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Bill Evans Senior Honors Project

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Bill Evans Senior Honors Project

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HNR 499

Dr. Ellenberger

Introduction to Bill Evans:

Bill Evans was one of the most influential pianists in the development of jazz music. Through his piano playing he incorporated into the jazz syntax Classical techniques and lyrical pianism in previously unexplored ways. His approach to jazz employed an exceptionally broad span of dynamics, pianistic techniques, harmonic extensions and polyrhythmic motifs. Evans demonstrated a complete emotional palette in his playing through his wide arsenal of musical techniques. He masterfully balanced improvisatory spontaneity with intentional preparation. Evans' purposeful and contemplative approach to the production of his music established him as a powerful figure in the development of jazz. To properly understand Evans' influence on jazz piano playing, a few core principles regarding jazz piano playing must be explained.

Components of Jazz Piano Playing:

Jazz piano playing consists of two primary components. The first component of jazz piano is the harmonic content of the accompaniment, which is referred to in the colloquial as "comping". Comping provides a harmonic backdrop upon which the melodic forefront may stand. For example, medium and up-tempo swing tunes receive most of their comping content from quick, interjectory offbeat chords. These succinct "stabbed" chords provide energy and momentum, by working in a conversational manner with both the soloist and with the other members of the rhythm section. Ballads, in contrast, have developed with more Classical influence in the form of sustained harmonies and fluid step-wise movement in the voicings. This smooth approach to comping adds gravity and depth to the tune. Evans showed these traits in his playing with curt and rhythmically displaced comping chords accompanying upbeat tunes. In his ballad playing, Evans' comping was elongated and incessantly focused on the voice-leading from one chord voicing to another. Evans was known for imbuing his renditions of ballads with intense emotions. This emotional depth was possible in part due to his voice-leading as shown in his comping.

The second component of jazz piano playing is the art of improvised soloing. Improvised soloing as a form of musical development in Western Classical music reached its peak usage during the Classical and Romantic eras. In these eras, improvised solos generally took the form of cadenzas. Cadenzas were expository passages which accentuated one instrument within an

ensemble or orchestra. Cadenzas from these eras were often improvised during a live performance and would showcase the soloist's technical prowess. There would also be references made to the piece's thematic material amid the technical passages as a testament to the soloist's creativity. The presence of improvisation in Western Classical music diminished over time, but improvisatory music found new life in the 20th century through the emergence of jazz big bands.

In the Dixieland era (1900 – 1930) and the Swing era (1930 – 1945) of jazz, improvised soloing consisted mainly of short outbursts of individuality from the horn section members. In the Dixieland era, solos often occurred as a group improvisation in which the full horn section would solo simultaneously. In the Swing era, improvised solos were more reminiscent of Classical soloing in the usage of individual solos. These solos drew inspiration from the melodic content of the tune being played, well-known musical gestures, colloquially known as “riffs”, and the harmonic landscape produced by the rhythm section. The next genre of jazz music to emerge was bebop, which organically emerged from the swing era and as such is difficult to assign a specific date in time for its origin. Bebop improvised soloing elaborated upon the previous solo format by expanding the harmonic and melodic language upon which the solos were built. Harmonic content expanded to commonly include extended or altered chord tones. The addition of this new variety of chord tones functioned in much the same way as adding phonetic sounds and letters to a spoken language's dialect would; it allowed for the creation of new sounds and phrases.

The jazz syntax was broadened immensely by the new melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic combinations used in the bebop era. The melodic content of jazz branched out to include modes and unique scalar patterns in the solo lines and in the melodies of tunes in a style known as cool jazz. Miles Davis was one of the first to embrace the musical dialect of modes into his jazz compositions. Davis sought out Bill Evans precisely because he was capable, with his Classical background, to provide a nuanced and sophisticated approach to the use of modes, which Evans garnered from his mastery of Ravel and Debussy. Bebop was already an established subgenre of jazz when Evans began to play jazz, but the techniques of classical piano had not yet been fully integrated into jazz piano, in particular, the use of “color” as an expressive tool. Pedaling technique and “touch” are both primary means of achieving a more colorful piano tone, and both were underutilized in jazz before Evans.

