

Third Stream:
The Synthesis of Classical and Jazz Music

Submitted by

Randy Martono-Chai

MULT 432
Jazz History
Shenandoah University

March 4, 2014

Third Stream

“Third stream” jazz is a term coined in by the American composer Gunther Schuller as a musical genre that fuses classical music with jazz. Improvisation, a key element in jazz, is a major component of Third Stream jazz and its focus of its synthesis with classical music. Schuller, also a jazz musician, historian, conductor, and Pulitzer Prize and Grammy Award winner, presented this idea in his famous 1957 lecture at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Later, Schuller, continued to define Third Stream, proposing that it was a genre that met halfway between classical and jazz, and not solely “Third Stream Jazz,” nor classical per se. (Jazz, 2013) He offered an official list of “What Third Stream is Not” in 1981, furthering his definition and scope of the musical genre that did not include jazz with strings, jazz being played on “classical” instruments, classical music played by jazz players, inserting an Impressionistic or Neo-Romantic styles into jazz, jazz in fugal form, fugues player by jazz players, and most importantly, merely an option for any musician to design creatively without vitiating the integrity of either classical or jazz music. (Schuller, 1999)

There were countless artists of both classical and jazz music genres that have successfully made this fusion of classical and jazz, which spurred Schuller to his lecture that influenced the retrospect of music created in the 19th century. Classical composers created these works that are loosely classified as Third Stream, although not involving improvisation, but did manifest their interest and appreciation for the cross of jazz and classical traditions. (Schuller, 1999)

Maurice Ravel, Impressionistic composer from France, demonstrated this in several of his numerous works, but it is most prominent in detecting this jazz and

classical fusion in his 1925 work, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. This one-act opera had gliding passages of the virtuous nature found in classical musicians, but every so often showed off an edge of swing, syncopation of rhythms, and implications of jazz vocals in the roles of the singers on stage.

Aaron Copland, 20th century composer, wrote a piano concerto in 1926 and a concerto for clarinet and string orchestra in 1948, both that contain jazz elements enveloped inside the heavily charged works that showed the monstrosity of his technical endeavors. Passages in these two works illustrate some sense of syncopation, alluding to the “hot” jazz of the New Orleans style, and motives that were seemingly created over improvisation. Additionally, Benny Goodman, jazz clarinetist, commissioned Copland to compose the concerto for clarinet and string orchestra, which Goodman premiered and recorded. (Giddins, 2009)

George Gershwin's popular 1924 work “Rhapsody in Blue” demonstrates Gershwin's efforts to formalize jazz into a showcase worthy of the American concert halls for one of the first times in history. Strictly considered a classical symphonic work featuring solo piano, rather than a virtuosic jazz piece, “Rhapsody in Blue” still possesses elements of jazz, such as the notes derived from the blues scale found in the main motive, which is also made obvious in its title. Additionally, syncopated rhythms, clave rhythm, climactic attacks of the brass section, and the opening with a clarinet, all point in the direction of jazz influence in Gershwin's composition. Gershwin's 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess* contained elements of jazz as well, including syncopated rhythms; dialectical expressions of the South, commonly associated in vocal jazz; and a bit of swing and jazz dance. *Porgy and Bess* also starred mostly African-Americans trained in the field of

classical singing, which gave the work an edge in its allusion to jazz, founded by the black community. Several of these songs also became jazz standards, too, which were considered unique, in that primarily Broadway musicals and Tin Pan Alley songs were made into jazz standards, but never before from an opera.

One of Leonard Bernstein's most prestigious works, if not the most, was his 1957 musical, *West Side Story*, which combined a more Latin-jazz flavor into his composition. Polyrhythms, syncopation, and somewhat rock-like dance anthems are all jazz elements Bernstein has used in this stage work whose plot models the story of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Not only does *West Side Story* use the archaic elements such as the theme of rivalry between two opposing sides in its storyline and a classical basis of singing, but a more modern take in its way of expression, as further supported in its use of Latin-jazz.

Artie Shaw, a jazz clarinetist, composer, and bandleader, was known for his imitation of Impressionistic composers, such as Ravel and Claude Debussy. His 1924 work, "Interlude in B-flat," displayed the imagery and colors derived from qualities that defined Impressionism. Nonetheless, it is still a jazz piece, for its improvisational qualities and derivatives that define jazz more than classical, but still functions as a Third Stream piece for Shaw's efforts in creating this fusion.

