

An Analysis of Igor Stravinsky's
"Ebony Concerto" (1945)
for Modified Jazz Band

By

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Introduction

Igor Stravinsky was one of relatively few fortunate composers to have a lengthy career with multiple periods and a large output of music. In the case of Stravinsky, musicologists have divided his career into three such periods: “Russian,” (c. 1907 - 1919) “Neo-Classical,” (c. 1920 – 1954) and “Serial” (c. 1954 – 1968). During his Neo-Classical period, Stravinsky moved to America. While he was in America, he began to become influenced by jazz music. This became evident in works such as *Preludium for Jazz Band* (1936/1937). The influence of jazz in Stravinsky’s music is perhaps most prominent in his piece *Ebony Concerto*, (1945) a work dedicated to jazz clarinetist and bandleader Woody Herman for an ensemble of modified “jazz band” instrumentation.

In this paper, I will be conducting an analysis of Igor Stravinsky’s *Ebony Concerto*. Using what I have learned about the music of Igor Stravinsky in Advance Music Theory Seminar, I will uncover elements of *Ebony Concerto* and how they relate to compositional techniques often used by Stravinsky throughout his works. I considered this an appropriate piece for me to analyze because of my background of study in jazz music. Therefore, an important aspect of my paper will be to compare and contrast musical elements of *Ebony Concerto* to musical elements of traditional jazz music.

I will begin my paper by discussing the instrumentation of *Ebony Concerto* and how it relates to instrumentation in traditional jazz band music. I will then conduct a small analysis of each movement of this relatively short work. I will conclude my paper by talking about what I have discovered and learned while conducting my analysis of *Ebony Concerto*. In constructing this paper, I hope to gain and improve analytical tools in the music of Igor Stravinsky. I also hope to improve communication and writing skills as I create the final paper.

Instrumentation

Ebony Concerto is scored for solo B-flat clarinet, two E-flat alto saxophones (doubling clarinet), two B-flat tenor saxophones (first doubling clarinet), one E-flat baritone saxophone, one B-flat bass clarinet, French horns (presumably in F), five B-flat trumpets, three tenor trombones, piano, harp, guitar, piano, bass, tam-tam, cymbals and drums (drum set). This instrumentation is a modification (or extension) of a traditional jazz band (also known as a “big band”). A traditional jazz band consists of two E-flat alto saxophones, two B-flat tenor saxophones, one E-flat baritone saxophone, four (or five) B-flat trumpets, three (or four) tenor trombones (fourth bass trombone), guitar, piano, bass and drum set. Stravinsky has all of these instruments present plus additional ones. In a traditional jazz band, bass clarinet will be considered a double for the baritone saxophone. However, in the case of *Ebony Concerto*, the bass clarinet is played by a separate instrumentalist. Additionally, it should be noted that traditional big band does not make use of the French horn (though in rare cases it did) and the only percussionist in a big band is usually the drum set player (the additions of tam-tam and cymbals would not be used). The harp is also not a traditional jazz band instrument, but likely carries the same function as the piano (being a harmonic supporter and part of the “rhythm section.”)

It may be more appropriate to call this an “extended” jazz band, as it has all of the instruments of a traditional jazz band (or “big band”), plus more. At the time this piece was composed (1945) the “Big Band and Swing” era had already passed, and jazz music was in its “Bebop” era (which consisted of mostly smaller music ensembles). Therefore, the height of development and popularity of big band music had already been reached, and Stravinsky would have had all of that era’s music to garner influence from at the time of *Ebony Concerto*’s

composition. Though later composers would also extend the instrumentation of the traditional jazz band (such as Charles Mingus' *Epitaph*) Stravinsky was one of very few at the time to extend the jazz band beyond traditional orchestration. It could be due to Stravinsky's background composing for symphony orchestra that he envisioned French horn, harp and an extended percussion section as being part of the work.

