

Symphonic Jazz (The story so far) - scat with scattered facts

(Note for James Morrison Trio/Adelaide Symphony Orchestra *Showtime* concert, 17 August 2002)

In 1494, the Vatican concludes the Treaty of Tordesillas by which the New World is divided between Spain and Portugal. The Portuguese gain a foothold in Brazil when they ‘transport the sugar-plantation system, based on slavery, from Cape Verde and the Biafran Islands to the part of Brazil they called Pernambuco... Brazil becomes the largest slave-importing center in the world.’ In the importation of slaves to the Americas five centuries ago lies the roots of what will become the most important musical style since 1900 – jazz, not forgetting all its fascinating spinoffs (crooning, rock’n’roll, Top 40, Mersey Beat, easy listening).

Soon the English get interested in the New World, and West African slaves are traded to the east coast of North America, principally Virginia and the Carolinas. As Europeans make first footfall in the Americas, the folks at home are listening to consorts of viols and gavottes and galliards played on spinets. The orchestra as we know it hasn’t yet taken shape.

Back across the Atlantic, the African slaves bring with them their rich oral traditions of storytelling, oratory and singing. (The Brer Rabbit stories are merely written versions of stories passed down orally on Louisiana plantations since the beginning of slavery in those parts. Brer Rabbit probably started out as an African Hare, *Lepus capensis*.)

As we fast forward to the Baroque era (the 17th century, in which Locke and Hume establish the principles which will inspire republicans in 18th-century British America), keyboard players in Continental orchestras improvise the harmonies indicated by a bass line notated with figured clues. The Europeans have ‘perfected’ musical notation. It helps preserve the exact blueprint of a piece of music as it is passed around the continent, but ultimately has the effect of narrowing down the opportunities for individual performers’ contributions. Yet at this stage, virtuosi, like the *castrati* who sing in Handel operas, are expected to extemporise complex melodic ornaments. The orchestra is beginning to settle into its standard complements of winds, brass and strings.

As the colonial Anglo-Americans chafe under British taxation, they establish cotton and tobacco in the New World with the help of their growing army of slaves. No doubt the lowland rice and cotton fields of Virginia and Georgia resound with the responsorial singing of African descendants.

George Washington gets to found a republic but misses out on seeing in the 19th century. By 1811 Beethoven becomes too deaf to play in public, and his *Emperor* Concerto (nicknamed for Napoleon – ironically, since the composer is an arch-democrat) has to be premiered instead by one Friedrich Schneider in Leipzig in November 1811. Where Beethoven would once have performed from mere shorthand sketches of his part, he is now obliged to write the solo part out in full. This spells the death of improvisation in classical music. None of the great concertos since, apart from Brahms’ Violin Concerto (1878), leaves room for improvisation, not even in the cadenza, which had been the last bit of a classical piece to withstand ‘pre-arrangement’.

The importation of African slaves is banned in the ‘united States’, but the extension of slavery into new states west of the Mississippi is a constant source of debate and ‘border wars’. The South Carolinians, feeling that the federal government interferes too much with their ‘special institution’, secede. Abraham Lincoln saves the Union and frees the slaves, though so far only those in the rebel states. He is derided by critics as a ‘baboon’ – but one who enjoys Donizetti and early Verdi opera. The Civil War won, emancipated slaves light on the instruments of demobbed Union troops (the basis of the typical Dixieland line-up: cornets, euphoniums, clarinets, and banjos) and fuse a distinctive new style out of gospel, marches, quodlibets and hymns. Scott Joplin of Missouri is one who, sitting at an upright piano, responds to a new dance craze, the cakewalk, by adding a foot-tapping syncopation to create Ragtime.

Freed from plantations, former slaves flock to cities such as New Orleans in the Mississippi Delta, a former French colony, where the ten dollar note was once called a ‘dix’, and we see the birth of Trad jazz, sometimes called Storyville after the red light district where many of the first bands played. Trumpeter Louis Armstrong heads up the Mississippi River in search of greater

opportunities, and takes his jazz to Chicago: Jazz is 'inscribed' on Ol' Man River. Kansas City, mid-course, becomes another centre, as, around the 1930s, Benny Moten, Count Basie and co. create their own brand of swing.

Jazz is becoming desirable. White folks want to get in on this. American popular song, which has its roots in the folksy parlour style of Stephen Foster, has already, since the 1890s, adopted the lilt of jazz in the work of Tin Pan Alley song pluggers.

