

# French Music Reconfigured in the Modal Jazz of Bill Evans

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## Introduction

At an anecdotal level, French classical music, especially that of the twentieth century, is commonly understood to have played a role in the improvisational thinking of Bill Evans (1929–1980) in the later 1950s, as part of a larger eclectic tradition which extends back to Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, and others. But, equally, the relevance of this repertory to Evans as a classically-trained musician has often been glibly dismissed as an unsurprising “given” and so has rarely been probed in any scholarly depth. This complacency begs various questions. For instance, how significant a force was French music for Evans, in comparison, say, with Russian repertory? What role(s) might French music play in Evans’s art? And, more particularly, in what ways might French music be reconfigured within his modal jazz?

These loci – French music and Evans – appear to offer an ideal opportunity for detailed investigation of relations between musical types. Such relations might range from parallels, potential intersections, through to specific eclecticism (where causality may plausibly be established), which could assimilate, adapt, and individualize a given source – “chameleon”-like. I shall term this third type of linkage, the potential of which will be explored below, a “source-product relationship”. I should emphasize

that the identification of any such eclectic practice holds no derogatory implication: it is simply that an artist flourishes within a given cultural context. Implicit are “crossings” and transformations of genre, culture, national identity, and timeframe. Also implicit of course is the ubiquitous question of musical influence. Brief allusion may be made to ideas of key literary thinkers such as Harold Bloom (1973) and T. S. Eliot (1951), who held opposing theoretical views on influence, characterized essentially as “anxiety” versus “generosity” towards the past, which were subsequently brought into musicology by Joseph Straus (1990), but this small paper is not the place for a detailed theoretical disquisition on the topic. (A full-length book chapter on Evans and French music is currently in progress and will be published in due course within my planned monograph on *French Music in Conversation with Jazz*.)

At issue are the nature and mutability of music materials; or, sometimes, the constancy of materials within an altered context. As a French specialist, I am interested to explore the impact of earlier French music in later settings, especially jazz, but I also want to offer some of the probing of the Evans-French music relationship that has been lacking. Firstly, I wish to check out the general assumption of Evans’s association with French music (and how extensive this association was). Secondly, in two case studies on aspects of the album *Kind of Blue* (Davis, 1959) and *Peace Piece* (Evans, 1958), I aim to investigate these proposed musical relations, albeit on a small canvas. In doing so, I also want to foreground the artistry of Bill Evans.

### Relating Evans and French Music

Evans’s parentage, with his Ukrainian mother, and his education, which included violin and piano lessons, certainly meant that he was exposed to varied music. As Evans’s main biographer Peter Pettinger (1998: 16) notes, they enabled access to “sonatas by Mozart and Beethoven and works by Schumann, Rachmaninoff, Debussy, Ravel, Gershwin ... Villa-Lobos, Khachaturian, Milhaud, and others”. Immediately, our attention is drawn to a broad palette of Western composers, from Classical and Romantic Austro-German figures, through to a balanced selection of Russian and French twentieth-century composers. The Russian-Ukrainian dimension is clearly important and thus the Evans-French connection

is not in any sense exclusive. Arguably, the Russian and French domains may be regarded as of roughly similar significance. Such “crossings” were developed by Evans’s formal study of music, which included techniques of harmony and composition, at Southeastern Louisiana College, from where he graduated in 1950.

In his article on “The Poet: Bill Evans”, the respected jazz authority Gene Lees (1997: 421) has observed that Evans “brought to bear coloristic devices and voicings and shadings from post-Romantic composers, including Debussy, Ravel, Poulenc, Scriabin, and maybe Alban Berg.” Thus Lees emphasizes the French impressionists, Debussy and Ravel, while expanding the neoclassical representation, with Poulenc joining Milhaud; he also expands the Russian domain with the inclusion of the French-influenced composer, Scriabin. So, albeit a generalized foundation, there is consensus amongst the most established writers on Evans that French classical composers did constitute a significant force.

