

FUGUE FORM AND JAZZ MUSIC. CITATIONS, CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES, AND REINTERPRETATIONS

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SUMMARY. The present study examines the ways in which the Baroque fugue - a paradigmatic model of contrapuntal thinking - has been incorporated, reinterpreted, and hybridized within jazz and hybrid academic/jazz composition from the mid-twentieth century to the present. While numerous studies have addressed the general interaction between traditional academic music and jazz, the specific connection between fugue and jazz remains only partially explored, with the most consistent research concentrated in Russian musicology. This article synthesizes the principal modalities through which the fugue has been accessed by jazz and crossover composers: (1) through structural adoption, (2) through exclusive use of imitative polyphonic procedures, and (3) through combined approaches. By analyzing major scholarly contributions and representative musical works, the study proposes a conceptual clarification of the phenomenon and situates it within the broader polystylistic context characteristic of contemporary musical creation.

Keywords: jazz, fugue, counterpoint, hybrid music, polystylism, post-tonality

1. Introduction

By virtue of its inherent flexibility and its historical ties to improvisatory genres—toccata, fantasia—counterpoint constitutes a fertile terrain for allusion, recomposition, and innovation. As Sterrs (2013) observes, “counterpoint has always served as a pretext for allusion, recomposition, and innovation”², a remark that anticipates its openness to stylistic inflections within the aesthetics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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² Sterrs, Tamika Sakayi. *Toward a compositional paradigm based on post-tonality, jazz, and counterpoint*, PhD Thesis, Athens, Georgia, 2013.



According to the literature, the connections between Western art music and jazz are both manifold and historically grounded, far surpassing the level of superficial borrowing and rising to the status of autonomous compositional paradigms (Schuller's "third stream"; Friar, 2017). The expansion of polystylism in the latter half of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for deep interactions among musical languages that had previously been regarded as aesthetically incompatible.

Despite an extensive bibliography on the relationship between art music and jazz, the specific association of the fugue with jazz idioms has rarely been treated systematically. Major exceptions are found in Russian musicology, especially in the work of Chuvilkin (*About the essence of the concept of «jazz fugue»*; *Jazz Fugue in the Context of Interaction Between Academic and Jazz Music of the 20th – Early 21st Century*), where the very concept of the "jazz fugue" is proposed and theorized.

1. Theoretical Context: Fusion, Polystylism, and the Academic–Jazz Intersection

The convergence of three musical worlds—post-tonality, jazz, and Bachian counterpoint—emerged during a period shaped by several essential forces that influenced the evolution of artistic currents across the twentieth century. Among the most transformative of these was the rapid development of technology and scientific progress. For the first time in history, twentieth-century technologies enabled both academic composers and jazz musicians to access, study, and interact with works created by artists from earlier eras, from distant geographical regions, and from diverse social and cultural environments.

From the early decades of the twentieth century, modernist composers and jazz artists shared a mutual admiration, manifested in a continuous exchange of musical ideas. During the formative years of jazz, its melodic and especially rhythmic distinctiveness was subtly absorbed and stylistically reshaped within works that soon became emblematic for major European and American composers. Gunther Schuller³ notes that "it was Charles Ives

³ The phenomenon proved to be far more extensive than initially assumed; to Ives's name we may add, among others, John Alden Carpenter (*Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*; *Krazy Kat*), Paul Hindemith (*Suite 1922*; *Ragtime Wohltemperiert*), Erik Satie (*Ragtime du Paquebot* in the suite *Parade*), Darius Milhaud (*La Création du Monde*; *Le Bœuf sur le toit*; *Three Rag-Caprices*), Georges Auric (*Adieu New York*), Arthur Honegger (*Concertino*; the oratorio *Le Roi David*; *Prelude and Blues for Quartet of Chromatic Harps*; *Trois Blues*), Jean Wiener (*Sonata syncopé for piano*; *Suite for violin and piano*), Kurt Weill (*The Threepenny Opera*;

(although rarely acknowledged, even today) who deserves credit as the first composer to incorporate elements of Black music into his symphonic works, chamber pieces, and vocal miniatures. (...) For him, ragtime was simply a natural addition to an already rich and ever-expanding set of popular musical models.”⁴

Conversely, scholars examining the intersection between Western art music and jazz have also highlighted the reverse phenomenon: the penetration of traditional academic writing techniques and compositional procedures into the works of jazz musicians. In her study on the fusion of twentieth-century idioms, jazz language, and counterpoint, Tamika Sakayi Sterrs offers only a succinct mention of a few representative works—an indication of a far broader and still underexplored field.

