

On Harmony and Meaning in Clare Fischer's Music¹

Clare Fischer's harmony differs in some respects from general jazz harmony. First of all, Fischer's harmony is fundamentally horizontal, whereas harmonic thinking in jazz in general would be vertical. As a result, Fischer's music is often approached in a fundamentally wrong way. In this paper Fischer's harmony is examined in detail. Aspects of voice leading will be discussed, and also the voicings, which differ to a degree from the ones found in jazz. Ultimately the question is put what it is that makes Fischer's music sound as it sounds.

Clare Fischer is probably best known for the recordings he made in the '80s with his group Salsa Picante, an electric Latin jazz ensemble. But there is more to the person of Clare Fischer. Born in 1928, he received his Master of Music degree in composition from Michigan State University in 1955. Since the very beginning of his career, Fischer has worked both as a pianist, composer and arranger. As a composer and arranger, he has written in various styles, and for various ensembles, ranging from writing for vocals - he was the musical conductor and pianist of the Hi-Lo's for five years (1956-1962) - through big band - writing for Dizzy Gillespie (1960) - to large orchestra - arrangements for Prince, Joao Gilberto and Robert Palmer, to name but a few. As a pianist he mainly works in jazz-style, with strong Latin influences. He is also strongly interested in keyboards, and has recorded several albums on organ.

Within the (Latin) jazz idiom Clare Fischer has developed a distinct style of his own. I believe this style is determined by four features.

First, *dynamics*. An important facet of Fischer's music is the fact that, contrary to most jazz or Latin music, it is very restrained. To put it in another way, it is 'not hot'. The music is extremely controlled on all levels, not least because so much of it is arranged. The themes, and often many parts of the accompaniments of the solos too, are carefully written out. Dynamical climaxes are usually absent, both in the arrangements, and even in the solos. And also more generally, Fischer's music will rarely be louder than mezzoforte.

Second, *instrumentation*. In this respect Clare Fischer's music is distinguished by a preference for woodwinds, and even more important, the extensive use of keyboards and synthesizers. The use of woodwinds and unusual brass wind instruments may be seen in a longer Ellington-Thornhill-Evans tradition, but, more than that, I believe it is a reflection of Fischer's dynamic tastes. These tastes lead to a frequent use of the flute in smaller bands, for example, where the more powerful tenor saxophone or trumpet are usually favoured in jazz. Keyboards are an even more important feature of Fischer's instrumentation. They determine in large part the effect of the music. With the choice of specific sounds it is possible to highlight certain voices, or alternatively to camouflage voices, to the point where it becomes hard to pin down the single notes. So the use of keyboards is

1 This paper was originally presented at the Fourth European Music Analysis Conference, 22 October 1999, in Rotterdam.

not an end in itself, but serves a very specific purpose. Another aspect of the instrumentation that must be mentioned here, is the fact that Fischer often does not stick to the usual registers, like in his high writing for vocals or low writing for keyboard.

The third feature I want to mention is the way Fischer deals with *rhythm*. In a lot of the pieces Fischer uses Latin rhythms, particularly Cuban and Brazilian ones. Although in applying the Latin rhythms he shows respect for the tradition, he ultimately uses them for his own purposes. Typical of Clare Fischer is that he will not allow the drums to drown the music. There is a connection here with his dealing with dynamics. Again the music is stripped of the 'hot' aspects.

But, finally, it is first and foremost the characteristic *harmony* which determines Fischer's style and makes it stand out within the Latin jazz idiom; it is the harmony which makes the music immediately recognizable as his. In this paper I want to pursue the question what it is that makes Fischer's music sound as it sounds, and to that end I want to concentrate primarily on the harmony.

Let me first define some terms. I will use the word 'harmony' in a general way, and more specifically to indicate chord choice, the overall harmonic scheme. For vertical harmonic units I will use the words 'voicing' and 'sonority', both referring to the sound as a whole, to which notes it contains, and their positions. Also I will have to refer to general or standard jazz harmony, and when I do that, I am assuming that there *is* something like a standard jazz harmony. And indeed I think that although there are not very many *strict* rules, it is safe to say that there is an ordinary way of doing things in jazz, a 'common practice', so to speak.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. Each system consists of a treble and bass staff. Chord symbols are written above the treble staff, and melodic lines are written in both staves. The first system (measures 1-5) includes chords: Am⁹⁻⁵, D⁹⁺⁵, D⁷⁺⁹, Gm, Gm/F, and Em⁹⁻⁵(13). The second system (measures 6-10) includes chords: A⁷⁺⁵₄₉, A⁷⁻⁵₃, D^{M9}, G⁹13, Eb^M_{M7}⁹⁻⁵, Eb^M_{M7}⁷⁻⁵, and Ab¹³₉. The third system (measures 11-15) includes chords: C[#]m, C[#]m/B, Bbm⁹⁻⁵(13), Eb⁷⁺⁵₄₉, Eb⁷⁺⁵₄₉⁺¹¹, and Ab^{M9}. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and articulation marks.