Crucially, we can also find authorial support for this stance among the various interviews that Evans himself gave. In one such interview (Ginibre, 1965), he declared: “I love impressionists. I love Debussy. He’s one of my favourite composers.” Similarly, where the neoclassicists such as Les Six were concerned, Evans recounted: “I remember first hearing some of Milhaud’s polytonality and actually a piece that he may not think too much of – it was an early piece called *Suite provençale* – which opened me up to certain things” (Enstice and Rubin, 1992: 136). So what then was the nature of the appeal of this French music?

I would argue that in early twentieth-century French repertory, particularly, Evans found an affinity of sound world with his own improvisational priorities: lyricism, polyphonic lines; a rich harmonic palette of sevenths and ninths; subtle textures; and voicings: in short, a vehicle for expressivity. (Incidentally, in privileging lyricism and melody here, I am not claiming their exclusivity to this relationship: clearly, Evans’s intricate right-hand melodies also develop in part directly out of jazz pianistic traditions, especially those of “Bud” Powell, Nat “King” Cole, and Lennie Tristano.) While melodically diverse and modally free (in common with some Russian music), this French repertory was still tonic-based; and for Evans too: “I think of all harmony as an expansion from and return to the tonic” (Lees, 1997: 434).

In addition, crossing in and out of such repertory seemingly contributed to Evans’s distinctive piano tone; as Lees (1997: 441) acknowledges, “Bill brought into jazz the kind of tone appropriate to Debussy and Ravel

... obvious in the classical world in the playing of Walter Gieseking and Emil Gilels". Most importantly, it appeared to stimulate his imagination. After all, improvising musicians need their stylistic hallmarks or background formulae since any notion of a spontaneous improvisation, without a predetermined framework or embedded harmonic knowledge is a myth (Berliner, 1994: 1), and Evans was "genuinely one of the most imaginative, inventive, and adventurous improvisers the art has known" (Lees, 1997: 441–2).

Comparisons between Evans and Frédéric Chopin – as a nineteenth-century predecessor and adoptive Frenchman – are traditional and still prove useful below, but what of Evans and Maurice Ravel? For each, the piano formed the focus of their artistic being. Ravel composed at the piano, while for Evans: "the piano, on which he could attack and sustain with crystal clarity, remained his one true love" (Pettinger, 1998: 11). Both favored miniatures and rated subtle nuance over forceful dynamic. Melody was imperative. Both were experts on their heritage: Ravel on Couperin, Mozart, and Mendelssohn; Evans on Chopin and Ravel. Both were sensitive individuals for whom music offered a nonverbal emotional outlet.

Conversely, as avid readers both valued words: Ravel selecting Marcel Proust, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Edgar Allan Poe; Evans favoring Thomas Hardy and William Blake. And Ravel's own lecture on *Contemporary Music*, presented on his American tour in spring 1928, offers a set of principles for relating classical music and jazz which may be inverted to test Evans's practice, as pursued in the case studies. Each eclectic artwork, for which a reliable source may be found, initially "adopts" some of that material, then subjects it to "minute stylization" – even "manipulation", transforming it in a new setting which embraces "national characteristics" and "individualities" (Ravel, 1928: 140), so creating originality. Indeed, as Ravel himself said on another occasion: "If you have something to say, this something will never emerge more distinctly than in your unintended unfaithfulness to a model" (Mawer, 2000: 56). It is in no sense a second-rate creativity.

In order to support the two case studies which follow, the reader is advised to consult the relevant aural and written resources. (For copyright reasons, music quotations are not included within this article.) Resources for the initial case study include the recording re-released on CD (Davis, 1959), a transcription (Davis, n.d.), and various French music scores (Milhaud, 1923; Ravel, 1911; Ravel, 1927; Ravel, 1931; Ravel, 1932).

