

Forte's Lecture on Jazz: An Introduction

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Allen Forte's 1958 lecture "The Development of Diminutions in American Jazz," which applies Schenkerian concepts of melodic diminution and prolongation to instrumental improvisations from the early blues through the bebop era, is the earliest known analytical study of jazz by a professional music theorist. Owing to an initial absence of a suitable publishing outlet, and Forte's subsequent commitment to other areas of research, it has never before appeared in print.¹ Forte delivered the lecture, in a German translation prepared by his friend the Austrian theorist Ernst Oster, at various *Amerika Häuser* cultural centers in Germany and Austria, under the aegis of the United States Information Agency, in spring 1958.² At the time, the only published technical studies of jazz were Winthrop Sargeant's 1938 book, *Jazz, Hot and Hybrid*, and André Hodeir's *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence*, which appeared in French in 1954 and in an English translation two years later.³ Indeed, Forte's lecture predates by several months Gunther Schuller's well-known article on Sonny Rollins, until now widely regarded as—in the words of Henry Martin—"possibly the first piece of jazz writing to analyze a work in musical detail for the sole purpose of showing its structural depth and, by implication, the depth of fine jazz improvisation more generally."⁴

¹ These explanations for not previously publishing the lecture were furnished by Forte in a personal communication to the author.

² Allen Forte, personal memo on his lecture, September 16, 1995.

³ Winthrop Sargeant, *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* (New York: Arrow Editions, 1938). Sargeant's book appeared in a second, revised and expanded edition (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1946), and in a final, expanded third edition retitled *Jazz: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964 [reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1975]). André Hodeir, *Hommes et Problèmes du Jazz* (Paris: Au Portulan, chez Flammarion, 1954), revised edition published as *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence*, trans. David Noakes (New York: Grove Press, 1956).

⁴ Henry Martin, "Jazz Theory: An Overview," *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 8 (1996): 10; Gunther Schuller, "Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation," *Jazz Review* 1/1 (November 1958): 6–11, 21, reprinted in *Jazz Panorama: From the Pages of Jazz Review*, ed. Martin Williams (New York: Crow-Collier Press, 1962), 239–52, in Schuller, *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 86–97, and in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 212–22.

Schenker's theoretical model was originally devised for "common practice" tonal Western art music. Forte took the unprecedented step of adapting this model to jazz, and his introductory comment that "it seems to me regrettable that music theorists have not yet interested themselves in the history of jazz improvisation" posed a challenge that went unfulfilled for some years. No analytically-oriented article on jazz was published in an academic music journal until Frank Tirro's 1967 "The Silent Theme Tradition in Jazz,"⁵ and only in the 1970s did the first dissertations and publications addressing jazz improvisation from a Schenkerian perspective begin to appear, by authors such as Thomas Owens, Milton Stewart, Henry Martin, and Steven Strunk.⁶

This belatedly published document therefore represents a hidden chapter in the short history of academic jazz studies. And it also, significantly, reveals a little-known dimension to the early career of Forte, the preeminent music theorist of the last half-century.⁷ A pioneer of Schenkerian analysis and atonal pitch-class set theory, Forte has written on Western art music for many decades but only began publishing studies of music outside this core repertory in the 1990s, with a still-growing series of books and articles on classic American popular song.⁸ Still, as his many friends, colleagues, and students know, he has been involved with jazz and popular music ever since his early years as a piano student, when he practiced songs

⁵ Frank Tirro, "The Silent Theme Tradition in Jazz," *Musical Quarterly* 53 (July 1967): 313–34.

⁶ Thomas Owens, "Charlie Parker: Techniques of Improvisation" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1974); Milton Lee Stewart, "Structural Development in the Jazz Improvisational Technique of Clifford Brown" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1973), published in *Jazzforschung* 6/7 (1974–1975): 141–273; Henry Martin, "Aural Sketches: Chick Corea's 'Where Have I Known You Before,'" *In Theory Only* 1/2 (May 1975): 4–9; Steven Strunk, "The Harmony of Early Bop: A Layered Approach," *Journal of Jazz Studies* 6 (fall/winter 1979): 4–53. See Martin, "Jazz Theory: An Overview," and Thomas Owens, "Analysing Jazz," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, eds. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 286–97.