In 1950, Gunther Schuller clarified the concept of *Third Stream*, addressing the misconceptions that risked limiting its broader recognition: “The idea embodied in the basic philosophy of *Third Stream* is the concept of descent – born from the union of two principal musical streams of equal stature, and I emphasize the word equal. These two *musics* may also be allowed to continue developing organically, without further fusion, should they wish to do so; that is, they may remain discrete and distinct. Today, Third Stream is simply one way in which the two directions may discover and meet on common ground.”⁵

2. Research dedicated to the “jazz fugue” phenomenon

The adoption of the fugue by jazz composers and by those working within hybrid academic/jazz frameworks occurs through several approaches: by employing the formal structure of the fugue, by using solely the polyphonic procedure characteristic of the genre (the imitative entrance of the theme in successive voices), or through combinations of these two dimensions. Tamika Sakayi Sterrs identifies three principal modalities through which the fugue becomes associated with the language of jazz: content integration, recomposition, and formal dissolution.

Mahagonny), Ernst Krenek (*Jonny spielt auf*), Dmitri Shostakovich (*Jazz Suites*), Aaron Copland (“Jazzy” from *Three Moods for piano*; *Music for the Theatre*; *Piano Concerto*), Maurice Ravel (the “Blues” movement from the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*), and Igor Stravinsky (*Ragtime for Eleven Instruments*; *Piano Rag Music*).

⁴ Schuller, Gunther. “Jazz and Musical Exoticism”. In *The Exotic In Western Music*, Jonathan Bellman ed., Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1998, p. 283.

⁵ Idem.

The most extensive analytical work on the integration of fugue into jazz has emerged from Russian scholarship, particularly in the writings of Chuvilkin⁶. He proposes three variants of the concept, all of which maintain the structural principles of the Baroque fugue while adapting them to a jazz idiom. The essential distinctions are the following:

- *fugue with jazz elements* – works by academic composers that combine post-tonal language, jazz idioms, and Baroque contrapuntal techniques;
- *jazz fugue* – compositions written in a distinctly jazz vocabulary while observing the structural principles of the fugue;
- *jazzing-fugue* – jazz-style arrangements or reinterpretations of classical fugues.

This conceptual triad enables us to understand the phenomenon not merely as a technique but as an aesthetic continuum, ranging from citation to genuine synthesis.

3. Relating the Concept of the Fugue to Jazz

Within the theoretical tradition of the fugue, the term simultaneously denotes a compositional procedure (imitation), a formal structure, and the interaction between form and technique.

In relation to jazz, Chuvilkin and Sterrs identify three principal modalities through which the fugue is employed:

- the use of the fugue structure – preserving its formal architecture;
- the adoption of the imitative thematic procedure alone – focusing on the polyphonic technique independently of the full form;
- the combination of structural design with polyphonic procedures.

These modalities can be observed in representative examples from both academic-jazz repertoire and the work of jazz musicians.

4. Representative typologies in the fugue/ jazz relationship

4.1. *The integration of the fugue into academic / jazz fusion compositions*

This category includes compositions that incorporate within the fugue form a musical content grounded in another stylistic idiom and/or in diverse

⁶ Chuvilkin, Vsevolod Stanislavovich. "About the essence of the concept of «jazz fugue»". In *South-Russian Musical Anthology*. 2019, N 4, pp. 85-91.
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musical languages. Complex examples – such as Milhaud's *La Création du monde* or George Gershwin's *Crab Canon Fugue* – stand out through their high degree of experimentation in the fusion of disparate idioms with the structural rigor of the fugue.