In respect of the second study, supporting resources comprise the re-released recording on CD (Evans, 1958), a transcription (Aikin, 1980: 44–6), and various French scores (Chopin, n.d.; Jolivet, 2002; Messiaen, 1964). When referring to scores and transcriptions which use rehearsal figures or letters, a shorthand notation is employed: Fig. 1 -1 refers to the measure preceding rehearsal figure 1; Fig. 1 denotes the full measure with this label attached; Fig. 1 +1 refers to the measure following figure 1.

### Case Study No. 1

My first case study highlights a hybrid source-product relation between Ravel's Concerto for the left hand composed in 1929–30, which was introduced by Evans to Miles Davis (Davis & Troupe, 1989: 216), and part of the iconic album, *Kind of Blue* (Davis, 1959). In Davis's no non-sense style: "because we were into Ravel (especially his Concerto for the left hand ...) and Rachmaninoff ... all of that was up in there somewhere" and "We were just leaning toward – like Ravel, playing a sound only with the white keys" (Davis & Troupe, 1989: 224–5). Sure enough, in that opening riff of *All Blues*, the opening contrabassoon figure from the *Concerto for the Left Hand* (Ravel, 1931) is adopted and adapted: the jazz chameleon at work. Interestingly, however, this Ravel work is not strictly a product of impressionism, as was privileged by Evans above, but one of interwar neoclassicism, itself much influenced by early jazz and the music of George Gershwin.

Within a minor mode on E, Ravel (1931, measures 2–3) presents the pitches E, F-sharp, E, G, in dotted rhythm and beginning on a semi-quaver anacrusis. He then extends the figure upwards. Meanwhile, after its initial G, the Davis/Evans riff explores the pitches D, E, D, F, effectively a transposition of Ravel down a major second, then balanced by a descent to the lower G: D, E, D, G. In fact, this latter pattern also matches a portion of the *Sonate pour violon et piano* (Ravel, 1927), measures 8–9 of the "Blues" movement: E-flat, F, E-flat, A-flat. Additionally, Evans's material for the four-measure introduction comprises a tremolo oscillation between pitches G and A, where another Ravelian connection (this time an impressionistic one) is implicit: "A number of tunes started with brief atmospheric introductions, colored by delicate, pointillistic

rippling. This was Evans the orchestrator at work, thinking perhaps of the *pianissimo* flutes, clarinets, and harps of dawn in Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*" (Pettinger, 1998: 144).

It is a moot point, however, whether similarity with the double bass motive which begins the fugal subject in *La création du monde* (Milhaud, 1923) might be even greater. After an initial sounding of D, Milhaud utilizes the same melodic fragment: D, E, D, F [D], and then extends the idea via the blues third: D, E, D, F-sharp/F, D (Milhaud, 1923, Fig. 11 -1). In turn, each of these figures relates to Gershwin, *The Man I Love*. All share a four-note motive – a kind of paradigm – identified by veteran critic André Hodeir (1958: 254), as “particularly prized by composers ‘inspired’ by jazz”. And so the cycle continues ... As Davis (1989: 225) comments, white-note modality has much to answer for, while dotted or swung rhythms are another common feature.

Evans's debt to Ravel is also evident in his extended solo in *All Blues*, again with much white-note modality, at around 8'26" in the recording (Davis, 1959). His melancholic melody in Dorian on G (Davis, n.d.; see letter D, measures 1–10) bears affinity with the solo in the first movement of the *Piano Concerto in G* by Ravel (1932, Fig. 4 +2), while his expressive minor third, plus flat seventh, gesture is reminiscent of the exquisite cantilena in the *Concerto for the Left Hand* (Ravel, 1931, Fig. 9 -3). The faster tempo and urgency in *All Blues* is one way in which Evans's eclectic response is “individualized”. Evans's block harmonies in second inversion, with pitches D, E, F in the tenor line, combined with long-short swung rhythms (Davis, n.d.; see letter D +1), may be heard as an adaptation of the piano entry in the *Concerto for the Left Hand* (Ravel, 1931, Fig. 4 +3), which features second-inversion triads mixed with seventh chords in dotted rhythm as a variant of the opening contrabassoon figuration. (These second-inversion block triads occur too in the second waltz of *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Ravel, 1911), at measure 25ff., where the slow tempo, quiet dynamic, and expressive qualities are congruent both with Evans's practice and his theory in privileging French impressionism.) This similar chordal-rhythmic patterning is especially striking later on in Evans's solo (Davis, n.d.; see letter D +16), which effectively “amplifies” the Ravel as a series of ninth chords, repeated within a dotted rhythm: F, A, E, G; G, B, F, A; and A, C, G, B.

