

Chopin meets Jazz

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In the musical culture of today, more attention is devoted to crossstylistic barriers, to reaching for a variety of inspirations, referring to the achievements of the past and commenting on them in one's own way. These artistic activities usually lead to seeking newer means of musical expression, while at the same time pointing to the timeless values rooted in tradition.

However, these days an unequivocal assessment of those classical music pieces, which are frequently expressed in a postmodern approach towards the works of past ages, becomes a really difficult task. Representatives of stylistic purism assume that interference with the original material too often becomes an eclectic process, which does not lead to a new aesthetic quality. Also, it may be seen as a manifestation of disrespect for the ideals of the author: we deal with fragments of well-known pieces whose original form and content were clearly defined by their composers.

Yet, demands for creating completely original music which would meet the idealistic concepts of the uniqueness of each work of art, basically seem to be fruitless. As suggested by Richard Shusterman, an apparently original work of art is always a product of undisclosed borrowings.¹ It is difficult to imagine a work new in all respects, since the legitimate desire for approval and understanding among the public excludes absolute radicalism. Originality must therefore be limited to just a percentage of novelty with a fairly high dose of continuation (borrowings).



This rule has been applied in numerous cases of taking up and processing musical material in the musical culture of all historical periods. Interestingly, the artistic value of this type of classical music arrangements, which largely consists in the use of other authors' themes and ideas and integrating them within the framework of the new works, is not questioned. This phenomenon has been so frequent in the creative endeavors of composers in each era of music history that it became the subject of numerous scholarly musicological works.

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Jazz interpretations of Chopin's themes, so popular in recent years among Polish jazz pianists, are continuations of the practice of adapting existing material for new compositions, which began as early as the Renaissance. This phenomenon refers particularly to the parody mass developed in that era, in which the thematic material often accounted for whole compositions (one's own or of other authors), such as motets. It is worth mentioning that a fifteenth-century melody L'homme armé, occurring in more than 30 parody masses and numerous lute and organ compositions, became the most common

cantus firmus.

In the Baroque era, the fugue was the most ingenious way to develop a theme, mostly improvised on a specified, known, borrowed motif. At that time pieces began to be transcribed on a large scale and their texture was often modified. In later ages the form of variation came to the fore, in which a usually simple theme underwent various transformations, from ornamentation and figuration of melody to significant transformations of each element of the work. The practice of inclusion of other composer's material or one's own previously composed theme with the framework of a new composition is therefore not unique.

Transcriptions and arrangements are typical phenomena in jazz, since it is in the essence of jazz, to use other composers' material and modify it for new compositions. The choice of the theme for improvisation often concerns fragments derived from classical music, from artists such as Bach, Mozart, Schubert and even Strauss and Mahler. Yet, compositions by Chopin attract the biggest and still continuing interest among jazz musicians.

The trend associated with jazz interpretations of Chopin's music appeared in the Polish jazz in the early 1990s. On the one hand, it is the most original and native stylistic trend of all the trends influencing jazz in Poland. On the other hand, it is an exceptional phenomenon internationally, because none of the works of classical composers have been chosen for so many jazz arrangements worldwide.

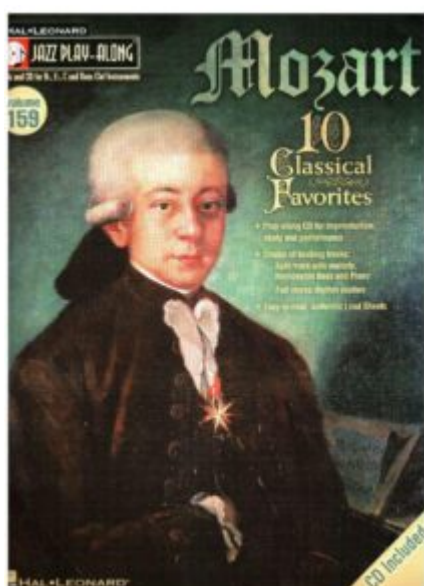
However, the achievements of Polish jazz pianists in this regard became the most symptomatic, because the piano texture, as well as the process of improvisation on a given theme, show the most obvious reference, not only purely musically, but also emotionally, to the musical language of Chopin.