Claude Thornhill, an American pianist, arranger, composer, and bandleader, created the jazz standard "Snowfall," which he later used in 1941 for an experiment with an orchestra playing cool jazz. It indeed had an interesting take on the subgenre of cool jazz, with formal instructions for players in the ensemble to avoid using vibrato and play

in the relaxed tone that cool jazz musicians normally play. This indicated another way of applying classical instrumentation into the style of jazz.

Stan Kenton, an American pianist, composer, and arranger, was a major influence in the creation of the controversial American jazz orchestra. He created a long-play album called *City of Glass* in 1951, a recording of works by another American composer, Robert Graettinger, which demonstrated a polystylistic sound. It was experimental music, with an atonal center that drew upon ideas explored by previous 20th century composers of the classical genre, namely Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, and Arnold Schoenberg. Graettinger wrote “Thermopylae,” the first track, and gave it to Kenton to see if he can record it. Upon agreement, Graettinger followed through by composing the rest of a four-part “tone poem,” which became the entire long-play album. *City of Glass* became a huge deal in the history of American music, as it carried the ideal that composers of the post World War II era wrote music for the sake of music without having any social means. The album contributed widely to the creation of experimental music and the idea of fusion between classical and jazz music.

Duke Ellington created an Impressionistic-esque sound in his 1953 album, *Piano Reflections*. In his recording of “Reflections in D,” he demonstrates an eerie tone, rhythms that offset the balance of timing, and harmonies similar to that utilized by Debussy and Ravel. The rest of the album take on similar ideas and functions of musical elements found in the Impressionistic period, more or less, with a few that return to a more familiar form of jazz than others. It is also noted in history that Ellington was a close friend with Schuller, which is most likely the reason why he took great interest in experimenting with his usual creation of music with classical music.

Art Tatum, known as one of the giants of jazz piano, was proclaimed by Schuller, as he took on the virtuosity and techniques found in classical piano and transferred them into solo jazz piano. His 1953 recording of “All the Things You Are,” for example, shows him playing the melody, enveloped in “licks” such as fast scales and patterns that reflect the styles of Frederic Chopin in his compositions. This style of playing solo jazz piano was never performed at this level until Tatum, and this demonstrates another method of producing Third Stream music. (Peterson, 2010)

Marian McPartland recorded a jazz album *With You in Mind* in 1957, which, albeit mostly just jazz works, had a tune called “Fur Elise,” alluding to Ludwig van Beethoven’s twenty-fifth Bagatelle of the same name. McPartland took the melody of Beethoven’s work and utilized the chords in the A section for her improvisation. Accompanied by strings and a trio, “Fur Elise” was recorded in a manner that warmly included a classical style of playing. Thus, McPartland demonstrated a way of bridging classical and jazz music by using material found in each respective genre to create music that surprises listeners by its archaic and newfound elements. (Sheridan, 2009)

George Russell, an American jazz pianist, composer, arranger, and theorist is considered one of the first jazz musicians to contribute to music theory, with theory he proposed based on the harmony of jazz, rather than European music. His first notable work was the album *Jazz Workshop*, recorded in 1957 with Bill Evans. Based on the fundamentals of improvising based on scales, rather than chords or harmonies, the creation of “Concerto for Billy the Kid,” a track found in *Jazz Workshop*, demonstrates a style of improvising that lies on more familiar grounds to classical musicians than jazz musicians. Additionally, it contains the “classical” element of title-use, referring to a

more complex form of composition that features a single instrument supported by an orchestra: in this case, the Evans is being featured while the rest of the band accompanies him. This was considered evolutionary, bridging closer the gap between classical and jazz music, and finding more ways to relate the complex, more advanced ideals of both genres together. Needless to say, Russell was awarded internationally for his contributions.

Charles Mingus, a jazz double bassist, bandleader, and composer, followed Ellington's footsteps, earning the title of "Heir of Duke." As Ellington drew upon the ideas of Third Stream into his later works, Mingus followed a similar pathway, delving into free jazz, utilizing a symphonic orchestra to produce a style similar to that of Ravel and Schoenberg, as in, much later Impressionistic and Modernistic sounds, together with his original jazz flavor. In his album, *Pre-Bird*, recording in 1960, he demonstrated at best the extent of his endeavors. Incidentally, Schuller helped by conducting the orchestra, adding his directive insight to the productio. The best example of Mingus and Schuller's performance would be found in the track, "Half-Mast Inhibition," a prolonged work, where dissonance of atonality can be found easily throughout the piece, but loosely keeping the rhythms of jazz, allowing enough room for passages to stagger through in free form. Thus, Mingus takes a unique production of Third Stream music, fusing free jazz with classical music of the Modernistic era. (Emerson, 2003)