As a link to the next case study, a fundamental feature of *Flamenco Sketches* is known to have been initiated by Evans, since it can be traced back to *Peace Piece*. The alternating chords, C7 (C, E, G, B) and G11 (G,

B, [D], F, A, C), constitute a double-borrowing: Evans revisiting his own work, which itself borrowed this progression from Leonard Bernstein's *Some Other Time*. Evans's long-term girlfriend, Peri Cousins Harper, remembered how he would cross or "drift" from one locus to the next (Pettinger, 1998: 68), hence the fluidity and this interpolation. Evans's improvisation in *Flamenco Sketches*, where his spacious, syncopated arpeggio waves in G lead to more intricate moments, also recalls *Peace Piece*, where this same device cues a winding down of activity.

## Case Study No. 2

My second and main case study: Chopin, Messiaen, and *Peace Piece*, demonstrates a more acute source-product relation in respect of Chopin (n.d.), plus a parallel with potential intersection in respect of Messiaen (1964). Pettinger identifies Chopin's *Berceuse* Op. 57 in D-flat major, which was composed around 1844, both as "a piano piece that Evans knew well" and a "clear precursor" to *Peace Piece*, from *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* (Evans, 1958). He also questions: "we know [Evans] was a Scriabin enthusiast, but did he know Olivier Messiaen, whose *Catalogue d'oiseaux* [1956–8] for piano was just appearing?" (1998: 69); and although Evans's biographer responds simply, "No matter", I want to take up his propositions and examine the materials and relations to arrive at some conclusions.

The *Berceuse* is based on "a two-harmony left-hand ostinato, which like *Peace Piece*, never varies until it makes a cadence at the end". Although Pettinger is broadly correct, there are subtle alterations in Chopin's second half of the measure, and Evans also creates small changes. The effect of the melody over the bass is to create new harmonic inflections, such as the expressive superimposition of A-flat/A over G: Evans's favored V9 construct, i.e. G, B, D, F, A-flat/A. Both Chopin and Evans introduce their melodies after several ostinato iterations. (We might even propose a further reference, and thus triangulation, here: while Evans's piece is definitively in 4/4, the sounding of the left-hand pattern followed by the slow, expressive right-hand cantilena inevitably sets up association with the opening of the slow, triple-meter movement of Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*.)

For Pettinger, in the *Berceuse*, “The right-hand line starts simply, each succeeding two or four measure section introducing a fresh decorative idea” (1998: 69); what he does not say is that this is because Chopin’s piece is a theme and variations. Evans too enjoys frequent variation, often working in two-measure “breaths” joined as eight-measure spans. In fact, the ostinato apart, Evans claimed his piece to be “completely free-form” (Pettinger, 1998: 69). One really similar melodic gesture concerns the multiple repeated A-flats preceded by octave grace-notes across measures 15–18 of Chopin’s *Berceuse*, and the repeated Gs preceded by upper grace-notes on F-sharp, 11 measures from the end of Evans’s *Peace Piece* (Aikin, 1980: 46). Evans’s major seventh version: F-sharp, G, might be perceived as a rather poignant misreading, or rewriting of history, in a Bloomian sense (Bloom, 1973). (We might also hear further correspondence with *Valses nobles*, II, mentioned above: Ravel’s top line from measure 25 onwards features reiterated C pitches, preceded by grace-notes on the same pitch.)

