Charlie Parker:
Four Graphic Analysis of his Compositions

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This work examines phenomena consistent to four works composed by bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker in the 1940's: Confirmation, Dewey Square, Moose the Mooch, and Yardbird Suite.[1] At the present time, the most thorough effort in applying Schenkerian analysis[2] to jazz compositions is G. Roger Davis' dissertation *Levels Analysis Of Jazz Tunes*, in which various analytic norms are developed and proposed as additions to standard terminology and notation, by way of eighteen jazz tunes dating from the 1930s through the 1960s.[3] In this work, Davis introduces new terminology and notation requiring modification or supplementation to Schenker's methodology, that are necessary to explain phenomena that occurs consistently within the jazz idiom. Since the terminology used in this analysis of Parker's music have been established by Davis, an understanding of some basic concepts is required before proceeding to examining how these ideas are manifest.

This analysis is concerned with the "fixed" portions of Parker's compositions, i.e. the composed melody and supporting harmony.[4] Improvisations, since they are based upon the same harmonic patterns as the melody, are regarded by Davis as resulting in structures similar to those of composed melodies (i.e., linear prolongations). It is understood that variants that arise from performance deviations would result in similar variations found on all structural levels. The four compositions analyzed here are similar in that they share a 32-bar AABA strophic song structure; in this regard, one complete 32-bar cycle is regarded as representing a complete fundamental structure. Furthermore, it is not within the scope of this paper to debate whether the extensions of Schenkerian analysis, that have been used extensively to explain linear progressions of post-tonal music[5], are really "Schenkerian": I regard Schenkerian analysis as a tool that can be used to uncover phenomenon exhibited in virtually all linearly-composed music that is based on Western harmonic principles and philosophy.

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[1] Standard "lead sheets" and graphic analyses showing structural levels are provided in the appendix; the *Ursatz* level has been omitted in all graphs as it can be easily deduced from the information provided. Therefore, three different levels of middleground and the foreground level are presented in the graphic analyses.

[2] Definitions of Schenkerian terms are now widely used in music theory; see Heinrich Schenker's *Five Graphic Analysis* and *Free Composition* for full explanations of terms and concepts.

[3] An examination of how structural levels occur in jazz improvisation may be found in *Schenkerian Analysis Of Modern Jazz*, by Steven L. Larson.

[4] While bass lines are traditionally improvised, roots of chords have been notated in the graphical analyses contained in this paper.

[5] It is widely understood what post-tonal music is; the composers and their works are well-known.

Tritone substitution and modal mixture in the Ursatz

Two of Davis's five principal ideas concerning the *Ursatz* in jazz tunes may be applied to the music of Charlie Parker. They are summarized by Davis as follows:

"1. One of Schenker's models of a third-line, a fifth-line or an octave-line serves as the fundamental line in jazz tunes. . . The fundamental bass arpeggiation is usually I/V/I. The fundamental bass may substitute I/SubV^7/I for I/V/I.

2. In jazz, mixture occurs in the *Ursatz*."[6]

The phenomenon in jazz known as "tritone substitution", involving a dominant a half-step above the chord of resolution, is known as a "SubV^7" (Tritone Substitute Dominant).[7] Thus jazz harmony permits two functional dominants: the fifth-related dominant found in common practice tonal music as well as the Tritone Substitute Dominant.

Of the four Parker compositions analyzed, *Yardbird Suite* exhibits both types of phenomenon. *Yardbird Suite* is also unusual in that of the four works, it is the only composition exhibiting an octave-line *Ursatz*; all other compositions use the fifth-line as the basis of structure. In *Yardbird Suite*, the lowered seventh and sixth degrees are structural parts of the *Urlinie*. This differs significantly from the traditional model permitted by Schenker; however, when considering the idiomatic use of "blue" notes in jazz, it is not surprising to find these pitches embedded deep within the background structural level.[8] *Yardbird Suite* additionally exhibits characteristics that allows a variant reading of the SubV^7 as the structural dominant. While the SubV^7 occurs in *Yardbird Suite* as an interruption in the structure as a first level middleground event, as will be shown, a variation in the accompanying harmony and bass support (i.e., E^7-B^7 progression in the penultimate measure) would easily facilitate substition of the structural dominant with the SubV^7.[9] Again, the traditional Schenkerian model does not allow for the principle of substitution to occur at the *Ursatz*; augmented sixth chords function in traditional tonal music as middle ground passing motion, usually preceding the structural dominant.