Case Study: Leonard Bernstein – Prelude, Fugue and Riffs

Bernstein's interest in jazz is evident throughout his life and works, beginning with his undergraduate thesis on the absorption of racial musical elements into American music⁷. The early use of jazz by Gershwin and Copland exerted a decisive influence on Bernstein's distinctly American compositional voice, which frequently interweaves symphonic writing with jazz idioms. *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs*, composed in 1949 for Woody Herman's jazz band, was revised in late 1952 with reduced instrumentation and received its premiere only in 1955. As Bernstein himself suggests, "the title proclaims the intersection between concert music and jazz, the Baroque forms of Prelude and Fugue being complemented by a series of riffs (in jazz parlance, a riff is a concentrated and repeated melodic figure)."⁸

Over time, the work has occupied a highly debated and often contested position, due to its inherent blend of styles and the tension it generates between cliché and complexity. It is embraced neither by jazz performers nor by classical ensembles and consequently enjoys relatively few performances. Moreover, the piece does not easily fit into the *Third-Stream* category: although *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* is undeniably shaped by Bernstein's deep familiarity with jazz, it does not appear to require improvisation. This apparent absence of improvisatory practice is one of the primary reasons the score is not readily accepted within the conventional jazz repertory, where spontaneous creation is considered essential.

The *Fugue* follows the *Prelude* without interruption and is written exclusively for the saxophone section, punctuated by rhythmic gestures in the percussion and supported by the double bass. Although the metric organization is indicated with precision, the alternation of symmetrical and asymmetrical measures imparts a sense of freedom to the musical flow, highlighting the play of contrapuntal lines and the circulation of thematic material across layers. While Bernstein's writing at times approaches a pointillistic technique, the fugue form nonetheless imposes a cohesive structure built around a central thematic nucleus.

⁷ *The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music*, Harvard thesis, 10 April 1939.

⁸ Parsonage, Catherine. "Approaching jazz-influenced wind music". In *Journal of the World Association for Symphonic Bands and Wind Ensembles*, 10, 2003, pp. 79-94.

Bernstein constructs a fugue with two subjects, treated in separate sections, followed by a synthesis and a final recapitulation that reunites both themes. The expository articulations are conceived with distinct contrapuntal strategies: the first subject is presented in a traditional manner, with successive entries and the progressive accumulation of voices.

E.g. 1

Exactly the same beat $J = 160$

1st theme

response *mp*

p *slap tongue* *f* *sub.* *mp (natural)*

Leonard Bernstein, *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs, Fugue*, ms. 1-10

The second fugue introduces a contrasting thematic idea – *cantabile*, fluid, and quasi-isochronous – yet treated differently from the perspective of imitation. The texture is articulated into two distinct layers: a polyphonic one, in which the subject continually circulates among the various contrapuntal voices, and a rhythmic accompaniment.

E.g. 2

response 110

2nd theme

ff *p dolce* *dim.* *p* *ff*

Leonard Bernstein, *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs, Fugue*, ms. 26-31

Other less complex examples – such as the fugue from *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 1* by Villa-Lobos and David Van Kriedt's *Fugue on Bop Themes* – although proceed from the strict formal prototype, remain faithful to the traditional fugal paradigm.

In contemporary music, Miho Hazama and Trevor Coleman propose striking, multimodal approaches in which the fugue becomes a vehicle for articulating extra-musical concepts. In 2015, Miho Hazama composed *Fugue* for a mixed ensemble she describes as a “chamber jazz orchestra,” a hybrid instrumental formula combining the instruments of a big band with a traditional chamber ensemble. The work is constructed on the basis of a non-musical concept: a numerical grid built on numbers 1 through 8, a principle closely related to algorithmic thinking.