Despite minor differences, the extent of parity here – the tempo; calm feeling; basic I–V ostinato; variation; upper piano register; scales; arpeggiation; trills; the coda’s rhythmic augmentation and final diminuendo – means that, rather than Chopin’s lullaby being just a “precursor”, we might regard it as Evans’s conceptual and formal model. In other words, this is more constancy than transformation, albeit within a wholly new context. Conversely, a pertinent observation that, “in performance ... [the *Berceuse*] should sound like a written-out improvisation” (Pettinger, 1998: 69), enables us to take another step: while Evans gained from Chopin; turning the tables, we can see that, beyond his conventional composer status, Chopin too was an improviser. His virtuosic variations inhabit that elusive realm between composition and quasi-spontaneous performance.

As a second layer, relating *Peace Piece* to *Catalogue d’oiseaux*, Pettinger (1998: 69) perceives “much birdsong incorporated around the apex of the Evans arch, where the bitonal texture scintillates in the manner of the French master”. This is a fair assessment, but it would be foolish to force any argument for direct influence. Strictly speaking, Evans’s improvisation is bimodal, occasionally polymodal: while the bass works in C (subscribing to Evans’s own tonal principles, mentioned earlier), the melody invokes a much wider, fluid modality. We may reference Ionian, Lydian, whole tone, chromatic, and blues-inflected modality, such as the E/D-sharp and A-sharp/B inflections which occur across measures 14–17



from the end (Aikin, 1980: 46). From the middle onwards, Evans's palette is more piquantly dissonant than is typical for him. Interestingly, however, amid bell-like, crystalline, and cascading textures (which one might loosely term "impressionistic" effects), the trills and grace-notes highlighted apropos Chopin are still relevant.

We find translated equivalents of those decorated repeated notes in *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (Messiaen, 1964) within the opening piece entitled "Le chocard des alpes" (The alpine chough). One such instance ("Le chocard", p. 4, measure 1) concerns a reiterated demisemiquaver sextuplet construct on A-flat, D, A. Furthermore, a particular parallel may be drawn with Messiaen's second number, "Le loriot" (The golden oriole), which shares the laid back tempo of *Peace Piece*, as well as the alternations between songful bursts and sustained pitches, and the contrasts of dynamic. (Alternating tempos and characterizations are also demonstrated in Messiaen's eighth piece, "L'alouette calandrelle": The short-toed lark.) Like Evans, Messiaen enjoys upper registral extremity: florid evocation of the wren involves trills ("Le loriot", p. 2, measure 1). Meanwhile, the song thrush foregrounds major sevenths and minor ninths, e.g. B-flat, A; and E-flat, E ("Le loriot", p. 3, measures 4–10), both comparable with intervallic features of Evans's improvisation, e.g. E-flat, E; D-sharp, D; and F-sharp, G (Aikin, 1980: 46). Messiaen employs open fifths in the bass from the start to the finish of "Le loriot", while Evans's piece ends in just this way (see description below). Moreover, Messiaen's third piece, "Le merle bleu" (Blue rock thrush), features a final "Très lent" marked "souvenir du merle bleu" ("Le merle bleu", p. 24, measure 11), which has a similarly spacious feel to the coda of *Peace Piece*, each also making use of quartal harmonies.

Of course there are salient differences: which is not to make a value judgment; rather, each creator is an individual. The works exist on very different scales: an extensive multivolume collection and a "one-off" (probably "two-off") improvised miniature, approximately 6'43" in duration. Messiaen's textures are busier, more complex than Evans's. A stronger notion of melody and accompaniment is preserved in Evans, whose practice is, ironically, more in the classical tradition. Finally, there is a literalism to *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, which is specific – almost scientific – to the bird being evoked; by contrast, Evans's conception is much freer and in that sense more imaginative.

