The Musical Artistry of Bheki Mseleku

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PART TWO

Improvisation
Chapter 6 – Considerations for analysis

Jazz is a language. Understanding the vocabulary, syntax, everything involved, and putting it together – that’s what jazz musicians have to do.74

Communication is an unconscious action and although we practise things to say at times, it is for the most part unprepared. For a language to make sense it has to have clear construction and an intelligible vocabulary, but for it to tell a story that is engaging or evokes emotion, it requires artistry.

Improvisation and composition are essentially informed by the same creative source, where improvisation can be seen as spontaneous composition – an ability to create in the moment. This defines the discipline of jazz and forms a substantial part of its practice – the melodic style of which comprises a recognisable ‘vocabulary’ that speaks to its development and to those who contributed to its construction. Players are identified by the phrases and concepts they use in their improvisations.

Analysis seeks to discover the conceptual approach that informs the skill set of the improviser so that we can learn, absorb and regenerate the music. More specifically, it attempts to explain the relationship between a phrase and the underlying harmony, in which the former is viewed as the horizontal counterpart of the latter.75 There are always limitations in that we can never see into the mind of the artist and know what informed their choice(s) in any single moment. We can, however, unpack the construction of a phrase and this gives us clues about the player, their influences and, more importantly, what may have been part of their practice in acquiring their skill. The point is not to try to describe the moment scientifically but rather to understand its design. This could be as simple as noting that Mseleku plays a minor 7th rather than the half-diminished chord in each of the sequences of ‘Aja’. We may never know why he chooses to do that, but we can note that this is his choice and that in itself is interesting and yields an overall result. There are so many ways to identify with the

74 Larry Ridley, in Gourse (1997: 257)
75 Berliner (1994: 105)
performance and its detail. What can be identified are the characteristic devices that point to key influences and ways of doing things – an overall concept. This is almost like trying to get inside the mind of the artist and understand the language that facilitates their ability to make the choices they do. In fine art, the apprentice sets up his easel in the gallery to copy each skilful stroke of the master in the hope it will rub off in some way.

The pianist

For the most part, the improvised line reflects concepts consistent with all players; however, for a pianist, the delivery of the line is dependent on the support of the left hand. Different styles having emerged over time, all of which point to formative players who have been a part of the development of the jazz piano style and from whom subsequent players like Mseleku adopted their own style. Mseleku exhibits classic stylistic elements relating to the support of the left hand in its relationship to the improvised line. These are consistent with the players who influenced him and include elements of stride, bebop and contemporary left-hand voicings.

Stride

Thelonious Monk, one of Mseleku’s key inspirations, had strong roots in the stride tradition associated with pre-bebop players like James P. Johnson, Fats Waller and Duke Ellington. This style is more suited to solo piano; however, it has developed to suit ensemble playing in abbreviated form and is generally characterised by the root note of a chord played on the first and third beats of a bar (sometimes inclusive of a 7th or 10th depending on the player’s hand size) followed by a chord played on beats 2 and 4. As an example, in Monk’s solo rendition of ‘Sweet and Lovely’, the first and third beats are played as root-7 voicings followed by a closed-position chord on beats 3 and 4 (Fig. 6.1). In his solo on ‘Tea for Two’, Monk abbreviates this approach to suit the context of the ensemble using only root-7, root-3 and 3-7 voicings (Fig. 6.2).

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76 Gourse (1997: 13)
77 Levine (1989: 155)
78 Monk (1964)
79 Monk (1962)
Fig. 6.1
Thelonious Monk on ‘Sweet and Lovely’

Fig. 6.2
Excerpt from Thelonious Monk’s solo on ‘Tea for Two’
The stride style has been modernised to include more contemporary left-hand voicings. This is seen in Mseleku’s playing on ‘Monk the Priest’ and ‘Melancholy in Cologne’ where he uses a stride approach but includes some variation in the voicing style.

