

Analysis of the Construction of Improvisational Phrases in “All the Things You Are” by Jazz Pianist Michel Petrucciani

Runhe Zhang, Chao Hu

School of Pop Music, Jilin University of Arts, Changchun, Jilin, China

Abstract: Michel Petrucciani, a distinguished French pianist in the 1980s, whose career and life were equally legendary, achieved remarkable feats. His renowned composition “All the Things You Are” advanced and refined the bebop language. This paper undertakes a comprehensive exploration and study of the piece, focusing on its improvisational construction of melodic lines, harmony, and rhythmic expression. The aim is to illuminate its distinctive musical style and artistic principles. By doing so, this paper aims to inspire researchers of Michel Petrucciani’s improvisational style and jazz music from multiple perspectives, providing a reference for future enriching studies in jazz, thereby holding academic and practical significance in these domains.

Keywords: Improvisation; Harmony; Scales; Michel Petrucciani.

1. Introduction

Michel Petrucciani is one of the most outstanding jazz musicians since 1980s. He has a unique concept and interpretation of jazz. His works are full of emotion, power and strong color. His music works are emotionally charged, powerful, and vividly colorful. Spanning various jazz styles, they incorporate multiple musical elements. His music is characterized by a sense of freedom and flexibility, seamlessly integrating diverse improvisational styles to create intricate and varied compositions of significant educational and scholarly value. His masterpiece “All the Things You Are” transcends traditional boundaries (of bebop) with innovative scales and structures that captivate audiences, establishing itself as a timeless classic and a quintessential representation of jazz music.

2. Introduction of “All the Things You Are”

“All The Things You Are” is a classic jazz standard that includes dozens of different chords, so it is more challenging than tunes like “Autumn Leaves”. We can draw inspiration from both harmonic and scalar approaches in Michel Petrucciani’s improvisation. (Note: The key signatures in this article are Bb, Eb, Ab, Db.)

Before the analysis begins, it is crucial to examine its harmonic progression. Its form is basically AABA, but with interesting variations. Firstly, the first two A sections involve tonic chord substitutions, such as Bbmin7 to Bb7, and Eb7 to Ebmaj7. The last A section's first five measures mirror the first A section, but with subsequent differences and an extension, resulting in a length of 12 measures instead of the 8. Therefore, unlike the standard 32-measure AABA form, this is a somewhat unconventional 36-measure AABA form.

3. Introduction to Michel Petrucciani

Michel Petrucciani was a musical genius born for music, and he forged an extraordinary musical legacy. In 1962, the angel of music, Michel Petrucciani descended to earth, despite being a physically challenged angel. Michel

Petrucciani displayed extraordinary talent at a young age. At the age of 4, he was captivated by the music of Duke Ellington's orchestra, which inspired him to embark on his musical journey. Michel Petrucciani's life seemed to fast forward at an astonishing pace. At the age of 13, he performed his first concert and, just entering his teenage years at 19, he released his first album. His duo performances with saxophonist Lee Konitz catapulted him to fame, and his emergence brought saxophonist Charles Lloyd out of retirement. In 1983, he was recognized as one of the “Best European Jazz Musicians” by the Italian government. Throughout his life, Michel Petrucciani created over 40 personal albums, performed in over 220 concerts in a year, broke records in jazz album sales exceeding 100,000 copies, and became a prominent figure in various top jazz magazines.

In his early years, Petrucciani was deeply influenced by the jazz pianists Bill Evans and Oscar Peterson, and it was not difficult to find their musical imprints in Petrucciani’s music, and they had a profound influence on Petrucciani. Under their influence, Petrucciani quickly found himself and developed his own unique music system. His music was rich, powerful, and emotionally charged, reflecting the strength derived from his struggles with his own destiny, overflowing with love for life and a strong sense of optimism.

Michel Petrucciani's musical career came to a permanent rest at the age of 37. He left behind a legacy of over twenty albums and an eternal spiritual wealth.

In 2011, the biographical documentary film “Michel Petrucciani” directed by Michael Radford and starring Vanessa Guide, was released. This film vividly portrays Michel Petrucciani's brief yet brilliant musical life, serving as a profound tribute to his enduring legacy.

