 Compound Melody and Jazz Improvisations: A Reconsideration

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The arresting effect of a performance by an expert jazz improviser owes much to elements such as tone color, vibrato, pitch range, and dynamic compass. It also owes much to another element, one that is less apprehensible to most listeners: voice leading. How do diminutions interact with the structurally more significant notes they prolong? What is the connection between structural notes in different registers? When does it make sense to look for contrapuntal relationships within a single improvised line? These are remote matters even for many listeners who are musicians. To them, issues of voice leading don’t stand out as clearly or as insistently as do the other elements mentioned above. Nevertheless, these are crucial issues, in that voice leading endows the musical surface with its shape, its form, and indeed its beauty. The present essay examines a specific voice-leading element, compound melody, and the role it plays in a jazz improvisation by the alto saxophonist Paul Desmond (1924–77).

I first addressed this topic in my doctoral dissertation, which I wrote under the guidance of Allen Forte. After examining many analytical studies of jazz improvisations, I was puzzled to find that most of them left the topic of compound melody unaddressed, and the few that did con-

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1 The word “diminution” is used here in its Schenkerian sense, which is essentially synonymous with “embellishment.” For an overview of the concept of melodic diminutions, see Allen Forte and Steven E. Gilbert, Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), ch. 1 (7–40).

2 A compound melody is a single line in which “distinct components of the voice leading” convey “two or more voices over a longer span of music” (Forte and Gilbert, Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis, 67 and 68).

3 John Check, “Concepts of Compound Melody in Jazz Improvisations” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1997).
sider it tended, as a rule, not to make much of it. Here, then, was an opportunity: my dissertation would be the first to concentrate primarily on this topic. Then as now, I was strongly influenced by Forte’s scholarship, in particular by his book, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era: 1924–1950*. It was published as I was beginning work on my dissertation, and I was drawn to his light touch in his analytical graphs and explanations. The graphs did not look as rigidly Schenkerian as I then assumed such graphs had to look. He used Schenkerian terms and concepts to illuminate pieces of music that he clearly loved—pieces that he believed merited closer examination and deeper appreciation—but he used these terms and concepts flexibly, and always to illuminate the music. Never was there the intimation that a certain song or passage “failed” to comply with this or that Schenkerian precept. As Forte noted in an introductory chapter on “the large-scale view”:

> Although I wish to acknowledge Schenker’s influence, I emphasize at the same time that [my] adoption of the linear-analytical procedures he developed is modest in scope and does not begin to engage the full range of his formulations. Nor do I intend to explain at every turn the adaptations of Schenkerian ideas or deviations from them, for this would distract the reader from the main thrust of the book: the study of musical design in the American popular ballad during the quarter-century 1924–1950.

Forte’s graphs concentrated on details of the foreground and the early middleground. In this respect, as in others, I decided to follow his lead in my own work on compound melody.

Another, lesser-known work of his that influenced my thinking was an unpublished lecture given in 1958, titled “The Development of Diminutions in American Jazz.” It was one of

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6 The lecture was given at various *Amerika Häuser* in Germany and Austria, under the aegis of the United States Information Agency. It was translated by Ernst Oster into German, the language in which it was read.
the earliest attempts at using Schenkerian techniques in the analysis of jazz improvisations. Concentrating on the work of Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, and Charlie Parker, Forte sought to show how chromatic inflections in what he termed the “melodic dimension” worked their way into the “harmonic dimension.” The increased complexity of the latter, in turn, gave rise to an even more inflected melodic dimension. Forte saw improvisations less as variations upon a theme than as novel voice-leading constructs with notes of greater and lesser significance.

Looking back on my dissertation, I now realize it left two important matters underexamined: strategy and motivation. What conditions give rise to compound-melodic voice leading? Why is it used? These are two of the questions I hope to touch upon here.

Paul Desmond’s improvisation is on the song “All The Things You Are,” by Jerome Kern (music) and Oscar Hammerstein II (lyrics). The gem of an otherwise forgettable musical, Very Warm for May (1939), it quickly became a popular vehicle upon which jazz musicians based improvisations. Harmonically, its refrain is characterized by a prominent descending circle-of-fifths sequence. The chorus analyzed below is from a 1953 live performance by the Dave Brubeck quartet, featuring Desmond. The saxophonist’s improvisation is five choruses long; only the last chorus will be examined here. The transcriptions are my own and show just the solo line and bass.