‘Monk the Priest’ – stride piano
In the bebop and hard bop styles, the left and right hands work together to play the melody and chords. The left hand generally plays root-7 or root-3 voicings and the right hand plays the melody as well as other chord tones. This is common to players like Bud Powell and subsequent players like Barry Harris. ‘The Messenger’ (dedicated to Powell) is a perfect example of the right and left hands working together to support the melody in an integrated piano style. Mseleku plays open fifths or root-7 and root-3 voicings in his left hand, while the right hand plays the melody as well as other notes below it to complete the chord voicing. The excerpt below includes other typical techniques associated with the style, including drop-2 voicings and voicings in thirds (Fig. 6.5).
Improvisation in the bebop and hard bop styles is typically supported by root-7 or root-3 voicings and on occasion (depending on the size of the player’s hand) complete root-7-3 voicings. The positioning of the left hand allows for the improvised line to utilise the resonant middle area of the piano in conjunction with the chords. Below (Fig. 6.6), an excerpt from the bridge of Bud Powell’s solo on ‘Jeannine’ shows typical voicings placed under the improvised line.

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**Fig. 6.5**

Opening bars of ‘The Messenger’

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**Fig. 6.6**

Excerpt from the bridge of Bud Powell’s solo on ‘Jeannine’

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80 Powell (1961)
Mseleku uses these voicings on occasion depending on the context. Fig. 6.7 shows root-7 voicings used in his solo on ‘Timelessness’. The improvised melody is accentuated with octaves adding the 3rd of the chord at points in the right hand.

**Fig. 6.7**
Root-7 voicings in the last A of Mseleku’s first chorus on ‘Timelessness’

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**Rootless voicings**

Mseleku uses a mix of voicing styles; however, he tends more toward the use of rootless left-hand voicings to support his improvised lines. These comprise mostly two, three or four-part structures played in the middle to lower-middle range of the piano (often in anticipation of beats 1 and 3) and are constructed around the same principles as closed-position voicings used in big band writing. Typically, the chords are voiced either from the 7th or 3rd (or the 6th if there is no 7th in the chord). The other chord tones (the root and 5th) are often substituted with tensions depending on the function of the chord. Fig. 6.8 shows chords derived from a closed-position F7 chord. Tensions 9 and 13 replace 1 and 5 to create a denser structure with alterations depending on the function of the key.

**Fig. 6.8**
Closed-position left-hand voicing techniques
This technique is consistent with the comping style developed by players like Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly and is utilised by many of the post bebop players like McCoy Tyner or Herbie Hancock. A voicing can also have multiple meanings; for instance, F13 is also used for C-6, B7#9, EbMa7#11 and A-7b5 (Fig. 6.9). This brings a consistency to the voicing style especially in the movement from one chord to another.

McCoy Tyner (one of Mseleku’s key influences) often uses rootless voicings in his solos. Below is an example from his solo on ‘Bessie’s Blues’. Here, chords are mostly voiced from the 7th and utilise the same structure of a tritone with an added 4th above, spelling the dominant 7th and tension 13 (Fig. 6.10). Fig. 6.11 shows similar left-hand rootless voicings played by Mseleku in his solo on ‘Aja’. Typical of the technique associated with these voicings, Mseleku switches between chords voiced from the 3rd and 7th in order to facilitate good voice leading and keep the voicings in the same register. Some chord structures are denser than others; for instance, the C-7 in the first bar is voiced as b7-9-b3-5, whereas the B-7 in the subsequent bar is absent of its 9th degree. Patterns of voicing begin to emerge across different solos so that we are able to see a preference for particular densities and constructions. The key will also have an impact on whether the construction of a voicing is from the 3rd or 7th. For instance, Mseleku tends to play DMa7 as 3-6-7-9 and AMa7 as 7-1-3-5. This is purely because of the register. DMa7 played from its 7th would either be too low and muddy or too high in register. In this case, choices are informed by the practicality of the instrument with the key defining the voicing type.

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81 Levine (1989: 155)
82 Coltrane (1964c)
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Modal voicings

Mseleku also uses a style of comping in which fourth-based structures consisting of notes drawn from a mode are used to create a sense of harmonic
movement in harmonically static environments. This style is generally associated with the modal period in jazz and is used by players such as McCoy Tyner. Fig. 6.12 illustrates Tyner’s use of fourth-based voicings shared between the right and left hands in the opening statement of ‘Miles’ Mode’. All the notes are drawn from the Dorian mode on B and the chords are predominantly in fourths, except for the voicings built on degrees 1 and 2 of the mode. The sequence is referred to as the ‘Dorian row’.84

Fig. 6.12
‘Dorian row’ on B minor – Tyner on ‘Miles’ Mode’

In the solo sections, the left hand supports the right with three-part fourth voicings diatonic to the mode. The example below (Fig. 6.13) illustrates an excerpt from Tyner’s solo on ‘Impressions’.85 For the most part, the melodic content remains within the Dorian mode. The voicings are entirely drawn from the mode, with only those built on scale degrees 1, 2 and 3 being used.

