The Musical Artistry of Bheki Mseleku

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PART ONE

Analysis of Compositions

Mseleku’s conceptualisation of harmony and his use of form are consistent with approaches found in African-American jazz. The added texture of his traditional roots, however, brings a unique and lyrical quality to his work that is distinctly African and this, combined with other influences like classical and Latin-based music, has seen his style branded more in the world music genre than that of pure jazz. Some of his influences are more present in certain works than others; however, a consistent musical approach is evident in all and this resonates in the conventional structures and chord progressions typical of the jazz style.

Established harmonic practice in jazz is evident in the extensive use of typical root-based harmonic progressions from which thousands of tunes have emerged. These form the backbone of the repertoire and have facilitated infinite possibilities for composition as well as tremendous freedom for musical expression. It is through this that the melodic language of jazz ultimately developed. Mseleku noticeably subscribes to this in his compositions and his unique and original voice within the medium is testimony to its endless potential for creative expression.

The compositions selected for analysis are grouped under different headings not to isolate them in specific categories but rather to unpack and draw attention to the artist’s influences and stylistic inclinations across a spread of compositions. All the compositions on the listed albums are instrumental except for ‘Through the Years’, which has lyrics written by Abbey Lincoln. Those that include voice, either sung by members of the ensemble or by the artist himself, are generally not in a traditional accompanied song format, but rather include voice as a form of chant in the music. Several compositions have clear African-American jazz influences – some being directly dedicated to American jazz legends like pianist Bud Powell and saxophonist John Coltrane. Mseleku’s traditional African heritage is also distinctly present in several compositions as well as Afro-pop and traditional township influences, particularly those on
the *Home at Last* album. More subtle influences include elements of western classical Romantic music and some Latin-based influences. A particular fascination with cyclical harmony also forms a significant part of Mseleku’s conceptual approach to composition. In some instances, it forms the foundation of the entire harmonic structure of a tune. This is discussed by the artist and is perhaps an appropriate point of departure for unpacking his harmonic approach to composition and improvisation.
Chapter 1 – Cycles

Expectation and predictability are hardwired into the harmonic system in jazz and this gives a particular structural sensibility to the music. Chords behave a certain way in respect of their function and we are comfortable with typical progressions appearing over and again. Like short musical equations, they invite predictable outcomes but also generate infinite possibilities for composition. These are the bedrock of the jazz standard repertoire. Many tunes use identical progressions and some repeat entire sections in different keys with recurring themes. For instance, the classic I-VI-II-V progression underpins the opening statements of ‘Time After Time’, ‘I’ll Take Romance’, ‘Let’s Fall in Love’ and ‘When I Fall in Love’ and the I-IV-III-VI-II-V progression at the beginning of ‘I Thought about You’ also appears in bars 5-7 of ‘When I Fall in Love’, bars 13-16 of ‘Gone with the Wind’ and in bars 3-4 of ‘That’s All’ and ‘Our Love Is Here to Stay’. Melodic repetition and thematic construction are also found in many classic tunes like ‘All the Things You Are’, ‘Joy Spring’ or ‘You Must Believe in Spring’ where entire sections reappear transposed to different key centres. Chords are often reharmonised or disguised with substitutions giving much scope for creative exploration within a basic predictable harmonic framework.

The mathematical nature of harmonic expectation allows for chords to be combined in ways that can endlessly fulfil expectation of resolution with no real ending point. These are cyclical progressions, a simple example being a cycle of dominant 7ths where each resolves to the next in an endless realisation of resolution. More complex examples can be found in combinations of chords that explore the symmetry of the harmonic system. These are of particular interest to this study as they form a central thread in Mseleku’s compositional approach. Mseleku discusses this in the BBC programme and demonstrates his use of it in an improvisation over a common chord sequence found in the first eight bars of the jazz standard ‘Autumn Leaves’. This ‘conventional’ progression also forms

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22 Bragg (1992). For the transcription of which, see Appendix A.
23 Mseleku does not refer to ‘Autumn Leaves’ as the inspiration for this extended progression; it just so happens that the chord sequence is the same.
the foundation for his extended improvisations on both ‘Closer to the Source’ and ‘Meditations’. In this example, a continuous cycle is created through a pivot modulation at the point in which the progression resolves to the relative minor facilitating an endless progression that passes through all twelve keys. Each chord progresses as expected from II-7 to V7 to I, creating a natural harmonic cycle in which there is endless scope for expression (Fig. 1.1).