Lennie Tristano, jazz pianist, composer, and teacher of jazz improvisation was known as a cool jazz, avant-garde jazz, and bebop jazz musician, but was known for his fusion of atonality and counterpoint in the style of Johann Sebastian Bach. Best demonstrated in Tristano's 1962 studio album, *The New Tristano*, Tristano embraces the style of classical music from even as early as the Baroque period. In the track "G Minor

Complex,” he combines the unrestling dissonance of an atonal sound from 20th century classical music, the polytexture found in Baroque counterpoint, and the harmonic functions typical used in jazz music to create the avant-garde sense of his music. This fusion widened the scope of jazz-fusion, creating a stronger bridge between jazz and classical music with his take on an archaic style derived from over three centuries before his prime. (Carter 2005)

Post Schuller’s lecture that coined the term “Third Stream music,” modern composers have taken their own liberties to expand the repertoire of the genre. Nikolai Kapustin a Ukrainian-Russian composer and pianist idolized Tatum and Oscar Peterson’s styles of playing, and modeled numerous works after their approach to solo piano. He composed the work, “Suite in the Old Style,” op. 28, in 1977, combining the prowess of Tatum’s pianistic skills with the compositional style of post-modern classical writers. The same can be said with his 1997 work, “24 Preludes and Fugues,” Op. 82, combining counterpoint, as Tristano did in his avant-garde works, with the sultry passages Peterson created in his improvisations. (Emerson, 2003)

Krzysztof Penderecki, a Polish composer and conductor, was known by the media as Poland’s “greatest living composer” for his efforts in the field of classical fusion. He implemented free jazz into his orchestral works, taking on a significantly less restrained improvisational method of writing his melodies that fit the style of dissonant harmonies found in experimental jazz. His 1971 work, “Actions for Free Jazz Orchestra” possessed such acclaim for Penderecki’s clever fusion of classical and jazz that he was praised worldwide. (Dver, 2012)

Jack Cooper, an American composer and music educator, built upon Schuller's study of synthesizing classical and jazz music together, and proposed in a thesis in 1999 on how to push the boundaries of Third Stream composition. He hopes that this would encourage artists to continue experimenting with music found in the middle grounds of genres considered far apart in sound, such as jazz and classical music. He mentions in his thesis that Cooper partnered with Grammy Award-winning producer Tom Bellino to record works by modernist composer Charles Ives fused with an arrangement for jazz orchestra. This recording will become the prime example of modern takes of Third Stream music and a continuation in evolution of American music, as it demonstrates musical composition of jazz with classical approach, and vice-versa with classical music. (Dver, 2012)

Albeit purists, or those who protested against the idea Third Stream music, argued that Schuller's proposition was an assault to their traditions, Schuller proposed the "List of What Third Stream is Not" in 1981, merely giving a stronger framework for composers to build their experimental music on when attempting the creation of classical and jazz music. (Jazz, 2014) By doing so, Schuller attempted to persuade purists to think that Third Stream music would not taint their respective classical and jazz genres. Regardless, for jazz musicians who were against the idea, complained that the genre laid the groundwork for restrictions and limited the freedom with improvisation. Some disliked the incorporation of classical instruments, or even the styles and articulations Impressionism or New-Romanticism. Some jazz musicians, however, appreciated this experimental music that involved elements of classical music, as well as incorporating more "classical" ways of musical articulations found in cool jazz. (Third Stream, 2014)

As for 20th Century composers, those who have attempted to fuse the two genres together enabled the incorporation of jazz rhythms and texture and chordal sounds and functions typically found in jazz. This expanded their method of writing and ultimately a wider set of repertoire. Even though some classical composers argue that detaching themselves from using jazz elements when writing helps with manifesting their own individual style, many on the other hand found this as an opportunity to create an evolution in their music. (Schuller, 1999)

Thus, the idea of Third Stream music was impactful on both classical and jazz genres. The sounds and color of jazz inspired modern composers to attempt a more “American” approach to writing, while jazz artists instigated a wider scope of approach to jazz composition. Works found throughout the twentieth century became vastly diverse, with a significant factor to the musical enrichment in history that is known as a synthesis of classical and jazz music. (Gunther Schuller, 2014)

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