Fig. 6.13
Use of fourths in Tyner’s solo on ‘Impressions’

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83 Coltrane (1997)
84 DeGreg (1994: 220)
85 Coltrane (1985)
Mseleku employs similar voicings in his solo on ‘Blues for Afrika’ (Fig. 6.14). Here, he uses fourth-based chord structures built off scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. These fit well with the normal rootless left-hand voicings off the 7th and 3rd and the combination speaks to both a modal and functional context in the blues.

**Fig. 6.14**
Mseleku’s use of fourths in ‘Blues for Afrika’

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**Construction of the improvised line**

It is common to indicate the relationship of a scale to a chord and accepted practice governs which scales fit which chords. It is important, however, to differentiate between the use of a scale as the primary source of improvisation and its use as a means of outlining the movement of

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86 Rees (1994)
harmony in the melodic line. In static chord settings, a scale can be used to drive the colour of a mode – the improviser’s intention being to create a melody within the confines of the scale. This is generally referred to as a ‘modal approach’. By contrast, for a line to carry the movement of harmony, it must give focus to harmonic action so that in the absence of the chords, it conveys the story of moving harmony. In some cases, an improviser may choose to use a single scale as the primary source for improvisation despite the underlying harmonic changes. Here, a source scale (often diatonic to the key) becomes the driver of melodic content, absent of harmonic function. The difference in approaches is well demonstrated on ‘Home at Last’. In Fey A Faku’s solo on ‘Mamelodi’, Faku derives the entire melodic content of his opening statement from the Ab major scale (Fig. 6.15). The line floats above the changing harmony, concentrating on motivic and melodic development. In the absence of the underlying chords, there is no indication of the harmonic movement in the line.

Mseleku uses a similar approach in his improvised solo on ‘Adored Value’ (Fig. 6.16). Here, he uses a Bb minor pentatonic scale as the source for the development of his melodic line over a part of the A section. The five note pentatonic scale has a commonality with all the chords except C7 and F7. This gives focus to the central tonality of Bb minor. The II-V-I in Gb is thus not stated as a functional harmonic action and Gb is heard as bVIIIma7 in the key of Bb minor. The concept of the melody is driven by the scale and not the harmony.

Fig. 6.15
Feya Faku on ‘Mamelodi’
By contrast, in ‘Mamelodi’, Mseleku focuses on harmonic function so that we are able to hear the movement of the harmony in his line (Fig. 6.17). The improvised solo line explores all the detail of the progression. This includes recognition of the function of diatonic chords in their relationship to primary structures of the tonic, subdominant and dominant, as well as the articulation of secondary dominant functions, and the use of typical devices associated with the language and style, including pivoted arpeggios and enclosures targeting primary chord tones. Mseleku marries the melodic freedom afforded by the ‘modal’ approach (absent of harmonic function) with lines that speak directly to the functional sensibility of the harmony. The skill of creating a beautiful melody whilst still making the chord changes and exploring the potential complexities of the harmony is what makes Mseleku such an exceptional artist.
At times, Mseleku also uses modal scales to drive melodic improvisation; however, as in the example below (Fig. 6.18), he gives deliberate focus to the character of the mode in its relationship to the harmonic structure of the tune. Although the notes add up to form a scale, the design of the line is often conceptualised in a particular way that addresses aspects of the mode. Similar phrasing is seen in McCoy Tyner’s improvisations. In Fig. 6.13, Tyner divides the Dorian scale into two parts: a minor triad or four-note group built on the root and a major triad or four-note group built on the 4th degree. Although the notes add up to form a Dorian scale, the division of the scale into two parts becomes the conceptual thinking behind the construction of the line rather than the scale itself. The resultant phrasing has a very particular quality that speaks to Tyner’s approach and influence. Mseleku can be heard using a similar approach on ‘Blues for Afrika’. Here, he divides D Dorian into segments that target the character of the mode (Fig. 6.18).

