

Quartet a la Brubeck

Delve into the time-shifting music
of jazz composer Dave Brubeck

BY EMILY ONDERDONK

JEREMY COHEN'S MOTHER, ELLIE, likes to tell a now famous (to friends and family) story about her son. When he was very young, Jeremy became sick and stayed home from school. "He was inconsolable. Nothing would make him feel better, except listening to the David Brubeck jazz albums *Time Out* and *Time Further Out*," says Ellie. Well, years later, the love of Brubeck's music has led Cohen to transcribe two (so far) string-quartet arrangements of Brubeck tunes: "Strange Meadowlark" and our featured piece, "Blue Rondo a la Turk."

Why "Blue Rondo"?

"Simply because, as a violinist I have always wanted to play that piece," says Cohen, now the first violinist for Quartet San Francisco, "and I knew it would work well for strings."

And work well it does. Both the theme and accompaniment lie well on stringed instruments, so the left-hand technique is straightforward. The opening eighth-note theme fits perfectly into a slurred bowing, which accentuates the 2-2-2-3 rhythmic pattern of the 9/8 sections, while also giving the theme a more

lyrical feel. Many classically trained players already have experience with mixed-meter material, so moving back and forth from 9/8- to 4/4- time won't be all that difficult. Here's how the transition works: three eighth notes in the 9/8 section equal one quarter note in the 4/4 section.

As is usual for making the crossover to jazz, the hardest part is the accurate execution of the jazz style by classically trained string players. This, in my opinion, is what makes learning this piece so much fun.

ACADEMIC MILIEU

Brubeck was born December 6, 1920, in Concord, California. His father was a rancher and his mother, a pianist. He studied piano with his mom and began composing at the age of four. By age 13, Brubeck was per-

forming professionally with local jazz groups. Entering the College of the Pacific in Stockton, California, in 1938 as a veterinary student, he quickly changed his major to music. After graduating in 1942, he was drafted into the army, entertaining the troops while playing piano in various army bands. In the army, Brubeck met and played briefly with Paul Desmond, the saxophonist who would later join the famous Dave Brubeck Quartet.

After WW II, Brubeck enrolled at Mills College in Oakland under the GI Bill in order to study with composer Darius Milhaud; to this day, Brubeck considers himself a composer who plays the piano. Milhaud plied him with polytonality and counterpoint, which Brubeck explored in his own compositions. Milhaud encouraged his young student to continue in the jazz style, telling him, "If you want to express this country, you will always use the jazz idiom."

While at Mills, Brubeck and his fellow students founded the experimental Jazz Workshop Ensemble, which recorded in 1949 as the Dave Brubeck Octet. At the same time he formed the Dave Brubeck Trio with drummer Cal Tjader and bassist Norman Bates. This group existed until 1951, when, with the addition of Desmond, Brubeck formed his first quartet. Tjader and Bates were later replaced by Joe Morello on drums (in 1956) and Eugene Wright on bass (in 1958). This group remained together until 1967, when Brubeck disbanded it to concentrate on composing.

Since then, he has written and in some cases recorded several large-scale compositions, including two ballets, a musical, an oratorio, four cantatas, a mass, works for jazz group and orchestra, and many solo piano pieces. He also has written a string quartet entitled "Chromatic Fantasy" based on the famous Bach piece; the new work has been recorded by the Brodsky Quartet.

Recently, he has founded the Dave Brubeck Institute at his alma mater, now the University of the Pacific, where young, gifted jazz musicians from around the country go to study and occasionally play with him in concerts.

A RONDO THE WORLD

The Dave Brubeck Quartet toured all over the world, and many of Brubeck's albums reflect the influence that music of other cultures had on his own compositions. The rhythm of "Blue Rondo a la Turk" was suggested by a 1958 trip that started in England, went through northern Europe, behind the Iron Curtain into Poland, through Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, and on to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Ceylon. Around this time Brubeck began experimenting with time



TIME OUT: Jeremy Cohen, Kayo Miki, Joel Cohen, and Emily Onderdonk are Quartet San Francisco.



signatures that were unusual in jazz, such as 5/4 and 11/4, which inspired the landmark Desmond-penned songs “Take Five” and “Eleven-Four,” and 9/8, the signature of Brubeck’s own “Blue Rondo,” the first tune on the groundbreaking *Time Out* album, released in 1959.

According to the album liner notes: “Blue Rondo a la Turk’ plunges straight into the most jazz-remote time signature, 9/8, grouped not in the usual form (3-3-3) but 2-2-2-3. When the gusty opening section gives way to a more familiar jazz beat, the three eighth notes have become equivalent to one quarter-note, and an alternating 9/8 to 4/4 time leads into a fine solo by Paul Desmond. Dave follows with a characteristically neat transition into the heavy block chords which are a familiar facet of his style, and before long, ‘Blue Rondo a la Turk’ is a stamping, shouting blues. Later the tension is dropped deliberately for Paul’s reentry, and for the alternate double-bars of 9- and 4- time which herald the returning theme. The whole piece is in classical rondo form.”