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[6] Mixture refers to notes borrowed from the parallel minor key.

[7] In conversations with Roger Davis, he always referred to this as being an "extension of the augmented sixth chord principle."

[8] In addition to the lowered sixth and seventh scale degrees, the other "blue" note one might expect to find in the fundamental line would be the lowered third scale degree.

[9] Actually, considering normative jazz performance practice, this type of progression would work easily with most jazz tunes.

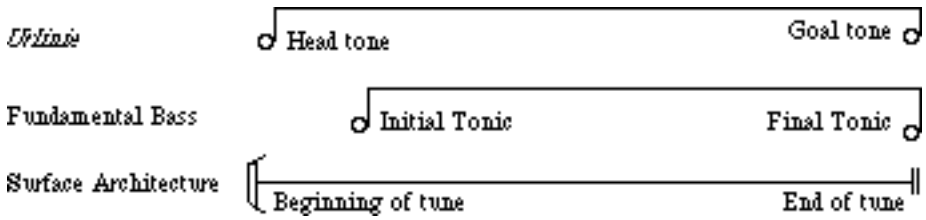
Middleground: Structural Syncopation and Alignment, Structural Interruption

Davis provides criteria for describing various types of structural "misalignments" that are present in jazz compositions composed in the 1950s and 1960s. These types of first level middleground phenomenon, which he terms *structural syncopation,* often result in structures requiring alignment at the fundamental level. While some of the characteristics displayed in later jazz compositions such as Bill Evans' *Blue in Green* and Cole Porter's *I Love You* exhibit these complex middle-ground structures, many of the jazz compositions by Charlie Parker are extremely innovative because structural syncopations are introduced for the first time *by the 1940s.* Therefore, a brief discussion of some of the characteristics of mid-20th century jazz compositions is necessary not only to gain a basic understanding of structural syncopation, but also to distinguish between structural syncopation that occurs at the first level middle ground and that which occurs at more surface levels of structure.

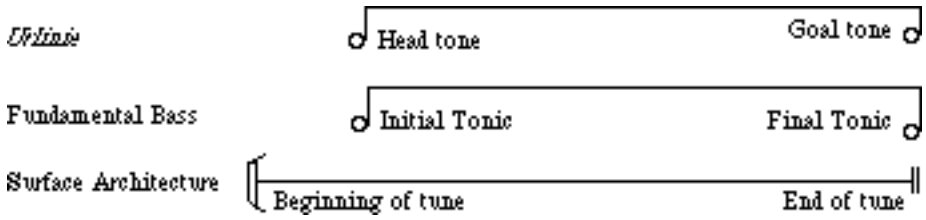
In jazz compositions from the 1920s and 1930s, beginnings of the fundamental bass and the beginning of the *Urlinie* (head tone) coincide with the beginning of the tune; endings of the fundamental bass and *Urlinie* (goal tone) arrive by the end of the tune. Davis describes these tunes as being *structurally aligned* because the surface architecture (motives, phrases, sections), fundamental bass and Urlinie are aligned.[10] When the beginnings and endings of these three elements (*Urlinie*, fundamental bass and surface architecture) do not coincide, the structure can be described as being *structurally syncopated*, resulting in a type of "counterpoint" between the three elements. Tunes described as exhibiting structural syncopation can be further classified as being simple and complex. Davis provides models for five simple structurally syncopated types, characterized by completion of the Urlinie and fundamental by the end of the tune:

[10] The criteria for alignment requires the fundamental bass and *Urlinie* to occur within the same measure.