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7 Forte goes so far as to call the song “an apotheosis of the chain of fifths” (The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 75).
8 Dave Brubeck Quartet, Jazz at College of the Pacific (Fantasy LP 3223, 1953; reissued 1987, on CD, as Fantasy OJCCCD-047-2). Joining Desmond and Brubeck (piano) on this recording are Ron Crotty (bass) and Joe Dodge (drums).
Figure 1. Desmond’s solo, mm. 1–8

NB: top system = transcription, middle system = foreground analysis, bottom system = middleground analysis
What may be most striking about the beginning of the fifth chorus (shown in Figure 1) is its resemblance to an ornamental variation. The structural notes in mm. 1–2, A₄ and D♯₅, match those of Kern’s original melody. This correspondence, however, does not account for their structural status; that is based instead on the way they are presented. Falling on the second beat of m. 1, the alto-range A₄ receives a two-note prefix that descends by step. (In the graph, “alto” notes receive downward stems and descant or “soprano” notes receive upward stems.) Desmond mirrors this decoration in the second half of the measure, as a two-note ascending figure returns to A₄. These two A₄s also receive agogic stress, which lends subtle emphasis to the backbeats, 2 and 4. The same design appears in m. 2, now decorating descant pitch D♯₅. Measure 3 begins by promising more of the same: the alto is embellished by another descending prefix as it falls to G₄.

Why should this fifth and final chorus begin as it does? For one thing, it would appear to bring clarity and regularity to the solo at the very point that these two qualities may be most desirable. The preceding (fourth) chorus was in many ways the highlight of the solo; the music there was at its most energetic, the voice leading unpredictable and complex. A measure of relief is what the fifth chorus offers, and it provides it at the outset with the regularity of its design.

One could easily imagine the whole of mm. 1–2 sequenced in mm. 3–4 with structural notes G₄ and C₅. Yet, no sequence materializes. This may be sensed as soon as the middle of m. 3, when the solo dips down on the third beat to C₄ (instead of E♭₄, the note that would have continued the sequence). There follows an octave coupling between C₄ and C₅, during which the alto returns to A♭₄. This coupling raises interesting points about the kinds of decisions one faces when performing an analysis on a piece of music—especially an analysis that focuses on compound-melodic elements. At first thought, the C₄ in m. 3 might seem to be a questionable
structural note. After all, it is the following $E_b4$—not the $C4$—that receives the agogic stress; it is the $E_b4$ that stands as the long in yet another pattern of short–short–long. One argument in favor of the $C4$ holds that it is structural not so much for what it is, but for what it can retrospectively be understood to have been: the lower duplicate of $C5$, the note to which the long ascending gesture in mm. 3–4 is directed. The lower note provides the foundation for the higher note. As such, it makes sense to consider it structural (and to stem it accordingly). This argument looks ahead, interpreting a moment in time in light of what is to come. Another argument looks back on what was—and what might have been. That is, as mentioned above, model–sequence behavior was in the works, and it was with the sounding of the $C4$ that the sequence was broken. It marks a new beginning, one that can be suggested analytically by placing a stem on the $C4$, conferring upon it structural status.

So much for the descant voice in mm. 3–4; what about the alto voice? Why should the foreground $A_b4$ in m. 4 be stemmed? What significance does it have? Yes, this note is yet another long in the familiar short–short–long pattern; but there is also this: it participates in a prolongation that began in m. 1. The middleground graph shows $A_b4$ beginning in m. 1, lower-neighbor $G4$ entering in m. 3, and $A_b4$ returning in m. 4. Granted, the ear (or my ear, at least) may be drawn in mm. 3–4 more to the coupling of $C4$ and $C5$. But this is not to say that it is the only thing to which the ear is drawn. It is a matter of extent or prominence, and a matter, too, of perspective: while the coupling may be the significant event in mm. 3–4, the significant event across mm. 1–4 may be the prolongation of $A_b4$.

