Stylistic Symbiosis in Brad Mehldau's Covers of Rock Songs

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ABSTRACT

While Brad Mehldau is generally considered to be a jazz pianist, his music is eclectic, combining aspects of jazz, rock, and classical music all at once. My goal is to analyze and theorize about these pluralistic aspects, specifically in his covers of rock songs. Mehldau has covered a wide range of rock songs over the course of his career — probably more so than any well-known jazz musician — ranging from alternative rock to folk, both in trio settings and as a solo pianist. In my thesis, I analyze Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers as a solo pianist, in order to explicate the harmonic, rhythmic, and formal elements that constitute his idiolect. I argue that Mehldau's novelty as a jazz artist arises from his embrace of the ambiguous modality of rock (including lament-bass progressions, modal mixture and Aeolian progressions), his employment of rhythmic devices more common in classical music and rock than common-practice jazz (such as odd meters, grouping dissonance, and tresillo and other Euclidean rhythms), and his linearization of cyclical popular songs into large-scale ternary forms, often channeling the narrative structures of classical composers rather than limiting himself to the traditional theme-and-variations approach pervasive in common-practice jazz.

RÉSUMÉ

Brad Mehldau est généralement considéré comme étant un pianiste jazz; pourtant, sa musique est tout à fait éclectique, combinant des aspects du jazz, bien entendu, mais aussi du rock et de la musique classique. Mon objectif est d'analyser et de théoriser ses aspects pluriels, plus particulièrement dans ses reprises de chansons rock. Que ce soit seul au piano ou en trio, l'éventail des reprises de Brad Mehldau est impressionnant, allant du rock alternatif au rock folklorique, en passant même par la chanson française à travers Léo Ferré; il n'y a aucun doute que Mehldau se distingue dans le monde du jazz par son choix de chansons. Dans cette thèse, j'étudie les reprises de chansons rock de Brad Mehldau seul au piano, afin de pouvoir expliquer les éléments harmoniques, rythmiques et formels qui constituent son idiolecte. Je démontre que l'originalité de Mehldau en tant que musicien jazz découle de son penchant pour la modalité ambiguë du rock, son usage de figures rythmiques plus communes dans le rock et la musique classique que le jazz traditionnel, ainsi que sa transformation de chansons essentiellement cycliques en quasi-sonates — processus que je nomme « linéarisation » ou « sonatisation » —souvent en imitant les structures narratives des compositeurs classiques, plutôt que de se limiter à l'approche du thème et variations ancrée dans la musique jazz.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would like to thank my family and my partner, Shanice, for their endless support throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. I am forever grateful for their love and encouragement, and this thesis is dedicated to them.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Counsel (SSHRC) for their generous graduate scholarship. I am also very grateful towards the Schulich School of Music of McGill University — which has formed and enriched my musical thinking for the past seven years — for awarding me additional funding and numerous teaching experiences over the past two years.

INTRODUCTION

While Brad Mehldau is generally considered to be a jazz pianist, his music is eclectic, combining aspects of jazz, rock, and classical music all at once. In this thesis I analyze and theorize about these pluralistic aspects. Mehldau has recorded extensively both as a solo pianist and with his trio (piano, bass, and drums), although more recently he has explored other kinds of ensembles as well. My thesis examines his solo piano covers of popular rock songs. There are two reasons to focus on Mehldau's solo work rather than his trio recordings: the first is practical, because of the greater ease of transcription, while the second is aesthetic and is an attempt to capture Mehldau's stylistic essence more directly, uninfluenced by his musical partners. In an interview with Ludovic Florin, when asked about his approach to playing as a solo pianist, Mehldau posited the following:

> There is often a normative approach to a musical format that takes precedence: a way of playing piano in a rhythm section, for instance. In the case of solo piano, there are certainly fixed styles — stride piano, Tatumesque — but in my own development as a solo player, I haven't become tied to an existing approach. It has been easier to avoid a style playing solo than it is if I'm playing in a rhythm section in someone else's band, for example, because of the freedom that comes from playing alone: there is no one to answer to; there are less reasons to play in a style, and more immediate opportunity to forget about genre. Of course, forgetting about genre does not mean that someone will suddenly invent a new genre; it just means that there may be more immediate opportunity to mix various influences that would normally be disparate.[1]

It is precisely these various, disparate influences that I wish to shed light on in my analytical work, considering them on harmonic, rhythmic, and formal levels, as they

[1] Ludovic Florin, interview with Brad Mehldau, in Philippe André, *Elegiac Cycle: Complete Transcription and Analysis* (Paris: Outre Mesure), 25.

manifest themselves in Mehldau's wide range of covers.

I focus primarily on Mehldau's popular-song covers, rather than his own compositions or his recordings of jazz standards, again for two reasons. First, there is a lack of published research on this topic. René Rusch has written an article on Brad Mehldau's cover of Radiohead's "Paranoid Android" (Rusch 2013). This article is purely analytical, however, and does not attempt to theorize general aspects of Mehldau's idiolect beyond "Paranoid Android." There are no other published explorations of Mehldau's rock covers. Three theses on Mehldau's own compositions, by Daniel Arthurs (2011), Mark Baynes (2015), and Mats Arvidson (2016), have examined chord-scale relationships, Schenkerian voice-leading, and semiotic interpretation respectively. Another thesis by Timothy Page (2009) considers Mehldau's use of motive in his rendition of the jazz standard "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" (*Art of the Trio* Vol.1, 1997), and a set of complete transcriptions of Mehldau's 1999 opus, *Elegiac Cycle*, has been published by Philippe André with some accompanying analysis. My second reason for wishing to work on Mehldau's covers is because Mehldau's individual style is most immediately recognizable when he covers popular songs.

At this point, it is worthwhile to emphasize a crucial difference between what is signified by "cover" in comparison to another similar term, "standard." One might well ask: "isn't playing a jazz standard a kind of cover?" The answer to that question depends on how these terms are being used. There are three fundamental differences between covers and standards. The first difference is historical: in general, jazz standards belong to what is sometimes referred to as the "Great American Songbook," comprising popular songs from the first half of the twentieth century. Covers, on the other hand, usually refer

to songs belonging to the pop-rock tradition beginning around 1960. The second difference, directly related to the first, is a difference of styles associated with these genres: standards and covers imply different harmonic, formal, and rhythmic principles. Generally, harmonic progressions in jazz standards are often based on fifth relations; standards are filled with what jazz musicians refer to as "ii–Vs" or "ii–V–Is." Standards also follow archetypal theme types, often 32-measure rounded binary forms, but other lengths are possible as well (though almost always multiples of 4 or 8). Jazz standards often employ swing rhythm, or the unequal subdivision of the beat in roughly a 2:1 ratio (though there are many exceptions, including pieces in a Latin feel, and some ballads). Rock covers, on the other hand, are much less constrained with regards to harmony, rhythm, and form; fifth relations are not particularly pervasive (in fact, fourth relations are more common[2]); forms include diverse combinations of verse–chorus–bridge with possible intro and outro, or simpler strophic forms; and rhythmic subdivisions are more often straight than swung and involve backbeat accompaniment patterns. Lastly and most importantly, the term "cover" implies a singular canonical version written by a singular artist or band; covers of popular songs are inevitably in dialogue with their originals. For this very reason, covers strive to be innovative by contributing something new to their respective original recordings. Standards, on the other hand, have no definitive version: they have no canonical recordings, but instead a myriad of interpretations or "takes" by a plethora of jazz musicians, some more popular than others, but none being *the* original recording. Composers of standards are not known as the performers of their own works, nor are they directly responsible for the popularity of their songs.

[2] By "fourth relations," I mean descending fourths and ascending fifths (in other words, plagal motion). On the other hand, "fifth relations" denotes descending fifths and ascending fourths.

While many other jazz musicians have stepped outside the realm of jazz standards and covered popular songs before Mehldau (such as Count Basie, Jaco Pastorius, and Herbie Hancock, to name a few), none before have covered such an extensive and eclectic repertoire of rock songs, ranging from Radiohead and Nirvana (alternative rock) to Nick Drake and Joni Mitchell (singer-songwriter) to Massive Attack (trip hop). Mehldau's covers of popular songs represent a significant part of his recorded catalogue. Since his debut with Warner Bros. in 1995, Mehldau has released 22 albums as solo pianist or as bandleader, mostly of his trio, but larger ensembles are also explored in *Largo* (2002) and *Highway Rider* (2010). Mehldau's albums are listed below in Table A.

Table A - Mehldau's recorded output as a solo pianist and bandleader

SOLO WORK	**BANDLEADER WORK**
Elegiac Cycle (1999)	*Introducing Brad Mehldau* (1995)
Places (2000)	*The Art of the Trio Vol.1* (1996)
Live in Tokyo (2004)	*The Art of the Trio Vol.2* (1997)
Live in Marciac (2011)	*The Art of the Trio Vol.3* (1998)
10 Years Solo Live (2015)	*The Art of the Trio Vol.4* (1999)
After Bach (2018)	*Places* (2000)
	The Art of the Trio Vol.5 (2001)
	Largo (2002)
	Anything Goes (2004)
	Day is Done (2005)
	House on Hill (2007)
	Brad Mehldau Trio Live (2008)
	Highway Rider (2010)
	Ode (2012)
	Where Do You Start (2012)
	Blues and Ballads (2015)
	Seymour Reads the Constitution! (2018)

Mehldau's 22 albums as soloist or bandleader contain a total of 249 tracks, of which 51 are rock covers, spanning 38 different rock songs and comprising roughly 20% of his recorded output. This proportion is significant, and unparalleled in the jazz world as far

as I know. The 38 rock songs are listed below, in alphabetical order, in Table B. Trio covers are highlighted in blue, solo covers in green, and non-highlighted songs have been covered by Mehldau both as a soloist and as a bandleader.

Table B - Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers

SONG TITLE	ARTIST	# OF COVERS
"And I Love Her"	The Beatles	2
"Baby Plays Around"	Elvis Costello	1
"Bittersweet Sympohny"	The Verve	1
"Blackbird"	The Beatles	2
"Black Hole Sun"	Soundgarden	1
"Day Is Done"	Nick Drake	1
"Dear Prudence"	The Beatles	1
"Dream Brother"	Jeff Buckley	1
"Everything in its Right Place"	Radiohead	1
"Exit Music (For a Film)"	Radiohead	3
"Friends"	Beach Boys	1
"Got Me Wrong"	Alice in Chains	1
"God Only Knows"	Beach Boys	1
"Great Day"	Paul McCartney	1
"Hey Joe"	Billie Roberts	1
"Hey You"	Pink Floyd	1
"Holland"	Sufjan Stevens	2
"Interstate Love Song"	Stone Temple Pilots	1
"Jigsaw Falling Into Place"	Radiohead	1
"Junk"	Paul McCartney	1
"Knives Out"	Radiohead	3
"La mémoire et la mer"	Léo Ferré	1
"Lithium"	Nirvana	1
"Martha My Dear"	The Beatles	2
"Mother Nature's Son"	The Beatles	1
"My Valentine"	Paul McCartney	1
"Paranoid Android"	Radiohead	2
"River Man"	Nick Drake	3
"Roses Blue"	Joni Mitchell	1
"She's Leaving Home"	The Beatles	1
"Smells Like Teen Spirit"	Nirvana	1
"Still Crazy After All These Years"	Paul Simon	1
"Teardrop"	Massive Attack	1
"Things Behind the Sun"	Nick Drake	2
"Time Has Told Me"	Nick Drake	1
"Waterloo Sunset"	The Kinks	1
"Wonderwall"	Oasis	1
"50 Ways to Leave Your Lover"	Paul Simon	2

While I recognize that the corpus study above is not an ideal measure of Mehldau's output of rock covers, it is *a* measure that gives us a glimpse of the whole. A more complete consideration would include live performances throughout Mehldau's career, but this is practically very difficult, since many of Mehldau's performances are not readily available in recordings. For reasons of scope, I have limited myself to Mehldau's output as soloist or bandleader, based on the list from Mehldau's official discography.[3] A more complete picture would include compilations, promotional albums, soundtracks, etc. Most significantly, I have omitted significant duo collaborations, with artists such as jazz guitarist Pat Metheny (2005), vocalists Renée Fleming (2006) and Anne Sofie von Otter (2010), saxophonist Joshua Redman (2011), percussionist Mark Guiliana (2014), and singer-songwriter Chris Thile (2016), among others.

I have tabulated the most covered artists and the most covered songs in Mehldau's career in Tables C and D respectively. Three names emerge as Mehldau's favourite artists to cover: the Beatles (as well as Paul McCartney's solo work), Radiohead, and Nick Drake.

Table C - Most covered groups

	# OF SONGS COVERED	# OF TRACKS RELEASED COVERING THESE SONGS
The Beatles	6	9
Radiohead	5	10
Nick Drake	4	7
Paul McCartney	3	3
Paul Simon	2	3
Nirvana	2	2
Beach Boys	2	2
Sufjan Stevens	1	2
All others	1	1

[3] Mehldau's official discography is available here: https://www.bradmehldau.com/music/

Table D - Most released covers

TITLE	ARTIST	# OF RELEASES
"Exit Music (For a Film)"	Radiohead	3
"River Man"	Nick Drake	3
"Knives Out"	Radiohead	3
"Blackbird"	The Beatles	2
"Paranoid Android"	Radiohead	2
"And I Love Her"	The Beatles	2
"Things Behind the Sun"	Nick Drake	2
"Martha My Dear"	The Beatles	2
"Holland"	Sufjan Stevens	2

As I have mentioned, my thesis focuses on Mehldau's solo piano work, excluding his covers in trio settings for aesthetic reasons and ease of transcription. Mehldau's solo output of rock covers narrows the list to 23 songs. These 23 songs are shown in Table B as the green and un-highlighted entries.

My thesis is organized into three parts. In the first chapter I address the parameter of pitch, focusing on Mehldau's predilection for certain harmonic progressions typical of rock music, and examine what these have in common. I also analyze some of Mehldau's own compositions, to show what these share with his repertoire of covers, and evaluate how rock has influenced his own music over time. For example, some harmonic devices typical of rock, such as the Aeolian progression, are prevalent in his renditions of particular rock songs, and make their way into Mehldau's personal compositions. Other flagship harmonic devices in Mehldau's covers and compositions include the use of modal mixture, variants on the lament bass, a rock-like emphasis on IV, and modulatory shifts (often featuring harmonic motion from the tonic to the subtonic, which is typical of rock practice).

The second part of my thesis addresses questions of rhythm and texture in Mehldau's playing. In this chapter, I examine Mehldau's employment of rhythmic devices more common in classical and rock music than common-practice jazz, which include odd and changing meters, grouping dissonance and polyrhythms, as well as tresillo and related rhythmic patterns. I discuss Mehldau's use of what I term "strumming textures" in his covers, which is important to his idiolect and formal approach to solo piano song structures.

The third and final part of my thesis addresses the topic of form. This chapter includes three brief formal analyses of Mehldau's covers of Léo Ferré's "La mémoire et la mer," Nirvana's "Lithium," and Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother," comparing them to their corresponding originals. The latter two analyses are informed by complete transcriptions made by Vincent Sorel and Michael Lucke respectively.[4] By examining Mehldau's covers vis-à-vis their originals, I will show how Mehldau *linearizes* repetitive and cyclical popular songs into large-scale ternary forms, often channeling the narrative structures of classical composers (such as Brahms, an overt influence), rather than limiting himself to the traditional theme-variations-theme framework pervasive in common-practice jazz.

In brief, my thesis explores aspects particular to rock, jazz, and classical styles and their interactions in Mehldau's music. In addition to providing new analyses of Mehldau's rock covers and a broader theorization of his style and techniques, my work also provides a model for analysis of other cross-genre artists such as Joshua Redman and Chris Thile.

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[4] Although Vincent Sorel and Michael Lucke have given me permission to use their transcriptions, the complete transcriptions are not attached to this thesis. Vincent Sorel's transcription of "Lithium" can be found here: http://sorwellz.free.fr/jazz-transcription/mehldau-lithium%20marciac.pdf, and Michael Lucke's transcription of "Dream Brother" is available for purchase from his Patreon webpage: https://www.patreon.com/michaellucke.

CHAPTER 1
THE HARMONIC LANGUAGE OF BRAD MEHLDAU

1.1 - Harmonic Idioms in Mehldau's Repertoire of Rock Covers

The idiolect of jazz pianist Brad Mehldau is truly unique, and while there are many dimensions that contribute to his singular voice at the level of phrasing, texture, and rhythm, the sound of Mehldau is also recognizable at a purely harmonic level. This is because Mehldau's harmonic syntax is the most consistent framework in his idiosyncratic sound; other elements can vary widely from performance to performance. In Mehldau's music, the ambiguous modality of rock serves as a foundation for a new kind of jazz improvisation, consciously avoiding the better-established harmonic idioms of common-practice jazz. The harmonic structure of common-practice jazz is fundamentally based on fifth relations and the tonic–(pre-dominant)–dominant functions of common-practice classical tonality, and extends the basic harmonic unit to include 7th, 9th, 13th, added-6th and other added-note chords. In particular, tritone substitutions as well as ii–V–I and ii–V progressions in subordinate keys are a defining and unique feature from swing to bebop. Such progressions include applied ii–Vs, chains of chromatically rising or descending ii–Vs, and chains of reinterpreted ii–Vs, where the root of the V chord becomes the root of the next ii chord in the chain, thus creating a series of ii–Vs in a descending 5th sequence. Of course, the use of such progressions entails the crucial importance of the leading tone as key-defining. None of these features are typical of rock harmony, which I summarize in the following paragraph.

First and foremost, the basic unit in rock is the triad or the power chord, not the extended triad commonly used in jazz. That being said, added notes such as the 2nd, 4th,

6th, and 7th are all idiomatic. The main difference in the language of rock is that these tones have little or no expectation to resolve; for example, the rather common sus4 and sus2 labels in rock are short for "suspension," but do not imply an expected resolution as in classical music or common-practice jazz. Rock harmony is subdominant-biased, in large part due to the strong influence of the blues, which features an idiosyncratic motion from V to IV in the last 4 bars of the typical 12-bar blues form. Rock often incorporates modal or modally mixed harmonies such as bIII, bVI, and bVII in major, or I and IV in minor. Generally speaking, dominants in rock music are less important than in classical music or common-practice jazz, and sometimes the distinction between dominant and pre-dominant function is blurred, and can be better summarized as pre-tonic.

There are five underlying harmonic devices that recur in Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers. These are: the use of modal mixture, Aeolian bVI–bVII–I progressions, descending bass lines (often in the spirit of lament-bass progressions), a rock-like emphasis on IV (both in the context of plagal or double-plagal progressions and dominant to subdominant progressions deemed nonsyntactic in common practice), and various forms of modulations not based on fifth relations (most commonly i or I to VII). I will also discuss the use of pentatonic and blues scales in Mehldau's covers and compositions, and the resulting avoidance of the leading tone.

I do not wish to imply that such elements of Mehldau's music are present in all of his works, but rather, that these are the most *recognizable* elements of his music; they are the elements, at least harmonically, that distinguish him from other modern jazz pianists. Covers or compositions of his that do *not* make use of these devices still have a role in defining his overall aesthetic, of course, but often, such works sound less obviously like

him.

Over the course of this chapter, I will survey the harmonic progressions (and melodic peculiarities) of many of the 23 rock songs Mehldau has covered as a solo pianist. In cases where Mehldau covers multiple songs by a particular artist — such as Radiohead and The Beatles — I will focus my attention on 1 or 2 songs only, for reasons of scope. Otherwise, I will discuss examples by all of the artists listed in the corpus of solo covers, with the exception of Nirvana, Léo Ferré, and Jeff Buckley. The reason for this is because I will analyze three songs by these particular artists in the final chapter on form, where complete analyses of "La mémoire et la mer" by Léo Ferré, "Lithium" by Nirvana, and "Dream Brother" by Jeff Buckley are presented.