Most jazz pianists do not incorporate their instrument's pedals into their playing as a means of effecting tone color changes. The usual preference is for the piano to function primarily as a percussive instrument rather than a flowing and lyrical stringed instrument. Evans utilized the sustain pedal with classical mastery, and through it he delivered heartfelt lines with the ‘soul’ of the piano fully in his command. (The sustain pedal is often referred to as the soul of

the piano for its ability to connect a series of pitches together cohesively).¹ The sustain pedal helps to transform a piano from a percussive instrument into a percussive and lyrical one. Evans' Classical training enabled him to take full advantage of the sustain pedal to lyrically connect the various layers of voices in his jazz playing.

An accomplished jazz pianist is constantly aware of the usage of rhythms and harmonies while accompanying or performing an improvised solo. This prevents the pianist from falling into a subconsciously derived set of standard rhythmic and harmonic sequences for comping material. The construction of rhythmic and harmonic combinations should be grounded in practiced sequences and logical progressions. However, when traditional approaches are too heavily relied upon, the music can become stagnant and predictable. The choice of rhythms and harmonies should be mentally engaging. They should originate from an internal palette of tonal colors and rhythmic shades. Their usage should be purposeful and emotionally justified. They should also be melodic, with strong voice-leading at their foundation. Evans succeeded in avoiding musical stagnation by nurturing a healthy, collaborative relationship between his heart and mind. In the brief film documentary, *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans*, Bill Evans expounds upon the value of connecting the heart and mind in the creation of jazz music while conversing with his brother, Harry Evans. Bill Evans mastered traditional rhythmic and harmonic progressions in order to organically incorporate unique and original concepts into his playing that were grounded by cornerstone musical elements. Evans mastered traditional rhythmic and harmonic progressions to organically incorporate unique and original concepts into his playing that were grounded by cornerstone musical elements.

Evans was always focused on the music in the moment that it was occurring. His emotional depth was seemingly inexhaustible. Regarding the validity and purpose of Evans' music, legendary jazz saxophonist Cannonball Adderley stated: "Bill Evans has rare originality and taste and the even rarer ability to make his conception of a standard seem the definitive way to play it."² It was through the mastery of these previously mentioned jazz piano techniques and concepts that Evans achieved such monumental success as a jazz musician. With the core principles of jazz piano playing established, the musical development of Evans and how he changed jazz piano can be analyzed.

The Beginning of Bill Evans:

Bill Evans' first encounters with music were as an observer, watching as his older brother, Harry, received lessons on the piano. Evans was known for sitting down at the piano and attempting to replicate what he had heard his brother playing. When Evans took lessons of his own at age six, he flourished. He showed a natural propensity for accurately playing written

¹ Anton Rubinstein, Teresa Carreño (2013). "The Art of Piano Pedaling: Two Classic Guides", p.13, Courier Corporation

² Pettinger, P. *Bill Evans How My Heart Sings*,

music the first time he saw it, which is a skill known as sight-reading. Evans' first piano teacher encouraged him in his sight-reading skills. She did not chastise him for his distaste in repetitive practice, instead, she nurtured his exceptional sight-reading ability and taught him how to read a great deal of intricate music accurately. The reinforcement of his natural gifting led young Evans to form a positive relationship with music. His relationship with music was unencumbered by the negativity that can come about from forced practice sessions. Even into his collegiate years, Evans found tedious repetition an unenjoyable part of his musical studies. He excelled in music despite his dislike for monotonous technical exercises through a strong emotional connection to music. His emotional connection to music led him to play the piano with feeling as his prime motivator for practicing.

At the age of seven, Evans took violin lessons. The violin was not as alluring to him as the piano was, but it did instill valuable musical qualities in him. His characteristic "singing", lyrical lines on the piano may have been inspired by his violin playing. Evans exhibited exceptional attention to detail when it came to articulation and phrasing at the piano. In music, articulations add "color" and variety to the music by accentuating, shortening, elongating or smoothing individual notes. Phrasing also produces variety in music by shaping the volume and inflection of individual notes in a sequence of notes, called motifs, to invoke an emotion. The piano is incapable of swelling in volume and indefinitely sustained pitches as a percussive instrument. Regardless of this fact, Evans dedicated himself to creating a sound quality on the piano which created the illusion of swelling and sustain to increase his expressive capabilities. He also focused on accentuating important notes within each chord he played. This accentuation provided his playing with direction and a tangible purpose behind the selection of each note. Intentionality and mental preparation were essential to Evans' success as a jazz artist.