4. Analysis of Michel Petrucciani's Improvisational Scale-based Thinking

When improvising using scale-based thinking, it is crucial to explore the various possibilities offered by scales corresponding to the harmony, of which the most used is the Middle Tonal scale. Flexible application of scale-based

thinking enhances improvisational skills, enriching harmonic characteristics effectively.

4.1. The Scale in the Major Seventh Chords

In major seventh chords, the scale most commonly employed is the Ionian Scale mode, which is the natural major scale. Michel Petrucciani frequently utilizes the Ionian Scale in his improvisations, such as:



Figure 1. Google Scholar

An exemplary demonstration occurs in his improvisation over Emaj7, descending from B to C#, which follows the E Ionian Scale. The return to C at the end of the measure anticipates the upcoming C7 in the next measure.



Figure 2. Google Scholar

As shown in the figure, Db, Bb, and Eb, in accordance with the key signature, utilize the Ionian Scale.

In the major seventh chords, we can also use the Lydian scale, i. e. raising the quartet of the major scale by a half-step to enhance the harmonic richness of the scale, such as:



Figure 3. Google Scholar

The triplet is a classic example of the Lydian scale ascending.

Chromatic scales are also frequently used in the major seventh chords, such as:



Figure 4. Google Scholar



Figure 5. Google Scholar

Both figures above incorporate the chromatic scales, which belongs to each scale yet don't exclusively belong to any scale. Playing chromatic scales over any chord won't sound "wrong", but excessive use can make improvisation sound dull. Instead, consider them as helpful tools for smoother transitions towards target tones during improvisation.

4.2. The Scale in the Seventh Chords

The dominant seventh chord corresponds to the Mixolydian Scale, which lowers the seventh note compared to the major scale. Such as:



Figure 6. Google Scholar

The keys like Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, Fb correspond to the Gb's flat seventh tone.

The most commonly used scale in dominant seventh chords is the alt scale. The alt scale consists of 1, 2b, 2#, 3, 5b, 5#, 7b, and 1, incorporating the sharp and flat ninth, sharp eleventh, and flat thirteenth of the tonic. When improvisational selection, jazz musicians often choose several of these altered scales when encountering a dominant seventh chord. Therefore, the alt scale is widely applied. Such as:



Figure 7. Google Scholar

Ab is the flat ninth of G7, Bb (which is A#) is the sharp ninth of G7, Eb is the flat thirteenth of G7, Db (which is C#) is the sharp eleventh of G7. In this phrase, Michel Petrucciani brilliantly incorporates the alt scale, skillfully integrating all four altered tones into his improvisation.



Figure 8. Google Scholar

In this phrase, B \flat is the flat thirteenth of Eb7, F# is the sharp ninth of Eb7, E \flat is the flat ninth of Eb7. It is noteworthy that the sharp eleventh is not used in this phrase, yet it still employs the thinking of the alt scale. When jazz musicians use the alt scale, they do not necessarily have to use all the altered tones simultaneously, but they can still enrich the harmonic color.

The dominant seventh chord offers the most variety of color among all chords, and can also employ the diminished scale, bebop scale, blues scale, etc., depending on the context and preference.

4.3. The Scale in the Minor Seventh Chords

The minor seventh chord corresponds to the Dorian Scale, where the natural sixth degree of the minor scale is raised by a half step to form the Dorian mode. Such as:



Figure 9. Google Scholar

Where b is the natural sixth degree of the G natural minor scale, Michel Petrucciani raises it by a half step, forming the Dorian Scale.

We can also observe that Michel Petrucciani is improvising using:



Figure 10. Google Scholar

Fmin7 employs the Aeolian Scale, Bbmin7 uses the Dorian Scale, Eb7 uses the Mixolydian Scale, and Abmaj7 uses the Ionian Scale. All these four scales are consistent with the key signature of Ab major, allowing us to simplify the complex variety of scales in this method. Such as:



Figure 11. Google Scholar

In the case of Fmin7 here using the Aeolian Scale, F is the VI chord in Ab major, and one reason to use the Aeolian Scale on the VI chord is that it allows you to use just one scale throughout the VI-II-V-I progression.