So far in this chorus, structural notes have received agogic stress. (The sole exception, as we have seen, is the $C4$ in m. 3, which is coupled with a note that itself receives agogic stress.) The new descant note in m. 5 ($A_b4$), in addition to possessing agogic stress, is metrically
accented, falling as it does on the downbeat of the measure. How slight, by comparison, does the alto-voice component, F4, appear to be. Slight in surface salience, yet it nevertheless serves as the lower registral boundary in mm. 5–6. More abstractly, it lingers in the musical imagination as Desmond directs attention to the descant voice from the fourth beat of m. 5 through the end of m. 6. It changes as it lingers: when sounded on the third beat of m. 5, it forms a consonance against the D♭ in the bass. The G chord in the second half of m. 6 is the dominant of C major, the tonal region that serves as the goal of mm. 1–8. Against that chord, F is the dissonant chordal seventh. While literally absent from most of the measure, its conceptual presence is suggested when the solo touches on E₄ on the downbeat of m. 7, for that note supplies the resolution of the seventh.

The four notes following the E₄ sound at first like a suffix; in fact, they could be graphed that way simply by removing the upward stem from the G₄ in m. 7. Yet I am reluctant to do this, as m. 7 extends the prolongation of G₄ that began in m. 6. Perhaps as important, m. 7 looks forward to the opening notes in m. 9. The G₄ and succeeding G₃ prepare the way for the entrance in m. 9 on G₅. What happens in m. 7 exemplifies the advantages of a compound-melodic analysis. Were the analysis of m. 7 to show E₄ as the only structural note—with the following G₄ as a diminution relating to it—the analysis would fail to hint at the forward-looking quality of the solo at the end of m. 7. Conversely, were the analysis to show only G₄ as structural, it would neglect something essential about that measure, namely, the note that falls on the downbeat and the fact that it is the resolved third of the region’s tonic triad. At some level of consciousness, Desmond must have known this; his placement of that particular note in that particular place seems too deliberate for it to have been mere chance or happy coincidence. Or so, at any rate, it seems to me.
Figure 2. Desmond’s solo, mm. 9–16
The solo in the next eight measures (mm. 9–16, shown in Figure 2) resembles in some ways mm. 1–8. Again there is clarity and regularity, only now it is provided by a new rhythmic pattern: four eighth notes followed by a single quarter note. Characterized by scalar passages, this pattern is used in a straightforward manner: in mm. 9–13, every descending gesture is followed by an ascending gesture using the same notes an octave lower. In the midst of all this repetitiveness, what keeps the solo from sounding predictable? Actually, a case can be made that here it is predictable, but that its predictability, far from compromising the overall effect, serves a particular aesthetic goal. That goal is one of dislocation, a feeling of being out-of-phase or out-of-joint; it comes about because of the hemiola between Desmond’s line, which has a relentless “three-ness” to it, and the surrounding rhythm section, which digs even more into the straight-ahead $\frac{3}{4}$ meter. (Notice the repeated bass notes in the first halves of mm. 9–11.)

It is with the appearance of E♭4 on the third beat of m. 13 that the hemiola comes to an end. Remarkably, this has little effect on the continuity of the solo. Part of the reason has to do with voice leading: the middleground graph shows that the descant at the end of m. 13 remains on E♭5; then it falls by step to D♭5 (m. 14) and to C5 (m. 16). The voice leading is smooth and even; in consequence, the solo during the hemiola feels connected with the solo after the hemiola. Yet there is more at work than voice leading: there is register. While the hemiola was in effect, the solo dipped into and out of different registers as high descending lines were answered by low ascending lines. After the hemiola, the solo continues to explore the same two registers, doing so into m. 15. One further element contributes to the cohesiveness of the solo in mm. 9–16: diminutions. The consonant skips in mm. 14–16 subtly look back to the beginning of the fifth chorus. There, structural notes were decorated by two-note figures that could as well be considered filled-in consonant skips. Now, in mm. 14–16, Desmond presents the skips directly (i.e., minus the intervening passing tones).
Figure 3. Desmond’s solo, mm. 17–24
Looking at the graphs of mm. 9–16 makes one thing apparent: the individual lines of the solo’s compound melody vary in extent and prominence. This is evident especially in the middleground graph: the alto line consists of just three notes, C5–B♭4–A♭4. Would anything be lost in regarding them as middleground consonant skips (as opposed to components of a line)? Only something pleasantly understated: each one is a goal tone; each concludes a purposeful, five-note figure. The way they are led into reminds me of the way a skilled debater makes one point to begin with, then another, and then a clinching third. In a sense, not to single out these notes for analytical emphasis would be to miss the larger argument Desmond is trying to make.