Despite his displeasure with traditional practice routines, Evans developed into an articulate Classical pianist by his teenage years. Bill and Harry Evans were both capable of tasteful renditions of challenging Classical piano repertoire. To quote Bill Evans, "From the age of six to thirteen, I acquired the ability to sight-read and to play classical music, so that actually both of us (brother included) were performing Mozart... intelligently, musically. Yet I couldn't play 'My Country Tis of Thee' without the notes."³ Although he was proficient at playing written music, Evans had not yet developed the ability to play music by "ear", meaning he could not hear music then mimic what he heard at the piano accurately. Evans would later develop the ability to play by "ear" out of necessity in jazz ensemble settings. In a jazz ensemble, there is rarely verbal communication during a tune, requiring players to hear one another's musical expressions and complement them with their own expressions.

Evans' comprehension regarding Classical music did not come about through conventional means. His relationship with music was less as a Classical pianist or

³ Pettinger, P. *Bill Evans How My Heart Sings*, pg. 12

instrumentalist than as an emotional being seeking a means of self-expression. Evans went as far as to state: “Everything I’ve learned, I’ve learned with feeling being the generating force. I’ve never approached the piano as a thing itself, but as a gateway to music.”⁴ Showing his versatile musicality, Evans played the flute during his high school years and went on to play flute in marching and military bands during his time in the United States army. Evans strove to not merely be a skilled pianist, but to be a brilliant musician no matter what instrumental conduit he was using to make music.

Classical meets Jazz:

Evans graduated from Louisiana State University in 1950 with a degree in musical education. The repertoire from his senior piano recital provides insight into the caliber of Classical musicianship Evans achieved. The first third of Evans’ recital repertoire consisted of one of Johann Sebastian Bach’s prelude and fugues from the Well-Tempered Clavier, a brief and moody Johannes Brahms Capriccio, and Frederic Chopin’s Scherzo in B Flat minor, opus 31. The selection of these three composers is quite common for a piano recital. J. S. Bach’s preludes and fugues are often included in keyboard recitals for their physically challenging and intellectually engaging polyphonic construction. Polyphony refers to music in which there are multiple individual musical lines being played or sung at one time, interweaving and harmonizing. For pianists, polyphonic works are especially challenging as the pianist is responsible for the production of many simultaneous musical lines through only two deft hands and one capable mind. Bach’s works also require of a pianist a mastery of voicing and weight displacement. Evans said of Bach: “Bach changed my hand approach to playing the piano. I used to use a lot of finger technique when I was younger, and I changed over to a weight technique. Actually, if you play Bach and the voices sing at all, and sustain the way they should, you can’t really play it with the wrong approach. It’s going to straighten you out in a hurry if you have a concept of what it should sound like.”⁵

The second portion of Evans’ senior recital was dedicated to a select collection of Dmitri Kabalevsky’s preludes for piano. Kabalevsky’s *Preludes, Op. 38*, was at the time a very contemporary work, as it had only just been composed in 1944, six years prior. Instead of performing the Kabalevsky preludes in chronological order, Evans chose to perform for his recital 4 of the 24 preludes in a very particular order: No. 4, No. 2, No. 18, and No. 6. Each of these short pieces are based on a Russian folksong and each numbered prelude tells of an event or dramatic occurrence in the Russian folksong. Evans chose to disregard the obvious ordering of the four pieces to create his own audible narrative. This conscious choice to rearrange another musician’s works offers insight into the musical mind of Evans. He sought to

⁴ Pettinger, P. *Bill Evans How My Heart Sings*, pg. 11

⁵ Pettinger, P. *Bill Evans How My Heart Sings*, pg. 39

establish a coherent and recognizable narrative through his music, not just in one phrase, or even in just one piece, but throughout the entirety of a performance.

The final third of Evans' senior recital consisted of a performance of the first movement of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37*. This performance on April 24th, 1950, was accompanied by Evans' primary collegiate piano teacher, Ronald Stetzel. This part of the performance showed Evans' ability to collaborate with another musician. This was a skill which he would call upon in his future jazz ensemble roles, especially in trio settings. It was through the study of Classical works such as these that Evans prepared himself for a successful future in musical performance. The refined touch technique and nuanced lyrical lines which Evans possessed from his Classical training became a permanent and defining feature of his jazz language, and likewise became a feature of the music of many pianists who followed.