Fig. 1

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
2	4	6	8	1	3	5	7
3	6	1	3	6	1	3	6
4	8	3	7	2	6	1	5
5	1	6	2	7	3	8	4
6	3	1	6	3	1	6	3
7	5	3	1	8	6	4	2
8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

On the other hand, in his 2016-piece *Polyfugue* (part of the larger *Polycycle* project), Trevor Coleman introduces two proprietary musical concepts: *comprovisation* - a single operational principle that reconciles a historically entrenched dichotomy between composition and improvisation - and *polycycle*, an extension of polymeter to multiple musical parameters organized as interlocking cyclical strata. Both concepts are theorized in depth in Coleman's doctoral research and embodied in an extensive compositional portfolio.

E.g. 3

♩ = 106 MC1

Oboe

Cello

Piano

mf

Chords: Gm7, Aø7, A/C, Cm7, Bø7, E7(♯9), F♯ø7, Fm6, B♭ø7, E♭maj7(♯5)

Chords: Em7, F♯ø7, F♯/A♯, Am7, A♭ø7, D♭7(♯9), E♭ø7, Dm6

Trevor Coleman, *Polyfuge*, ms. 1-12

4.2. Recompositions and reinterpretations of existing fugues

The second typology comprises recompositions of a pre-existing fugue, achievable through quotation and commentary, juxtaposition and synthesis, or compositional experiment. An illustrative case of quotation/commentary is Jacques Loussier's re-writted *Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor*, in which direct quotations are followed by free-jazz improvisations.

E.g. 4

T⁹ 144 = ♩

Piano

Jazz.



Loussier-Bach Toccata and Fugue in D minor, ms. 1-8

Experimental compositional ventures, such as David Brubeck's *Chromatic Fantasy Sonata*, differ from the other typologies by blurring the boundary between rigorous *fugato* style and jazz. References to Baroque music are articulated more subtly, conveyed "in the manner of" rather than through direct quotation.

4.3. Formal disintegration / deformalization

The final category, exemplified by Bud Powell's *Tempus Fugue-It*, has been described by analysts of the phenomenon as a case of formal dissolution. Here, the essence of the fugue form has been reduced to the title and a thematic line. Although the formal rules and conventions are undermined to the point of near-complete elimination, the melodic line, endowed with thematic function, continues to undergo development within a different stylistic framework.

E.g. 5



The image shows a musical score for Bud Powell's 'Tempus Fugue It', measures 1-16. The score is written for piano in G major, 4/4 time. It consists of two systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system (measures 1-8) features a complex polyphonic texture with multiple voices. The second system (measures 9-16) continues this texture. Chord symbols are provided above and below the staves: HA1, G-7, A7, D-, A7, D- (above the first system); G-7, A7, D-, /C, Bb7, A7b5, D- (below the first system). The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and articulation marks.

Bud Powell, *Tempus Fugue It*, ms. 1-16

5. Aesthetic perspectives and implications for contemporary composition

The integration of the fugue into jazz reveals three aesthetic traits shared by the composers involved:

- adherence to a modernist aesthetic;
- a preference for mutual borrowing;
- a sustained concern with the reinterpretation of Baroque counterpoint.

In current practice, stylistic mixing goes beyond surface treatment and presupposes a deep understanding of both cultural and technical contexts. As Friar (2017) argues, genuinely authentic results emerge only in the work of composers who “organically internalize multiple musical languages”, rather than pursuing hybridization as an aesthetic end in itself.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of how the fugue is integrated into jazz highlights the complexity of a process that goes well beyond mere stylistic echoes and entails a profound restructuring of musical parameters. The three principal modes of association – structural, procedural, and combined – converge to demonstrate that, by virtue of its universally applicable polyphonic mechanisms, the fugue remains a fertile model for exploration within contemporary stylistic contexts. Although this classification foregrounds formal considerations, each

subcategory represents an infusion of the traditional template with the challenges posed by the sonic language of jazz (most often in fusion with various manifestations of post-tonality), to varying degrees and up to the most radical transformations.

At the same time, Chuvilkin's studies and Sterrs's observations point to the need for a shared compositional paradigm in which post-tonality, jazz, and Baroque counterpoint are no longer treated as discrete domains, but as constituent elements of a hybrid language in continuous transformation.

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