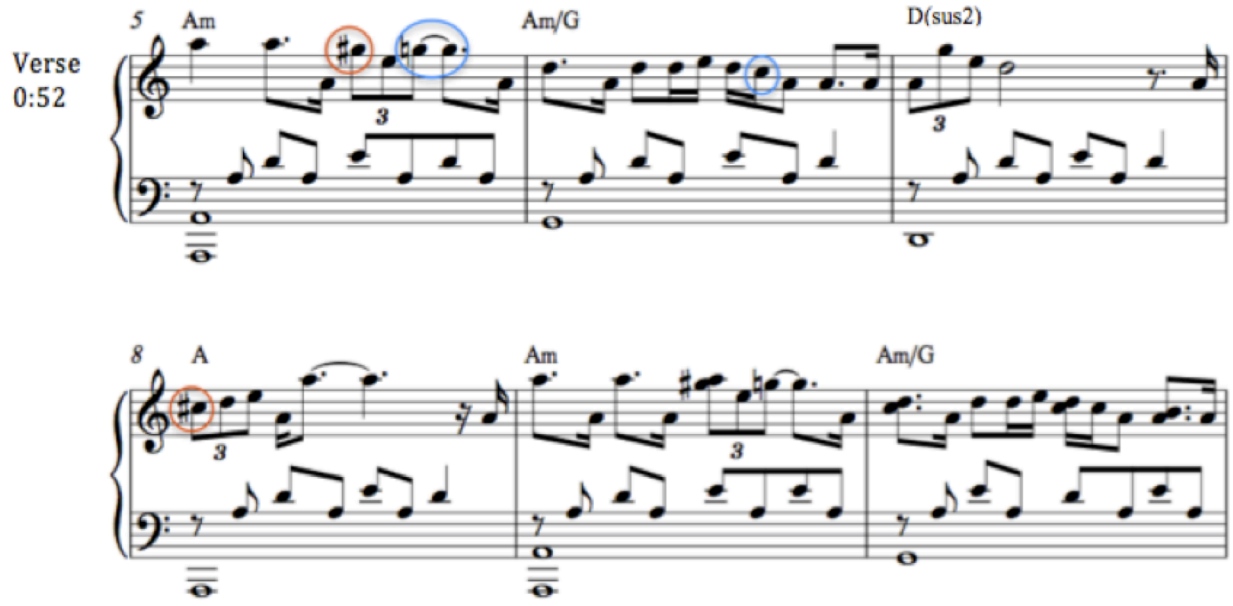
I opted to organize this chapter by song rather than by harmonic device because it allows me to delve deeper analytically into each song and also provides the reader with a more complete view of the form of each song. Since I am here concerned with local events and not complete structures, I will abstain from commenting on the segments of texts of the original songs that coincide with these harmonic structures, to avoid superficial connections between morsels of songs and their covers (such analysis would be limited, I suspect, to various kinds of apparent word painting).

"Teardrop" - Massive Attack

My first example is Massive Attack's "Teardrop," from their 1998 album *Mezzanine*. This song was covered by Mehldau and released on his 2016 album *10 Years Solo Live.* "Teardrop" certainly stands out from other tracks on the album *Mezzanine*, most of which are rather stagnant harmonically, and thus more typical of Massive

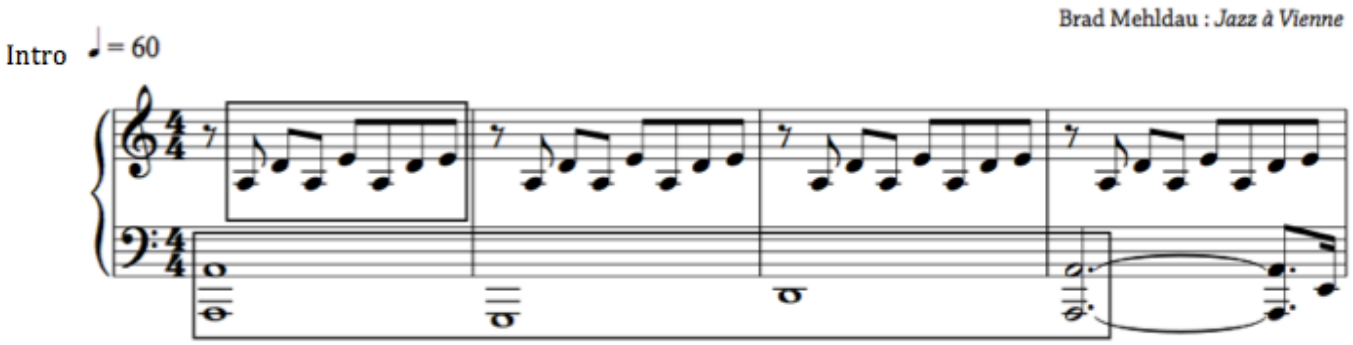
Attack's house/trip-hop style. In "Teardrop", the pitch content of the melody forms a minor pentatonic scale on A with flexible thirds and sevenths: A–C–C#–D–E–G–G#–A. The melodic contour highlights the affective difference between major and minor intervals above the tonic A and the dominant E. This is especially clear on the third beat of m.5 (see the first bar of Fig. 1.1), where the seventh G# leaps down to E and back up to G natural. A modally mixed third also occurs over the tonic, between the C in m. 6 and the C# on the downbeat of m. 8. I have circled the modally mixed thirds and sevenths in the transcription of the Mehldau version, with the major ones (C# and G#) in orange and the minor ones (C and G) in blue (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 - Modal mixture in Mehldau's cover of "Teardrop," by Massive Attack (Verse 1, at 0:52). Excerpt from Vincent Sorel's transcription (Vienna concert, 2010).



My focus here is the chord progression used in this song: Asus4–Am/G–Dsus2–A. Note in particular the chord on D, devoid of a chordal third, which is neither major or minor. This ambiguity paves the way for the shift from A minor (expressed by the previous chord) to A major (expressed by the subsequent harmony). Interestingly enough, the bass line of this harmonic progression (A–G–D–A) consists of the same intervals (P4, P5, M2) as the ostinato figure in the middle voice (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 - Mehldau's introduction in "Teardrop" (same version and source transcription as previous example)

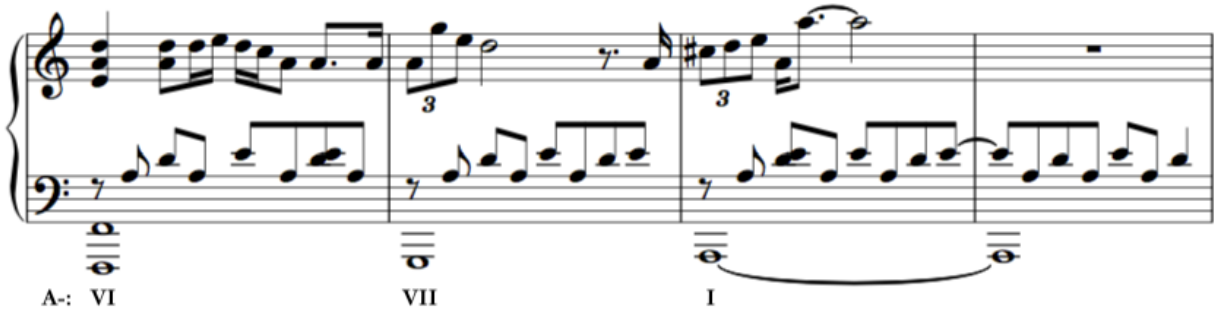


This may be suggestive of a double-plagal progression, i.e. bVII–IV–I (in which bVII functions as IV/IV). In addition, one could perhaps argue that the root of the second chord is G, due to the melodic emphasis on its chord fifth, D, throughout this measure. In this case the second chord should be labeled $G^{6/9}$ and it forms a double-plagal progression. More analytically important and aurally salient, however, is the move from minor to major over the course of the phrase. The first harmony is neither major or minor, as it is a sus4 chord with no third, but as the bass moves down to a G in the next measure, and as the melody briefly touches on C natural in a typical pentatonic passing motion in the second half of m. 2 in Figure 1.1, the implication is that the first measure was minor, just like the second one. The overall arch of the four-chord progression thus brings us

harmonically from A minor to A major, a modal shift analogous to the mixtures of C/C# and G#/G in the melody.

The song as a whole is in a strophic form, consisting of four verses separated by instrumental breaks. The orchestration of the first three verses thickens towards a climax in the third, slightly extended verse, before the truncated instrumental final verse. (One could call the fourth verse a postlude rather than a verse, except that the harmonic material is the same as the verse). The harmonic progression that occurs for the first time at 1:13-1:21 in the Massive Attack recording, towards the end of the first verse, is F–G–A (see Figure 1.3), an Aeolian progression that recurs at the end of every verse. The Aeolian progression introduces bVII dominant-functioning harmony for the first time, which serves as a contrast to the tonic-prolongational nature of the double-plagal progression. As we will see throughout this chapter, this harmonic progression, very typical of rock, but not of jazz or common-practice harmony, occurs frequently in Mehldau's music (and often as the basis for improvisation).

Figure 1.3 - Aeolian progression in Mehldau's cover of "Teardrop" (Jazz in Vienna), at the 1:27 mark (end of verse 1)

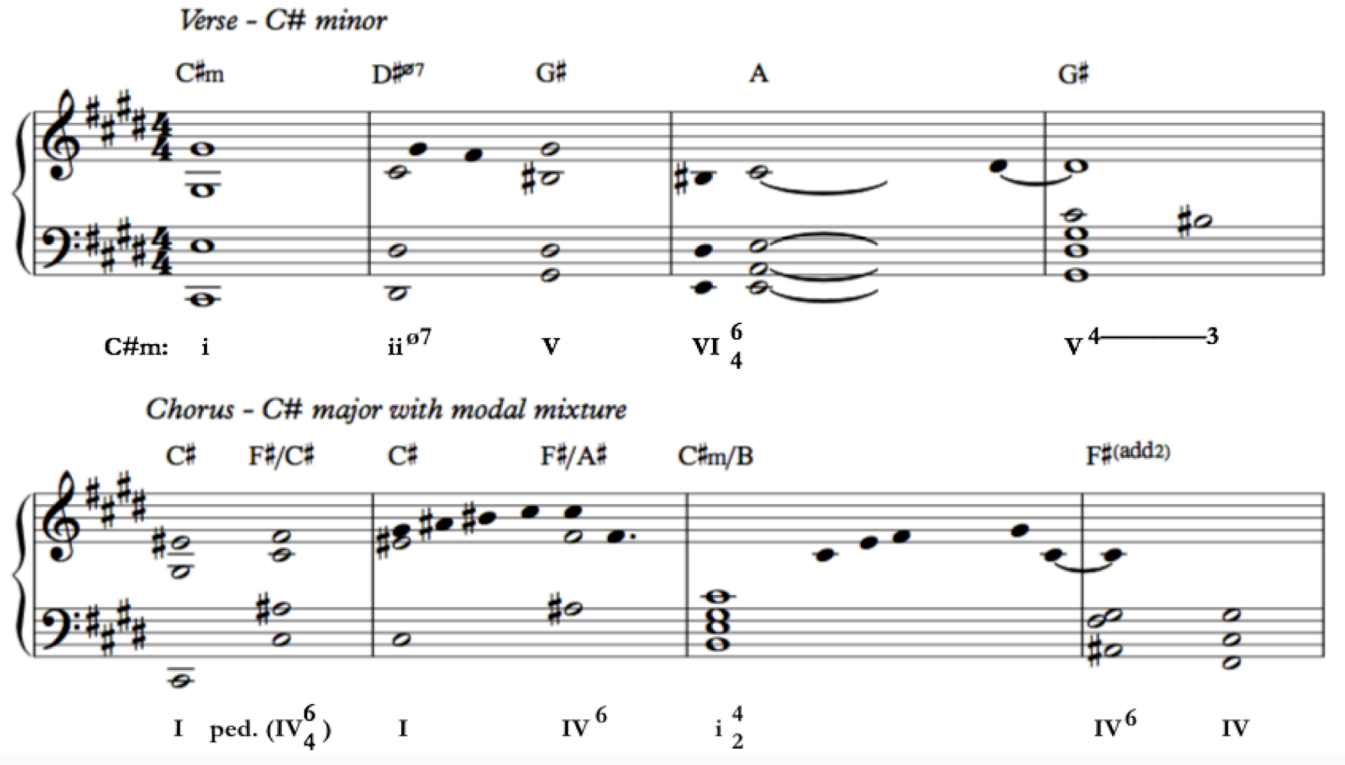


"Things Behind the Sun" and "River Man" - Nick Drake

My next two examples are from singer-songwriter Nick Drake, and both feature interesting cases of modal mixture. "River Man" was released in 1969 on *Five Leaves*

Left, Nick Drake's first of three records, while "Things Behind the Sun" was released on Drake's third and final record, *Pink Moon*, in 1972. Brad Mehldau has covered "River Man" on numerous occasions, releasing three different covers on three different albums: *The Art of the Trio III* (1998)*, The Art of the Trio V* (2001)*,* and *Live in Tokyo* (2004). Meanwhile, two different covers of "Things Behind the Sun" have been released on the concert discs *Live in Tokyo* (2004) and *Live in Marciac* (2011). Figure 1.4 presents a reduction of Mehldau's interpretation of the verse and chorus in his cover of "Things Behind the Sun." In my analysis, I have chosen to employ both traditional Roman numeral analysis and chord symbols derived from classical and jazz theory respectively; this seems especially fitting with the music of Mehldau, which crosses the bridge between these two genres.

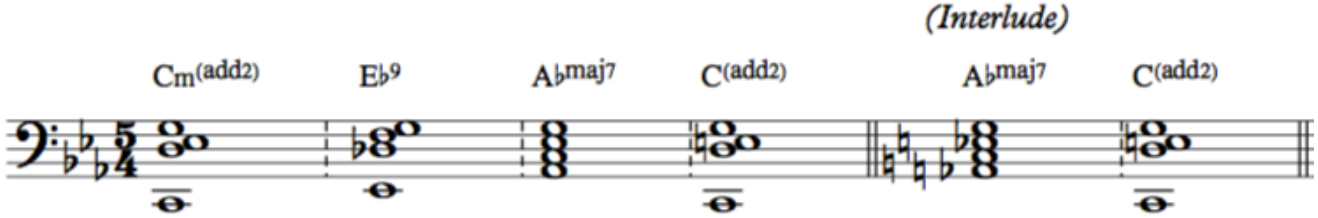
Figure 1.4 - Harmonic reduction of Nick Drake's "Things Behind the Sun." Minor/major contrast between the verse and chorus.



The verse of "Things Behind the Sun" establishes the tonality of C# minor through a i–ii–V progression followed by a prolongation of V via a neighbouring VI chord. The chorus, however, is in C# major — or at least, so it seems, until the C#-minor chord with B in the bass (in the third bar of the example). This B, which is the lowered seventh degree of the scale, should be understood as a descending passing tone. This alone may not be sufficient to qualify as modal mixture, buts more striking is the quality of the C#-minor chord in the right hand, which clearly borrows from the parallel minor mode expressed in the verse, and thus contrasts sharply with the previous harmonies in the chorus, I and IV in C# major. Although there are no Aeolian or lament-bass progressions in this song, the nature of this descending passing tone in the bass is of a similar affective quality; in all three cases, the leading tone — which carries with it a strong semantic quality evoking common-practice harmony — is strategically avoided.

"River Man" is particularly interesting because of its unusual harmonic progression (see Figure 1.5, which shows Mehldau's own voicing), and demonstrates Mehldau's attraction towards rock songs that step outside of diatonicism and common-practice harmony.

Figure 1.5 - Four-chord loop in the verses of Nick Drake's "River Man," followed by a repetition of the last two chords in the interlude (Mehldau's own voicing shown)



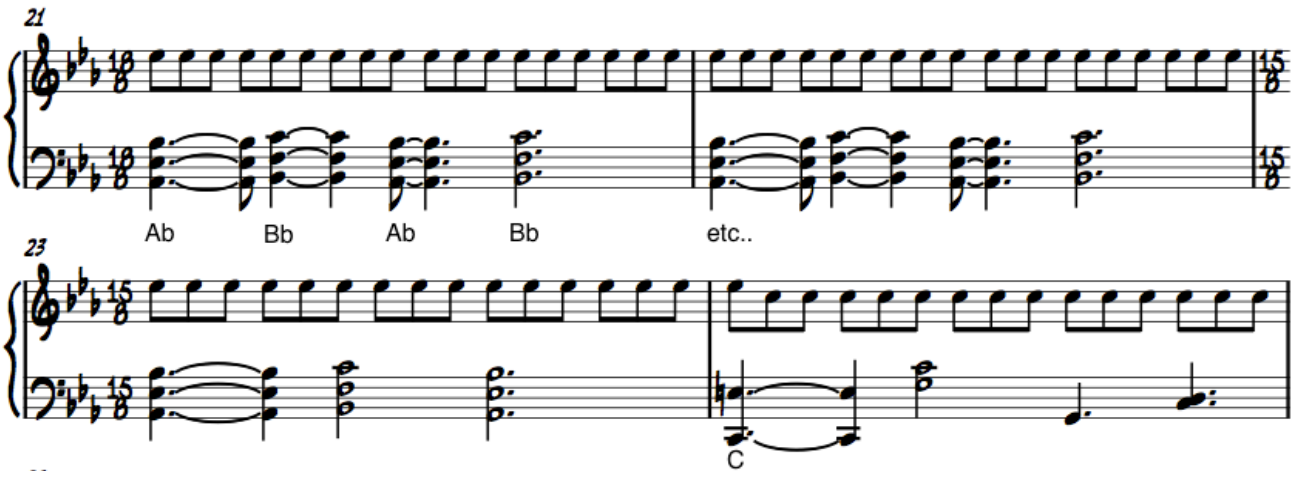
The main chord progression of the verse is normal insofar as it cycles through four harmonies in a four-chord loop. This is indeed pretty standard for many kinds of popular

music; the progression itself, however, is unusual. The four chords are Cm(add2)–Eb9–Abmaj7–C(add2). The overall form of Drake's "River Man" is two iterations of verse-chorus, separated by an instrumental interlude. The song, of which the tonic is C, begins by introducing a strumming pattern on a C-major harmony in the guitar before commencing the four-chord loop, which constitutes the harmony of both the verse and chorus. The instrumental interlude in the middle of the form cycles through the latter half of the four-chord loop only. The song ends with a coda (not shown), which alternates between C major and C minor harmonies with a Lydian inflection (raised fourth), whose presence provides an element of tension or unrest as the song comes to an end. The trajectory of the four-chord progression from C minor to C major follows an arch similar to the previous Massive Attack example. Unlike the Massive Attack example, however, the juxtaposition of Eb and E is more direct, perhaps even jarring in this case: every time the four-chord loop restarts, and especially in the interlude, E and Eb create cross-relations in the context of C and Ab major harmonies. One might be tempted to apply the label of "Picardy third" to the C-major chord, but this is too reductive — it implies that the major tonic substituting for the minor one is merely decorative, and it also implies that the formal role of such a substitute harmony is to provide an element of surprise. The major chords ending these four-chord progressions do not provide an element of surprise every time they occur; instead, they seem to have an integral role in the harmonic structure.