In the second half of m. 15 and throughout m. 16, the solo concentrates on descant pitch D♭5 and its diminution, B♭4. This provides a break from the registral give-and-take that so marked the music from m. 9 through the first half of m. 15. The break, it turns out, is but momentary. The solo on the bridge (mm. 17–24, shown in Figure 3) again moves back and forth between different registers, presenting its ideas first in one octave and then another.

What has just taken place, while slight, deserves further attention. It seems to capture something of Desmond’s turn of mind. By concentrating on the upper register in mm. 15–16, he appears to signal that he has lost interest in moving back and forth between octaves. The effect upon us listeners is to “close off” mm. 9–16 as an independent unit in which a unifying device—the motion between octaves—promotes a strong sense of beginning and ending. The expectation is that what follows will initiate another independent unit, one in which the solo concentrates its energies on a single register, one with an equally clear beginning and ending. This creates the impression that the improvisation is to consist of a series of discrete units, one after the other, with little or nothing to connect them. Two things result from the soloist’s forays between registers beginning in m. 17. First, they upset any expectation about that measure’s being the start of a
brand-new unit. (How could it be, when it looks back to the registral play of m. 9ff?) Second, they weaken the impression that the solo is composed of individual units that have little or nothing to do with one another. Desmond deceives us (or at least confuses us) by leading us to expect one thing only to surprise us with something else. It is a neat trick of musical legerdemain.

Another element joins the improvisation in mm. 9–16 with that in mm. 17–24, and that is voice leading. Activity in this respect is concentrated on the descant. That compound melody would appear to be absent in the later measures is not really surprising, as the solo continues to track back and forth between one octave and another. This makes for an abundance of couplings: several appear in the middleground graph of mm. 17–19; a longer-range one, spanning A3 and A4, appears later in mm. 20–21. It is in light of these many couplings, the purpose of which is to suggest the presence of a single note in various pitch-specific guises, that the placement of the descant in m. 18 becomes significant. C5, prolonged since the end of m. 16, returns in m. 18, but this time as a prefix diminution of B4. The reigning chord is D—the dominant of G, which is the tonal region in effect from approximately m. 14 until m. 20. Against this dominant, C5 assumes the role of chordal seventh. Its stepwise resolution enters prematurely: the tonic (G) is not reached until m. 19—or so, at least, is suggested by the transcription and its tyrannical barlines. It turns out that another hemiola is at work. As Figure 4 shows, Desmond makes two $\frac{3}{4}$ measures out of mm. 17–19; B4 now falls on the downbeat of the second of these measures. Hemiola is thus another element—although a far from obvious one—connecting the improvisation in mm. 9–16 with that in mm. 17–24.

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9 The hemiola could be read another way, namely as four measures of $\frac{3}{4}$ within three measures of $\frac{4}{4}$. But this reading feels forced to me.
Moving on to mm. 20–21, one may question the reading of the coupling between A₃ and A₄. Figure 5 presents an alternate reading, showing only the solo. One point in favor of this analysis is that the two Bs are in the same register; the flag on the intervening A₃ indicates that it is a complete lower neighbor that itself receives a suffix diminution. A second point is that the chord in effect in m. 20 is G major, the temporary tonic; the analysis in Figure 5 preserves the stable chord member (the third) and scale degree (♯), leaving it to the next measure, when G is displaced as the tonal center, to bring about a change of descant. In defense of the earlier reading of Figure 3, I would point out the following about rhythm. Measure 20 brings with it a return of the familiar short–short–long pattern. It returns at a crucial point, hard on the heels of the hemiola. My ear seizes upon it, wanting to hear the downbeat of m. 20 as a downbeat—specifically as the downbeat of a ½ measure. Hearing the first half of the measure as a return, my ear hears the second half as a confirmation of what it heard. It is a matter of priority: I hear the second half of the measure in relation to the first, not the other way around. Therefore I hear the B₃ in relation to the A₃, with the former as an incomplete upper neighbor of the latter (at the
middleground). Another point in favor of the analysis in Figure 3 concerns the prominence of couplings from m. 9 onward. Beginning in that measure, each structural pitch appears in different octaves; this is true of both the long descant line—observe its stepwise descent from G4 to A4—and the less extensive alto line found in mm. 9–13. Couplings bind mm. 9–21 together into a larger musical unit, one missing only its final component.