Overview, "Ebony Concerto"

Ebony Concerto is likely named as such because the word "ebony" refers to "black music," or music that is traditionally born of the African diaspora. Although this is a dated and potentially problematic term from a white composer, I point it out in order to understand where Stravinsky was coming from in terms of his compositional approach. It is important to understand that, with *Ebony Concerto*, he was attempting to convey the influence of jazz music on his own music. That factor is significant when conducting an analysis of the piece.

Ebony Concerto is written in three movements: Allegro moderato, Andante and Moderato – Con moto. These movements together create the "fast-slow-fast" arc that tends to be associated with the baroque concerto. It is appropriate, therefore, that this piece lies within Stravinsky's Neo-Classical period, (as I delve into the separate movements later in this paper, I will elaborate on some of the other Neo-Classical elements used). Though stylistic elements of jazz music are used throughout the work, Stravinsky still uses classical forms. The Allegro moderato is in sonata form (though unusually executed), the Andante movement is a binary form, and the Moderato – Con moto is a rondo form. This also points to the piece's Neo-Classical nature, as many three-movement sonatas and symphonies of the Classical era have similar formal structure. This piece contains many elements of "jazz music" that I will elaborate on further as I discuss

each movement individually. However, none of the formal functions of the piece specifically relate to formal functions of jazz music.

I. Allegro moderato

The first movement of *Ebony Concerto* is in Sonata form, though it is presented in a very unusual way. For starters, the primary theme is in B-flat and the secondary theme is in E-flat (the subdominant as opposed to the dominant). There is no development section in the movement. It is an exposition, recapitulation, then a very short coda. The form of the piece is thus:

Exposition (mm. 1 – 77)

- Primary Theme (mm. 1 – 17)
- Transition (mm. 18 – 43)
- Secondary Theme (mm. 44 – 68)
- Closing (mm. 69 – 77)

Recapitulation (repeat mm. 1 – 37, mm. 78 – 102)

- Secondary Theme of Recapitulation (mm. 84 – 102)
- Coda (mm. 102 – 104)

The primary theme consists mainly of a motif with two notes: A-natural and B-flat (Note: score is transposed.):

The image shows a musical score for five Bb Trumpets. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a common time signature (C). The primary theme motif is presented in five staves, numbered 1 through 5. Each staff contains a sequence of notes and rests, illustrating the two-note motif (A-natural and B-flat) mentioned in the text. The notes are primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some rests. The score is transposed as indicated in the text.

Right away, this separates *Ebony Concerto* from traditional jazz music. The I – V – I harmonic progression that is definitive of tonal music is not one that is particularly definitive of jazz. Jazz music, which is derivative of the blues, tends to center around a mixolydian sound. Apart from the instrumentation, Stravinsky does not offer a hint of jazz influence in these opening measures. Instead these opening trumpet measures give the impression of a brass fanfare more than anything else.

In m. 5, however, the saxophones enter (except for the baritone saxophone). This is the first clue that something in this music is different from what you might normally hear from Stravinsky. Although the tonal language does not change in these measures, it is nevertheless unusual to have this number of saxophones playing at once. It is the type of sound we have only gotten to know through jazz music at that point. So, although the harmonic language does not yet allude to jazz music, the instrumentation does.

The primary theme and transition represent Stravinsky's technique of composing in blocks. He will take a short motif as he does here and repeat it in different places in time. For example, the motif here first occurs at m. 1.1, then again at m. 2.1.5. When the saxophones come in with the motif, it is at m. 5.2. The way Stravinsky constructs the "blocks" of motifs on different beats creates syncopation that ultimately drives the piece forward, (this is a technique that is prominently used in *l'Histoire du Soldat*). This technique of syncopation is present throughout the primary theme and transition.

At the first measure of the transition (m. 18), Stravinsky implements the first "jazz style" technique:

A musical score for four staves, likely woodwinds. The first staff has a circled number '4' above it. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The dynamic marking 'mf' is present on each staff. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes with stems, and some notes have a 'b' (bend) symbol above them.