⁷ To my knowledge the only work citing the lecture is a doctoral thesis by Forte's student John David Check, "Concepts of Compound Melody in Jazz Improvisation" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1997), 8–10.

⁸ Two classics among Forte's many publications are "Schenker's Conception of Musical Structure," *Journal of Music Theory* 3/1 (April 1959): 1–30, and *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). His writings on popular song include: "Secrets of Melody: Line and Design in the Songs of Cole Porter," *Musical Quarterly* 77/4 (1993): 607–47; *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924–50* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); "Milton Babbitt's Three Theatrical Songs in Perspective," *Perspectives of New Music* 35/2 (1997): 65–84; "The Real Stella and the 'Real' Stella: A Response to 'Alternate Takes,'" *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 9 (1997): 93–101; "Reflections on the Gershwin–Berg Connection," *Musical Quarterly* 83/2 (1999): 150–68; "Harmonic Relations: American Popular Harmonies (1925–1950) and Their European Kin," *Contemporary Music Review* 19/1 (2000): 5–36; and *Listening to Classic American Popular Songs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

by Gershwin as well as classical works.⁹ Forte even played jazz professionally for a time, after his discharge from the US Navy after World War II, and before embarking on his academic career by enrolling at Columbia University.¹⁰ (Readers may also be interested to learn that he witnessed Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie's legendary residency at The Three Deuces nightclub on New York's 52nd Street in 1945, and subsequently heard Miles Davis at the Royal Roost. Among his friends from those days is the jazz singer and pianist Bob Dorough, more recently of *Schoolhouse Rock* fame.)

When Forte gave this lecture on jazz in 1958, he was teaching the piano at Columbia's Teachers College and Schenkerian analysis at the Mannes College of Music, and had recently published his first book, *Contemporary Tone Structures*.¹¹ The following year, he joined the Department of Music at Yale University, where he founded the nation's first Ph.D. program in music theory and taught until his retirement in 2003. Today, he asks the reader to "please bear in mind that [my lecture] was intended for a particular audience, written at a particular time, and that [it] was intended to be read aloud."¹² After over half a century, Professor Forte would no doubt approach aspects of the paper differently,¹³ but for the sake of historical accuracy he has chosen to publish it here in its exact original form—except for minimal emendations involving references to the recordings and slides that were used in the presentation and now appear as musical examples. While the lecture was only read in German, the present English version is from the typescript and handwritten figures that Forte retains in his personal papers. The transcriptions

⁹ Allen Forte, "Gershwin Lives On, 100 Years Later," *Yale Daily News*, October 23, 1998. As a piano accompanist, Forte can be heard performing songs by Gershwin and other American songwriters with singer Martha Bennett Oneppo on a recent CD, *Songs for Yesterday and Today: American Popular Songs of the Golden Age* (Roméo Records 7230).

¹⁰ Biographical details in this paragraph are based on personal communications between Forte and the author. For further information, see <http://www.allenforte.com/bio.html>.

¹¹ Allen Forte, *Contemporary Tone Structures* (New York: Columbia Teachers College, 1955).

¹² Forte, personal memo, September 16, 1995. Forte's closing remark that "the apex of [jazz improvisation technique] may well lie in the past," for instance, probably reflects the fact that, in 1958, the world of jazz had recently experienced the untimely death of Charlie Parker (arguably the most accomplished improviser the music has ever known) and had yet to witness the tremendous new burst of creativity that began to gather force the following year. In 1959, several now-canonic jazz albums were recorded, including Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*, and Ornette Coleman's *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, as well as *Portrait in Jazz*, the first album by the classic trio led by Bill Evans (today Forte's favorite jazz pianist).

¹³ Consider, in this regard, Forte's report that, before beginning work on a recent monograph, he "destroyed all the filed analytical material I had accumulated on the [book's topic]...in order to get a fresh start, unencumbered by opinions and hypotheses that belong to an earlier era in my own studies" (Allen Forte, *The Atonal Music of Anton Webern* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998], 367).

are his own (and were proofread for accuracy by Milton Babbitt), and a new appendix identifies the recordings.

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