Example 1
Gilda, mm. 1-16.

To get an idea of Fischer's harmony, let us now turn to the first 16 bars of the theme of *Gilda*, a tune recorded on the album *Lembranças* in 1989 (see Example 1).² At first, the music does not strike us as being much out of the ordinary. The harmonic scheme presents us with no problem in knowing where we are in a tonal sense: there are sequential II-V-I-progressions and the bass almost exclusively plays the roots of the chords. The structure of these 16 bars is also very straightforward: 8 bars of model and 8 bars of sequence over a tritone. So at first hearing the music is unproblematic.

But on further consideration, there does seem to be something peculiar or strange in the harmony of these bars. As I mentioned before, it is not the harmony as such, meaning the chord choice, that is characteristic. In general Clare Fischer uses regular chord progressions in his own tunes, as in *Gilda*; and also when using other people's material, he stays close to the original harmony. Therefore it must have something to do with the way in which the harmony is worked out.

So what is so strange about these notes, what do we actually hear? Because the overall style of the music is Latin jazz, we expect the harmony and voicings to derive from jazz. We find that in bar 7 for example, in the way the F7, F#7 and G7 are set. The root, the third and seventh of the chords are at the basis of the voicings, and on top we find the 13. Also the parallel movement is quite typical of jazz. If we look at bars 3 and 4 on the other hand, we hear more traditional harmony, which I will call 'classical' for want of a better word. The music is triadic; the melody is accompanied by a parallel voice in thirds or sixths. The whole gesture of these bars is that of a classical idiom. But there are also more peculiar bars, for example bars 1-2 and 5-6. Clearly they derive from the jazz idiom, but to a certain degree they differ from that. And it is especially the peculiar bars that catch our attention and strike us as being different. They contain the typical Clare Fischer voicings. They seem to determine the music to a large extent, and it is this aspect of Clare Fischer's music that always gets focussed on when his music is discussed.

But to focus exclusively on these 'Clare Fischer voicings' is to miss the point. First of all, Clare Fischer's harmony stands out from general jazz harmony because it is primarily linear; Fischer's harmonic thinking is fundamentally horizontal. The principle of voice leading, of linearity, governs all of Clare Fischer's writing, and therefore also the parts that are more traditional or jazz-like. In this way alone it is set apart from general jazz harmony, which is basically vertical. The music is not polyphonic, but Clare Fischer's horizontal thinking does not restrict itself to voice leading. Alongside the melody we find middle voices, that can be more or less independent within one piece, and can vary in number within one piece.

It is not the horizontality in itself, though, that determines the characteristic sound of Fischer's music. It is the fact that the notes often behave quite differently from how they are expected to behave in a context of tonal-functionality. Adding to that, many chromatic notes occur, that can not be explained in terms of secondary functions. Strange notes, in short. And finally, Clare Fischer's voice leading *does* bring about voicings that differ from general jazz voicings.

But above all it is the *combination* of different types of harmonies, especially of the Clare Fischer voicings with the traditional ones, that creates the typical effect this music produces. Listening to the first 8 bars of *Gilda*, we hear the weird contrast between bars

2 Clare Fischer, *Lembranças*, Concord Picante 1990. The musical notation of *Gilda* as printed here is the original notation by Clare Fischer, a source which I was able to consult.

1-2 and 3-4 and then again 5-6. The confrontation of both worlds within such a small segment of the music has an alienating effect, but at the same time *almost* turns them into camp, into kitsch, as the sincerity of both worlds is negated. As much as the Clare Fischer voicings are original, this strange combining of the basically uncombinable contributes in no small measure to the impact of Clare Fischer's music, and this, although easily overlooked, is what we hear.

Let us turn to some examples of the above by looking at *Gilda* in greater detail. In bars 1 and 2 of *Gilda*, we hear a II-V-progression in the key of G minor. Notice that in the $Am7^{\flat}5$ -chord the third is missing. Also the major 9 is used, a note that does not belong to the G minor tonality. Although it is not uncommon to put a major 9 on the IInd degree in minor, in this case it is very much exposed and sounds rather harsh. The E^{\flat} in the middle voice, which doubles the melody, functions as a rather unusual suspension to the major 9 of V. The E^{\flat} of the melody is tied to the V, so the strange combination of $b9$ and major 9 results from the voice leading. Both these 9s function as suspensions again and resolve to the root and the $\sharp 9$ of V respectively.