The lead saxophone (Alto 1) is instructed to play the first note with a bend. That bend likely came from the influence of jazz music on this piece, as bends are often featured as stylistic flourishes in jazz music.

At this point, it is significant to point out that there is a series of ostinatos occurring during the transition (specifically during mm. 18 – 33). There is an ostinato in the bass, in the harp left hand, and in the tam-tam. This is important to note because the ostinato is another compositional technique that Stravinsky is fond of.

The secondary theme (mm. 44 – 68) features another stylistic “jazz” idiom – the use of trumpets with harmon mutes:

A musical score for a brass section starting at measure 44. The score includes parts for Solo Cl., Trpts. (Trumpets), Trbns. (Trumpets), Bass, and Drs. (Drummers). The Solo Cl. part has a circled number '44' and a '10' above it. The Trpts. part has 'harmon' markings. The Bass part has a 'pizz.' marking. The score is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The dynamic marking 'mf' is present on the Solo Cl. part.

While the harmonic language at this point in the piece is not reflective of “jazz music” in itself, the melody of the secondary theme (played in the solo B-flat clarinet and trombone 1) has a “tune-like” quality that we may come to expect from the standard repertoire in jazz.

Additionally, the block technique of Stravinsky continues during the secondary theme in other parts of the ensemble, and the ostinato technique continues in the drum set.

In the Coda (mm. 102 – 104) the main fragment of the primary theme is played one last time in the trumpets:



The circle and plus signs represent “open” and “closed.” Often in jazz music, a trumpet player takes a plunger mute or hat mute and covers the bell with it when the music indicates “closed” and removes it when it’s “open.” Stravinsky finishes the movement here, with a textural jazz idiom. In short, this movement does not have any jazz language in terms of harmony or melody, but it does have elements of jazz texture and articulation.

II. Andante

The Andante is the relatively “slow” movement of *Ebony Concerto*. It is in a binary form. While it is the “middle event” of the piece and also the shortest, it is also the one that most accentuates the influence that jazz has on this piece. It begins with the tonal quality of a static F minor chord. The melody is played in B-flat tenor sax 1 and E-flat baritone sax. No jazz

language is present for the first five measures of the movement, but Stravinsky continues his block motif compositional technique.

At m. 6.4, jazz language is introduced in a striking manner. The trumpets (without trumpet 5) play the main melodic motif together with harmon mutes, giving the section a sound we might hear in the music of Duke Ellington or Gil Evans:



A musical score for five trumpets. The top staff is marked 'muted' and 'p'. The four lower staves are each marked 'harm. mute' and 'pp'. The music consists of a melodic motif in the upper staves and a rhythmic accompaniment in the lower staves.

This passage from the trumpets sets the stage for the harmonic language to follow. At m. 8.2, a variation of the main melodic theme is presented. Instead of being strictly in a minor mode, however, Stravinsky shifts the presentation of the motif to a more “bluesy” center. By “bluesy,” I mean that Stravinsky combines both the minor and major third, in order to create “blue notes” as they clash together:



A musical score for a single trumpet. The first measure is marked with a '2' in a box. The music features a melodic motif with a mix of minor and major thirds, creating a bluesy sound. The notes are marked with a 'h' for harmonic.

In this section, Stravinsky also introduces the note E-flat, which helps the movement solidify its “bluesy” identity by giving it a mixolydian sound. While the influence of jazz is now

extremely apparent in the harmonic language of the piece, Stravinsky is still employing blocks and ostinatos in his compositional techniques.

III. Moderato – Con moto

The Moderato – Con moto is the final movement of *Ebony Concerto* and it is written in rondo form. The divisions of the movement are thus:

A – mm. 1 – 11

B – mm. 12 – 81

A' – mm. 82 – 92

C – mm. 93 – 126

A'' – mm. 127 – 143 (end).

