

Essay on Development of the Piano in the Jazz Era

Around the beginning of the 20th century, the earliest Jazz piano style emerged, centred in New Orleans. Ragtime music came directly from the jazz styles of the early 20th century. Jelly Roll Morton, was one of the most prolific jazz pianists and was one of the founders of ragtime jazz music.

He wrote many compositions himself and always insisted that the other musicians in his band played the music exactly as written, this was a sign of very little freedom in ragtime music. Although, Morton's piano music was all essentially ragtime music, it allowed for more than the norm in terms of freedom for improvisation. Over the years the piano was used very differently and even moved sections within the bands of the 20th century which played jazz music. It went from being a melodic instrument to being a part of the rhythm section along with the drums, bass and guitar.

The development of the piano is very evident progressively through the jazz era. The use of chords such as major, minor, augmented etc are all found in the harmony of the piano part, these are all chords taken from western music. The development although is that now, they have been varied in ways to give different effects. Compound chords, added 7ths, 9ths, etc all give richer chords which leave the melody instruments with more scope for the theme above the accompaniment.

Early jazz music, in the 1920's was made up of the frontline and the rhythm instruments. The piano always fell under rhythm in this case as it was simply used as a chordal instrument, played possibly in ostinato's which would give the rhythmic drive that was necessary.

Seeing as jazz began in the New Orleans area of the USA, this early style became known as 'New Orleans jazz'. This style was created and initially dominated by the pianist Joseph Ferdinand La Menthe, better known as "Jelly Roll Morton" (1885 - 1941). Morton was a combination of ragtime pianist, composer, blues and Jazzman rolled into one. He began playing professionally in the "Redlight District" of New Orleans called Storyville in 1902 when he was seventeen. Morton is also regarded as the first true Jazz composer. The development over the coming years was to be huge as the style and uses of the piano differentiated throughout the twentieth century. The piano was playing chords in a rhythmic fashion; this was known as comping and was a form of rhythmic improvisation as the pianist had freedom to perform this as they wanted.

In Louis Armstrong's West End Blues, the trumpet takes the frontline whilst the piano accompanies with comping of the chords. Later it then becomes more complex as the piano answers the trumpet part playing more complicated melodic lines. The texture is mainly melody and accompaniment, later on the development shows that frontline instruments play polyphonic melodic lines against one another.

Count Basie, based in Kansas City was one of the world renowned jazz pianists of his time. He was influenced greatly by Fats Waller and incorporated his 'stride' style of playing into his music. This was based on a blues orientated piano style of playing, the piano started to become more prominent in the likes of Count Basie's band rather than just being a member of the rhythm section. The piano parts are clearly heard in the likes of Lester Leaps In and Taxi War Dance as individual melodic lines. The

piano has developed from simple comping and has allowed for the walking bass line to be played by the brass, freeing the left hand in the piano part.

Duke Ellington was influenced by both stride playing and ragtime music. He built up his band in New York, they built a style developing from blues which gave a swing beat driving the music forwards. Ragtime piano music had fast memorable passages and therefore could be virtuosic in ways, the piano part in the likes of Ko-ko were evidently being played by an accomplished pianist.

Bebop was still based on the principle of improvisation over a chord progression, but the tempos were faster, the rhythms extremely syncopated, the phrases longer and more complex with exciting new tone colours and dissonant harmonies. The main thing to look out for when analysing bebop music was the flattened 5th, it was very common in this particular style as it became one of the 'blues' notes.

Thelonius Monk one of the revolutionary pianists of the Bebop era, he began to introduce more angular music rather than worrying about it being pleasant or tuneful to the ear. Polychords like those mentioned previously were also in full use at this point. Compound chords and added notes along with the basic triads became very common.

Monk's work also used high levels of dissonance in comparison to other composers/arrangers pieces. The basic chords became more complex and his melody lines also became much more interesting which resulted in the adventurous piano parts we later heard in the likes of Straight No Chaser and some of the work of Gil Evans.

In 'So What' by Miles Davis, the harmonic structure consisted of two different chords played in the same pattern throughout the piece. The piano was in control of this and although simple, it was a vital part as it gave scope for the improvising solo instrument parts playing above the accompaniment. Dminor7 and EflatMinor7 are the two chords that were used in this piece.