The way in which this harmonic progression resists categorization parallels Mehldau's harmonic preferences in his own music. Mehldau's cover of “River Man” is unsurprisingly faithful to the original; as I have suggested, the unusual quality of the

harmonic progression, further heightened by the 5/4 meter, seems to embody Mehldau's aesthetic. This is true at least for the four-chord progression; what he does with the interlude is of particular interest. In his earlier covers of "River Man" (*Art of the Trio III* and *V)*, Mehldau faithfully renders the harmonic sequence of the interlude. But in a more recent cover from *Live in Tokyo*, released in 2004, instead of alternating between Abmaj7 and C as in Mehldau's earlier covers and Nick Drake's song, Mehldau instead opts for his signature Aeolian progression, alternating between Ab9 and Bb9, voiced in fifths (which is also typical of Mehldau) before going back to C on the downbeat of m. 24 (see Figure 1.6). This suggests, perhaps, a growing influence of rock's tonal systems on Mehldau's aesthetic, but such a claim is somewhat premature and would require more research. The Aeolian progression is one of Mehldau's harmonic tropes, which he favours not only in many of his covers (including the previous Massive Attack example), but also in his own compositions, as we will see later in this thesis.

Figure 1.6 - Mehldau's Aeolian prolongation in the interlude of "River Man," from *Live in Tokyo* (at 1:55), replaces the original simpler progression Abmaj7 to C.



The Aeolian progression seems particularly well-suited to this cover because it highlights

the Aeolian nature of the tune itself, which often oscillates between C and Bb; in fact, the whole song clearly avoids the pitch B, the leading tone. B is the *only* pitch *not* used by either Nick Drake or Brad Mehldau. Now, a flatted seventh degree does not necessarily suggest the Aeolian mode; it could suggest Dorian, Phrygian, or even Mixolydian — yet, the music does not sound as though it conforms to *any* of these modes. As Temperley has pointed out, "the role of modal organization in rock has been somewhat overstated by [Everett, Moore, Walser, Biamonte, and myself]" (Temperley 2011, 2) and this rings especially true for "River Man" and Mehldau in particular. It is precisely this *ambiguous* modality that theorists have struggled to grapple with that plays a central role in the harmonic language of Mehldau's covers and compositions.

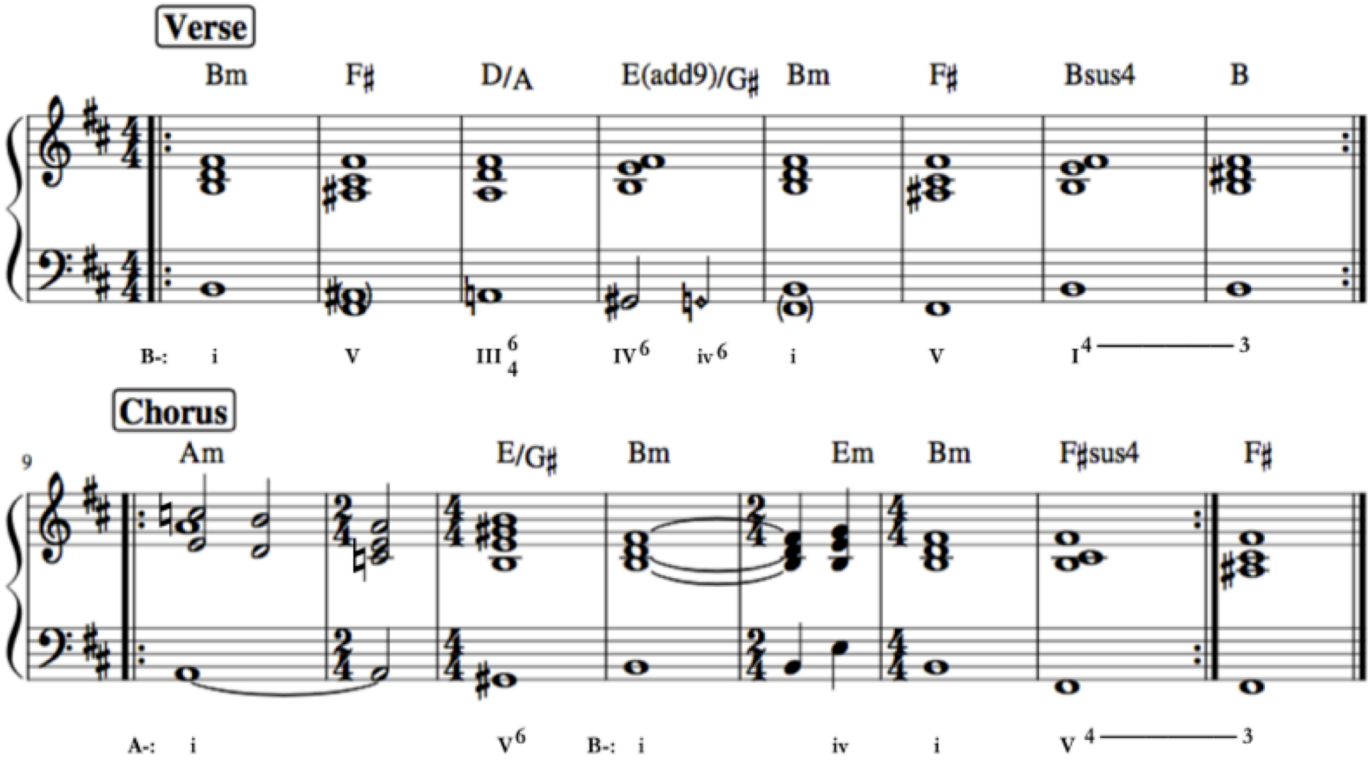
"Exit Music (For a Film)," "Knives Out," and "Paranoid Android" — Radiohead

A discussion of Mehldau's rock-influenced framework for jazz would not be complete without a consideration of Radiohead. Mehldau has released more covers of songs by Radiohead than any other rock group: these include various interpretations of "Exit Music (For a Film)," "Paranoid Android," "Everything in its Right Place," "Knives Out," and more recently, "Jigsaw Falling Into Place." I will focus here on "Exit Music (For a Film)" and "Knives Out," both of which have been released in three different versions. "Exit Music" appears on *The Art of the Trio III* (1998), *The Art of the Trio IV* (1999), and *Live in Marciac* (2001), while "Knives Out" appears on *Day is Done* (2005) and in two strikingly different versions on *10 Years Solo Live* (2015). I urge the reader to listen to these two different versions, as the disparity between them clearly demonstrates a point I made early on: that harmony is perhaps the *only* stable element in Mehldau's

musical language — and indeed, the only thing in common between these two versions here is the underlying harmonic progression that inspires the virtuosic works.

The harmonic makeup of "Exit Music (For a Film)," featured on Radiohead's 1997 album *OK Computer*, contains archetypal examples of three harmonic devices discussed in this chapter: lament-bass progressions, modal mixture, and scalar shifts. The song as a whole follows the form of verse-chorus-verse, with an instrumental introduction and an extended final verse that contains within it a kind of bridge. A reduction of the harmonic progression of the verse and chorus is shown in Figure 1.7.

Figure 1.7 - Harmonic makeup of the verse and chorus of Radiohead's "Exit Music (For a Film)"



While the realization of the chord progression by the acoustic guitar does not strictly follow a lament bass — a line descending from scale degree 1 to scale degree 5, either diatonically or chromatically — the line is certainly implied by the progression, where

the bass line B–A#–A–G#–G–F# is strongly implied by the harmonic progression. In Figure 1.7, the descending chromatic bass line is shown by following the bass notes indicated in parentheses. The bass note G-natural in the fourth measure — which acts as a chromatic passing tone, but also carries with it a marked change of affect from major to minor — is notated with a distinct diamond-shaped notehead, because it only occurs in every other phrase during the verse. The modal mixture in this song is limited to Radiohead's use of the Picardy third at the end of both phrases within the verse, as well as the passing IV chord in first inversion, which occurs as a result of the lament bass line.

Modulatory shifts in this work occur between the end of the verse, which establishes B as tonic, and the beginning of the chorus, which temporarily establishes A minor as tonic before returning back to B minor within the chorus. This alternation between B minor and A minor occurs a second time within the chorus. While this shift is of only two steps on the circle of fifths (certainly nothing extravagant), the effect of such a shift between two minor keys a whole step apart is quite striking. There are, I believe, two reasons for this. First, unlike traditional pivot-chord modulations, here there is no transition whatsoever between these two key areas. Second, A minor is vii within the context of B minor, which is not a typical key area that one might expect to hear as tonicized.

I now move on to another Radiohead song, "Knives Out," released on their 2001 opus *Amnesiac*. An excerpt of a transcription of the second version from *10 Years Solo Live* by Vincent Sorel is provided in Figure 1.8. The opening progression has a clear downwards progression akin to a lament bass. In m. 5, Mehldau transforms the Ab major into its parallel minor, once again employing modal mixture.

Figure 1.8 - Brad Mehldau's introduction to Radiohead's "Knives Out," from *10 Years Solo Live* (excerpt from Vincent Sorel's transcription). The same chord progression is used in the verse.

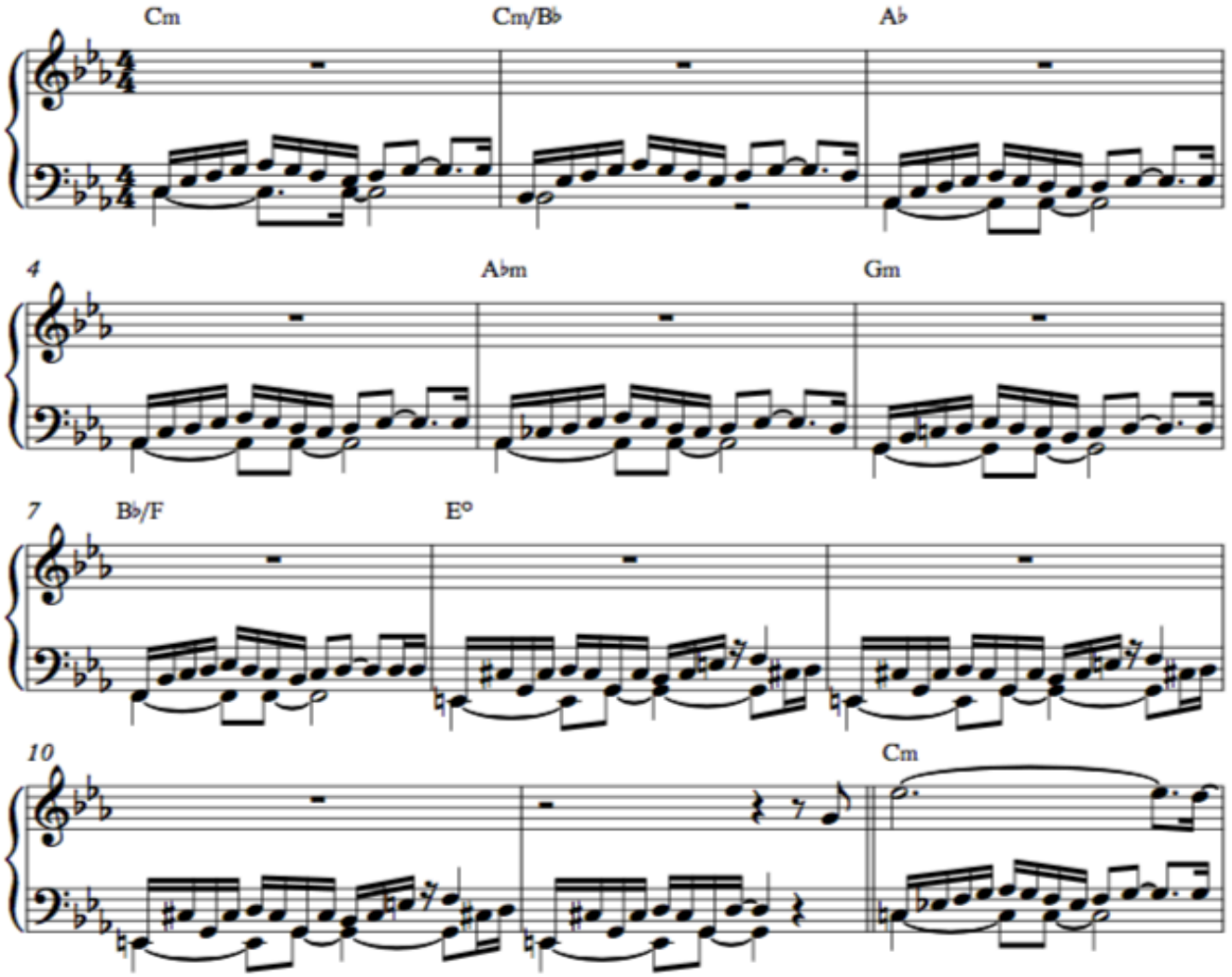
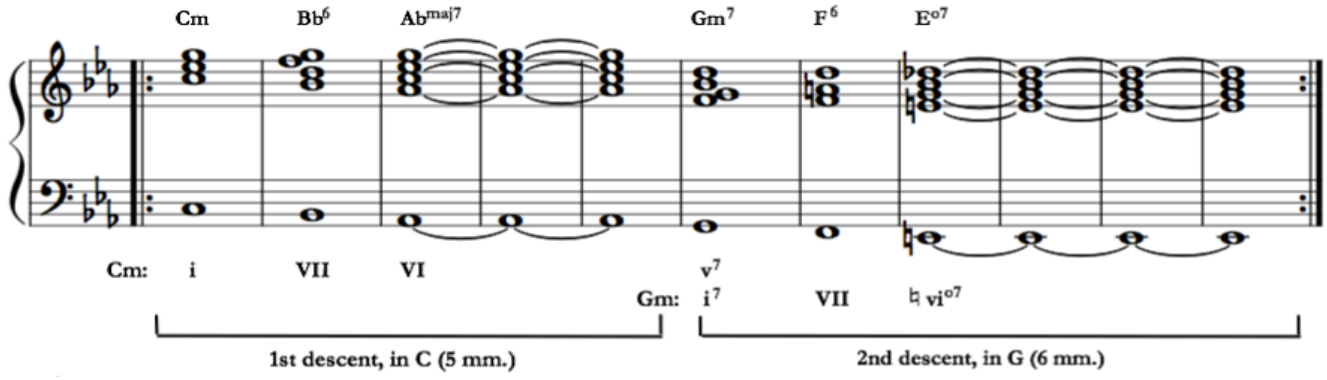


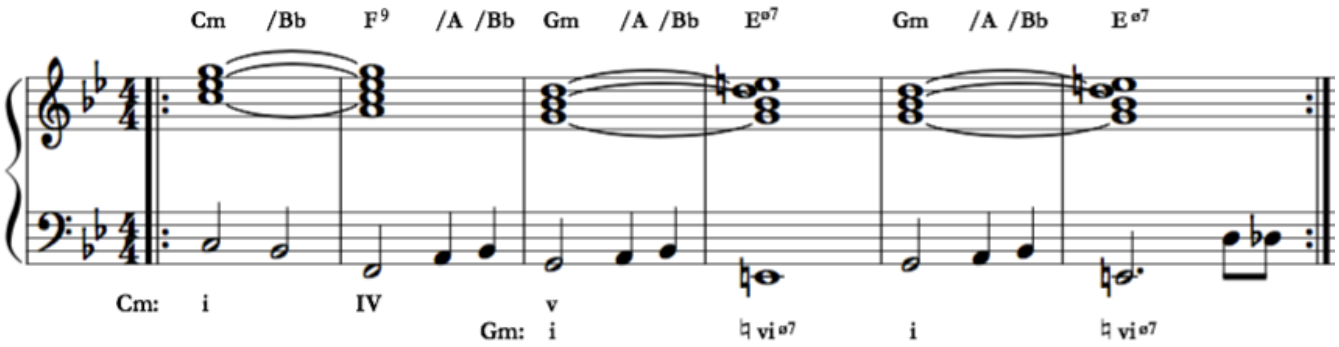
Figure 1.9 - Harmonic reduction of the verse in Radiohead's "Knives Out"



Note that this Ab minor chord is not present in the original Radiohead song; instead, the harmony stays on Ab major, as can be seen in Figure 1.9. In the cover it serves as a transition towards the second half of the progression in G: Gm–F^6–E^{o7}. G is established as the new key center in two ways: through parallelism — as mm. 1-5 and mm. 6-11 represent two similar descents — and through the emphasis on D as the dominant scale degree in the second half of the verse. This can be seen most clearly in Figure 1.9, where I provide a harmonic reduction of the verse from Radiohead's original recording, pointing out the two parallel descents in brackets. The use of the E diminished seventh chord in m. 8, both in the reduction and Mehldau's cover, introduces two foreign tones, E natural and Db (spelled as C# in Figure 1.8), into the pitch reservoir, so to speak, brightening the sound and producing an element of surprise in the process, as one is likely to expect Eb — that is, VI^7 — from the parallel structure set up in the first half of the verse.

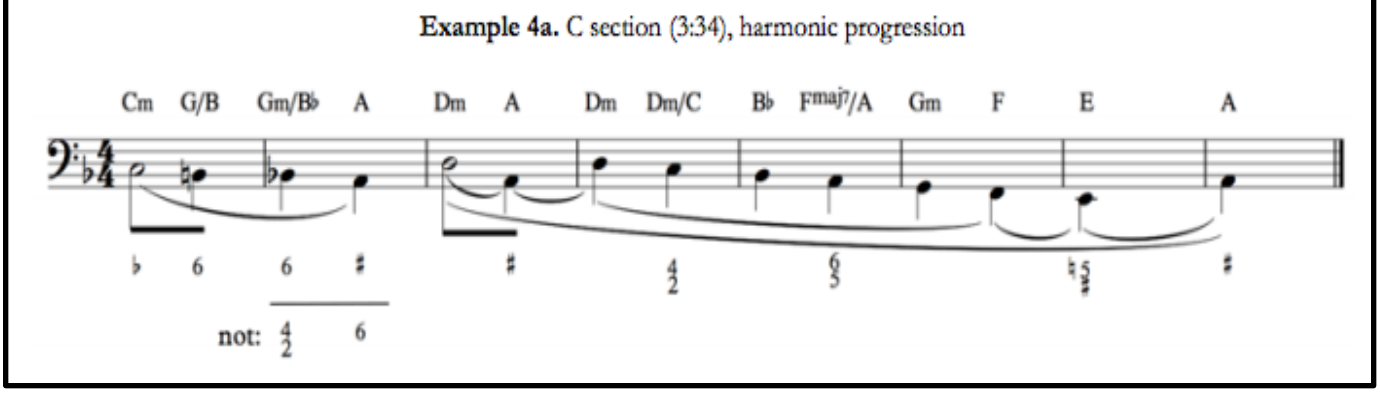
A very similar harmonic progression is found in the introduction and verse of another Radiohead song, "Paranoid Android," from the 1997 album *OK Computer*, which Mehldau has covered as well. In Figure 1.10, I provide a harmonic reduction of the verse of Radiohead's "Paranoid Android."

Figure 1.10 - Harmonic reduction of the verse (of section A) in Radiohead's "Paranoid Android"



In particular, notice the striking similarity between mm. 3-6 of the "Paranoid Android" reduction and mm. 6-10 of the "Knives Out" reduction; both passages feature a harmonic move from G minor to E diminished. Moreover, the modulatory shifts between C minor and G minor in "Knives Out" and between C Dorian and G Dorian in "Paranoid Android" further connect these two harmonic progressions. One point of contrast between the two verses, however, lies in the nature of their bass lines; in "Knives Out," the bass outlines a scalar descent, whereas the bass in the verse of "Paranoid Android" does not proceed linearly. However, in what René Rusch calls the C section of "Paranoid Android" (beginning at 3:34), linear bass lines play an important role. In Figure 1.11, I reproduce Ex.4a from Rusch's article (Rusch 2013), which provides a harmonic outline of the section.