The main theme of the A section is first played in the bass clarinet and the bass. The theme centers around D-minor. However, the piano and trumpets play an unusual chord for this melody – C – D – G – B:

The image shows a page of a musical score for the beginning of the A section (measures 1-11). The score is arranged in a system with ten staves. From top to bottom, the staves are for: Bb Bass Clarinet, French Horns (1 and 2), Bb Trumpets (1, 2, 3, 4, 5), Trombones (1, 2, 3), Piano, Harp, Guitar, and Bass. The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is common time (C). The music begins with a melodic line in the Bb Bass Clarinet and Bass, marked *mf*. The French Horns and Bb Trumpets play a chord of C, D, G, B, marked *pp* and *open*. The Piano, Harp, and Guitar are silent in this section.

Given that the melody is in D-minor, the piano is playing the characteristic note of D Dorian (B-natural). It is significant to point out that characteristic notes of modes are often accentuated in modal music, especially in that of the jazz style. This would be especially viable given the static harmony in this opening section. However, this is likely not a jazz influence on the piece, as the era of modal jazz had not yet come to be in the year 1945. Therefore, I analyze the use of that chord as Stravinsky wanting to add tension and color to the harmonic language at that point in the piece.

With the drum set, the trumpets and piano create a rhythmic ostinato throughout the opening A section of the movement, keeping that compositional tool of Stravinsky's. At m. 10.4, Stravinsky once again alludes to jazz in his texture by employing plunger mutes in the trumpets, starting them closed at the beginning of the chord, then moving to open. This gesture ends the first A section and the Moderato.

At the Con moto (B section, m. 12) Stravinsky is simultaneously displaying two of his typical compositional techniques. Between clarinets 1 and 2, he is dove-tailing a small motif, while in the harp, guitar, bass and tam-tam, he is employing a three-beat ostinato over a four-beat (quarter notes) measure, thus creating syncopation:

The image shows a musical score for measures 12 and 13. The score is written for Clarinets 1 and 2, Tenor Saxophone 1, Harp, Guitar, Bass, and Tam-Tam. The key signature is D minor (three flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is marked with a box containing the number 12 at the beginning and a box containing the number 13 at the end. The Clarinet parts feature a rhythmic motif of eighth notes. The Tenor Saxophone part is marked 'solo' and 'mf cant.'. The Harp part is marked 'mf plucked and stopped'. The Guitar part is marked 'mf pizz.'. The Bass part is marked 'p' and 'fell'. The Tam-Tam part is marked 'p' and 'fell'.

The tenor saxophone 1 is carrying the melody, which still centers around D-minor. However, with the ostinato in the guitar and harp, the melody is now put in the context of a B-flat chord. Stravinsky therefore creates a harmonic shift by changing the bass but keeping the melody.

At m. 19, it is significant to point out the guitar part. Stravinsky voices out the guitar part fully, which is different from how it may have been notated in jazz music:



In jazz, a guitar part will typically have a lead-sheet symbol to indicate what chord it should play. If a composer wants a certain rhythm, they would use rhythmic notation with the chord symbol. If a composer wanted a certain voicing, they would have the lead note (top note) along with the lead sheet symbol. Very rarely do composers voice out an entire guitar chord unless they want something extremely specific.