The need for that component becomes acute in m. 22. Desmond leaves the measure empty, but the A4 remains in effect. Absent though felt, it acquires dissonant status against the B chord there, which is the dominant of E, the region in which the bridge cadences. Measure 23 brings the expected resolution of A4 to G♯4, even if the latter’s arrival is downplayed. Deflecting emphasis from it are the prefix diminution involving B4, the suffix diminution of the same note, and the long rest in m. 24. Considering the length of the preceding musical thought, taking into account the instability with which it almost ends in m. 22, and viewing the offhand way in which the resolution is handled, it is hard not to hear mm. 23–24 as a particularly characteristic statement. It is almost a wry remark.

Unlike the improvisation on the bridge, that on mm. 25–36 features compound-melodic voice leading; see Figure 6. Different parts of the solo concentrate on different voices. Measure 25, for instance, contains a prolongation of the descant C5 by a figure that augments the one with which the fifth chorus began. Now, instead of containing two eighth notes followed by a quarter, the figure consists of six eighths followed by a quarter. Its repetition is postponed by the stripped-down gesture running from m. 26 through the first half of m. 27. One of the things this gesture does is activate the alto voice E♭4 and its octave duplicate, E♭5. Another is to bring about a change of descant to B♭4, which is preceded by its lower duplicate. And, more subtly, it re-frames the figure heard just a moment ago and recasts its voice-leading purpose. Back in m. 25,
FIGURE 6. Desmond’s solo, mm. 25–36
(continued on next page)
FIGURE 6. (continued)
descant pitch C5 fell on both the first and last beats. No other note vied with it for prominence. Why, then, is the same figure (an octave lower in mm. 27–28) graphed differently? (“Always the same, but not in the same way?”) The answer is that it appears in a new metrical context, beginning not on the downbeat of a measure but on the third beat. This change in placement affects the form of the figure, which now seems middle-accented, not accented at its extremes. The C4 that would have been the structural note (in the old metrical context) instead serves as a decorated, chordal-skip prefix to A♭. (Note too the linear continuity between the B♭3 on the downbeat of m. 26 and the A♭3 on the downbeat of m. 28.) As if to affirm its newfound status as a structural note, Desmond fills m. 28 with three A♭s: the lower duplicate, the descant proper, and the upper duplicate, itself the solo’s apex.10

Measure 29 is a mystery. I have lived with this solo for nearly fifteen years, but am still no closer to understanding its role. Yes, its two pitches reinforce the alto and the descant (or descant duplicate). But what function does it perform? Why is it there? Sounding shortly after the apex, the three notes of m. 29 almost—almost—seem to detract from the impressive effect of m. 28, as though they were a bit of musical throat-clearing. For now, the most I can say for them is that they serve as “filler,” to connect portions of the solo that are more interesting and well-wrought. In keeping with this provisional interpretation, I enclose them within parentheses in the foreground graph.

Voice-leading activity in mm. 25–29 concentrated more on the descant than on the alto. In the descant there was motion: the middleground graph clearly shows the stepwise descent

from C5 to A♭4. Motion was absent from the alto: E♭4 appeared here and there, but no line issued from it. Now, it is the descant’s turn to remain stationary, fixed on A♭4, where it will remain until nearly the end of the chorus. The music instead is animated by the alto voice, chiefly by means of a conflict that plays out over the course of several measures. Its new note, C4, is announced on the downbeat of m. 31. From the pickup to m. 33 through m. 34 there is connective motion between the descant and C♭5. The flag on this note is justified on several counts. First, as it falls on the downbeat of m. 33, it seems to look back to the C(♯)4 that fell on the downbeat of m. 31. This is why the graphs of m. 33 include C♭4 within brackets: this lower note is the voice-leading source of the higher note. In addition, the C♭5 is a blue note.11 Up to this time in the fifth chorus, blue notes have been conspicuous in their absence. It is striking, then, that one should appear now, toward the end of the chorus—which is itself at the end of the five-chorus solo. (Incidentally, another blue note, G♭4, occurs in m. 33 within the prolongation of A♭4.) And last, the flag on the C♭5 is justified because of the attention Desmond pays to it in the ensuing measures.