Fig. 6.18
Use of the Dorian mode in ‘Blues for Afrika’
Further influence of Tyner is also seen in the symmetrical construction of Mseleku’s improvised lines. This is achieved in part through repeated use of melodic groups that outline essential chord tones or tensions. As an example, the opening phrase of Mseleku’s solo on ‘Blues for Afrika’ comprises melodic groups that speak to both dominant and minor function. The ascending line comprises segments that give focus to the harmonic transaction of a dominant 7th resolving to a minor chord, where the minor chord is expressed as a four-note group (1-2-b3-5) and the altered dominant as a minor chord of the same grouping, a half step higher than the root of the dominant. The melodic relationship of the groups determines the structure of the phrase. As an example, G-7 into Bb-7 also spells E-7b5 into A7alt. A single group as 1-2-b3-5 can have multiple meanings as well as multiple permutations, so that when used as the concept to drive improvisation, a very particular balance of line is achieved (Fig. 6.19).

The repetitiveness of this approach gives an almost mathematical quality to the improvised line. This is masked by the varying harmonic contexts in which a melodic group can function. The interrelationships allow groups to flow easily into each other making for logical and symmetrical lines. Infinite results for phrasing are afforded by the direction and permutation in which each group is played. This method of line construction is articulated by Jerry Bergonzi in *Melodic Structures* and speaks to a different approach to playing than found in the bebop school.

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87 Bergonzi (1992)
In the example below on ‘Open Sesame’, Tyner can be heard using the same four-note group several times in different contexts, thus creating a symmetrical consistency to his phrasing.

Mseleku can be heard using a similar type of phrasing in sections where changes move rapidly between different key centres using typical II-V-I sequences. A good example is seen in the bridge of ‘Timelessness’.

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88 Hubbard (1960)
The use of symmetrical scales – specifically the whole-tone and diminished scales – is also evident in Mseleku’s improvisations. Both scales have distinctive qualities that speak to particular tensions associated with dominant function. Fig. 6.22 shows the diminished scale used on C7 with characteristic tensions 13, #11, #9 and b9. The scale comprises two diminished chords which, when combined, create numerous combinations including minor and major triads as well as symmetrical dominant 7th voicings built on the diminished axis. The symmetry of the scale naturally invites sequences, some of which have become common property through extensive use by key players.
In the excerpt below, Mseleku uses three symmetrical diminished scales as the concept of his improvised line in his solo on ‘Blues for Afrika’. He explores the symmetry of the scale through a common property symmetrical pattern of triads built on each degree of the diminished chord.
Another example of diminished scale use is seen over the extended dominants in ‘Through the Years’. Here, the phrase is made up of two symmetrical segments a half step apart, each unit constituting the interval of a whole step and a minor third, outlining 1-b7-5 and #11-3-b9 on each dominant.

**Fig. 6.24**
The use of diminished scales on extended dominants in ‘Through the Years’

In the excerpt below from ‘Melancholy in Cologne’, Mseleku uses the whole-tone scale over the dominant 7th as it resolves to IVMa7 in each sequence.
A particular characteristic of Mseleku’s playing style is his use of additional notes placed above the improvised melodic line. These give accent to the phrasing in a particular way by adding notes drawn from the function of the chord at certain points in the line. In the excerpt below from ‘Melancholy in Cologne’, the character of the phrasing is driven by this idea.
Fig. 6.26
Added notes above the line – ‘Melancholy in Cologne’

Bebop phrasing

The running of dominant 7th scales into each other as a method of expressing many different contexts of moving harmony is common practice in the bebop language. Here, a single scale can carry the movement of multiple chords; for example, F7 caters for C-7, C-6, F7 and A-7b5.\textsuperscript{89} Repetition in the conceptual approach of lines using this methodology is evident in tunes with the same functional progressions. In ‘Aja’, ‘Melancholy in Cologne’ and ‘Mamelodi’, the movement from a Ma7 to a II-V a flattened fifth away is conceptualised with two primary scale movements; for example, DbMa7 into G-7b5-C7b9 is expressed as Eb7 running into C7. All the phrasing consistent with the expression of Eb7 becomes the driving force of the line until it moves into C7. Similarly, the movement from G-7b5 to C7alt is expressed as Eb7 running into Gb7.

\textsuperscript{89} Rees (1994)
The intervallic relationship of the melodic line is in minor 3rds whilst the harmonic relationship is in 4ths. Whether Mseleku consciously engaged this approach or whether he just picked up on it, it is clear that he is very familiar with the concept, especially in light of the fact that he is particularly attracted to these kinds of progressions in his compositions.