Paul Whiteman conceives such a thing as symphonic jazz. Even the swing bands have started devising more elaborate musical formats, patterns of riffs underlying solos, to create a more orchestral type of complexity, in place of the standard 32-bar repetitions of the verses of Tin Pan Alley songs, the basis of many a former jazz improvisation. It's 1938, and Benny Goodman gets his band into the bastion of classical music, Carnegie Hall, for one of the concerts of the century.

Meanwhile some songwriters, like **George Gershwin**, derided as jazz musicians by the classical music establishment, have been trying to fit jazz into the mould of classical forms such as the piano concerto and opera. Not everyone approves. Melbourne Conservatorium's Fritz Hart has called jazz 'negroid', as if that adjective will prove fatal to jazz's ambitions. Old attitudes persist, and as late as the 1990s, old Charlestonians, in South Carolina, think Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* presents the 'nigra' in far too sympathetic a light.

But jazz is proving too difficult to ignore. Duke Ellington's complex post-swing arrangements have the spark of genius, and classical musicians start to look for ways of incorporating jazz in ambitious art works. Jazz has come a long way from improvisation on 32-bar patterns, but even that simple form, with its cyclical rehashing of chord changes has done much to finally demolish the architectural creations of European symphonic thinkers.

Jazz offers escape from the aphoristic cul-de-sac of post-World War II serialism, the brick wall that had mistaken itself for an off-ramp. Conservatory-trained American composers create a Third Stream, a mid-Atlantic blending of European classical and African-American jazz. Proponent Gunther Schuller has played French horn on Miles Davis' 1950s album *Birth of the Cool*, which features Gil Evans' suave arrangements for brass nonet, a sound more familiar from the classical repertoire. Jazz itself becomes more experimental, looking further afield for inspiration. But Cuba is isolated from the American public when the US-backed dictator Batista is overthrown in 1959. The 60s with their Soviet missiles 'not ten jet minutes from Miami' see the Cuban influence on American musicians sealed off (Stan Kenton's *Cuban Fire* notwithstanding). Jazz musicians now open their ears to Brazil where the middle class descendents of the African slaves, people like **Antonio Carlos Jobim**, have created *bossa nova* whose softly sinuous rhythms probably fit better with the *Cool* ideology of their northern neighbours.

Jazz is flourishing. By now it has spread east and west. New York is a centre; there is an LA style. Jazz even spreads to Scandinavia, which produces artists like Niels Henning Ørsted Pedersen and Jan Garbarek, the saxophonist heard on the ECM label since the 1970s.

Since the early 1900s, jazz has been a feature also of 'that great America on the other side of the sphere' (as Herman Melville rather too zealously described Australia in *Moby Dick*). The first New Orleans band to play in Chicago in 1915 was billed as 'having come direct from the Hippodrome Theatre in Sydney' – could Sydney have heard jazz before Chicago? But jazz comes to Australia as entertainment. We're a part of the Pacific vaudeville circuit ex-San Francisco. Adelaide goes crazy in 1918 when Ben Fuller's Big American Musical Craze plays at the Majestic Theatre. Don Burrows grows up in Bondi and hears Frank Coughlin and others establish 'this "new music" on these shores'.

The symphony orchestra becomes more truly international. Works are now as likely to be premiered in Melbourne or Milwaukee as Munich or Mannheim. Bernstein's music has required orchestral musicians to swing, but they're very rarely asked to improvise. Steve Reich, a classical composer from New York, studies the drumming techniques of Africa's Ewe tribe with Alfred Ladzepko in Ghana in 1971. Terry Riley reintroduces a degree of improvisation when he asks musicians to play a sequence of phrases (in C) for as long as they individually like. Don Banks, an Australian who studied with Dallapiccola and Babbitt but also wrote music for Hammer Horror films, writes *Nexus*,

‘beautifully crafted from a “serious” compositional point of view, but...also showing a real understanding of the jazz performer’s role.’ Neo-complexicists try to create the impression of improvisation in their notation, while Bebop, four decades earlier, was already so subtle it was impossible to adequately notate.

James Morrison is born in Boorowa, NSW on 11 November 1962. He studies at the NSW Conservatorium with great Australian jazz musicians like **Judy Bailey** (born in Auckland), and National Living Treasure, **Don Burrows**. He performs with Bebop trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1987, records *Jazz at the Symphony* with the London Philharmonic in 1993, has performed with Ray Charles and B.B. King, and for numerous heads of states. Tonight he stands onstage at the Adelaide Festival Theatre with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, a conductor, vocalist and jazz trio to present the latest manifestation of the world’s greatest cultural exchange.

Gordon Kalton Williams
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