The transcription of m. 35 and its foreground analysis underscore an important fact about the analysis of jazz improvisations. If the analyst is also the transcriber, he or she must decide how to present the music “itself”—that is, the transcription, the very notes he or she will analyze. The influence of these decisions, often intuitively made, has a way of permeating the analysis. When I transcribed this solo for my dissertation, I decided to show the downbeat of m. 35 as a B♮4; this made it easy to notate the following notes, especially as B♭4 returns before the sounding of the B♭4. Influenced by this small decision, and mindful of the fact that mm. 34–35 contain the

11 Blue notes, according to Paul F. Berliner, are “microtonal melodic inflections . . . [used] for expressive effect” (Berliner, Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 68). See also the discussion of blue notes in Forte, The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 8–9.
most important cadence of the 36-bar chorus, I originally analyzed the B⁴ of m. 35 as an accented passing tone—a prefix to the following C⁵. The latter note, the third of the tonic triad, received a stem. I now think a better argument can be made for an alto duplicate of B⁴. To begin with, it falls on the downbeat of m. 35, as did the enharmonically equivalent C⁵ a mere two measures earlier, in m. 33. Further, the B⁴ in m. 35 occurs at the exact same moment that the cadential tonic is reached. The attractive dissonance between the C of the A⁵-major tonic and the C (or B⁴, enharmonically construed) maintains the “blue” note the improvisation engaged in m. 33. Then there is the return of B⁴ on the second beat of m. 35; absent this return, one would have a harder time pleading its case. Finally there is m. 36: falling on the downbeat of that measure, C(⁵)⁵ at last brings resolution to the alto line. The solo wends its way down chromatically to new descant pitch G⁴, en route to a coupling with C⁴ and the descant’s final resolution to F⁴. The middleground graph normalizes the voice leading in mm. 33–36, depicting the alto in its obligatory register and the flagged B⁴ of m. 35 as originating in C⁵.

The foregoing analysis concentrated on the way compound melody is used in an improvisation by the great jazz saxophonist, Paul Desmond. It showed, for one thing, that the improvisation used compound-melodic voice leading to different degrees and at different structural levels. It demonstrated, too, the myriad influences upon an analyst’s choice of structural notes. Any analysis that attempts to make distinctions between notes of greater and lesser prominence depends necessarily upon a close and sympathetic reading of the musical surface. This is why attention was paid, for instance, to rhythmic patterns, octave couplings, hemiolas, and metrical placement. An argument for a specifically compound-melodic reading hinges on

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12 Measures 34–35 contain the only A⁵-major authentic cadence in the entire chorus!
whether the structural notes of its constituent voice-leading strands can convincingly be understood as structural. The reading, in short, has to make good musical sense. If it does, then it opens a path to understanding and appreciating something deeper and more mysterious: the riddling matter of style. True, any understanding of style—whether jazz style, classical style, or styles in between and beyond—is bound to be incomplete, and any appreciation of it imperfect and fleeting. But this should not be a source of discouragement. It never discouraged Allen Forte. Nor should it discourage us, the students whom he emboldened.
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Dave Brubeck Quartet. Jazz at College of the Pacific. Fantasy LP 3223, 1953; reissued 1987, on CD, as Fantasy OJCCCD-047-2.


ABSTRACT

The concept of “compound melody” (a frequent component of Schenkerian analysis) pertains to the way a single line of music projects two or more voice-leading parts. While usually associated with works of the common-practice period, it also plays a role in jazz improvisations. This is especially so in an improvisation by alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, on “All The Things You Are” by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II. The voice-leading graphs of this solo, and the attendant commentary, suggest that an awareness and appreciation of compound melody can enable a deeper understanding of jazz styles.

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