There’s a lot of things you can do into it and – I don’t know – for some reason I get attracted to play these kind of changes, like going from the key where I started until I’ve played twelve keys in a whole because of the flow.²⁴

Endless variations are possible and motivic melodies naturally emerge from the cycle as a direct result of the symmetry of the progression. Below (Fig. 1.2), Mseleku plays a motif that traces the symmetry by continually targeting scale degrees 9-1-7-6 in each bar, making a repetitive three-bar unit. Mseleku uses additional harmonic devices like the suspended dominant in bar 1 on E7 or the diminished approach chords in bars 4 and 7 to enhance the complexity and delivery of the progression. The cycle provides infinite scope for expression, creating an almost meditative quality that has profound significance for the artist in his spiritual practice. This is reflected in the title of his Meditations album on which the cycle is used as a source for the improvisation.

²⁴ Mseleku, in Bragg (1992). See Appendix A.
I know that what I’ve just been playing most of the time is repetitious, but somehow, for me, it flows without any definite knowledge of where it will end. It seems like it can go forever. I tried to end this piece because it’s not a piece as such and I had problems with ending it because it just wanted to flow. This is what happens when I go out of time, like not having to worry that we’re filming now, or worry in terms of the gig that it starts at a certain point and ends at a certain point, or with a recording as well. These things create a problem, but for me, music should just be [an] experience every time, all the days of your life. It should be a spiritual thing – a ritual.  

This same chord sequence appears at the end of ‘Closer to the Source’ in which the piano improvises alone for a short duration through the cycle, eventually settling on a repetitive melodic theme that moves through two of the cycles (Fig. 1.3). This is played freely and expressively.

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25 Mseleku, in Bragg (1992)
Fig. 1.3
‘Closer to the Source’ – melodic theme played freely by the piano

After two cycles, the saxophone and piano play a second melodic theme (Fig. 1.4). This is also played freely with the piano improvising under the saxophone. The cycle eventually ends on the tonal centre of C minor.
‘Closer to the Source’ – melodic theme played with the saxophone
In another example, Mseleku improvises over a series of dominant 7th chords played through a cycle of fourths. Here, the emphasis is on tensions consistent with the diminished scale (b9, #11 and 13) using a constant structure comprising a minor third, perfect fourth and minor third built on either b9, 3, 5 or b7 of the dominant (Fig. 1.5).

**Fig. 1.5**
Dominant 7ths through a cycle of fourths
This, for me, sounds more like elemental sounds. It could be like thunder or whatever. Like nature can seem very unorganised sometimes, producing earthquakes and winds which can disturb a lot of people. So sometimes I guess, because of what we pick up, we can play these things otherwise there would be no necessity in them. I think another part of us live in another realm, which is not affected by any outward things that are happening, so it’s always still and peaceful and I try and tune to this part. Hence, I try sometimes to play things that move gently and harmoniously in the way that they move. Like my tunes. Some of them are very simple tunes because I feel attracted to this part of me that is like a child.²⁶

Repetitive melodic motifs are generated naturally from the cycle and the use of the diminished scale results in four-note symmetrical segments of alternating whole steps and half steps over each chord, creating a repetitive symmetrical line (the two-note, whole-step unit is switched from the second bar onwards).

