French music reconfigured in the modal jazz of Bill Evans


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Abstract

Twentieth-century French music played a privileged role in the improvisational thinking of the American modal jazz pianist Bill Evans (1929-80). And these loci offer an ideal opportunity for investigating relations between musical types: from parallels, potential intersections, through to specific eclecticisms, which assimilate, adapt and individualize a given source. Implicit are â€œcrossingsâ€ and transformations of genre, culture, national identity and time-frame; at issue are the nature and mutability of music materials. I aim to show the richness and significance of these interactions in two case studies: aspects of Kind of Blue (1959) and â€œPeace Pieceâ€ (1958) in connection with Chopin, Ravel and Messiaen. Evansâ€™s parentage and education meant he was exposed to highly varied music: â€œsonatas by Mozart and Beethoven and works by Schumann, Rachmaninoff, Debussy, Ravel, Gershwin, Villa-Lobos, Khachaturian, and Milhaudâ€ (Pettinger, Bill Evans: My Heart Sings). I argue that in French repertory, particularly, Evans discovered an affinity with, and catalyst for, his improvisational priorities: lyricism, polyphonic lines, a rich harmonic palette of sevenths/ninths, subtle textures, â€œvoicingsâ€ and exquisite tone â€œa vehicle for expressivity and imagination. Conversely, it is intriguing that relatively old French music has â€œlived onâ€, re-configured â€œchameleonâ€-like within a new postwar context.

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One such musical style is modal jazz. A phoenix that arose from the ashes of bebop in the late 1950s, the style is commonly associated with Miles Davis and his landmark Kind of Blue, whose relaxed tempi and whimsical, light-footed melodies have lured a myriad of listeners since its release in 1959, making the album the best-selling jazz record of all time. Modal jazz also pervades many recent styles of popular music, in large part due to the evocative sensibility of modal jazz. Modal jazz's seminal works are the recordings Milestones and Kind of Blue by Davis' ensemble and the theoretical formulations published in George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept. "There will be fewer chords," Davis explained to his band at the time, "but infinite possibilities as to what to do with them." Evans then left the world of â€œclassicalâ€ music to embrace the new world of jazz in the post-bop era. The world needed to move forward to the next thing. But what was it going to be? Evans brought his vast understanding of modal scales and deep appreciation of the musical line to create a new sensibility that moved a step beyond 1950s-style bebop as a follow-up to the big-band pop of the 30s and 40s. Kind of Blue, under the quiet tutelage of Evans, became a kind of hinge of music history. And then he left that group to form his own. Evans mostly played with small-scale groups, preferring the