LITTLE QUARTET, BIG BAND

“Blue Rondo” is clearly in A-B-A form: the A section is the theme in 9/8 and the B section is the blues chorus in 4/4. The middle (B) section is swung, as opposed to the A section, which is straight ahead. Our musical excerpts on pages 30–31 show some of each section, beginning with the last statement of the chorus, in an almost big-band style.

The cello acts as the bass, and plays pizzicato for the entire B section. Jazz bass players pull the strings back and to the side when they pluck—occasionally hitting the fingerboard. This creates a solid, unflappable toe-tapping rhythm. Cellists, imagine you are a jazz bassist,

and that *every* beat is as important as the last. Each quarter note gets the same emphasis, the same amount of sass. You are the timekeeper. While the other voices may ebb and flow, the bass (cello) line *must* stay steady—this is a big divergence from classical chamber-music playing, but it is crucial in jazz.

The upper three voices act as the wind or brass section of a big band, filling out chords together and playing in identical rhythm. Here it’s tricky to notate all of the jazz inflections successfully. The sound is full and sassy, with very little vibrato—or better yet, none at all. The lines over the notes do mean long and attached, but the notes need to be very direct—no easing into them, no swells, no shaping them yet. Also, you need to take your time when playing jazz and the blues, so be laid back about the timing of each phrase. If you’re slightly behind the beat, so much the better. It’s the cellist’s job to keep time for you, regardless of how you express the phrases.

In measure 128 (second measure of the first excerpt) there is an emphasis on the downbeat eighth note, with the *and* of the first beat being more of a release with a small accent. The eighth notes in this section are swung. Use vibrato on the longer notes of the phrase to give them emphasis; for example on the *and* of the fourth beat in measure 128, the *and* of the second beat in bar 130, and the *and* of the fourth beat in bar 133.

You can also use vibrato to imitate the “shake” made by the brass and wind sections of jazz bands. Unlike classical vibrato, in which the finger bends back to lower the pitch and forward up to the pitch, the shake is a fast, wobbly sound that goes both below and above the pitch. This involves releasing the finger pressure and resting the hand lightly on the

string, while using fast, shaking movements of the arm (spurring movements), to slide above and below the note. Use it here, but sparingly.

Next, emphasize the second and third beats of measure 129. On the *and* of the third beat, “ghost” an up bow on the rest before the down bow on beat four: during the rest, keep your finger on the note you just played, leave the bow on the string, but release all pressure. Then retake the bow without actually playing a note, but rather, make more of a hint of the note, with the sound of the retake giving the phrase rhythm.

The *and* of the fourth beat in measure 130 resolves on the second beat of measure 131—a kind of suspension. Play this chord without vibrato, and make a slight crescendo into the second beat of measure 131. Play the second beat short, as written, but with a fall-off (a fast glissando along with a fast down bow *without* any bow pressure). The eighth-note chords in measures 137 and 138 should all have fall-offs. The pickup to measure 139 begins a section of the piece in which the original 9/8 theme begins to interrupt the blues chorus. (It’s pure genius the way Brubeck incorporates the two meters, two styles, and two melodies together to form a complete phrase). Here the first violin part, a transcription of Desmond’s sax solo, leads smoothly into each 9/8 interjection. Although our excerpt breaks at measure 142, showing just one of these two-measure interjections, the 9/4 and 4/4 trade-offs continue until measure 149, at which point the original 9/8 theme (the A section) comes back to stay.

The second excerpt picks up at measure 153, providing the final 27 measures of the piece. From here on the tune is straightforward and the articulations are as marked. □

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Blue Rondo a la Turk

BY DAVE BRUBECK, ARRANGED FOR STRING QUARTET BY JEREMY COHEN



Brubeck's classic "Blue Rondo a la Turk" derives its name from two sources: a tour that the Dave Brubeck Quartet took in the late 1950s through Eastern Europe and the Middle East, including a stop in Turkey, and the work's clear rondo (A-B-A) form. The A sections present the theme in syncopated 9/8 time, grouped for the most part as three bars in the beat pattern 2-2-2-3 followed by one bar of 3-3-3. The middle (B) section is a swinging blues in 4/4, during which pianist Brubeck and saxophonist Paul Desmond improvised some lovely solos. The composition eases in and out of the contrasting sections, using

alternating two-measure phrases of 9/8 and 4/4 as a clever transitional device.

We offer two excerpts from Jeremy Cohen's string-quartet arrangement that provide a taste of each section, beginning with the last statement of the B section's bluesy 4/4 chorus, at measure 127. At the pickup to 139 the transition begins, with the original 9/8 theme beginning to interrupt the blues chorus. The second excerpt kicks in at measure 153, after we've returned to the 9/8 theme, and continues to the end of the piece. —Elisa M. Welch

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Cello

155 *sim*

161

167

173 *sim* *rit.*

rit.