1.



2.



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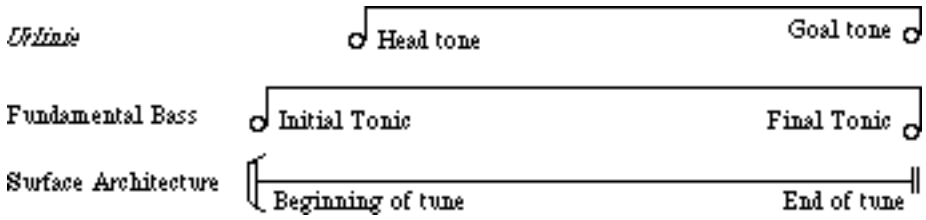

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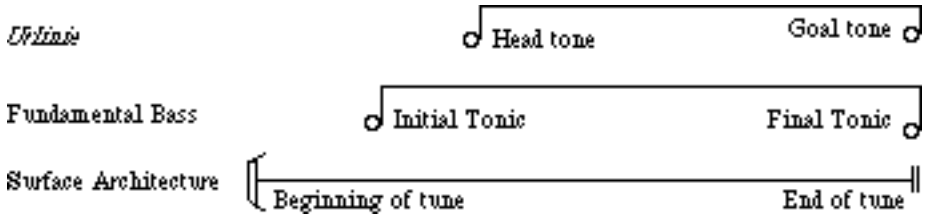