Figure 1.11 - René Rusch's harmonic analysis of section C in "Paranoid Android." (Rusch 2013 Ex. 4a)



This section begins with a lament-bass progression in C minor whose "implied descent to G is interrupted via a harmonic reinterpretation of the B-flat and A that support a G-minor 6/3 chord and an A-major triad, rather than the 4/2 and 6/3 chords of a typical lament bass" (Rusch 2013, [2.8]). Instead, the arrival on A serves as dominant harmony to a new key area: D minor. What ensues is a long descending bass in this new key,

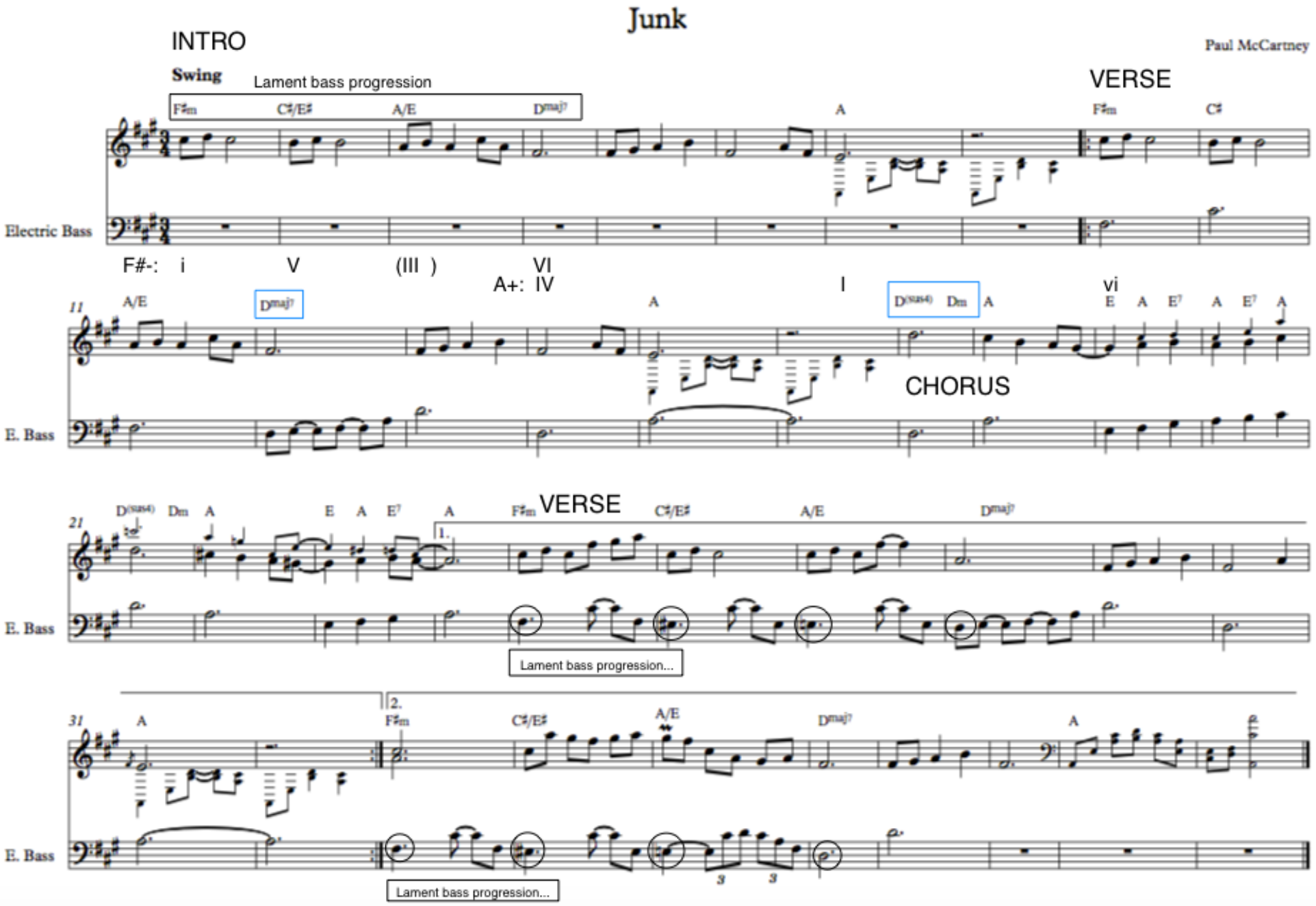
which moves all the way down to scale degree 2 (E), in turn serving as the bass note for an E-major triad, an applied dominant of V. In brief, "Paranoid Android" features two of the harmonic idioms discussed in this chapter: modulatory shifts between C Dorian and G Dorian in the verse and between C minor and D minor in the C section, as well as lament-bass-like linear bass progressions in the C section.

"Junk" — Paul McCartney

Paul McCartney's "Junk" is a succinct example of a song featuring both lament-bass progressions and modal mixture. This song was released in 1970 on McCartney's self-titled album, *McCartney*. I have produced a lead sheet transcription of "Junk," shown in Figure 1.12. The song as a whole is short, just under two minutes long, and consists of a simple verse-chorus structure repeated once. I believe that Mehldau was attracted to this song precisely because of its simplicity, and because of its harmonies, which are decidedly in line with Mehldau's taste. Right from the onset, "Junk", in the key of F# minor, begins with a lament-bass progression, though not a complete one, descending chromatically from F# to D, the submediant scale degree.[1] Instead of resolving down to the dominant C#, as one might expect, McCartney lingers on D, which we first perceive as VI in F# minor, but retrospectively hear as IV in the relative key, A major. In other words, the goal harmony of this truncated lament-bass progression, D, is treated as a pivot chord. Ambiguous tonics are of course very common in rock music, and this has to do with the general lack of proper dominant-tonic relationships in which the leading tone

[1] Lament bass progressions to the submediant are fairly common in the music of the Beatles. Similar bass lines (albeit with slightly different chord patterns) are found, for example, in: "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" (A–A/G–A/F#–A/F, although this song is by Lennon) and "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" (Am–Am/G–D/F#–Fmaj7, although this song is by Harrison).

Figure 1.12 - Lead sheet transcription of Paul McCartney's "Junk"



serves as a key-defining pitch; axis[2] and other double-tonic progressions are a good example of this. In "Junk," there is no dominant of F# minor used throughout, but there are dominant chords in the chorus in A major. This, along with the fact that the song ends on A major, confirms that the song as a whole is in A major rather than F# minor. Nevertheless, one will certainly hear the opening of the song in F# minor, even if consciously anticipating the move to the relative major. The use of mixture in this song is limited to the IV harmony. The chorus, clearly grounded in A major, uses iv (D minor), borrowed from the parallel minor mode. This device is simple but effective because it contrasts with the Dmaj7 chord of the F#-minor verse, a harmony which lingers for three full bars (longer than any other harmony in the song) and serves as a pivot towards the relative major key every time it occurs.

With regards to Mehldau's cover, the harmony is relatively unchanged, but there are two minor points worth noting. At 3:00 and 3:44, Mehldau approaches the A major harmony via tritone substitution (Bb7 substituting for E7 in this case), which is typical of jazz practice. At 3:13-3:20 of the recording, a kind of linear bass line — though not a lament bass progression — is used (G–F–E–D–C#–B–C#–D–C#), recalling a fragment of the melody from the verse (see m.17 of Figure 1.12).

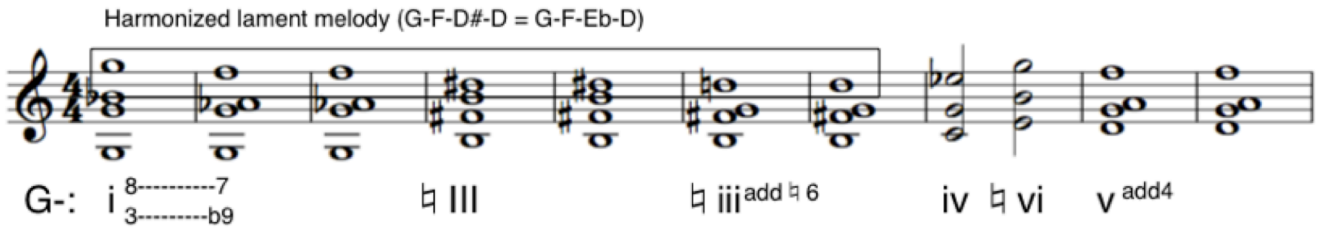
"Roses Blue" - Joni Mitchell

Brad Mehldau's cover of "Roses Blue" was released on the two-disc Japanese edition of

[2] Axis progressions — named after the comedy band "Axis of Awesome," famous for performing excerpts from various popular songs over a constant axis progression throughout — consist of a particular four-chord loop that is modally ambiguous because it can simultaneously be interpreted as vi-IV-I-V in major or as i-VI-III-VI in the relative (natural) minor . This progression is very common in popular music, and can be used in different rotations, which represents another reason for the use of the term "axis." If one takes the axis progression Am-F-C-G, for example, the most commonly used rotations begin on Am or C.

his 2004 album *Live in Tokyo*. The original song by Joni Mitchell is featured on her 1969 opus, *Clouds*. The form of the original song is strophic: the text is organized in seven stanzas, where the final stanza is a restatement of the first, and every stanza is set to the same music. The introduction is an instrumental presentation of the harmonic progression, in a freer meter compared to the square 4/4 of every subsequent stanza (though not hypermetrically square, insofar as the harmonic progression itself is unusual in its 10-bar length). Thus, one can get a full picture of the harmonic content of the piece from the repeated harmonic progression, which I show in reduction in Figure 1.13.

Figure 1.13 - Harmonic reduction and analysis of Joni Mitchell's "Roses Blue"



Joni Mitchell's harmonic progression is incredibly rich and particularly fertile for Mehldau to explore chromatic territory. The most obvious harmonic paradigms demonstrated here are modal mixture and harmonic ambiguity more generally. While the song as a whole is firmly rooted in G minor (or Aeolian), the harmonic progression is highly unusual. The second chord is best understood contrapuntally and not as a harmonic entity unto itself, as reflected in my Roman-numeral analysis. The arrival on the B-major triad in m. 4 is quite otherworldly; in fact, these two triads (G minor and B major) are almost as far apart as possible on the circle of fifths: 5 steps (or 7, depending on how one looks at it). The change in triad quality from minor to major further emphasizes their distant relationship. In neo-Riemannian terms, this is a PLP

transformation (successively, in that order). I interpret the B-major triad as a variant of B minor, a borrowed iii from the parallel mode of G major, hence ♮III. This makes sense considering that the B-major triad then moves to a B-minor triad with added sixth in m. 6. The relationship between m. 5 and the next stable harmony in m. 8 can also be viewed through a neo-Riemannian lens: here, B major and C minor are related by the "Slide" transformation ("S"), which is synonymous with applying L, P, then R (but can be defined more concisely in voice-leading terms as holding the chord third constant while moving both the root and fifth up a semitone). Modal mixture is also found in m. 8, where C minor and E minor are found in succession. C minor is iv in G minor while E minor is vi in the parallel major key; these two chords are also related as minor chromatic mediants. Despite the cross-relation between Eb and E, the progression is functionally coherent as both chords act as pre-dominants. The 10-bar progression ends with two bars of v harmony, with added 4th. The fourth is inarguably "added" in this case, and not "suspended", since the note F (the resolution of a suspended 4th) is also present in the chord, in the top voice. One could also justify the G as the chordal eleventh, but this at least implies the presence of a possible 7th and/or 9th which are not typically part of Mitchell's sound world; thus, I prefer the label "add4" borrowed from rock practice. Despite the unusual harmonic progression, the underlying functions expressed by my Roman-numeral analysis are normal insofar as they follow a kind of large-scale tonic–pre-dominant–dominant paradigm, where mm. 1-7 express tonic prolongation, m. 8 functions as pre-dominant harmony, and mm. 9-10 as dominant harmony.

Although I haven't included the melody in my reduction, one can easily follow the melodic line by listening to the song while looking at the graph, because the melody

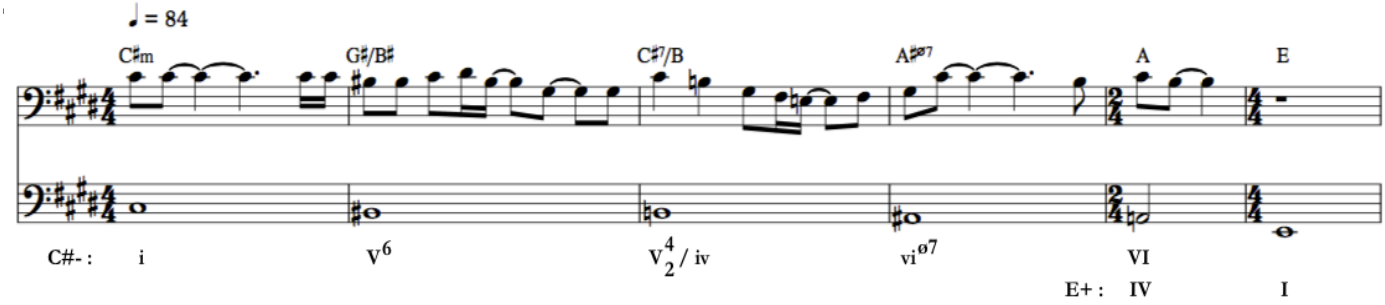
essentially recites the text on the top voice of each chord. Perhaps coincidentally (but probably not), the melody outlines a lament tetrachord in the first seven measures. Reinterpreting D# in mm. 4-5 as its enharmonic equivalent Eb results in the melodic motion G–F–Eb–D. Thus, the harmonic content of "Roses Blue" can be interpreted as a complex realization of a simple underlying diatonic lament tetrachord in the melody.

Mehldau's cover of "Roses Blue" begins with a rather long and nebulous introduction; the theme itself is only heard for the first time at 2:24, where it is played twice in succession. The theme comes back towards the end of the cover, at 6:48 to be exact. Mehldau improvises rather freely between 3:25 and 6:48, in such a manner that harmony and melody are not so distinct anymore, unlike the theme; the body of the improvisation — as well as the introduction —are more akin to a modal kind of improvisation, in which each chord in Joni Mitchell's progression is interpreted as suggesting or establishing a particular mode or scale, as codified in the branch of jazz theory known as chord-scale theory. With regards to the harmonic idioms discussed in this chapter, there are none present in this cover that are not already part of the original; in fact, the harmony in general remains relatively unchanged. This is perhaps due to the fact that Mitchell's harmonic progression is already complex enough intrinsically and does not invite further enrichment.

"Interstate Love Song" - Stone Temple Pilots:

"Interstate Love Song" is featured on Stone Temple Pilots' 1994 album *Purple*, which peaked at number 1 on the US *Billboard* 200 chart. Brad Mehldau's cover of this song

Figure 1.14 - Harmonic reduction and analysis of the verse of "Interstate Love Song," by the Stone



appears on *10 Years Solo Live.* The song as a whole is in verse-chorus form, and its verse features a lament-bass progression as well as modal mixture. Figure 1.14 shows the melody of the verse with its accompanying chord symbols, as well as a simplified bass.

Interestingly enough, the chord progression in the verse of this song is almost identical to that of "Junk" by Paul McCartney, analyzed previously in this chapter, but in the key of C# minor rather than F# minor. The chord progression is a truncated lament bass that descends to the submediant (A major), which then becomes a pivot chord functioning as IV in the key of the relative major, E. Both lament-bass progressions to the submediant are found in the verses of their respective songs, which feature more harmonically tight-knit (i.e. diatonic) chord progressions in their choruses. The verse of "Interstate Love Song" also features modal mixture. In my reduction in Fig. 1.14, this can be observed by comparing m. 3 to m. 4. The dominant chord in m. 3, C#7, contains three common tones with the tonic chord that ensues, C#m7. They share the pitches C#, G#, and B, but differ in their use of the mediant scale degree: C#7 uses the raised form of scale degree 3, E#, while C#m7 uses the lowered form E. Lastly, it is worth pointing out a kind of melodic-harmonic divorce in m. 3[3]: the melody descends to E natural, the lowest melodic point in the verse, which clashes with E# in the harmony (in the electric guitar in the original

[3] In rock, the melody can be out of alignment with the harmony or be mostly independent of it. For more on melodic-harmonic divorce, see: Temperley 2007 and Nobile 2015.

recording). This conflict between E and E# further emphasizes the modal mixture in the verse of this song. This gesture is reminiscent of the blues, in which major thirds in the harmony (above the chord's root) are often juxtaposed with minor thirds in the melody; this rub is also a signature feature of what is sometimes referred to as the Hendrix chord, that is, a dominant seventh chord with a sharp ninth (E–G#–D–G); for more on this chord see van der Bliek 2007.

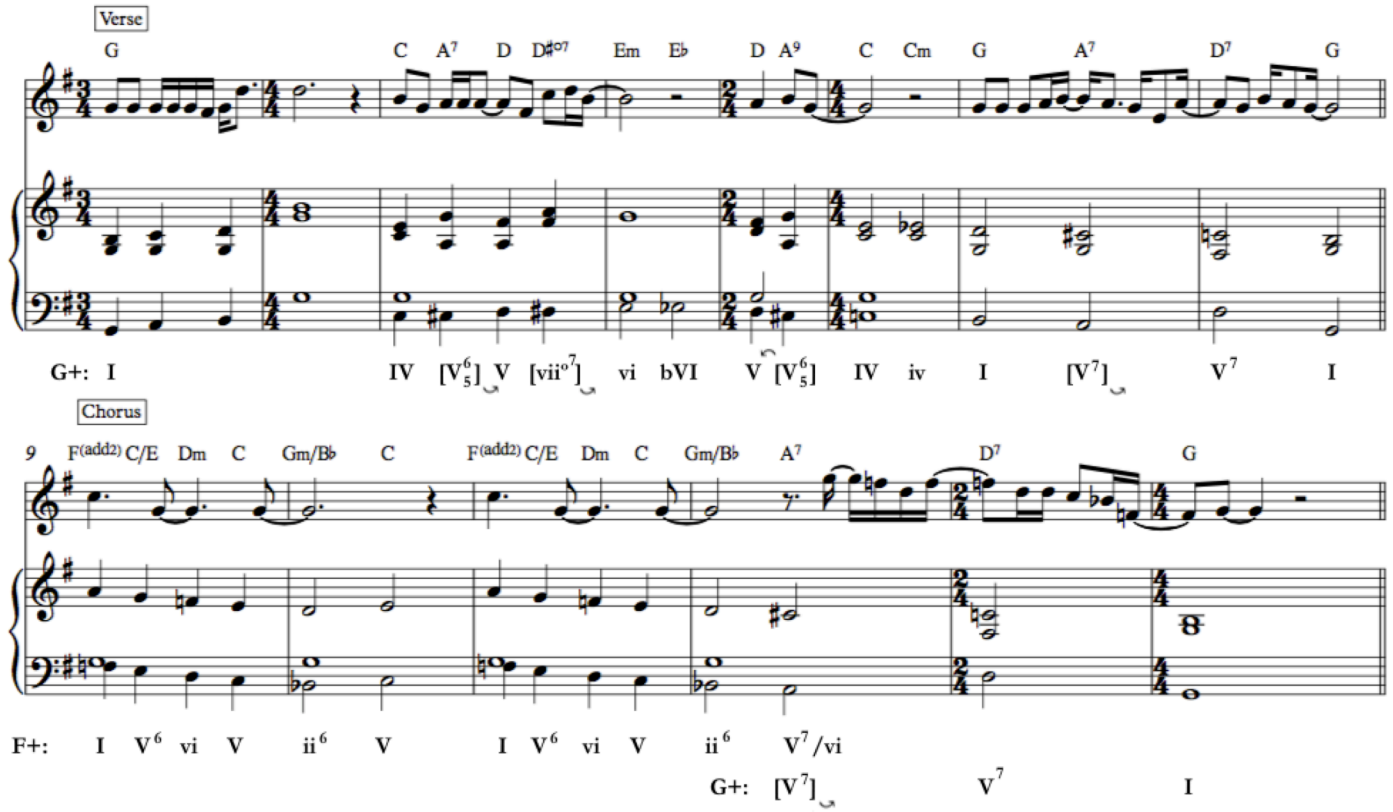
In Mehldau's cover, after the introduction (based on the main Mixolydian riff, reproduced in Figure 2.14 on p. 80) and the initial verse-chorus unit, multiple variations on the main riff, of gradually increasing density and dissonance, are played in a blues-like fashion from 3:44 onwards. Throughout these variations, E remains the governing tonic; however, the tonal center becomes nebulous from 11:55 onwards as Mehldau's increasingly dissonant variations resort to the use of clusters and chromatically inflected harmony. There are two modulatory shifts I wish to point out in this middle blues-like section of the music. First, there is a momentary shift to D major, which is established as tonic via an Aeolian progression (Bb–C–D), further emphasized by the low tonic D bass note that ensues (ca. 13:42-13:50). Shortly after (ca. 14:24), sequential transposition of the main riff's tune leads to a brief moment of G as tonic (15:08). The stable E tonic returns at 15:13 and remains until the end.