In bars 3 and 4 the (latent) six-part harmony is left for five-part, or one could even argue four-part, harmony. The music becomes triadic, creating, together with the 'sweet' effect of the parallel thirds and sixths, a rather strong contrast with bars 1 and 2.

In bars 5 and 6 the six-part harmony returns. As I mentioned before, the structure of the first 16 bars of *Gilda* is a 8 + 8 sequence. These 8 bars themselves are constructed as a sequence as well (4 + 4), so the whole structure seems to be the simplest possible. But on closer look it turns out that there's a bit more going on. It seems that the harmony and the melody from bar 5 onwards are sequenced in two different intervals: the melody is transposed a major second down and the harmony is transposed a perfect fourth down – melody and harmony split up, as it were. There are several possible approaches to the working of the sequence. The easiest way is to see the second voice in bar 5 onwards as the structural melody; the voice which the listener hears as the melody, because it is the top voice, played by the flute, is in fact an accompaniment of the structural melody in thirds. But because of the instrumentation, the suggestion that the top voice is indeed the structural melody, is really strong. In that case melody and harmony *do* split up, and at least two more approaches seem possible. The first is that the melody is the basis for the sequence. Would the harmony in bars 5-8 have followed the melody, then the progression would have been $Gm7^{\flat}5$ C7 Fmaj7 instead of $Em7^{\flat}5$ A7 Dmaj7; the whole progression would have been in the key of F as follows: (II-V) → II, II $m7^{\flat}5$ -V-I.³ Interestingly, in the 'distorted' sequence, the II-V progression ends on a D-major chord, whereas a D-minor chord was to be expected after the preceding minor II-V progression. One could see this chord as a match to the F-major chord.

It is also possible to take the harmony as the basis for the sequence. In this case one option is to see the progression as follows: (II-V) → IV, II-V-I_{pic}. The melody is sequenced a major second down, but not all intervals are transposed literally. Would that have been the case, then the final note (A in bar 7) would have been an A^{\flat} , with an F-minor chord as the implied harmony. In that case the melody note A can be seen as the Picardy third, to match the Picardy D-major chord. The whole construction is a lot smarter than it may seem at first impression.

3 In German and Dutch music theory, II $m7^{\flat}5$ is known as 'II Moll-dur' (by mixture).

The result of all of this is a friction between melody and harmony. In bar 5, where the six-part harmony returns, a $D\flat$ occurs on the $Em7\flat 5$. It functions as a suspension for the C in the melody in bar 6, an impractical note on the $A7$, since the leading note is needed. The C is 'turned into' a $\sharp 9$ (or $\flat 10$) by putting the $C\sharp$ in a middle voice.

Apart from that, the two voicings of the $A7$ in bar 6 do not contain so many strange notes in jazz terms. The fact that they are immediately recognizable as Fischer's has to do with their position in the sonority. The $C\sharp$ occurs in a rather low register. Also the gap between the $C\sharp$ and the $B\flat$ and C respectively is not filled with at least a G, as one might expect. The result is that the dissonants within the voicing itself (especially in the second voicing of $A7$: $C\sharp-C\flat$; $C\sharp-E\flat$; to a lesser extent $A-B\flat$) are not mellowed. The low E as a first note on the bass of the $Dm\flat 7$ in the next bar is even more remarkable than the low $C\sharp$ in the $A7$, as it is the 9 of the chord. Chord extensions in jazz usually appear higher up in the sonority.

Of all the remaining details of the first 16 bars, I just want to mention the voicing of the $E\flat m7\flat 5$ in bar 9. Here the eight-bar sequence starts, and as you can see the harmony and melody are transposed literally. Only the details of the part-writing differ. Again the major 9 is used; and again it functions as a suspension, this time for the minor third. A typical feature of the Clare Fischer voicings we find here is the minor seventh of the chord which is being suspended by the major seventh. The rather high register for the entire sonority, and the wide spacing make especially the first of the two voicings sound rather eerie.

In these examples most of the notes that are unusual or behave in an unusual way, like the 9 in $D7$ that resolves to the $\sharp 9$, can be explained by or are the result of voice leading. Of course the strongest relations between chords will arise if notes function as suspensions, or if chromatic relations are used. In this way any note can become a leading note, and that makes virtually anything possible.

flute

middle voices : I IV $\flat VII$ III

bass : I $(V^6) \rightarrow$ IV (subV) \rightarrow $\flat VII$ $(V^6) \rightarrow$ III (subV) \rightarrow

VI $\flat II$ V I

VI II (subV) \rightarrow V I

A \flat G F Em

Example 2

C.P., mm. 1-8.