Evans' career in music shifted primarily towards jazz performance and composition after his graduation from Louisiana State University in 1950. However, Evans did not cease studying Classical forms and techniques. His expertise as a well-rounded musician was called upon in New York in 1957 for a musical exhibition in the Brandeis Jazz Festival. The Brandeis Jazz Festival focused on the newly-coined "third-stream" of musical composition. The "third-stream" was a term established by Gunther Schuller in recognition of the growing relationship between European Classical music and American jazz music. The Brandeis Jazz Festival, organized by Schuller, featured ensemble works by three jazz composers: Charles Mingus, Jimmy Giuffre, and George Russell and three classical composers: Gunther Schuller, Milton Babbitt, and Harold Shapero. Evans performed splendidly at the festival, calling upon his Classical training to master the concert's full roster of challenging and diverse pieces. He improvised tasteful solos over the jazz compositions and masterfully performed exploratory Classical-Jazz fusion works like Babbitt's "All Set", a complicated, mathematically derived composition written with a jazz ensemble instrumentation.

Bill Evans and Miles Davis:

Evans held a profound philosophy on how to earn a living as a jazz musician. To quote Evans, "Now how should I tackle this practical problem of becoming a jazz musician, as making a living... I came to the conclusion all I must do is take care of the music, even if I do it in a closet. And if I really do that, somebody is going to come and open the door of the closet and say, 'Hey, we're looking for you.'" ⁶ In spring of 1958, Miles Davis came looking for Evans' talents. Davis needed a new pianist for his quintet and inquired of jazz composer George Russell and jazz saxophonist Cannonball Adderley as to whom he should audition for the role. Both musicians recommended Evans. Evans played in one of Davis' gigs at the Colony Club in Brooklyn and was invited to permanently join Miles Davis' group that very evening.

⁶ Pettinger, P. *Bill Evans How My Heart Sings*, pg. 38

The fateful connection between Miles Davis and Bill Evans led to musical growth in both individuals. Miles said of Evans, "Boy, I've sure learned a lot from Bill Evans. He plays the piano the way it should be played."⁷ Some critics saw Evans' nuanced Classical approach as an enemy to the raw energy Miles' group previously possessed. Miles saw Evans' approach as a great asset to his group's sound quality and considered Evans' Classical background and nuanced playing style of great value. Evans had a great respect for Miles long before they ever met in person. The offer to join Miles' group greatly strengthened Evans' opinion of himself as a jazz musician. Evans stated on the subject: "...If I continued to feel inadequate as a pianist, it would be to deny my respect for Davis. So I began to accept the position in which I had been placed."⁸ The exposure Evans received from his time with the legendary Miles Davis further established Evans in the spotlight of the jazz community. Evans went on to record over 50 albums and led his own jazz ensembles to great success. He also released a handful of solo albums which showcased his exemplary emotional and sophisticated playing, including his 1968 solo piano album, *Alone*.

Analysis of Midnight Mood:

On his solo album, *Alone*, Evans recorded his solo piano version of Joe Zawinul's *Midnight Mood*. An examination of this solo arrangement provides valuable insight into Evans' most intimate musical elements. Zawinul's original conception of the composition was bold and sharp in character. Evans' rendition is in every way smoother and more sensuous. The tempo and energy are retained from the original, but the emotional content from Evans transforms the piece into a love song. It is a love song in the most un-romanticized of ways. It does not sing only of the good times nor of a fairytale "happily ever-after". It tells of the quarrels and tragedies which come with any love affair. The honesty with which Evans presents his soul invites a listener to join in the emotional journey. Evans' musical aptitude and expressive control of the piano create an environment where his raw emotions come to the forefront of the piece.

In terms of musical construction, Evans' *Midnight Mood* has two components which stand out as prime examples of his brilliant musicality. The first of which is the usage of rhythmic displacement. Rhythmic displacement is the musical technique of interjecting rhythms into a piece which do not align with the strong beats or overall rhythmic cadence of the piece. In *Midnight Mood*, Evans juxtaposed rhythmic figures against the established cadence of the piece through the staggering of his bassline rhythms. In the introductory portion of the piece, Evans establishes a swaying jazz waltz rhythm which permeates the recording. During the main melody of the tune, Evans uses only consistent, pulsating arrival points for the left-hand bass notes, marking the beginning of each measure. During a restatement of the introductory

⁷ Pettinger, P. *Bill Evans How My Heart Sings*, pg. 51

⁸ Pettinger, P. *Bill Evans How My Heart Sings*, pg. 53

content, Evans stretches out the space between these arrival notes. The jazz waltz rhythm in *Midnight Mood*, which is comprised of a strong downbeat every three beats, is intentionally subverted by the staggering of the left hand's lowest notes. This produces the illusion of movement into another rhythmic style without ever actually leaving the format of a jazz waltz.

