

The best jazz has at its centre a balance between composition and improvisation

Discuss this view through referring to the music of at least two named artists in detail.

Introduction – Rewrite the question and state how you are going to answer it

“The best jazz has at its centre a balance between composition and improvisation” is a quote that could be applied to the music of both Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker. Ellington being known for his compositional skills, and Parker for his skills as an improviser.

Then split the essay into two halves, the first focusing on Duke Ellington and the second focusing on Charlie Parker. Begin with a general statement about the artist and how their works link to the question, and then start talking about specific musical features of the work.

Duke Ellington’s work represents this statement effectively as his music represents the perfect balance between “composition and improvisation”. He composed primarily for his ensemble, The Duke Ellington Orchestra, which included many talented solo improvisers.

“The Mooche” exemplifies this balance well. This song follows a strict compositional plan with composed music, however it also allows for improvisation to still play just as an important role.

The 4 bar introduction has a tritone substitution chord as a feature, however the introduction did not appear in early recordings of this work due to the 3 minute restriction of early recordings.

Section A is made up of 2 balanced 8 bar phrases in C minor, with the horns playing a descending chromatic line in 6ths and answered by a growling improvised, plunger muted trumpet solo. A composed 8 bar link based on the material from section A is then heard. Complex chromatic harmony is used in this section.

Section B is in the relative major (E flat major) and uses a 12 bar blues structure. The music in this section is all composed, using a homophonic texture, and based on a repeated syncopated riff.

Section C continues with a 12 bar blues structure, however it is now in the tonic minor of E flat minor. It is this section where we begin to hear much more improvised music, with the clarinet playing an improvised melody in its chalumeau register, and answered by a chordal guitar response.

Section D returns to E flat major, and we hear a female vocal scat solo, whilst the guitar now plays a countermelody.

Section E is another improvisation over the 12 bar blues in E flat minor. This time the solo instrument is a trumpet playing in growling style.

The harmony used in all of these solo sections uses lots of substitution chords, and secondary dominants as would be expected in this style of jazz music.

This highly structured composition then ends by returning to the C minor opening, however the trumpet improvisation is new, and the final bars are altered in order to finish on the tonic.

This clear structure, as outlined above, allows for much contrast in keys and texture, which are all planned compositional features. The tutti sections in particular are clearly planned and would have been written out in detail for the performers in Ellington’s orchestra.

This composition, whilst highly structured, still allows for much solo improvisation, most specifically in the 12 bar blues sections, creating a pleasing and effective balance of both composed ideas, and improvised.

If time permits you could also write about other pieces by Ellington (Specifically his version of Koko that we have studied would also suit this question nicely)

Once you have finished with Duke Ellington you then move on to Charlie Parker. As with the previous section, begin with a general statement about the artist and how their works link to the question, and then start talking about specific musical features of the work.

Charlie Parker didn't rely as much on highly detailed compositional plans, or entirely composed passages of music, however he still managed to strike a balance between composition and improvisation through his use of contrafact. This is a compositional style favoured by Parker, where he would take pre-existing chord progressions and improvise new melodies over the top of them. His version of "Koko" exemplifies this compositional style and strikes a pleasing balance between composition and improvisation, albeit in a much different way that Ellington does.

A previously mentioned, this piece is an example of contrafact, which is where a pre-existing chord progression is used, whilst new melodies are superimposed above it. This piece is based on the chord changes of the piece "Cherokee" by Ray Noble. Whilst this piece uses the chord progression from this song that is the only aspect that related to Noble's song. The progression is 64 bars long (double the standard 32 bar form we see in a lot of jazz standards) and it is made up four phrases that follow an AABA structure. It uses much dissonance as a result of added note chords (9ths 7ths and 13ths) and substitution chords are a feature. The B section follows a circle of fifths chord progression for the entirety of its phrase. The overall structure of Parker's version is: intro, chorus 1, chorus 2, drum solo and coda

The introduction is 32 bars long and falls into 4 distinct 8 bar phrases. It opens with the alto sax and trumpet playing in octaves. As this melody is doubled this gives the impression that it must have been a pre-composed melody (or at least pre-planned) as two performers could not improvise the same thing at the same time. This is then followed by two 8 bar improvised solos by the trumpet and the alto sax, and finishes again with some composed material on the sax and trumpet playing in thirds.

Chorus 1 sees the use of the structured chord progression from Cherokee, with the superimposed improvisation (played on the alto sax by Parker). As previously mentioned it uses an AABA structure and is split into 16 bar phrases. The style is typically bebop, a style, exemplified by fast running quavers, virtuosic playing, shifting accents, irregular phrase lengths and the use of a wide pitch range. Motivic development is also evident, with an example being the use of the "Woody Woodpecker" motif.

Chorus 2 is a new improvisation, played again by the alto sax, and continues in the same vein as chorus 1, however it opens with a quote from the jazz standard "High Society" which serves as the beginning of his improvisation for this section. Parker often liked to quote other composers in his work.

This is then followed by a drum solo, which showcases the players techniques and timbres, such as using the centres and edges of the drums.

The coda then uses ideas from the introduction to finish off the piece.

As you can see, whilst this piece is much more simplistic in its structure, which is typical of Parker's bebop style, it still has a good balance of both composition and improvisation at its core. This is shown

through the use of composed chord progressions and some composed melodies, alongside Parker's improvised sax solos in the choruses.

As with the Ellington stuff, if time permits you could also talk about other of Parker's work (Blues for Alice with his "Bird Blues" and Head arrangement, and Bird of Paradise which is another example of contrafact).

As you can see from the examples provided, by both Ellington and Parker, they both exemplify the view that "The best jazz has at its centre a balance between composition and improvisation". In particular, Ellington for his combination of composed material and improvisation, and Parker for his use of contrafact.