Figure 12. Google Scholar

Here in Bbmin7, there appears A \flat , which is from the Bb melodic minor scale (Bb minor major seventh chord). The minor major seventh chord is often used in place of the minor seventh chord, where we can hear a richer and darker sound. However, if the minor seventh in the minor seventh chord is a melodic note, then it's an exception and doesn't necessarily need this substitution. Substituting the minor major seventh chord for the minor seventh chord is just a way to add something "Eye-Catching" to people. When to choose this substitution depends on one's musical aesthetics.

5. Analysis of Michel Petrucciani's Improvisational Harmonic Thinking

In improvisation, incorporating chord tones often enhances the inherent color of the harmony itself. For beginners, using chord tones in improvisation can clarify their improvisational framework and make note choices more clearly. Therefore, mastering improvisation with chord tones is an essential skill in jazz music learning.

5.1. Improvisation With Chord Tones



Figure 13. Google Scholar

Selecting simple and pleasant chord tones as the starting point of a musical phrase is perfect suitable. Using chord tones allows for the creation of melodic phrases and sets the foundation for more complex developments later on.

5.2. Extension Tones and Alteration Tones

In the process of improvisation, chord tones are the basis and framework of improvisation. At the same time, we can also choose some extension tones and alteration tones to enrich the color, so as to make your improvisation more interesting. Extension tones refer to the three added notes above the seventh chord, namely the ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth. Among these, dominant seventh chords allow for the broadest range of extension tones, with minor seventh chords less frequently utilizing the thirteenth, and major seventh chords less commonly using the eleventh. Extension tones above the chord root that are altered by a minor or

augmented interval are termed alteration tones, such as sharp ninth, flat ninth, sharp eleventh, and flat thirteenth.



Figure 14. Google Scholar

In this phrase, F is the third of Dbmaj7, Ab is the fifth of Dbmaj7, C is the seventh of Dbmaj7, and Bb is the thirteenth of Dbmaj7, thus constituting extension tones.



Figure 15. Google Scholar

In the above figure, Eb (or Fb) is the flat ninth of Eb7, functioning as an alteration tone, while C acts as the thirteenth of Eb7, an extension tone. The flat ninth is frequently employed by jazz musicians as an alteration tone.

When we are faced with a dominant seventh chord, we can substitute with an altered chord (root, third, flat thirteenth, sharp ninth), such as:



Figure 16. Google Scholar

This measure simultaneously incorporates sharp ninth, flat ninth, sharp eleventh, and flat thirteenth tones, akin to Michel Petrucciani substituting G7 with G7alt during improvisation.

When improvising with harmonic thinking, it's essential to do a thinking, such as:



Figure 17. Google Scholar

Here Ab, C, Eb, G, and Bb represent the root, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth of Abmaj7, but they can also be viewed as the flat thirteenth, root, third, fifth, and seventh of Cmin7 (Phrygian Scale). This expands the improvisational possibilities within Cmin7, offering a wider range of scale choices, and more extension and alteration tones.

Jazz music is constantly evolving. For me, discovering new possibilities and trusting the ear are the most interesting aspects of jazz.

6. Conclusion

Michel Petrucciani's exceptional artistry in jazz improvisation serves as a paradigm for contemporary jazz musicians. His unique playing techniques make his music with agility and stylistic diversity. What his music conveys comes from his inner passion and pursuit, as well as his uncompromising and never-give-up.

This paper conducts a thorough analysis and exploration of Michel Petrucciani's representative work "All the Things You Are", aiming to interpret some of the artistic style of this master. This study holds significant relevance and reference value for current jazz piano compositions and theories of improvisation practice.

References

- [1] Li Lin, An Analysis of Jazz Piano Chord Playing Method, Modern Music, No. 9, 2017.
- [2] Guo Lanlan, Methods of Jazz Improvisation, Music Life, No. 3, 2007.
- [3] Chen Xiaoting, On the Charm of Jazz in Piano Impromptu Performance, China National Exhibition, No. 7, 2019.
- [4] Duan Baojun, On the Basic Music Form Features of Jazz Piano, Art and Literature for the Masses, No. 8, 2010.
- [5] Liu Hong, Basic Characteristics of Jazz and Its Influence in the Field of Music, Ludong University Journal: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition, No. 26, 2009.