²⁶ Mseleku, in Bragg (1992)
Mseleku’s attraction to cyclical harmony is evident in the title and construction of his composition, the conceptual structure of which is mirrored in both ‘Melancholy in Cologne’ and ‘Aja’. All three compositions are built on a symmetrical axis – ‘Cycle’ and ‘Melancholy in Cologne’ on a diminished axis and ‘Aja’ on an augmented axis. The use of diminished and augmented axes is seen in Coltrane’s compositions like ‘Giant Steps’, ‘Countdown’ or ‘Central Park West’. Although not purely cyclical, all utilise the augmented axis for compositional structure and tunes such as ‘Like Sonny’ employ both diminished and augmented axes. In ‘Cycle’, Mseleku utilises two musical ‘equations’ generated from the expectation of a dominant and its resolution. The symmetry created from progressing up a whole step to a dominant from a minor chord or down a half step from a major 7 chord provides two avenues of movement. If the progression continually moves from a major 7th down a half step to a dominant resolving as expected, an augmented axis will automatically result. If it moves from a minor 7 up a whole step to a dominant resolving to minor, the progression will continue endlessly through a cycle of fifths. Mseleku engages the repetitive symmetry naturally generated by these harmonic ‘equations’ to create interesting harmonic cycles. Repetitive motifs result
naturally from this symmetry and Mseleku uses this to drive the melodic integrity of the compositions.

‘Cycle’ comprises an eight-bar sequence of minor 7 chords built on the alternating notes of two diminished 7th axes (Fig. 1.7).

Each minor 7 chord is preceded by its dominant 7th, making an eight-bar repeated cycle (Fig. 1.8).

The progression is analysed as a series of dominant 7ths resolving to each of the minor chords built on the alternating diminished axis (Fig. 1.9). Each alternate minor chord has dual function, both as I-7 of the new key and IV-7 of the subsequent key, constituting a subdominant minor to dominant resolution on each of the minor chords built on the C# diminished axis.
The melody of ‘Cycle’ is constructed on a series of repeated one or two-bar phrases that trace the symmetry of the harmony, giving repetitive structure to the line. The action of the melodic line is propelled by the use of tensions #5 and #9 on the alternate dominant 7ths. The strength of movement from the minor chord to a dominant 7th up a major third is reinforced by the #5 also being the major 7th of the previous minor chord. Three eight-bar melodic sequences are used over the chord sequence and appear at the beginning and end of the tune making a twenty-four bar form in total (Fig. 1.10). All three compositions follow a similar format with repeated motifs that embrace and explore the symmetry of the cyclical harmony. Repetition and thematic phrasing are inherently invited by the symmetry of the harmony and this is also present in his improvisations on the same tunes.

Fig. 1.10
‘Cycle’ – three eight-bar melodic sequences
‘Melancholy in Cologne’ (*Star Seeding*)

‘Melancholy in Cologne’ is constructed on a diminished axis with a two-bar repeated chord sequence descending through the four key centres a minor third apart (Fig. 1.11). The progression moves from I\(\text{Ma7}\) to I\(\text{VMa7}\) via the substitute dominant. I\(\text{VMa7}\) has dual function, both as the chord occurring on the fourth degree in the key and as b\(\text{VIMa7}\) in the subsequent key. Being a sub-dominant minor related chord, the use of b\(\text{VIMa7}\) expresses a variation on the functional movement of the sub-dominant minor to the dominant seen in ‘Cycle’; this time it is expressed as b\(\text{VIMa7}\) followed by a dominant 7th a half step lower and via its related II-7 chord (Gb\(\text{Ma7}\)- C-7b5 F7).

![Fig. 1.11 'Melancholy in Cologne'](image-url)
Like ‘Aja’ and ‘Cycle’, three independent two-bar melodic phrases with some small variations trace the symmetry of the progression, making a twenty-four bar form in total. The melodic line generally follows the guide tones of the chords (Fig. 1.12).