**Repetition and common property phrases (licks)**

The use of repeated ideas is consistent with all the great jazz players. Charlie Parker, for instance, intentionally played many of the same phrases recurrently in his solos. These were part of his ‘practised’ vocabulary. Many of his phrases have become common property and appear in the improvisations of all the great players. These are indicative of a chain of influence within the overall style and hence we see the application of the common language devices by all players, including Mseleku. This does not mean that everyone who may have emulated a player like Parker sounds exactly like him. This would be impossible as each spontaneous moment in music is always informed by context and the choice of the individual. It is the way in which the language is creatively applied that defines the player. As an example, Bud Powell, who was formative in adding to and developing the language, can be heard using a typical phrase repeatedly in his solo on ‘All God’s Chillun’.\(^9\) This particular phrase spells a diminished 7th on the 3rd of a dominant chord. The same device is employed frequently by Mseleku in his own improvisations and is not so much a ‘lick’ as the logical outline of the tones that gives focus to the dominant. Hence, it is not by accident that Powell and Mseleku happen to use these notes to outline the movement of a dominant in spelling out its function. In his solo on ‘All God’s Chillun’, Powell uses variations on this lick nine times in the space of twenty-eight bars. There is, however, infinite variation in the delivery and placement in the bar; thus, we do not hear it as a lick but rather as part of a phrase that outlines the action of a dominant and its resolution. Fig. 6.27 shows variations employed by Powell in his introduction to the tune.

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90 Stitt (1949)
Fig. 6.27
Diminished on the 3rd of the dominant – Bud Powell in ‘All God’s Chillun’

Tyner is heard playing the same line in ‘Open Sesame’ (Fig. 6.20) and Mseleku can be heard using it several times in ‘Adored Value’ (Fig. 6.28). Both use the line because the construction of the harmony invites improvisation that is consistent with the language, its vocabulary and its lineage.

Fig. 6.28
Diminished on the 3rd of the dominant – Mseleku in ‘Adored Value’

Bar 22-23 solo on ‘Adored Value’
In tunes like ‘Aja’, the symmetry of the cyclical progression (being based on a four-bar progression played through an augmented axis) naturally invites repetition in the improvised line and this provides a natural balance to the phrases in Mseleku’s solo. Fig. 6.29 shows a repeated idea in which an ascending arpeggio is followed by a descending scale line with a resolution to the 3rd of the Ma7.

**Fig. 6.29**
Similar phrase construction in Mseleku’s solo on ‘Aja’
Alternate harmony as source for improvisation

The use of alternate harmony forms a large part of the explorative work of jazz musicians. Expected chord changes are often substituted with alternate changes that inform the improvised line, resulting in differences between the actual harmonic construction of a tune and what is played by the soloist. From an analytical perspective, addressing the relationship between the prescribed harmony of a tune and the implied harmony appearing in the performance is crucial to understanding the thinking of the player. Alteration of the harmony could entail replacing a single chord with one that has a functional relationship to the overall progression as seen in ‘Mamelodi’, where Mseleku replaces the G-7b5 with Db7 (Fig. 6.30) or entire sections with a string of substitute chords.

Fig. 6.30
Use of alternate harmony in ‘Mamelodi’

A distinction is made between the use of alternate harmony and the displacement of harmony. These often coexist, but it is an important
distinction to be made. In displacement, the improvised line may override the bar-to-bar chord relationship, blurring the actual moment of chord change in the line but retaining the overall harmonic integrity of the progression. In the excerpt below from Mseleku’s solo on ‘Blues for Afrika’ (Fig. 6.31), the line speaks to the chord changes but deviates from the chord-to-bar configuration. Mseleku anticipates the F-7 – Bb7 by two beats and this aspect of the line crashes into the bar of E-7 – A7, causing this, in turn, to be displaced by two beats. The A7 is still being stated in a bar that effectively should be D-.

Alternate harmony and displacement can also occur simultaneously, as seen in the excerpt below from Mseleku’s solo on ‘Timelessness’ (Fig. 6.32). Here, he adds IV-7 (F-7) between the V7 (G7) and IMa7 (CMa7) creating a dominant to subdominant minor to tonic resolution in place of the II-V-I. Displacement occurs as the F-7 is being stated in the CMa7 bar, meaning that the resolution to tonic happens two beats later.