In fact, in its internalizing and broader spiritual dimension, there is an affinity with the approach of Messiaen's compatriot, André Jolivet,

whose forward-looking *La princesse de Bali* from *Mana* of 1935 (Jolivet, 2002) concludes at measures 34–5 with a remarkably similar harmonic-spatial gesture to that in the final four measures of *Peace Piece* (Aikin, 1980: 46). Both loci balance an arpeggiated gesture which descends from treble to bass by an ascent featuring bell-like sonorities, which both follows on from and ends with a pause. The final measure of Jolivet’s score is marked “comme un gong très grave”, with pitches enunciated from a very low B-flat, through G, to C-sharp, G-sharp, D-sharp, the sound then fading away. Evans’s last two measures create a similar effect, but with a quartal emphasis: G, C, F; A, C, E; A, D, G, before a final fifth-based construct: C, G, [D].

## Conclusion

So, there is little doubt about the relevance of French music to Evans (as a force of comparable stature to Russian music), evidenced by a brief survey of biographical literature, supported by Evans’s own views, and coupled with observations of his practice which I sought to develop further in the short analyses above. In pursuing the role of this French music in the improvisatory art of Bill Evans, I have emphatically not been interested in some kind of contest; the words of Gene Lees (1997: 441) have offered a salutary caveat: “In jazz ... you are listening to individual expression”. But, while we respect individuality, none of us exists in a cultural vacuum and individuality is defined partly by reference to some “other”. I conclude that probing cultural and genre crossings between French music and Evans does serve to reveal a rich network, which, in the given case studies, foregrounds Ravel, Chopin, Messiaen, and Jolivet. (Interestingly, in these loci at least, there is less evidence overall of the specific impressionism to which Evans alluded, though looser impressionistic effects are evident.) Some instances present in parallel, with hermeneutic points of intersection. Notwithstanding the problematics of establishing causality, other specific instances where there is sufficient documentary support may be justifiably regarded as source-product eclectic responses, involving transformation of musical materials.

Arguably, the connection between Ravel’s *Concerto for the Left Hand* and the Davis/Evans *All Blues* (Case study No. 1) involves a double source-product effect since the former’s opening figure most likely

emerged from early jazz in the first place. *Peace Piece* (Case study No. 2) furthers this idea with a creative triangulation: Evans, Chopin, and Bernstein – plus Messiaen and Jolivet – with some relations clear-cut, or closed; others more ambiguous, or open-ended. For example, although the composition of *Catalogue d'oiseaux* was absolutely contemporary with the creation of *Peace Piece*, the sound of birdsong was already apparent in some of Messiaen's earlier music, and Evans may well have been exposed to such sounds (though it is unlikely that we will find firm evidence to support or refute this possibility).

Methodologically, the flexible approach advocated in *Contemporary Music* (Ravel, 1928: 140) has proved applicable to Evans's eclecticism: those loci which do have an identifiable source also encompass Ravel's "adoption", "stylization", and varying amounts of colorful transformation within their new artistic contexts. But, as Chuck Israels (1985: 110–11) has maintained, Evans's style never sounded artificial or constructed: "ideas filtered through him and emerged with deep conviction ... everything was synthesized into an integrated style." While the thinking of Bloom (1973), which focuses upon the notion of misreading history, has been seen to hold some limited (hermeneutic) applicability, I contend that Evans's general approach subscribes much more strongly to an inclusive and generous embracing of one's cultural history, as advocated by Eliot (1951) in "Tradition and the individual talent".

Thus French musical repertory has been shown to act as a significant modal and textural catalyst, especially in Evans's most introverted moments like *Peace Piece*. And beyond the case studies from 1958–9, Evans's longer-term interest in French music is supported by his later recording, albeit as a commercial activity, of arrangements of Fauré and Chopin for trio and orchestra (Evans, 1965). Such association with the French classics has likely raised the cachet of Evans's creative work in Europe – if not in the United States where he had to contend both with being white and often regarded as effeminate – potentially widening his appeal there. We may witness, for example, the exquisite yet curiously literal performances of his improvisations, including *Peace Piece*, recorded by the renowned French classical pianist, Jean-Yves Thibaudet (1997). Finally, it is intriguing that old French music has lived on, reconfigured – chameleon-like – within a new postwar modal jazz context.

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