Formally speaking, this cover is rather interesting in that the verse-chorus material, which represents a majority of the original song, is heard only twice in Mehldau's cover: the first time at ca. 1:11-2:18, and the second time ca. 2:40-3:44. Thus the verse-chorus material occupies only roughly 12% of the entire cover. By contrast, the verse-chorus material represents approximately 70% of the original song.

"Blackbird" - The Beatles

As stated in the introduction, Brad Mehldau has covered more songs by the Beatles than any other rock artist. I here turn my attention to "Blackbird", one of the songs that Mehldau has covered and released a number of times, which features many of the harmonic idioms discussed in this chapter. The original song by the Beatles was released on their 1968 self-titled album (more commonly known as the *White Album*). In Figure 1.15, I have produced a harmonic reduction of the verse and chorus as well as a transcription of the melody.

Figure 1.15 – Harmonic reduction and analysis of "Blackbird" (original version by the Beatles). The two introductory bars are omitted.



The song is in a standard verse-chorus form, where the verse is in the key of G major, and

the chorus tonicizes F major before cadencing in G. This latter observation is indicative of a modulatory shift that occurs between every verse and chorus. The shift is surprising, to some extent —despite the relative proximity of the two keys, which are only two accidentals apart — in that the music moves to VII (F being VII within the key of G major). This is not a typical area to tonicize in common practice, yet it is fairly common in rock.[4] Recall, for example, that Radiohead employs a very similar shift between B minor and A minor in "Exit Music (For a Film)," also at the onset of the chorus. "Blackbird" presents two instances of modal mixture, where Eb-major and C-minor triads (borrowed from the parallel minor key of G minor) are used in m. 4 and m. 6 respectively, as passing harmonies; following the major subdominant with a modally mixed minor one is in fact a favourite device of the Beatles.

While there are no lament-bass progressions proper in "Blackbird," a striking feature of this song is the chromatic bass line of the verse, shown in mm. 4-6 of my reduction, which ascends from the subdominant to the submediant degree and then descends again. This resembles some of the chromatic progressions studied so far in this chapter, which are lament-bass progressions to the submediant.

There are three other peculiarities regarding pitch structures in "Blackbird" that may have been attractive for Mehldau. The first is the pedal G pitch throughout, more precisely the "small octave" g (also known as G3, a fourth below middle C), resulting from the guitar's finger-picking pattern, which uses the open G string throughout. This may not be immediately apparent, but this pitch can be traced throughout my harmonic reduction. As a result, some harmonies are altered by this pedal tone: in particular, the D-

[4] As far as the Beatles are concerned, this form of harmonic movement is quite idiomatic: bVII is also the key relationship of the "Penny Lane" chorus, the "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" chorus, and the "Magical Mystery Tour" bridge.

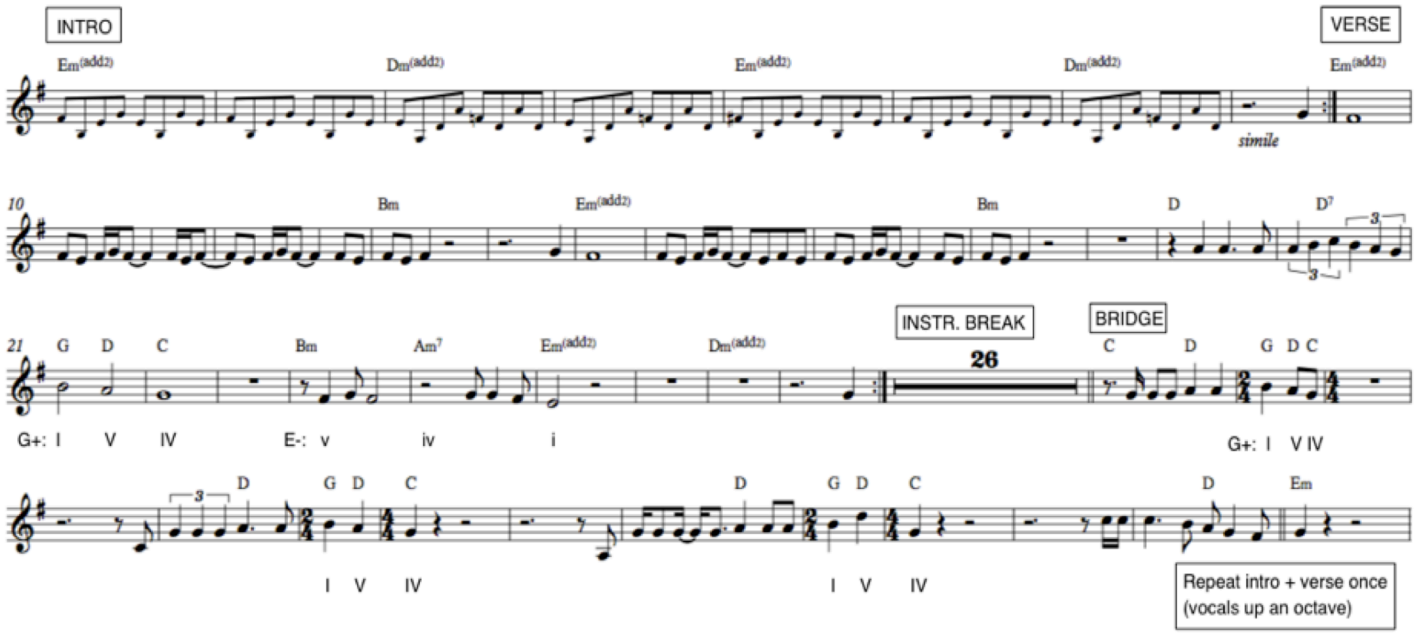
major harmonies in mm. 3 and 5. In my Roman-numeral analysis, I sometimes disregard the presence of this tone, precisely because it is a pedal. Related to this idea is a kind of melodic-harmonic divorce in the chorus: the G in the melody in bars 9 and 11 is somewhat divorced from the D-minor harmonies with which it is involved. This persistent G is commenting on the pedal G of the guitar plucking. Last but not least, a significant peculiarity in "Blackbird" is the use of the complete G-minor pentatonic scale in the vocal melody of the last three bars of the chorus (see mm.12-14 of my reduction).

Mehldau's cover of "Blackbird" counts among the more traditional covers in his repertoire. In "Blackbird," Mehldau follows the classic theme-variations-theme framework pervasive in jazz practice (in the *10 Years Solo Live* recording, the theme comes back at 5:22, after the variations); while this is expected of ensemble playing (such as trio work), this is unlike the sonata-like interpretations which are common in Mehldau's solo piano covers (more on this in chapter 3). Similarly to his covers of "Junk" and "Roses Blue," the harmony in the cover is kept very close to the original, again, probably due to the relative complexity of the original harmony.

"Hey You" - Pink Floyd

This song, from Pink Floyd's 1979 classic album *The Wall*, was covered and released by Brad Mehldau on *10 Years Solo Live*. It features two of the five underlying harmonic idioms discussed in this chapter, namely scalar shifts and dominant to subdominant progressions. A lead sheet is provided in Figure 1.16.

Figure 1.16 – Lead sheet transcription of Pink Floyd's "Hey You," with harmonic retrogressions labeled



Firstly, F# and F natural are used back and forth in the introduction, in the context of alternating E minor and D minor harmonies. What's more, this *particular* shift between i and vii is the same harmonic movement that we have seen previously in Radiohead's "Exit Music (For a Film)" and — in major, between I and bVII — in "Blackbird."

Dominant to subdominant harmonic progressions, also known as harmonic retrogressions, are featured extensively in the verse as well as the bridge of "Hey You," or in other words, throughout the entire song except the introduction, the instrumental break between the second verse and the bridge, and the transition from the end of the bridge to the third verse (which recycles the Em-Dm material of the introduction). Cadential v–iv–i progressions in E minor are used at the end of each verse (Bm–Am–Em). These progressions are preceded by I–V–IV progressions in the key of the relative major (G–D–C), which also feature dominant to subdominant motion reminiscent of blues harmony. All the retrogressions mentioned above are labeled in Figure 1.16.

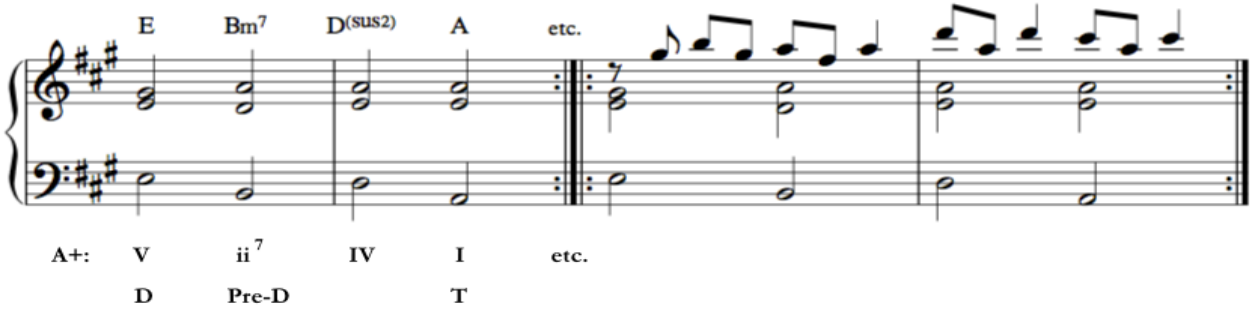
Similarly to his cover of "Roses Blue," the body of the development in Mehldau's cover of "Hey You" is a modal form of improvisation in which harmony is hard to pinpoint. Nevertheless, with regards to the harmonic idioms discussed in this chapter, Mehldau's cover of "Hey You" features modulatory shifts throughout (shifts other than the shift between Em and Dm in the introduction of the original), and the occasional use of descending chromatic bass lines, such as the D–C#–C–B bass heard ca. 3:27-3:37.

"Bitter Sweet Symphony" by the Verve and "Waterloo Sunset" by the Kinks

Mehldau covered these two songs in a single performance, released on *10 Years Solo Live*. Thirty years separate the original release years of the two covered recordings; the first song is released on the Verve's 1997 album *Urban Hymns,* while the second song by the Kinks dates from 1967. Harmonically speaking, they are on the simpler side of the spectrum of songs studied throughout this chapter, but it is worth briefly noting their significant use of dominant to subdominant progressions. Mehldau's cover features material from "Bitter Sweet Symphony" in the first 8 minutes, which he interprets quite literally "symphonically," through the use of strumming textures, in which a combination of repeated block chords, pedal tones, and/or rapid arpeggios are used to generate sound masses (strumming textures will be described in more detail in the following chapter). From 7:59 to 13:24, Mehldau improvises quite freely, referencing the motivic material of the instrumental accompaniment or "riff" from the original song in a myriad of keys in a developmental manner (refer to Figure 1.17 for a reduction of the riff from the original song, with harmonic analysis). "Waterloo Sunset" is heard briefly at the end of the performance, as a coda-like point of rest following the tumultuous symphonic and

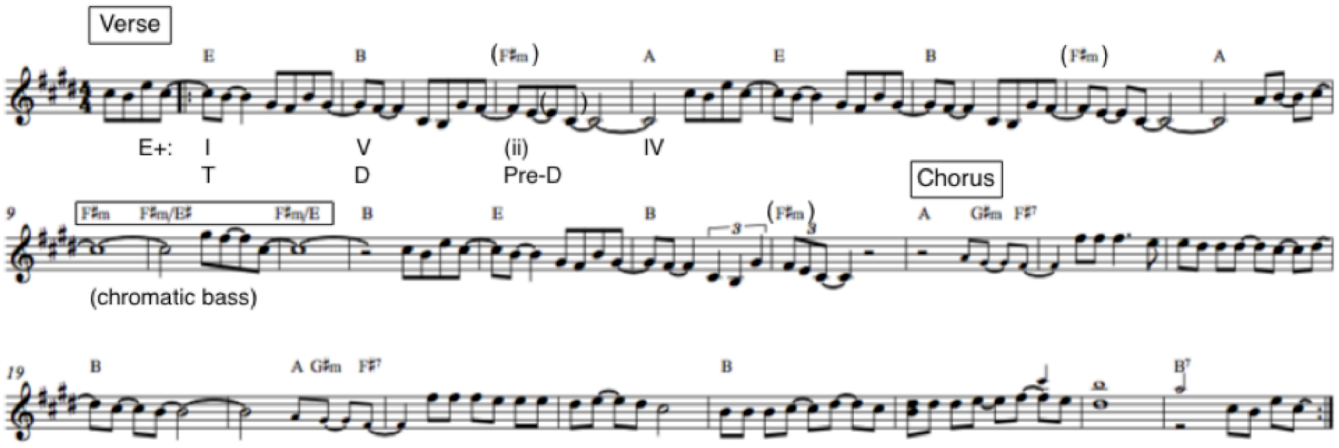
strumming textures of "Bittersweet Symphony" and the development-like section respectively, or more precisely, from 13:24 to the end (the applause begins at 15:31). At 13:24 Mehldau plays an introduction to the Kinks' tune, playing a I–V–ii–IV progression in E major.

Figure 1.17 - Riff and chord progression of The Verve, “Bitter Sweet Symphony”



In the original version of "Waterloo Sunset," each verse begins with a repeated I–V–IV progression in E major. However, Mehldau expands this progression slightly by adding a ii chord between V and IV, thus simultaneously expanding the subdominant portion of the phrase and referencing the riff of ”Bitter Sweet Symphony,” which follows a V–ii–IV–I progression, a rotation of the chords played by Mehldau in "Waterloo Sunset" (I–V–ii–IV). In Figure 1.18, I have produced a lead sheet transcription of "Waterloo Sunset." Here, the F#m chord is in parentheses because it exists only in the cover by Mehldau; the original has an additional measure of A major instead. A final point worth noting is the progression that occurs after the first 8 bars, consisting of I–V–ii–VI heard twice, which features a brief descending chromatic bass (F#–E#–E) that leads back to the dominant B followed by a reprise of the verse's original tune. Thus "Waterloo Sunset" contains one of the harmonic paradigms discussed in this chapter and suggests another, while "Bittersweet Symphony" contains only one.

Figure 1.18 – Lead sheet transcription of the verse and chorus of "Waterloo Sunset," by the Kinks



"50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" - Paul Simon

Mehldau has released two covers of this Paul Simon song from the 1975 album *Still Crazy After All These Years* in both trio and solo settings. The solo cover — the version of interest for my purposes — appears exclusively on the deluxe and Japanese editions of the album *Live in Tokyo.* This verse-chorus song features a repeated lament-bass progression in E minor in the verse: [Em(/G) D6 Cmaj7 B7b9] — and a blues in G in the chorus (over the progression G–Bb–C7–G).

Mehldau is faithful to the original harmony in his presentation of the theme in his solo cover. However, he precedes the verse by a longer descending progression with a stepwise bass, descending diatonically from E to F# which then leads to the dominant. Mehldau's introduction is reproduced in Figure 1.19, which is an excerpt borrowed from Vincent Sorel's transcription of that cover. In the original recording by Paul Simon, the introduction consists of a 6-measure long drum solo, followed by an instrumental version of the verse, thereby introducing the following harmonic progression:

[Em/G D^6 C^{Maj7} B^{7b9} | Em D#° $F\#m^{add4}$ $B+^7$ | Em D^6 C^{Maj7} B^{7b9} | Em Am7 Em].

Figure 1.19 - Mehldau's introduction to "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover"

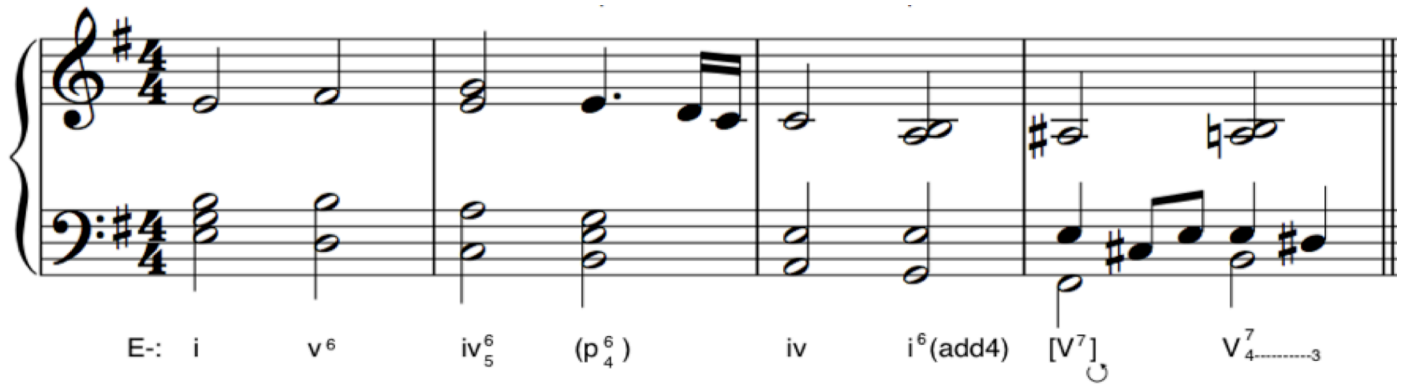
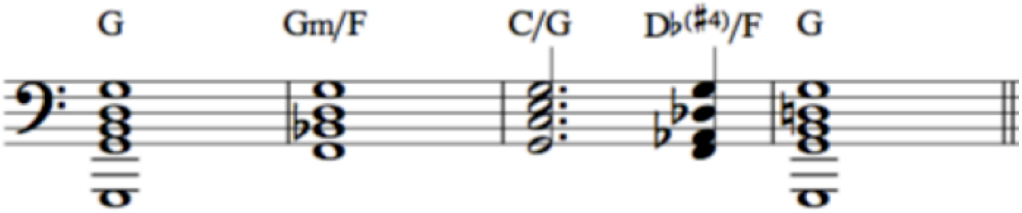


Figure 1.20 - Reduction of Mehldau's harmony in the chorus of his cover of "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover"



Besides Mehldau's octave descent in the introduction, discussed above, the harmony of the verse (also illustrated above) is preserved almost exactly. In the verse of Mehldau's cover, however, a few harmonic differences are worth pointing out. Most noticeably, Mehldau's voicing, illustrated in Figure 1.20,[5] emphasizes a G–F motion in the bass, i.e. back and forth between tonic and subtonic. This step down to the subtonic is not unlike the first step in a lament-bass progression, and is also very idiomatic in rock music, where the subtonic scale degree in the bass often functions as a substitute for the dominant. The affect of Mehldau's descending and rising step in the bass is markedly

[5] Figure 1.20 represents an idealized version of Mehldau's harmony in the chorus; a few discrepancies do exist between variations.

different from the rising bass line in Paul Simon's recording (G–Bb–C). Mehldau replaces the Bb chord of the original song with a G-minor triad with F in the bass, which highlights the affective difference between G major in the first bar and G minor in the second bar. Notice also Mehldau's addition of a new chord in the harmonic progression of the chorus (the last chord of Figure 1.20, a Db-major triad in second inversion with an added G), which functions as a dominant to G, where the notes Ab and Db pull towards tonic and dominant scale degrees, respectively. Finally, notice that the note G is held as a pedal throughout the four harmonies of Mehldau's chorus. In the recording, this pedal note is repeated (see 4:23-5:36) and consists of one of the three kinds of strumming textures that I will discuss later on, in chapter 3.