The recording of the album Chopin by the Andrzej Jagodziński

Trio in December 1993 provide the impetus to start a series of artistic activities in arranging Chopin's works by Polish jazz pianists. This award-winning album started a real avalanche of similar projects, each of which constitutes an individual approach to the material of Chopin reflected in the basic assumptions, such as the selection criteria of pieces or themes, and the process of transformation of the original.

Jazz arrangements of Chopin's works are generally in its mainstream, including all directions and styles appearing between New Orleans jazz and cool, or sometimes later styles which are not manifestations of avant-garde. Other arrangements which go beyond the mainstream convention mostly refer to the free jazz style. Pianists mostly chose for arrangements Chopin's works in triple meter, although duple meter dominates in jazz music.

Triple time, in most cases, was respected by artists, but it also happened that the change of time signature was the basic factor influencing the degree of modification of the original piece. Triple meter itself was not important, because there was a more essential consideration: compositions written in triple meter have characteristic themes or motifs as well as short forms which can easily be adapted to the field of jazz (eg. mazurkas).



Most jazz arrangements of Chopin's music, therefore, concern piano miniatures prevailing in the composer's works. This is due to the clarity of the melodic lines which stimulate artists' creativity to write, on their basis, themes of jazz standards. Prelude in E minor, Op. 28 No. 4 has become the piece of Chopin's music most frequently adapted to the field of jazz. Those numerous arrangements are also stylistically diverse. Prelude in E minor is characterized by a sophisticated, personalized harmonic, which almost completely eliminates the need for any changes.

The harmonic pattern of Chopin's Prelude found favorable conditions in Polish jazz. Forming seventh and ninth chords, as well as applying numerous suspensions and progressions, make the majority of musicians who approach the work treat the original with reverence. Chopin's complex harmonic language, combined with a simple and clear theme, constitutes an excellent basis for improvisation.

Chopin's compositions were and still are the subject of all sorts of arrangements, including various ways of transforming the pattern, which ranges from transcription, through instrumentation and arrangements, to paraphrases, resulting from the author's inspiration found in a particular piece or just its main theme. The interest in Chopin's music is, to some extent, historically justified. One has to realize the position Chopin holds in the history of music.

He was the innovator, being ahead of Wagner's achievements in the field of harmony and heralding the coming of Debussy; Chopin's use of folk scales and modes significantly anticipated Ravel's or even Bartok's achievements. Above all, however, it is Chopin's contribution to the development of piano technique and texture that is most significant. Therefore, the Improvisation, which is an inherent component of jazz arrangements, was a well-known and cultivated practice in Chopin's times. Moreover, it remains in full harmony with the creative process experienced by the composer himself.

Chopin was, in fact, one of the greatest improvisers in the history of music, who, from childhood, fascinated his listeners with the gift of improvisation and gained the admiration of the contemporary press, musicians, poets, writers, painters, as well as his family circle and friends.

Arrangements of Chopin's music have constantly been criticized by purists who regard such attempts as a kind of profanation (complete works with a degree of patriotic content seem to lose the latter in the sound chaos of jazz improvisations, which disturb the integral form of the original compositions).

The basic problem here seems to be that this ignores the fact that Chopin's music is essentially only a starting point, a kind of outer emblem for the creation of entirely new compositions, carrying a different content, characterized by the author's individuality. Taking into consideration the constant presence of postmodernism these days, the adding of swing, unknown in Chopin's days, to the qualities of his music, is both an interesting and appropriate practice.

Jacques Loussier – Impressions On Chopin's Nocturnes (Jazz)

(Track List *below)

**Klassik meets Jazz – Chopin: Valse
Op. 69, No. 1, "L'Adieu" (The**

Farewell Waltz) in A flat Major.

**Jacques Loussier – Jazz Impressions
On Chopin's [Nocturne in C minor,](#)
Op. Posthume**

**Klassik Meets Jazz – Chopin –
[Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2](#)**

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- Track List of Jacques Loussier – [Impressions On Chopin's Nocturnes \(Jazz\)](#):
- 1 – [00:00](#) 2 – [03:43](#) 3 – [08:02](#) 4 – [11:06](#) 5 – [14:35](#) 6 –

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