But voice leading can be more than just chromatic relations, stepwise movement or suspensions, as we saw in *Gilda* in the handling of the four-bar sequence. Let us have a look at another example from the album *Lembranças, C.P.*, a piece dedicated to the late Charlie Palmieri, a Latin jazz pianist. In this piece we see that the unusual sonorities are produced by the implementation of separate ideas, much like the separation of the melody and harmony in *Gilda*. The first 8 bars of *C.P.* consist of a sequential circle-of-fifths progression in minor. Once again, the harmonic scheme is a simple one: I-IV- \flat VII-III-VI- \flat II-V-I (see Example 2).⁴ The bass has a little two-bar melody which is sequenced. This line could just be a melody over the chord scheme, but one could also hear it as having a slightly different and also more elaborate harmonic scheme. In that case the bass reaches every next chord by way of a secondary dominant, alternating between secondary Vs and secondary subVs (see the harmonic analysis below the bass line in Example 2). Finally, it reaches II instead of \flat II in bar 6. The combination of these two layers brings about some surprising clashes. I have marked those with arrows in Example 2.

In what way do Clare Fischer's voicings differ from regular voicings? I would distinguish three possibilities. First of all, they can contain notes that do not belong to the key, or to the chord; or, alternatively, they can lack notes that 'should' be in the chord. We could summarise these as 'wrong notes'. Another possibility is that chord notes will be put in other places in the sonority than they would normally be. They are transferred somewhere else, so to speak. A third option is that chord notes are placed in a rather low or high register. Of course more often than not combinations of these three will appear.

The image contains two systems of musical notation. The top system, labeled '22', shows a piano accompaniment with a treble clef and a bass clef. The right hand plays a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand plays a bass line with chords and moving lines. The bottom system shows a close-up of the bass line with two chords. Arrows indicate the movement of notes between the two chords, showing how some notes are relocated to different positions within the chord structure.

Example 3
Dancing Song, mm, 22-24.

One very clear example of a voicing in which notes have been relocated is the C7-chord in bar 24 of *Dancing Song* from the album *Tjaderama* (see Example 3).⁵ A regular jazz voicing will have as its basis the important chord notes, the root, the 3rd and the 7th, and the tensions higher in the chord. Here we see that the chord notes are played high and

- 4 The notation of this example is based on Fischer's notation of an arrangement for the Metropole Orchestra, which I was able to consult.
- 5 Clare Fischer & His Latin Jazz Sextet, *Tjaderama*, Trend/Discovery Records 1987. Again, the notation is based on Clare Fischer's original notation.

the tensions are transferred to a low part of the chord, thus adding to the muddled sound. In this chord at least three, but maybe even four notes have to be transferred by an octave up or down to get a regular voicing.

This brings me to the final point I want to make about this. Although mostly the voicings arise from the voice leading, sometimes they are petrified, frozen, as it were, and used as independent vertical units. For example, Clare Fischer often very deliberately relocates notes in a chord structure, independently of a context. In bars 22-23 of *Dancing Song*, for example, the logical way of resolving the B \flat 7 to the E \flat maj7 would be as follows: the 7th resolving to the 3rd, the 3rd becoming the 7th, and the 13 going to the 9 (see Example 3). Instead, Fischer switches the 3rd and the 9, as it were. It is even one of Fischer's exercises for piano to take a regular voicing of, say, a II-V-I-progression, then to switch notes in the voicings, and then practice it in all keys.

Let us finally return to *Gilda* again. Although at first hearing the Clare Fischer voicings attract the most attention, it is also, or maybe even primarily as we have seen, the contrast with other types of settings, especially the traditional, that contributes to the overall effect. But does that really catch the whole impact of the music? If we listen to *Gilda*, we hear the strange notes in the Clare Fischer voicings, we hear the strange contrast between those voicings and the traditional harmonies. What impact should those highly chromatic, often harsh-sounding and conflicting notes have? Should they not create a powerful emotionality? That is not what we hear. As I indicated before, the rhythm and dynamics are very subdued, almost objective in a sense; no climaxes, no rubatos are played. Also the way Clare Fischer is playing is very casual, almost unemotional. And although some of the notes and voices are very well audible, others are put in synthesizer pads which, to some extent, eliminate their dissonances. Thus the dynamics, the way the rhythm is played, and the instrumentation – the three other aspects I mentioned before – obstruct the emotional potential the conflicting notes have. At the same time it is precisely this contradiction, this obstruction, that creates a sense of alienation, of estrangement, and of reflection, and therefore a new level of musical meaning. Of course Clare Fischer's harmonies are quite remarkable, of course the use of weird synthesizer sounds is typical of him, but it is the way in which all these things work together, or obstruct or contradict one another, that ultimately determines the emotional meaning and impact of Clare Fischer's music.