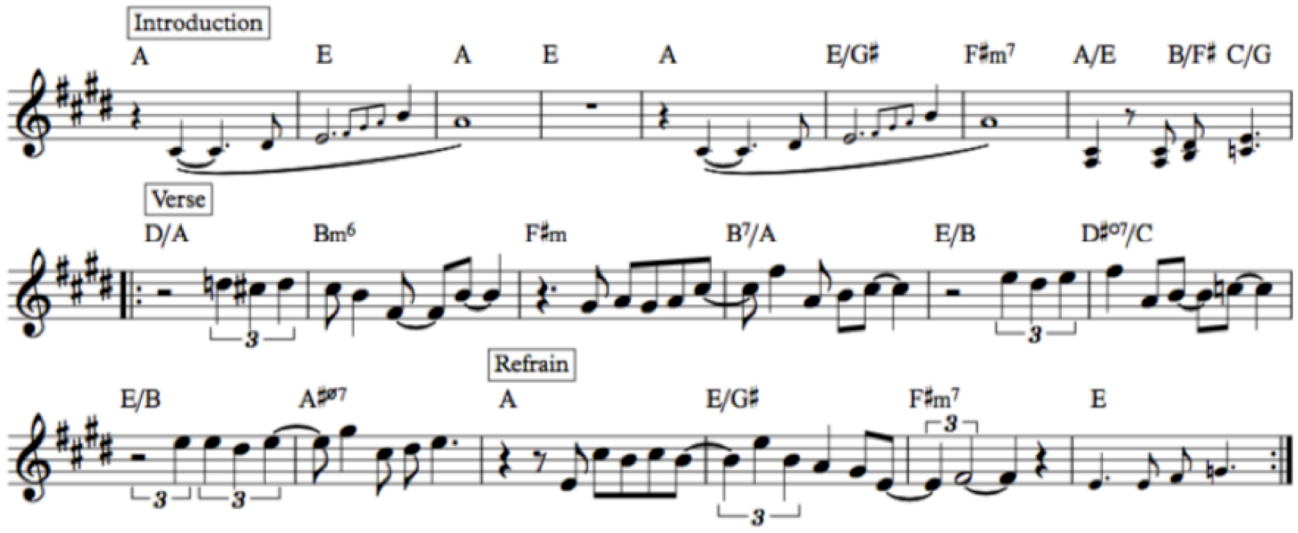
"God Only Knows" - Beach Boys

This song, from the highly influential 1966 record *Pet Sounds,* features chromatic bass lines, modal mixture, and particularly interesting modulations among the keys of A, E, and D major. I briefly outline the form of this verse-refrain song in Figure 1.21. In Figure 1.22 I provide the reader with a lead-sheet transcription of the first verse and refrain.

Figure 1.21 - Formal outline of the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows," with key areas

0:00	Intro	A+
0:17	Verse	A+ → E+
0:34	Refrain	E+
0:42	Verse	A+ → E+
0:58	Refrain	A+
1:05	Instr. break	A+?
1:13	Untexted verse	D+ → **A+**
1:29	Refrain	**A+**
1:35	Verse	**A+** → E+
1:52	Refrain	E+
	(overlapped repeats become outro)	
2:51		

Figure 1.22 – Lead-sheet transcription of the verse and chorus of the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows"



As can be seen in Figure 1.22, the introduction establishes the key of A major. In the verse, however, the music quickly shifts to V, i.e. E major, via a pivot chord (F#m) in the third measure of the verse, followed by the dominant of E, in third inversion. Note that this chord should resolve to E in first inversion, but resolves to a far less stable second-inversion triad instead. What follows in the second half of the verse going into the chorus is a linear bass line (see mm. 4-11 of transcription) that initially rises and peaks in m.6 at C natural — which further heightens the otherworldliness of this moment of modal mixture expressed by the diminished seventh chord in third inversion, borrowed from E minor — before descending chromatically to G# in m. 10 and then continuing diatonically down to E. One particular aspect of this song that contributes to its tonal ambiguity is the extensive use of 2nd-inversion triads throughout the verse (and also at the very end of the introduction); the effect of these chords is especially striking because they are primary triads (I, IV, V) and occur on hypermetric downbeats (see, for example, mm. 1, 5, and 7 of verse). Following the first two verse-refrain pairs and the short

instrumental break that ensues (refer to Figure 1.21), the seemingly freer material of the verse-refrain beginning at the 1:13 mark of the recording is nonetheless based on the same harmonic progression, transposed up a fourth, in the key of D major. When the music shifts or modulates to V (A major), in the second half of the untexted verse (1:21) going into the refrain, this creates a seamless elision with the A-major tonality of the final verse at 1:35 (see bolded key areas in Figure 1.21).

Mehldau's cover of "God Only Knows" is unique in a few different ways. Firstly, the theme is only very briefly heard in its original form; what ensues, from 3:23 onwards, is an impressionistic interpretation in which only morsels of the original melody are recognized here and there. Secondly, Mehldau interprets the overall tonic of the song as D rather than A (more on how this is achieved in a moment). Finally, Mehldau's interpretation does not follow the archetypal A-B-A or exposition-development-recapitulation archetype found in so many of his solo piano covers; instead, Mehldau omits the recapitulation (or restatement of the theme) and concludes the cover with a growing strumming texture which ultimately leads to a muddy and indeterminate sound mass.

Mehldau begins with a nebulous introduction referring to the verse (effectively omitting the introduction in the original recording which clearly establishes A major as the tonal center), followed by two statements of the verse-refrain, the first one starting at 1:10, while the second one, accompanied by harmonic strumming, begins at 2:22. Mehldau's verse is different than the original in at least two ways: first, Mehldau doesn't preserve the original 6/4 voicings, and second, Mehldau emphasizes D major as the tonal center. He does the latter by replacing the penultimate F#m7 chord in the original verse-

refrain by D major, and by omitting the final tonic chord E that follows (see last bar of Figure 1.22). This creates a harmonic loop in which Mehldau's version of the verse begins and ends with D major. Furthermore, Mehldau unmistakably interprets D as the overall tonic given that his introduction begins with D major, and the last four minutes or so of the cover (11:55 to the end) consist of a strumming texture which clearly begins in D major at 11:55 — with a brief recalling of the Beach Boys's tune at 12:14 — and eventually culminates in a harmonically indeterminate sound mass, which nonetheless gravitates around D. From the 3:23 mark onwards, a kind of development section begins. Here, Mehldau's approach is quite impressionistic; rather than conceiving of pitch in terms of chords or harmonic changes, it seems that Mehldau is thinking in modes or key areas. For example, the development section begins with a winding descent, moving rapidly through key centers in a downwards direction (for example, the following tonics are heard in succession: C at 3:23, Bb at 3:40, Ab at 3:53, Gb/F# at 4:05. E at 4:08, D# at 4:14, D at 4:17, C# at 4:21, C at 4:34, B at 4:47, etc.)

"Holland" - Sufjan Stevens

"Holland" is featured on Sufjan Stevens' 2003 album *Michigan*. The song as a whole consists of an introduction (two 7-bar phrases) followed by a pair of verse-choruses. The verses, like the introduction, consist of 7-bar phrases, while the two choruses feature more standard 8-bar phrases. The second verse is longer than the first by a whole phrase of 7 measures, and the second chorus is longer than the first by two whole phrases (the second of those has a truncated length of 6 bars). This form is outlined in slightly more detail in Figure 1.23.

Figure 1.23 - Form of Sufjan Stevens' "Holland"

0:00	Intro	2 x 7 measures
0:21	Verse	4 x 7 measures, + 2 bars added for transition
1:08	Chorus	2 x 8 measures
1:33	Verse	5 x 7 measures, + 2 bars added for transition
2:31	Chorus	4 x 8 measures (4th unit truncated by two measures) *new countermelody in the arrangement (last two units)*

Mehldau's cover of "Holland" was released on *10 Years Solo Live*. In an appendix to this chapter, I provide my partial transcription of Mehldau's rendition. I chose to proceed this way because the harmony is clearer in Mehldau's version than in the (purposely) detuned recording by Sufjan Stevens.

One interesting aspect of the harmony in this song is the extensive modal mixture; another is the modal ambiguity that results from the extensive use of sus4 sonorities. For instance, m. 1 and mm. 6-7 represent tonic and dominant harmony respectively, but the quality of these harmonies is ambiguous insofar as they have no chord thirds. In a larger context, however, the 7-bar phrase of the introduction and verse points towards Eb major (approximately a quarter-tone sharp in the original recording): the only pitch foreign to this key is the Gb of m. 5, which is easily justified as modal mixture — the fourth and fifth measures of each 7-bar phrase always feature a move from major I to minor i. As for the chorus, I interpret the overall key as the parallel Eb minor. In mm. 47-62 of my transcription, there are only three instances of pitches foreign to Eb natural minor: the note C — the raised form of scale degree 6 — in the bass of m. 49 and m. 57, and the G of m. 58, borrowed from the parallel major key, Eb. Overall, the motion from Eb major to Eb minor, first heard as local modal mixture in mm. 4-5, is reflected on a deeper structural level as a scalar shift between the Eb-major verse and the Eb-minor chorus.

In Mehldau's cover of "Holland," there are several moments that pertain to the harmonic idioms of this chapter. First and foremost, modulatory shifts are used throughout in this cover: for example, Mehldau moves up half a step, to E minor, ca 6.23, and later on, ca. 8:54, Ab is established as tonic via plagal motion (alternating I and iv). Secondly, Mehldau employs an Aeolian progression in the home key of Eb minor around 6:11-6:21. Finally, a kind of reverse lament bass, so to speak — in which the bass rises chromatically from Bb to Eb ca. 10:10-10:20 — is used as a transition before the recapitulation section of Mehldau's cover.

By way of conclusion, I tabulate my findings in Table 1.1, which outlines the harmonic devices employed in Mehldau's covers and their respective originals. I've opted to organize the table by original artist, then by alphabetical order (for the original artists who only have one song covered); the only exception to this is Paul McCartney's "Junk," which I have grouped with the songs by The Beatles. Note that, for Mehldau's covers, there are two years given: the first corresponds to the date of performance/recording, while the second corresponds to the release date. Of course, this table is not an exhaustive summary, as only one recorded cover is represented for each song. Nonetheless, this small corpus study provides a clear overview of Mehldau's harmonic predilections.

In summary, by studying the harmonic progressions of the songs covered by Mehldau as a soloist, I have uncovered five underlying harmonic paradigms: modal mixture, Aeolian progressions, descending bass lines (often in the form of lament-bass progressions), plagal and dominant to subdominant progressions, and scalar shifts.

Table 1.1: Overview of harmonic devices (grouped by original artist, then by alphabetical order)			
Original		**Mehldau cover**	
"And I Love Her" The Beatles 1964	-Modulatory shift (up a half step, from F#m to Gm)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2013/2015	-Multiple modulatory shifts -Modal mixture -Aeolian pendulum in the conclusion/epilogue (15:00 mark)
"Blackbird" The Beatles 1968	-Modal mixture (IV/iv, bVI) -Modulatory shift to VII (F major) -Blues scale	*10 Years Solo Live* 2011/2015	*Same as original*
"Martha My Dear" The Beatles 1968	-Modulatory shifts throughout (Eb, F, Dm)	*Live in Marciac* 2006/2011	*Same as original* + (Additional modulatory shifts and added dissonance in a thoroughly contrapuntal texture)
"Junk" Paul McCartney 1970	-Lament-bass progression to the submediant scale degree in the verse -Modal mixture (IV/iv)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2004/2015	*Same as original*
"Exit Music (For a Film)" Radiohead 1997	-Implied lament bass -Modal mixture (i/I) -Brief modulatory shifts to vii (A minor from B minor) in the chorus	*Live in Marciac* 2006/2011	*Same as original* + -Aeolian progressions (ex: F-G-A at 1:43)
"Jigsaw Falling Into Place" Radiohead 2007	-Main harmonic progression is lament-like; bass begins with B-A# and ends with G-F# (intervening Dmaj7 chord in between)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2011/2015	*Same as original* + -After playing the theme, Mehldau cycles through multiple key areas in the development section (3:11-10:12), which consists of a harmonic sequence by minor thirds, obtained by chaining relative ("R") and parallel transformations ("P"). Thus Mehldau cycles through these key areas: Bm/D/Dm/F/Fm/Ab/Abm/Cb/Cbm=Bm (enharmonic equivalency completes the cycle) Ex: The second cycle Bm/D at 4:02 Dm/F at 4:11 Fm/Ab at 4:34 Abm/Cb at 4:50 (new cycle begins at 5:06)
"Knives Out"	-Descending bass	*10 Years*	*Same as original* +

Radiohead 2001	progressions (C-Bb-Ab and G-F-E) in the verse -Modulatory shifts between Cm and Gm in the verse -Modal mixture in the chorus (Am/M and Dm/M) -Descending bass line in the chorus (first time: 1:03-1:16)	*Solo Live* 2004(v2) /2015	-Modal mixture: in the introduction and verse, Mehldau adds a transitory Abm chord between the first half of the chord progression (C-Cm/Bb-Ab) and the second half (Gm-Gm/F-Edim7) -Additional modulatory shifts (ex: temporary G tonic at 5:25, followed by plagal motion)
"Paranoid Android" Radiohead 1997	-Modulatory shifts between Cm and Gm in the verse of section A -Aeolian progression in B section (ex: 2:09) -Slide transformation in B section (Am-Ab) -In section C (3:34-5:35), Partial lament bass progression in C minor: C-B-Bb-A (ex: 3:34-3:40) and descending bass line in D minor: D down diatonically to E (first time: 3:45)	*Live in Tokyo* 2003/2004	*Same as original*
"River Man" Nick Drake 1969	-Modal mixture (I/i)	*Live in Tokyo* 2003/2004	*Same as original* + Aeolian progression
"Things Behind the Sun" Nick Drake 1972	-Modal mixture (shift from C#m to C# between verse and chorus)	*Live in Tokyo* 2003/2004	*Same as original*
"Lithium" Nirvana 1991	-Modal mixture (overall key is D with flexible scale degrees 3, 6, and 7).	*Live in Marciac* 2006/2011	*Same as original* (Power chords are replaced by major triads with freely added dissonances, which enhances the modal ambiguity between D major and D minor)
"Smells Like Teen Spirit" Nirvana 1991	-Picardy third at the very end (feedback A-natural in the context of Fm)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2010/2015	-Mehldau's cover is in A rather than F -Mehldau uses major chords rather than power chords, which produces a certain modal ambiguity not present in the original (chord progression: A-D-C-F which gives the following collection: A–C–C#–D–E–F–F#–G–A)

			-Mehldau concludes with a Phrygian chord progression A-Bb-C (8:55 to the end)
"Bitter Sweet Symphony" The Verve 1997	-Harmonic retrogressions (V to ii and IV)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2011/2015	*Same as original* + -Modulatory shifts (ex: Gm at 10:33)
"Dream Brother" Jeff Buckley 1994	-Modal mixture (Picardy thirds)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2013/2015	*Same as original* + -Modulatory shifts -Aeolian progressions (*see formal outline in chapter 3 for more detail)
"God Only Knows" The Beach Boys 1966	-Modulatory shifts (between E, A, and D major) -Linear bass line -Modal mixture (D#dim7 in E major)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2011/2015	-D (VII) interpreted as tonic in Mehldau's cover via omission of the introduction and E tonic chord at the end of verse. -Mehldau moves through key centers in a downwards direction (ex: starting at 3:23)
"Hey You" Pink Floyd 1979	-Modulatory shifts between E minor and D minor (i and vii) -Harmonic retrogressions (V to IV in G+ and v to iv in E-)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2011/2015	*Same as original* + -Chromatic bass lines. Ex: D-C#-C-B at 3:27-3:37 -Modulatory shifts throughout
"Holland" Sufjan Stevens 2003	-Modal mixture/ ambiguity -Scalar shift (Eb major to minor and Dorian)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2013/2015	*Same as original* + -Modulatory shifts throughout (ex: up a half step to Em ca. 6:23, Ab established as tonic via plagal motion ca. 8:54) -Aeolian progression in Ebm (6:11-6:21) -Reverse lament bass serving as transition before the recapitulation: chromatic ascent from Bb to Eb in the bass ca. 10:10-10:20
"Interstate Love Song" Stone Temple Pilots 1994	-Lament bass progression to the submediant in the verse -Modal mixture -Implied double plagal progression in the main riff	*10 Years Solo Live* 2014/2015	*Same as original* + -Momentary shift to D major, established by Aeolian progression. 13:42-13:50 (Bb-C-D) -Sequential transposition of main riff's tune (ca. 14:24) leads to brief moment of G as tonic (15:08).
"La mémoire et la mer" Léo Ferré 1970	-Descending 2nd sequence (fauxbourdon) over tonic pedal = lament octave?	*10 Years Solo Live* 2011/2015	*Same as original* + -Modulatory shifts (downwards chromatically, further emphasizing the lament quality of the initial harmony) - see formal outline in Ch.3 for more detail
"Roses Blue" Joni Mitchell 1969	-Modal mixture and ambiguity -Lament melody	*Live in Tokyo* 2003/2004	*Same as original*

"Teardrop" Massive Attack 1998	-Pentatonic scale with flexible scale degrees 3 and 7 -Aeolian progression (F-G-A) at the end of every verse -Modal mixture (i/I)	Jazz concert in Vienna (unreleased) 2010	*Same as original* + -Tonicization of D minor (3:44-3:50) and other short modulatory shifts to C#m (6:13) and Cm (6:17)
"Waterloo Sunset" The Kinks 1967	-Descending bass line in the introduction (diatonic octave) -Harmonic retrogressions in the verse (I-V-IV) -Brief descending chromatic bass line: F#-E#-E in the middle of the verse (first time at 0:36)	*10 Years Solo Live* 2011/2015	*Same as original* + -Different retrogression: ii chord added between I and V (i.e. I-V-ii-IV)
"50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" Paul Simon 1975	-Lament bass progressions in the verse -Modulatory shifts between chorus and verse (Em-G blues) -Blues scale in the chorus	*Live in Tokyo* 2003/2004	*Same as original* + -Chord inversions used freely in the harmonic progression of the chorus (Gm-Bb7-C) emphasizing scale degrees 1 and 7 in the bass.

All of the songs listed above feature at least one of these idioms, and most contain more than one in combination or succession. I do not claim that these harmonic idioms are *exclusive* to rock, but they are certainly *characteristic* of this music. Of course, modal mixture and descending bass lines are also typical of classical music (of the Romantic and Baroque eras respectively) — another overt influence on Mehldau's work, as is most evident in his 1999 album *Elegiac Cycle*, or in his recordings of pieces by Brahms, and more recently his performances of and improvisations on pieces by Bach on *After Bach* (2018) — but neither is particularly characteristic of jazz. In the last section of this chapter, I show how similar harmonic progressions and idioms manifest themselves in Brad Mehldau's own compositions, suggesting varying degrees of influences from the rock and classical musics that have influenced him.