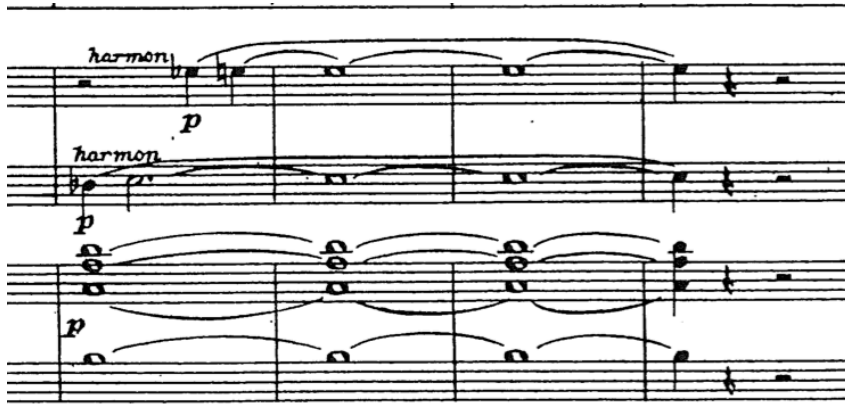
The tenor saxophone melody continues to implore jazz language as it implements the A-flat, thus creating a Mixolydian harmonic center:



Of course, Mixolydian by itself is not necessarily a characteristic of jazz. However, when Mixolydian is the tonic function, it is a characteristic of the blues, from which jazz derives. It is therefore viable to analyze the tenor saxophone including the A-flat as being an example of the influence of jazz in that particular moment.

At the end of the B section (mm. 78 – 81) Stravinsky employs the “blue note” in a similar way to how he used it in the Andante movement. Over the B-flat dominant chord, he has the

trumpet 1 play Db – D(n). Using both the minor third and major third gives the passage that blues quality and thus employs that jazz idiom:



The image shows a musical score for trumpet 1 and piano accompaniment. The trumpet part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It features a melodic line with a bluesy quality, characterized by the use of the minor third and major third intervals. The piano accompaniment is written on four staves, with the left hand playing a steady bass line and the right hand providing harmonic support. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *sf* (sforzando), and the word *harmon* (harmony) is written above the piano part.

In the A' section (mm. 82 – 92) Stravinsky no longer uses the characteristic note of D Dorian (B-natural) instead having the harmony play a D-minor seventh chord. The harmony and texture remain static as they did in the first A section of the movement. Only at end of the section (mm. 91.4) does Stravinsky finally evoke the B-natural in the trumpets (which is odd as it clashes with the piano's B-flat). As in the first A section, Stravinsky has the trumpets use plunger mutes on the final chord:



The image shows a musical score for trumpet 1 and piano accompaniment. The trumpet part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It features a melodic line with a bluesy quality, characterized by the use of the minor third and major third intervals. The piano accompaniment is written on four staves, with the left hand playing a steady bass line and the right hand providing harmonic support. The score includes dynamic markings such as *poco sf* (poco sforzando) and *p* (piano), and the word *plungers* is written above the trumpet part, indicating the use of plunger mutes.

The C section (mm. 93 – 126), much like the B section, is faster than the A sections. Just like the B section, the melody stays in D minor, but unlike the B section, the harmony stays there

too, at least for the first eleven measures. The melody appears in three of the saxophones, who are voiced much like they might be in a Basie Big Band saxophone soli:



The solo clarinet part provides a counter line while the harp, guitar, bass, tam-tam and drums are employing a three-beat rhythmic ostinato like in the B section, though this time they are not all playing rhythmically together. This increases the syncopation factor in the music. Stravinsky continues this pattern throughout the C section, though he notably provides an interlude (mm. 104 – 122) in which he has the bass clarinet play a quicker staccato melody over static brass hits, then moves that melody to alto saxophone, then later to the solo clarinet. He then brings the three saxophones back as they were at the beginning of the section to close the section.

Stravinsky then ends the piece with the A'' section (mm. 127 – 143) a third iteration of the A section, this time having the horns play in rhythmic unison. In doing this, he unites the ensemble for the last measures of the piece:



Conclusion

In conducting this analysis, I sought to explore Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto*. In doing so, I was determined to find compositional relationships between the piece and previous Stravinsky works. I also wanted to use my background in jazz music to identify characteristics shared by *Ebony Concerto* and jazz, in order to understand how much effect jazz music might have had on Stravinsky's own work. I believe I have successfully identified such common characteristics as well as notable differences.