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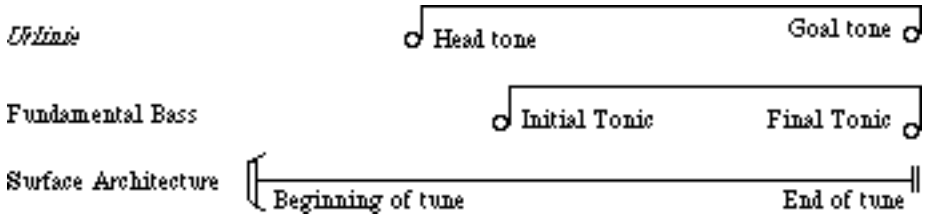
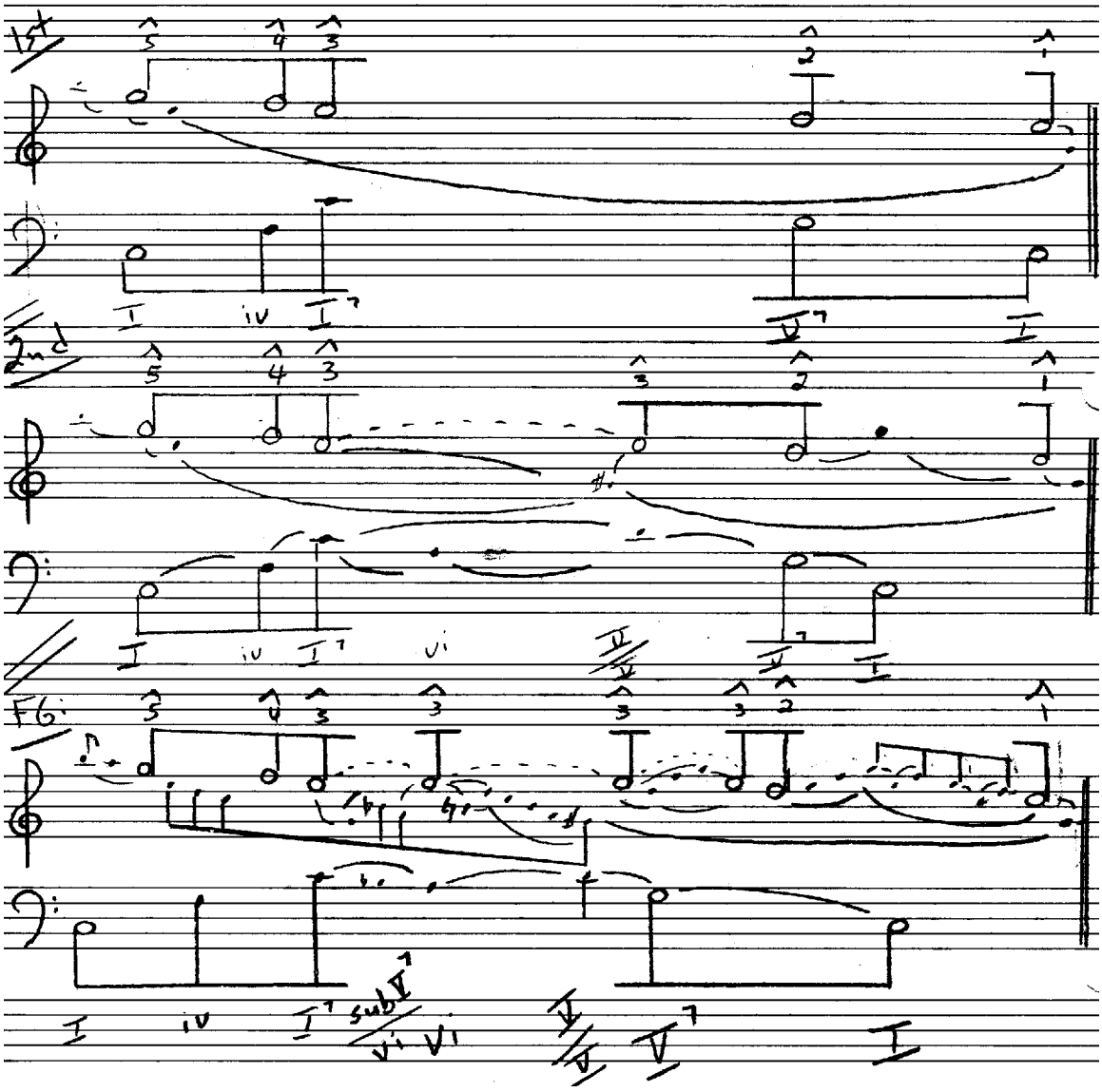


Since the beginnings of the fundamental line and initial tonic coincide with the beginning of the tune in all four compositions scrutinized here, true structural syncopation, existing at the first level of middleground structure, does not exist for these tunes. However, a related trait is found within these pieces: at middleground

levels of structure above the first level, motion of the fundamental line does not necessarily coincide with supporting motion found in the fundamental bass, resulting in misalignment of a slightly different type as the *Ursatz* is completed. Therefore, the rhythmic manipulations that occur at middleground levels above the first level are hereby realigned by the first middleground level.

The following example from the return of the "A" section in *Dewey Square* shows how foreground misalignment of structural support between the Urlinie and fundamental bass is reconciled at the second level middleground:

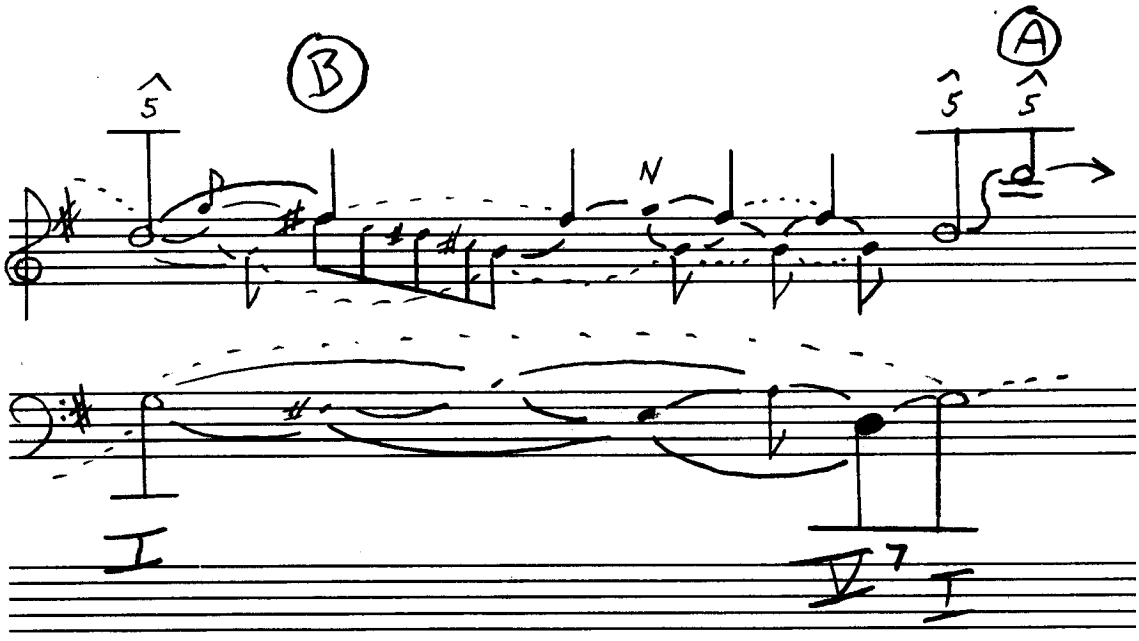


This phenomenon is quite common in Parker's compositions at foreground and surface middleground levels, perhaps due to his performance practice of playing chord changes two to four beats ahead (depending on the tempo) of the corresponding harmonic and bass support during improvisation. It would be a fair assumption to say that he used this technique in compositionsal practice as well.

Tension relationships.

In Charlie Parker's compositions the fundamental line and its prolongations creates tension relationships with the harmonic and bass support at various points throughout the cycle, while still functioning properly on a more background level.[11] This is true for the four compositions under considerations here, and results in so-called "higher interval sounds", such as 9ths, 11ths and 13ths, that are idiomatic and desirable within this style of jazz. Alignment of the structure would therefore occur at such points such as the structural interruption or at the end of the tune.

A further phenomenon not discussed by Davis but present at the middleground in *Moose the Mooch* concerns the apparent use of so-called bitonal structures involving simultaneous prolongations of two different key areas, resulting in an extended tension relationship. In the "B" section, a subsidiary fifth-line in the key of B major is initiated from the fundamental line, originating as a third unfolding (D to F#) from the structural 5th degree of the Urlinie, which is being prolonged at this point. This subsidiary activity involves secondary prolongations of F# (with activity through its upper neighbor G) and B throughout the "B" section, both resolving via stepwise motion (third unfoldings) back to D by the end of the section. The fundamental bass, on the other hand, involves a circle of fifths progressions that prolongs the dominant (G major) over the eight-bar progression via a I-V^7-I progression. This is shown in the following diagram, representing second level middleground structure:



[11] In other words, the triadic tonal fundamental structures found in jazz operate according to the same organizational principles found in traditional tonal music.

Further examination of other Parker compositions is warranted to determine whether this is a stylistic trait.[12]

[12] From conversations with Parker's musical associates, Parker is rumored to have been heavily influenced by composers such as Bartok, who are noted for their use of so-called bitonality. To my knowledge, this is the only example as yet examined that exhibits these characteristics.

Conclusion

Examination of Parker's output reveals many interesting characteristics, among them 1) modal mixture in the Ursatz; 2) use of substition dominant; 3) structural syncopation at surface levels of middleground, and 4) evidence of bi-tonal structure at the middleground level of structure. Use of such devices show him to be an innovative composer of fairly complex music, foreshadowing techniques that were to become explored more thoroughly in the 1950s and 1960s.

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