**Fig. 1.12**
‘Melancholy in Cologne’ – melodic analysis
'Aja' (Beauty of Sunrise)

Like ‘Melancholy in Cologne’, ‘Aja’ is also constructed on a symmetrical axis. A twelve-bar form comprises a repeated four-bar progression in the three key centres built on an augmented axis (Fig. 1.13).

Bars 3-5, 7-8 and 11-12 have the same functional construction as bars 1-2 and 5-6 of ‘Melancholy in Cologne’, the only difference being that the dominant and related II-7 take up an entire bar in ‘Aja’ as opposed to two beats in ‘Melancholy in Cologne’ (Fig. 1.14).

As with ‘Cycle’ and ‘Melancholy in Cologne’, the head of ‘Aja’ explores different melodic motifs as the primary drivers of the composition. Three distinctive thematic ideas reflect on the trilogy of the augmented axis creating a thirty-six-bar head (Fig. 1.15).
Fig. 1.15
‘Aja’ – melodic analysis
The thematic development naturally invited by the symmetry is also found in Mseleku’s improvised solo with particular melodic sequences repeated several times (Fig. 1.16). Below, an ascending arpeggio followed by a descending scale segment traces the four-bar progression in a similar way several times. The II-7b5 chords in bars 1 and 2 of the progression are replaced with II-7.

**Fig. 1.16**

Similar construction of improvised lines in ‘Aja’
The cyclical nature of the harmony invites similar phrases that occur multiple times and always in the same place. Fig. 1.17 shows a similarly constructed descending scale line in bar 2 of the progression, occurring five times in Mseleku’s solo.

**Fig. 1.17**

A descending scale segment in bar 2 of ‘Aja’

Bars 2-3

Bars 10-11

Bars 14-15

Bars 34-35

Bars 38-39
‘Angola’ (Celebration)

Cyclical harmonic sequences are also present in compositions that are not purely cyclical in nature but rely on sequences to drive the harmonic identity of the tune. In ‘Angola’, the movement of a minor 7 up a whole step to a dominant is used throughout the composition to activate harmonic movement between the central themes located in the two primary key centres of C minor and Db major. As indicated earlier, this sequence moves through a cycle of fifths, each minor chord effectively having dual function as I-7 in the resolution key and IV-7 in the subsequent key of resolution. Played in its entirety, the sequence will take twelve bars to complete a cycle (Fig. 1.18).

![Harmonic cycle through fifths](Fig. 1.18)

In ‘Angola’, Mseleku uses incarnations of this cyclical equation to bind different sections of the composition together. In Fig. 1.19, the resolution of the subsequent minor is stated before the dominant in the cycle. A similar progression forms part of ‘Meditation Suite’ (see Fig. 5.3 and 5.4).

![Harmonic cycle through a diminished axis](Fig. 1.19)
Several themes are heard throughout the composition (noted as phrases A-D). The first cyclical progression begins after phrase B at bar 24. Here, IV-7 (F-7) progresses up a whole step to V7 (G7) and resolves as expected to I-7 (C-7). This cycle repeats through the cycle of fifths until bar 31. V7 of A7 is suggested again in bar 32 as F-6, implying the upper structure altered tensions of E7alt. Although F-6 is not dominant in function, the suggestion of E7alt is reinforced by E7 having been just played in bar 30. F-6 has dual function in a sense – both as an implied V7alt of A-7 as well as IV-7 in the home key of C-7. This play on tonality facilitates an ingenious switch back to the key of C minor and establishes a key phrase (phrase C) and a central theme in the new key.

The second cyclical progression also begins after phrase B (after DC) and moves through a diminished axis. The same switch seen in bar 32 occurs at letter D. Here, Gb-6 has dual function both as IV-6 in the key of Db major and as an implied V7alt of Bb minor through spelling the altered tensions of the dominant of Bb minor (F7alt).

Fig. 1.20
Analysis of the head of ‘Angola’
CHAPTER 1 – CYCLES

Cyclical sequence off dim axis begins

(also implies V7alt of Bb-7)

phrase C

phrase C