1.2 — Harmonic Idioms in Mehldau's Own Compositions

Now that I have delved into some of the rock songs covered by Brad Mehldau over the years, I will look into some of Mehldau's own compositions, which are, on a fundamental level, harmonically very close to the rock songs discussed. I will show excerpts of compositions by Mehldau that exhibit clear connections with the harmonic devices discussed in 1.1. By doing so, I will demonstrate that Mehldau's idiolect in his own compositions borrows from the harmonic syntax of rock and the Romantic piano repertoire (particularly of Brahms) that he frequently performs.

I have chosen to discuss four different works from different stages of Mehldau's career, to shed light on his compositional aesthetic. These works will be presented chronologically by release year, starting with "Bard," from *Elegiac* Cycle (1999), followed by two excerpts of compositions originally featured on Mehldau's 2010 record *Highway Rider*: "Don't Be Sad" and "John Boy," the latter of which has been re-released as a solo version on *10 Years Solo Live* and transcribed by Michael Lucke.[6] I conclude with an analysis of a more recent composition, "Waltz for JB" from the 2015 album *10 Years Solo Live.*[7] In general, I have chosen to analyze works not previously analyzed by other theorists, to the extent of my knowledge.[8]

The first example, "Bard", is unarguably Romantic in character, but nonetheless some of the striking features of Mehldau's early compositions are directly tied to the

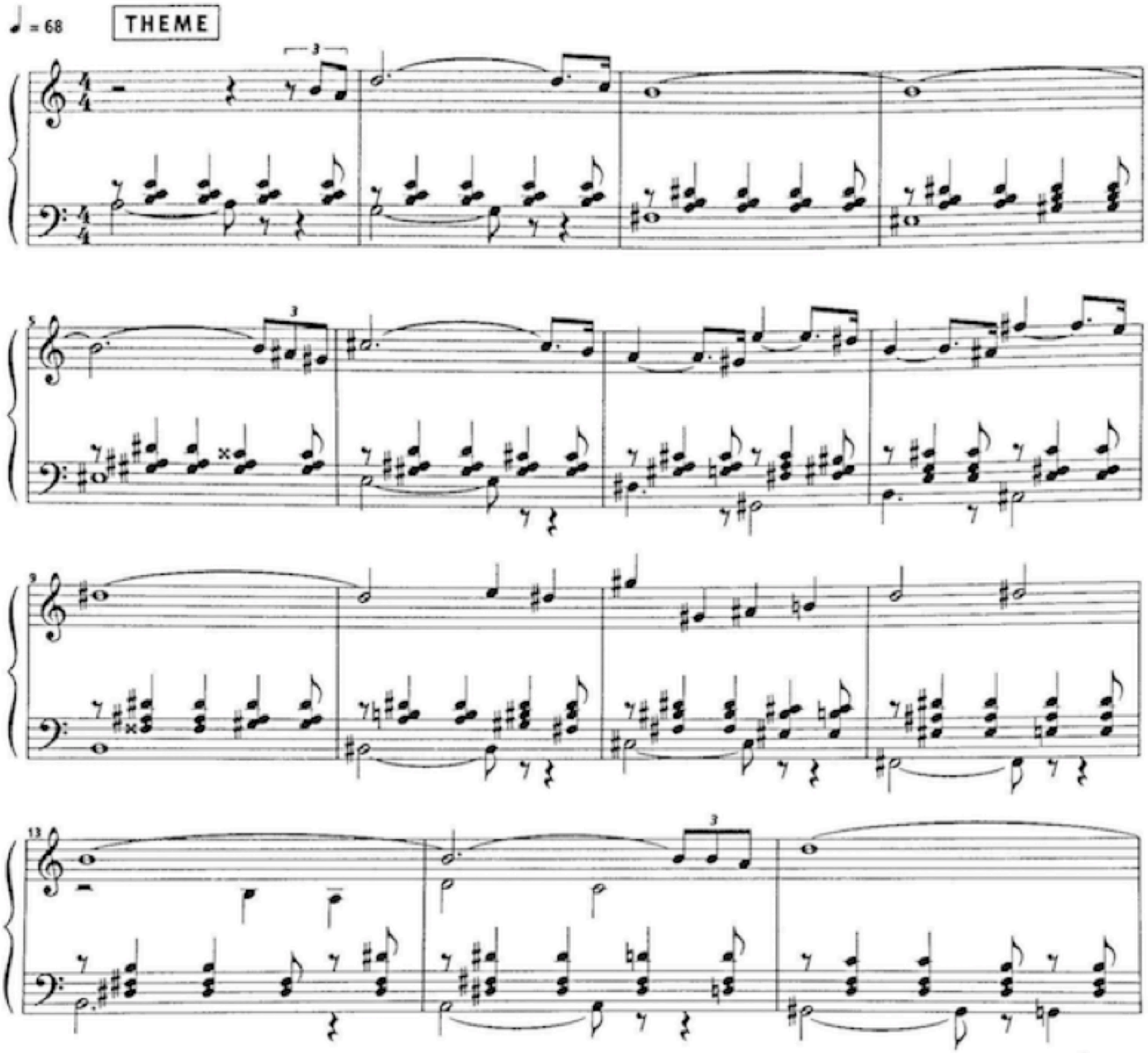
[6] Michael Lucke's transcription is available for purchase on his Patreon page. https://www.patreon.com/michaellucke

[7] A partial transcription of this piece, by Vincent Sorel, can be found at the following link: http://sorwellz.free.fr/jazz-transcription/Mehldau-waltz%20for%20JB.pdf

[8] For example, I have chosen not to analyze any of Mehldau's compositions covered in Danny Arthurs's insightful dissertation.

harmonic devices discussed in the first portion of this chapter. While my thesis as a whole focuses on Mehldau's relationship to rock, there are undeniable links between the expanded tonal harmony of 19th-century Romantic music and late 20th-century tonal or modal rock which justify spending a bit of time with two more Romantically-inclined compositions. Although there is no descending-bass lament progression in the otherwise appropriately titled "Lament for Linus," another composition from *Elegiac Cycle,* "Bard," features extensive use of this device. In Figure 1.24 below, I provide an excerpt from Philippe André's transcription of "Bard" (André 2011, p.56). The overall form consists of a 22-bar theme in A minor, with a PAC in B major halfway through, followed by a reprise which features a slightly more involved (arpeggiated) form of accompaniment. The excerpt copied here consists of the first half of the theme, until the cadence in B major. The harmony of this piece reminds me of the famous E-minor prelude by Chopin (op. 28, no.4), where the chromatic nature of the harmony is guided by stepwise motion in the bass and parsimonious voice leading with reduced concern for harmonic syntax. While this kind of harmonic progression is not a lament-bass progression properly speaking, "Bard" is a great example of Mehldau's fondness for linear bass lines, not only between I and V, and not only descending; in mm. 1-7 the bass descends a tritone from A to D#, and in the following four measures, rises chromatically from A# to C#. Although the harmonic language of "Bard" is undoubtedly Romantic, the relationship between the key areas of A minor and B major is unidiomatic of Chopin or Romantic music in general; this harmonic move is closer to the kinds of modulations found in rock, where

Figure 1.24 - Excerpt from Philippe André's transcription of "Bard," by Mehldau

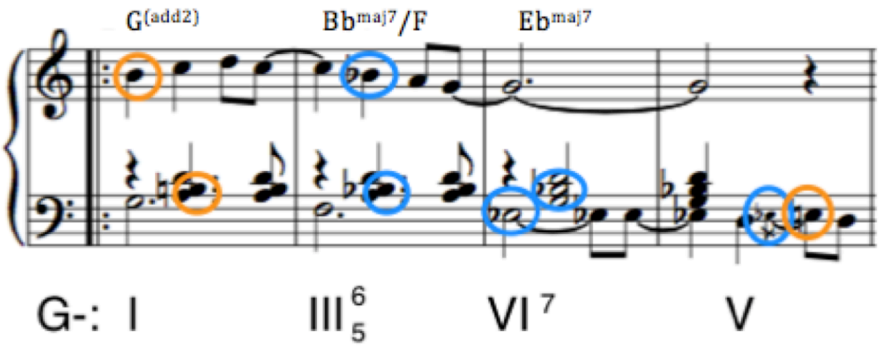


tonics a whole tone apart are common (though usually downwards as per the modulatory shifts between I and VII discussed earlier on). With regards to melody, the emphasis on B as well as the sequencing down a step of the melody (compare mm. 5-7 to mm. 1-3 in Figure 1.24) are further connections to Chopin's prelude. Texturally, Chopin's prelude

and Mehldau's "Bard" are both composed of block chords in the left hand (although in a syncopated rhythm in Mehldau's piece) and a stepwise melody in the right hand comprising mainly long notes. There is also an overtly organicist design behind this work; the opening melodic figure, B–A–D, is a musical cryptogram for Brad's name, and returns at the very end of *Elegiac Cycle*, in "The Bard Returns."

Next, I turn my attention to the opening of Mehldau's "Don't Be Sad." This piece is featured on the 2010 album *Highway Rider*, a double disc of original works arranged for chamber orchestra, led by Dan Coleman, and featuring long-time musical partners drummer Jeff Ballard, bassist Larry Grenadier, and saxophonist Joshua Redman. Many of the pieces on this album feature the harmonic devices discussed in this chapter, but I have chosen the opening progression of "Don't Be Sad" in particular because it illustrates two devices discussed in this chapter quite succinctly: lament-bass progressions and modal mixture. The reader will find a transcription of the opening in Figure 1.25. The initial harmonic progression is constructed on an unambiguous diatonic lament bass in G minor in the first four measures (then repeated in the following four measures), which is somewhat ironic considering the title. The four-bar phrase features extensive modal

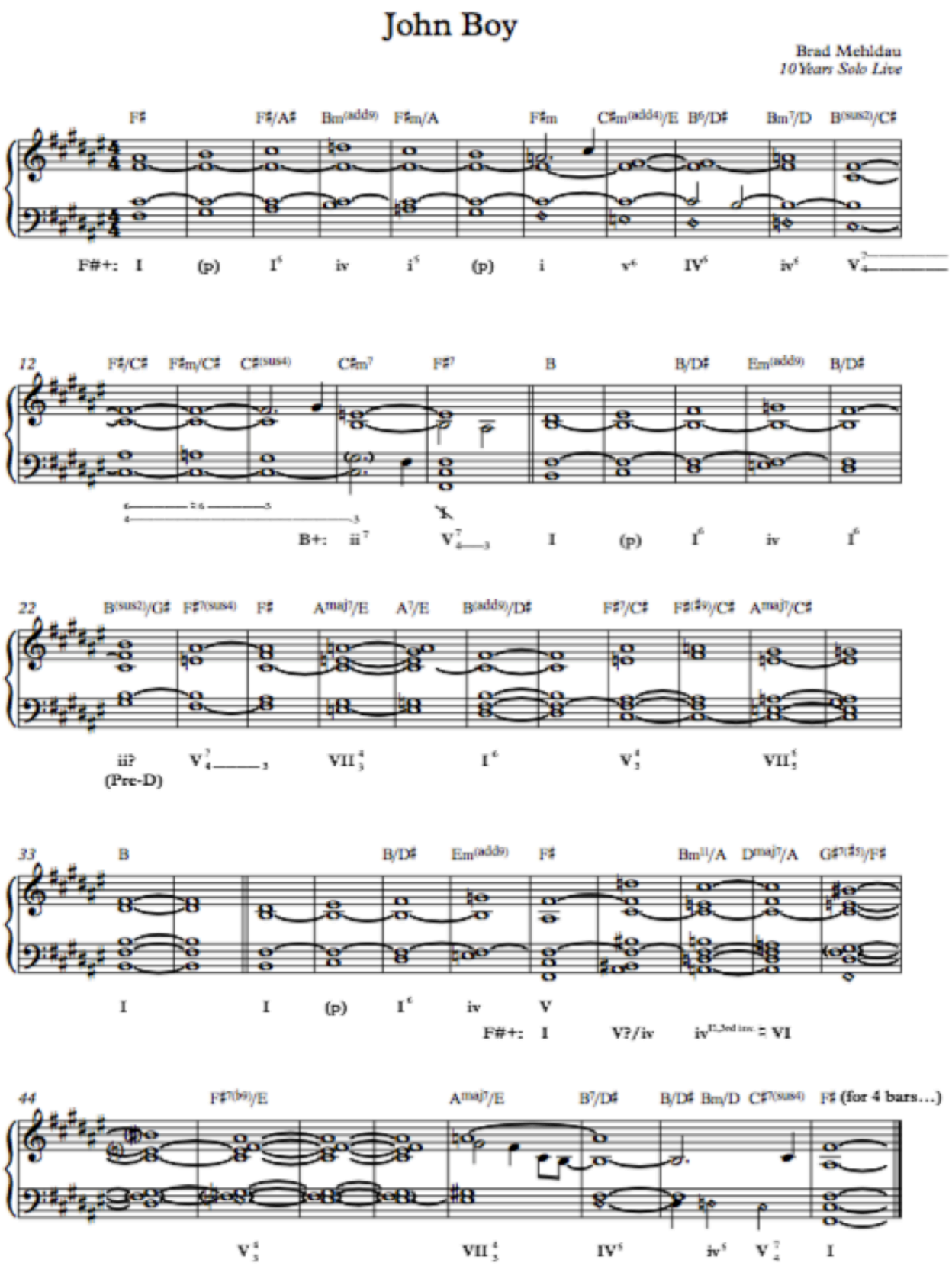
Figure 1.25 - Opening of "Don't Be Sad," by Mehldau, featuring a lament bass and modal mixture. Major and minor mediant and submediant scale degrees are labeled in orange and blue respectively.



mixture, as cross-relations between B and Bb and between E and Eb are frequent; in my transcription I have highlighted in orange the major or raised mediant and submediant scale degrees, and in blue the minor or lowered mediant and submediant scale degrees. For instance, the chromatic alteration from B in the first chord to Bb in the second chord is highlighted by the melody in the first two measures. Even more striking is the grace-note figure that first occurs in bar 4, pointing direct attention to Mehldau's fondness for major-minor rubs, in this case done by quite crudely juxtaposing the major and minor submediant scale degrees of the scale, in a blues-like fashion, as an attempt to replicate a bent note not available on the piano.

The other composition from *Highway Rider*, "John Boy," features many of the harmonic idioms discussed in this chapter. In Figure 1.26, below, I provide a harmonic reduction and analysis of the work, based on Michael Lucke's transcription of Mehldau's solo interpretation from *10 Years Solo Live*. The excerpt I analyze does not represent the whole composition, but includes its complete harmonic progression; in the full version, this excerpt is preceded by an introduction (an 8-measure long tonic pedal), followed by two melodic variations on the 54-bar theme here analyzed, and concluding with an 8-measure long tonic pedal, as per the beginning. Perhaps the most prominent harmonic feature of this composition in F# major is the modal mixture, most notably the use of i and iv— see, for example, mm. 3 and 5 (I vs. i), m. 4 (iv in major), mm. 9-10 (IV vs. iv), m. 20 (iv in major), m. 42 (bVI in major), etc. Moreover, bVII is frequently used as a minor-mode or modal substitute for V.

Figure 1.26 - Harmonic reduction and analysis of Mehldau's "John Boy," from *10 Years Solo Live*



For example, in mm. 23-32, bVII is used as a dominant that expands V. Another modally-mixed dominant is used in m.15; this is highly unusual in classical music and common-practice jazz, yet quite common in rock. This modally-mixed dominant also functions as a pivot chord, initiating a ii-V-I progression in the new key of B major. In this view, the dominant arrival in m.15 is deceptively reinterpreted as having pre-dominant function towards the key of IV (B major).

Lament-bass progressions are indicated with diamond-shaped noteheads in my reduction (see mm. 7-11 and mm. 43-50). They occur towards the beginning and end of the theme, both times in the home key of F#. The first 7 measures consist of tonic prolongation: I to I6 via passing motion, decorated by a neighbouring iv, and passing down again to a root-position tonic. This is followed by a lament-bass progression, which descends from tonic to dominant. The dominant arrival is then elaborated by an extended cadential 6/4 (note in particular the tenor voice, which descends chromatically from B to G# in mm. 11-14), which leads us to expect a kind of PAC in m.16, but these expectations are unfulfilled, as indicated by the crossed-out I in m. 16.

Finally, I would like to point out the significant role of IV in this piece, which is used both in the midst of dominant to pre-dominant progressions (see m. 45 to the end), and on a larger scale, as a local tonic (mm. 17-38). Despite the overt classical influence in this piece, the emphasis on IV and use of bVII as a dominant substitute betrays a rock influence on Mehldau's own music.

The last example considered in this chapter is Mehldau’s "Waltz for J.B.", a waltz dedicated to Jon Brion. Of all the compositions discussed here, this is the most aligned with rock's aesthetic. In fact, there are very few classical or even jazz aspects of this piece

(outside of the melodic variations and improvisation). In Figure 1.27, I provide an overview of the form of the work, suggesting that the piece can be read either as ABAB (repeated binary form) or as verse-chorus, reflecting the strong rock influence.

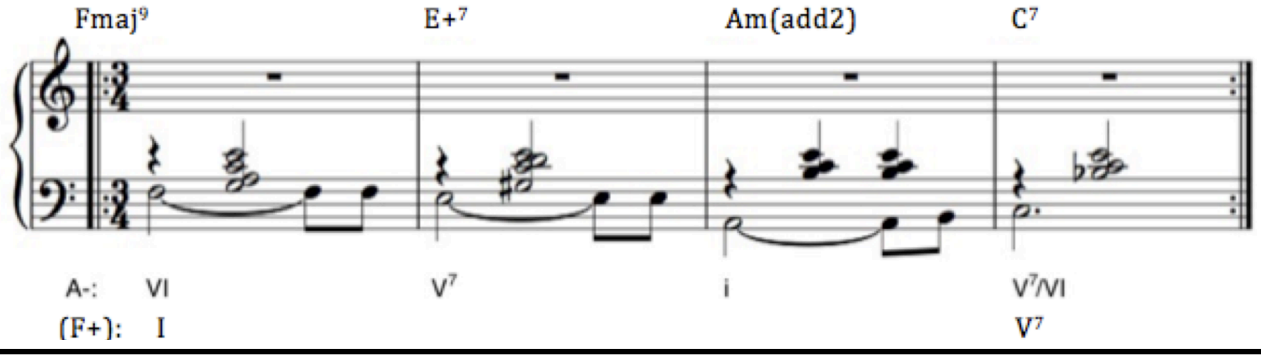
Figure 1.27 - Formal outline of Mehldau's "Waltz for J.B."

0:00	8mm.	Intro (4-chord loop)
0:17	16mm.	A section / Verse (same chord loop as intro)
0:49	16mm.	(variation)*
1:22	16mm.	B section / Chorus
1:54	12mm.	(repeat)
2:18	4mm.	4-chord loop (intro)
2:26	16mm.	A section / Verse
2:56	16mm.	(variation)*
3:28	16mm.	B section / Chorus
3:59	12mm.	(repeat of B section/chorus, lower register)
4:22	32mm.	Prolonged stretch on Aeolian pendulum
5:20	12mm.	(textural/registral shift)
5:33		(Aeolian pendulum ceases, end of B section material)
5:43	8mm.	4-chord loop (outro)
6:05		

*Fourth (last) chord loop employs major tonic (Amaj7), rather than A minor

The main progression in the verse or A section of "Waltz for J.B." consists of a four-chord loop, akin to a rock progression, which consists of a double-tonic progression simultaneously expressing A minor and F major (see Figure 1.28); the middle two bars are V–i in A minor, while the 4th bar into the first is V–I in F major.