Examples of rhythmic manipulation in Evans' *Midnight Mood*



A musical score snippet from Evans' *Midnight Mood*. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The music consists of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand. A red label "Paused" is positioned above the right hand staff in the fourth measure.

Example of rhythmic consistency in the bassline



A musical score snippet from Evans' *Midnight Mood*, starting at measure 30. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The music consists of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand. The bassline shows rhythmic displacement.

Example of rhythmic displacement in the bassline

The second example of Evans' musical brilliance is the usage of modulation, which in music refers to a shift in key center. Evans begins the tune in the key of Db major. The head of the tune is stated once in this home key, then modulates up a half-step to D major for the restatement of the main melody. The first modulation, beginning in measure 30, (see Example 1) is a concise enharmonic modulation which hinges upon the distant relationship between Db major and D major. In measure 30, the Gb/F# minor7 chord can be considered the first chord to have a logical function in both Db major and D major, however, that is not where the modulation occurs. It occurs in measure 32, where the Ger6 in Db is reinterpreted as a V7 in D major, a pivot chord that solidly establishes D major as the new key center by using enharmonic modulation, a technique that was popular with romantic composers like Schubert, Schumann, and others.

Example 1: Modulation from D-flat major to D major

30

24

Db Maj: iv7

D maj:(enharmonic to iii7)

I maj7(root in melody) ger6(Enharmonic), no 3rd

V/iii(maj7)

V7, no 3rd

I

The point to analyzing Evans' modulatory methods here is to recognize his usage of Classical progressions and modulations within the jazz syntax to produce cohesive and captivating modulations. Despite the piece's predictable harmonic architecture, Evans constantly revitalizes the piece through modulation. In less experienced hands, this modulatory journey would be cumbersome and feel jarring to the listener. Evans expertly melds the modulations together, making them seamless and tasteful. Through musical techniques such as these, Evans recognized the innate beauty of Zawinul's tune and reimagined it into a timeless jazz classic for solo piano.

Bill Evans' Jazz Traits:

Bill Evans was an emotionally complex and introspective musician. His greatest musical feats were not technical outbursts of flashy virtuosity, though he was fully capable of creating such gestures at the piano. The cornerstone of Evans' genius can be found in his devotion to making every note count. The overarching structures of Evans' musical statements, from the shortest motifs to the longest phrases, were guided by the profound partnership of his forward-thinking mentality and his emotional, musical intuition. Evans' musical intuition was emotional, of his own admittance, due to his spiritual connectiveness to music. He believed art, in any form, should enrich the soul and should function as a lens through which one could introspectively learn. With this perspective, Evans' improvised solos are some of the most pure and profound self-expressions in jazz. Evans embraced his emotional connection to improvisation while simultaneously keeping in control of where the music should go.

The mastery of preparedness and spontaneity which Evans possessed established him as an essential figure in the development of jazz. In the context of jazz, preparedness does not mean all material to be played has already been practiced or anticipated by the performer. Preparedness is the mastery of forms, harmonic sequences, and stylistic qualities so that when spontaneous developments occur, they are coherent and relatable to the piece being played. With these components of music mastered, impromptu freedoms may be exercised without

abandoning the original piece's form or character which is being personally reimagined through improvisation. Evans crossed over musical boundaries and knew how to elegantly step back into them thanks to his comprehension of form and structure. Evans was able to express through his solos how the mood and character of a piece resonated with him personally. Each solo was a journey which organically developed from a reverential appreciation for the original form of the piece being played. To quote Evans directly, "(Jazz) only is free insofar as it has reference to the strictness of the original form, and that's what gives it its strength."⁹

Bill Evans was an essential figure in the development of jazz music. His approach to the creation of jazz music was to treat jazz as more than just a musical style, but as a musical process. To quote Evans, "Jazz is not so much a style, as a process of making music. It's the process of making one minute of music in one minute's time."¹⁰ Evans' musical expressions can be appreciated and respected by musical professionals and the musically illiterate alike due to its timeless nature. His music unfolds and develops in the very moment that it is played by building upon the fundamental cornerstones of musical form and function. Evans believed it was better to start a musical idea with a satisfyingly simple motif than to fill silence with superfluous sounds. He incorporated Classical musicality into jazz piano playing through his lyrical, "singing" lines, his nuanced touch technique, and his tasteful usage of the sustain pedal. Through these technical means, Evans articulately expressed his deepest emotions through the musical language and process known as jazz – in short, Bill Evans made the piano sing.

⁹ Carvell, L. *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans* (00:25:57)

¹⁰ Carvell, L. *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans* (00:07:57)

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