonic variation and

foreshadowing the modal jazz of *Kind of Blue*; while “Gone” is an entirely new composition by Evans.² In the liner notes to *Porgy and Bess*, Charles Edward Smith quotes Evans stating, “The three of us, it seems to me, collaborated in the album,” and suggests that “Gershwin himself was creating anew as jazz ideas, always latent in his scores [...] came to life” (4). Hicock likewise asserts that “Gershwin might even have acknowledged that the Davis-Evans collaboration, more than any performance before it, was the most successful realization of his own vision of this music as a synthesis of African-American ‘folk’ and Western European ‘serious’ forms” (101).

An excellent example of this synthesis is “Prayer (Oh Doctor Jesus),” where Evans integrates black spiritual music with the urban sounds of jazz and classical music. The piece opens with Davis soloing over a humming pedal note in the bass in a call and response pattern with the orchestra. His sound is smooth and lyrical, very much in the style of Gershwin, and he often slides around the pitch making it sound as though he is floating over the notes. At 1:42, the music shifts into a slow blues with Davis now accompanied by an ostinato pattern from the orchestra supported by long tones from the trombones. This pattern continues to increase in volume up to 3:57 with the French horns producing siren-like sounds. These swells create the image of an urban atmosphere where people seem to be praying and lamenting as they go about their daily business. After a climax of volume and intensity there is a rapid decrescendo and release of tension. The music becomes more subdued, like a weary city after the people have returned to their homes for the night. One might discern in these chords and rhythms the lament of the slave songs transported from the plantation to the ghetto.

The previous collaborations between Evans and Davis culminated in the production of *Sketches of Spain* in 1959 and 1960. Owing to the history of Spain and its occupation by the Moors, Evans incorporated both Spanish and African musical scales into his arrangements (Davis 241-42). These complex arrangements—characterized by subtly shifting rhythms, textures, and colours, cross-voiced chords, and diatonic lines (Hentoff 8-9)—proved unusually challenging and required highly skilled musicians fluent in a range of musical styles and philosophies. In his autobiography, Davis complains about how, “In the beginning, we had the wrong trumpet players”: classically trained musicians who “couldn’t improvise their way out of a paper bag” (243), and praises those who “can both read a musical score and feel it” (244). These same challenges, however, are what earned the album its status as one of the greatest jazz recordings ever made. In the liner notes, Nat Hentoff applauds Davis and Evans in equal measure: “It is as if Miles had been born of Andalusian gypsies but, instead of picking up the guitar, had decided to make a trumpet the expression of his *cante hondo* (‘deep song’).” And Evans also indicates a thorough absorption of the Spanish musical temper which he has transmuted into his own uncompromising musical style” (6). Hicock also singles out the album for offering “a picture-perfect example of third stream’s elusive ‘symbiosis’ of the two forms” (115), and Schuller himself states of Evans, “I think he *was* a third-stream sensibility, because he took from both areas, I would say almost in an equal amount” (qtd. in Hicock 115).³

One of the highlights from *Sketches of Spain*, and a masterpiece of the third stream musical approach, is the sixteen-minute performance of the Adagio from Spanish

composer Joaquin Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez." The piece was originally written for guitar and orchestra; Evans replaces the guitar here with trumpet and flugelhorn. The recording opens with a classical, orchestral statement of the Concierto's familiar theme, around which Davis then improvises classical embellishments. At 3:50, the tempo shifts into a blues feel and Davis solos with a very bright tone and lyrical rhythm. At 5:51, the classical flamenco sound returns as a background of trilled flutes and harp. Davis engages in a call and response pattern with this background, producing a meditative sequence in which the orchestra seems to ponder the ideas he expresses. At 9:18, the jazz rhythm returns and he solos accompanied by the tuba and a bass ostinato. Davis' solo during this section, on trumpet with harmon mute, sounds very ominous, and he produces a particularly full and bright sound in the lower range of his instrument. Gradually, more accompaniment is added and the jazz rhythm begins to fade away until the bass ostinato drops out at 11:07. In this way, Evans allows jazz and classical elements to blend almost imperceptibly. From here, the orchestra crescendos until 12:46, where there is a dramatic restatement of the opening theme followed by a soft denouement. This recording features some of the most extraordinarily subtle, brooding, and emotional solos of Davis' career, and may constitute a rare success against what Schuller describes as "the ancient problem of Third Stream efforts: how to integrate highly individual [...] soloists into a more ambitious and specific compositional framework" (709).

While Miles Davis' status as one of the greatest improvisers and jazz musicians of the twentieth century is unquestioned, Gil Evans, unfortunately, has often been overlooked by jazz historians and fans⁴—primarily because of his status as an "arranger":

a label that suggests to many a secondary, derivative role in comparison to the original creativity of the “composer.”⁵ As these three albums clearly illustrate, however, Evans’ arrangements are every bit as creative as anyone else’s compositions. Chambers discusses “the difficult issue of just where to draw the line between composing on the one hand and orchestrating and arranging on the other,” arguing that “Evans crosses that line and recrosses it freely in this music” and that “His arrangements are, in a sense, compositions in their own right” (259). Hicoock similarly highlights “Gil’s genius for ‘recomposing’—transforming other people’s music into something all his own” (87). Evans is also praised for his skill in laying the musical foundations for improvisation: baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, in the liner notes to *Miles Ahead*, describes Evans as “the one arranger I’ve ever played who can really notate a thing the way a soloist would blow it” (qtd. in Hodeir 13); and Davis himself states in his autobiography, “I loved working with Gil because he was so meticulous and creative, and I trusted his musical arrangements completely” (215). In the process of walking a fine line between classical music and jazz, Evans would appear to have also created a third medium of musical expression, balanced delicately between composition and performance.

Notes

¹ All citations of Chambers refer to *Milestones 1* unless otherwise indicated.

² Chambers states, “Among the outpouring of jazz scores at the end of the 1950s and later, which were never more than jazzed-up versions of their Broadway or Hollywood originals, Davis and Evans’ *Porgy and Bess* is a breed apart. It is a new score, with its own integrity, order, and action” (292).

³ Schuller, significantly, played French horn in Evans’ orchestra for *Porgy and Bess*, and also played French horn with Davis and Evans in 1950 on several of the later recordings from their famous *Birth of the Cool* sessions.

⁴ In the liner notes to *Miles Ahead*, Hodeir asks, “Why is it that the author of these masterpieces, the composer-arranger Gil Evans, has remained almost unknown by the jazz public” (11)?

⁵ In *Milestones 2*, Chambers quotes Evans lamenting the status of arrangers in the recording industry: “‘You know, an arranger’s job is kind of a loser’s job, in a sense, because once you get paid for an arrangement, that’s the end of it,’ he told Zan Stewart. ‘Like for the Miles Davis sides – *Miles Ahead*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Sketches of Spain* – I got paid and that’s it. The people who wrote the original lines get the royalties” (13).

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