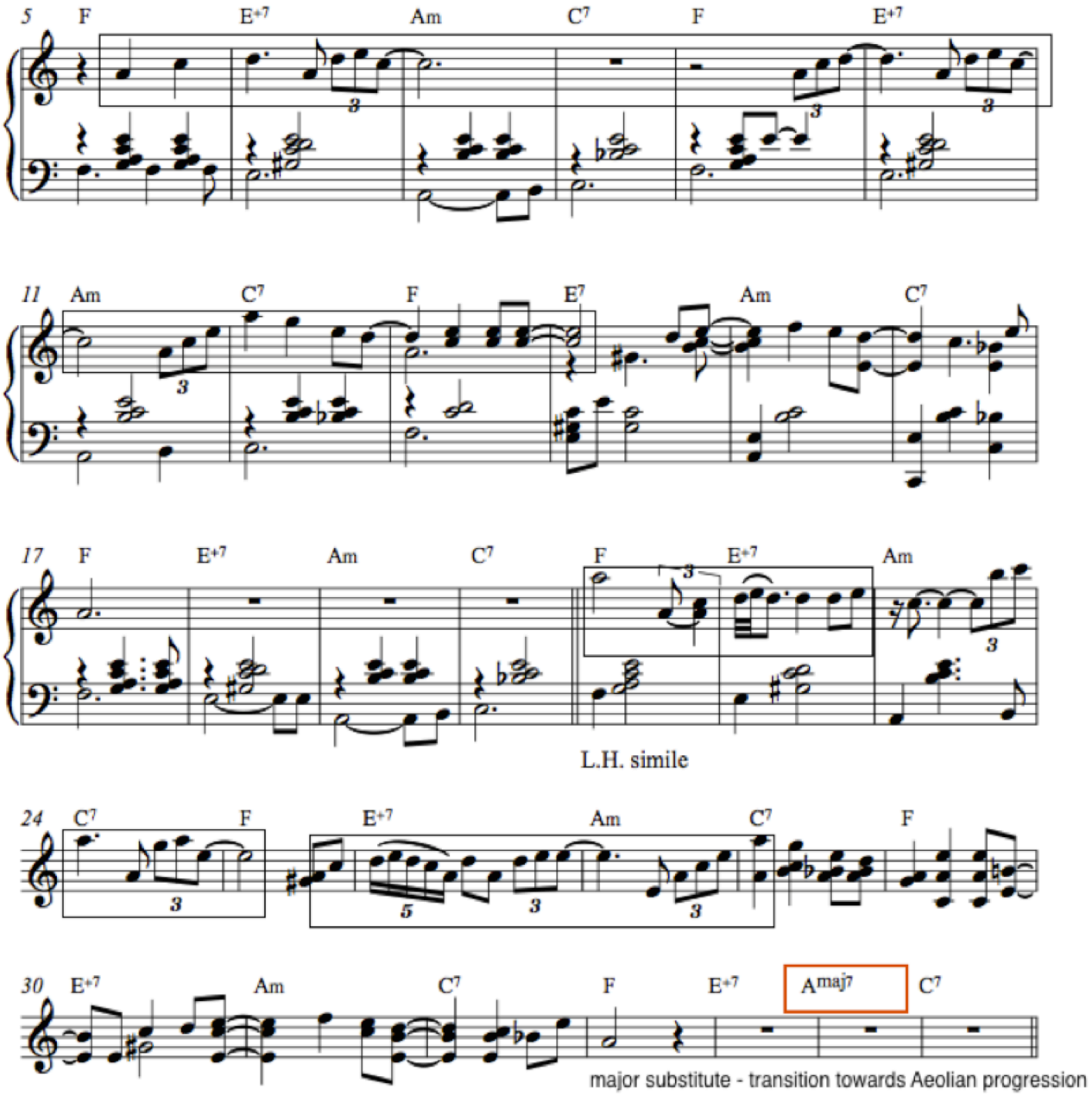
Figure 1.28 - Four-chord loop in Mehldau's "Waltz for J.B." (intro and A section)



F is in a stronger hypermetric position, but its status as tonic is weakened by the chord extensions (major 7th and 9th) and the high register of the bass (compared to the low bass note for the Am chord in the third measure). In other words, the first three chords clearly outline a VI–V–i progression in A minor, but the fourth chord, C7, gives the progression a rather ambiguous quality. Each time it occurs, the C7 seems to function as a dominant chord leading back towards F at the beginning of the progression, but this quickly proves to be ephemeral as E+7 comes back as the clear dominant of A minor. C7, a dominant seventh chord built on scale degree III and functioning as V7/VI, is analogous to the Eb7 in "River Man," which functions precisely the same way (and also in the context of a four-chord loop, though as the second chord rather than the fourth as per this example). Melodically, the rather simple, predominantly pentatonic nature of the melodic line recalls the tune of Massive Attack's "Teardrop." Mehldau's incorporation of pentatonic and blues-like scales is one of the many ways in which he evokes characteristic pitch structures of rock (see Figure 1.29).

In the liner notes of *10 Years Solo Live*, Mehldau states: "Waltz for J. B. is my own, and it is dedicated to Jon Brion. I've gotten to work with him as a producer of two of my records, but this song is dedicated to his songwriting. I named it for him after I wrote it because I heard so much of him in it (...) This tune followed the Nirvana tune ["Smells Like Teen Spirit"] nicely in concerts because they both play *on the rub between A major and A minor tonalities*" [my emphasis]. In "Waltz for J.B.", the rub between major and minor occurs in the B section or chorus of the piece: see, in particular, mm. 39-40 of Vincent Sorel's transcription, where the harmonic move from A major to C major allows Mehldau to juxtapose C# and C quite beautifully in an inner voice in the left hand

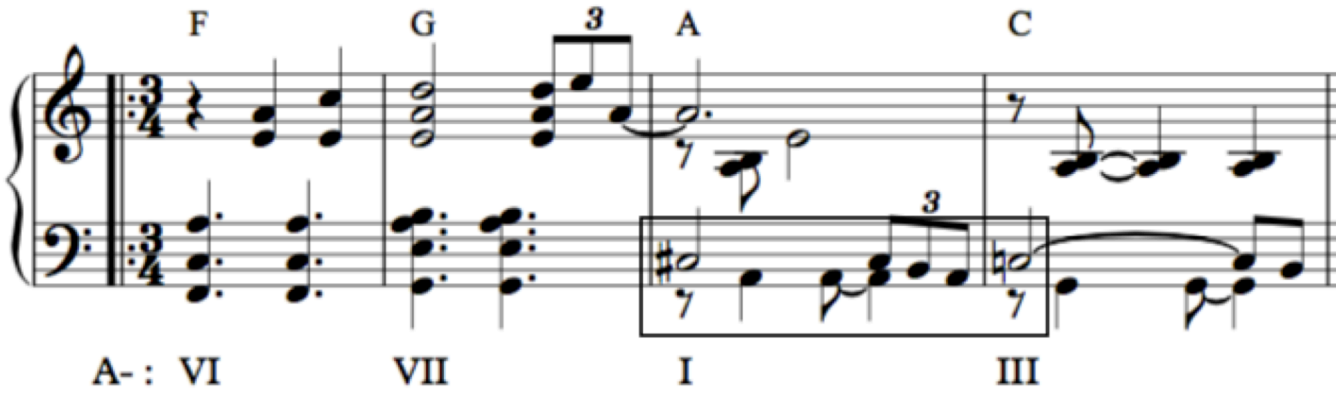
Figure 1.29 - Pentatonic features in the melody of Mehldau's "Waltz for J.B.," with A major substituting for A minor in the last instance of the four-chord loop before the B section (in orange). Excerpt from Vincent Sorel's transcription.



(shown in Figure 1.30). Furthermore, in the last instance of the four-chord loop in each verse, Mehldau replaces the A-minor harmony with A major (see the orange box in m. 35 of Figure 1.29). This serves as a transition towards the B section, which features the

Aeolian progression characteristic of rock music. Here, the progression is essentially F-G–A–C (all major chords), with chordal extensions added quite freely. Later in the B section (4:22–5:33), there is an extended passage that essentially improvises on an Aeolian pendulum, i.e. a repeated F–G–A–G progression.

Figure 1.30 - Section B of "Waltz for JB": Aeolian progression (first three chords) and "rub" between C# and C in the inner voice of the left hand (see boxed material)



In conclusion, in this chapter I have demonstrated the most prominent harmonic idioms in Mehldau's harmonic language. By demonstrating parallels between cover versions and his own compositions, I also hope to have shown that Mehldau's relationship to rock music is not merely a one-way street; in Mehldau's sound world, the relationship between jazz and rock[9] is *symbiotic*, precisely in the sense that Mehldau's aesthetic informs his choice of rock songs to cover, yet, at the same time, the harmonic peculiarities of rock music are infused in Mehldau's own harmonic palette.

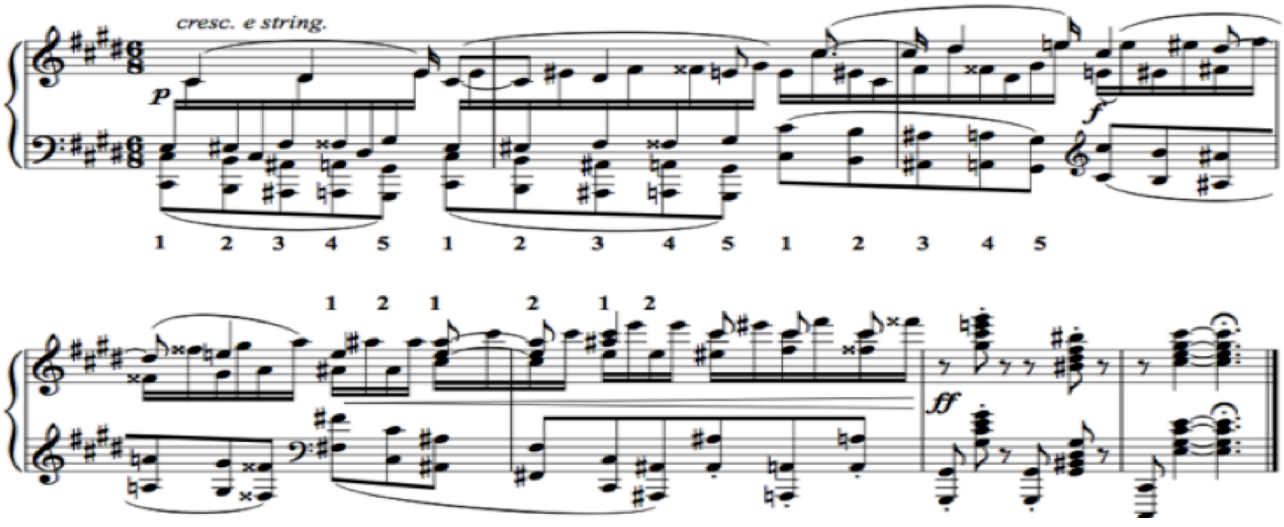
[9] And 19th-century classical music, as I've pointed out, though this is not the focus of this particular thesis.

CHAPTER 2
CONCERNING RHYTHM AND TEXTURE

2.1 The influence of classical music and rock on Mehldau's rhythmic language

In "Rock Hemiolas,"[1] an essay originally published in *Arcana VI: Musicians on Music* (a collection of essays by musicians edited by John Zorn), while speaking of odd meters, Mehldau states that: "[for him], the portal into that rhythmic world when [he] was ten was Rush" (Mehldau 2012, [2.5]), a Canadian progressive-rock trio known for rhythmically and metrically complex music. Mehldau traces some of the musical influences on his rhythmic language, more specifically on his composition "Boomer," featured on the trio album *House on Hill*. These influences range from the asymmetric 7/4 meter in "Subdivisions" by Rush, a group he adored as a young teenager, to the hemiolas of Brahms and of Led Zeppelin in "Kashmir." Mehldau cites a particularly interesting example of five-beat groupings in 6/8 meter towards the end of Brahms' Capriccio from Klavierstücke op.72, reproduced here in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 - Mehldau's example of a hemiola in Brahms's Capriccio from Klavierstücke, op.76



[1] Mehldau's essay is available here: https://www.bradmehldau.com/rock-hemiolas/

In his article, Mehldau reproduces an excerpt of his composition "Boomer" (from the 2006 album *House on Hill*), which features a traditional 4/4 backbeat in the context of a 7/4 meter, thus simultaneously referencing the septuple groupings of Rush's "Subdivisions" and the hemiola effect in Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir." At the same time, the piano and bass divide the 7/4 meter into two equal halves each consisting of seven 8th-notes, again referencing Rush's "Subdivisions" in its simultaneous use of 7/4 and 7/8 (see Figure 2.2). This excerpt from "Boomer" is reproduced here in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.2 - Mehldau's example of "large" and "small" 7 feeling in Rush's "Subdivisions (7/4 and 7/8 expressed simultaneously)

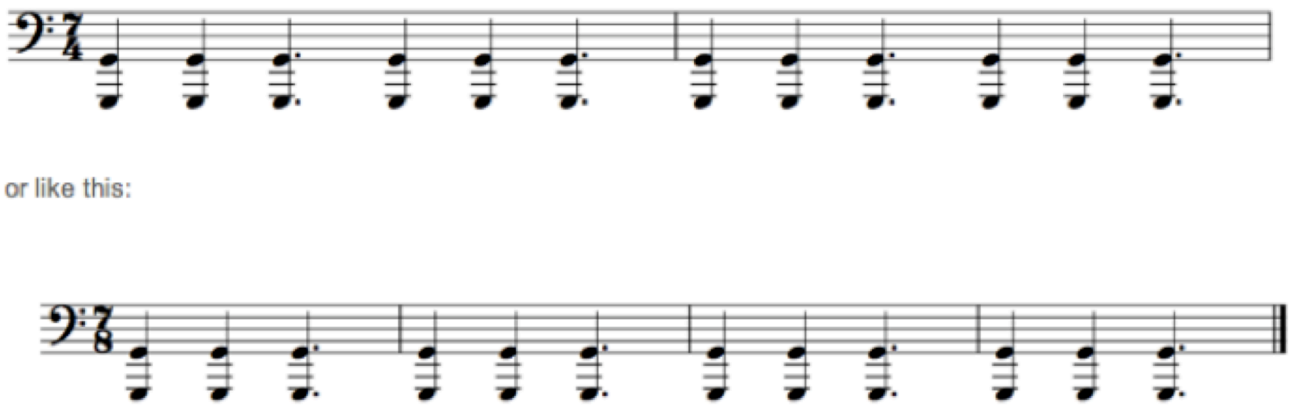
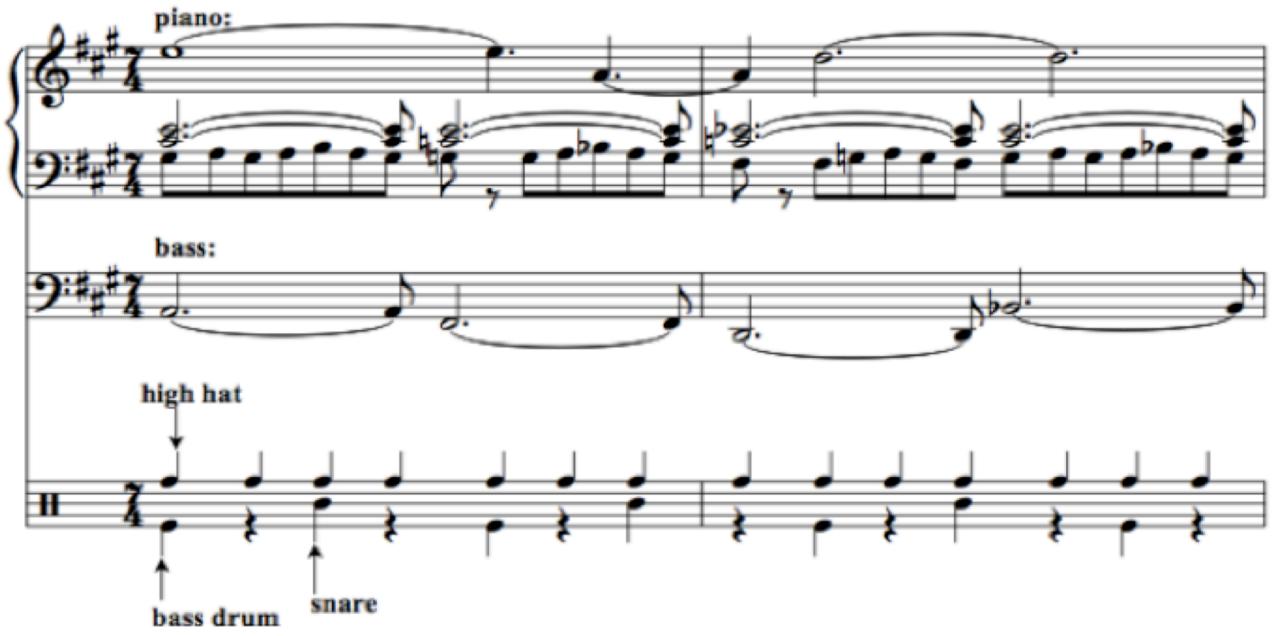


Figure 2.3 - Mehldau's excerpt of "Boomer," published in his article "Rock Hemiolas," which features elements of Rush's "Subdivisions" and Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir"



Besides a passing reference to Dave Brubeck for having contributed to the popularization of odd meters, there is no mention of other jazz musicians in Mehldau's brief article. Of course, the title of the article suggests that this is a piece of writing on rock, not on jazz. However, Mehldau elaborates considerably on the Brahms hemiola example, yet not at all when it comes to rhythmic dissonance in jazz. All this is to say that, while Mehldau is recognized primarily as a jazz musician, the focus of his discussion implies that his rhythmic language is anchored in other musics, i.e. various kinds of rock and classical music (most notably Brahms), in the same way that his harmonic language borrows heavily from such repertoires. This is not to say that Mehldau never ventures into more traditional jazz rhythms, or consciously avoids stylistically marked jazz rhythms; in fact, Mehldau is equally well versed in common-practice jazz rhythmic idioms, which is most apparent when he plays standards by Thelonious Monk, for example. However, for my analytical purposes, I am interested in the rhythmic devices that set Mehldau apart from other jazz musicians.

There are three recurring rhythmic paradigms in Mehldau's covers and compositions: odd-cardinality and changing meters, grouping dissonance, and various uses of 3+3+2 tresillo rhythms and other Euclidean rhythms. The first two paradigms are described by Mehldau in his own writing. Tresillo and Euclidean rhythms, which I will define below, are common in rock music (see Biamonte 2014 and Osborn 2014). In addition to these three rhythmic paradigms, I will discuss what I term "strumming textures" in Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers in a later portion of this chapter (section 2.3).

Unlike the previous chapter on harmony, here I will only discuss rhythmic

paradigms in Mehldau's covers, *not* in his compositions, though similar processes can be found in his own work (the composition mentioned earlier, "Boomer," is one example among many). I chose to limit myself to his covers for reasons of scope, but I hope that my thesis will encourage other scholars to pursue further analytical studies on Mehldau's rhythmic language. Also for reasons of scope, this chapter is organized by rhythmic paradigm, rather than by song as in the harmony chapter.

2.2 Three recurring rhythmic paradigms

In Table 2.1 below, I provide an overview of the three rhythmic paradigms, and examples of strumming textures as they are used in Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers and their corresponding originals. This is not an exhaustive list as I focus on one cover per song only; the cover versions are specified in the leftmost column, under the song title.

Table 2.1: Overview of rhythmic devices and strumming textures (grouped by original artist, then by alphabetical order)

Song title	Original	Mehldau cover
"And I Love Her" The Beatles Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	-Tresillo rhythm in the bass (ex: 0:21) -Reverse tresillo rhythm in the claves (2+3+3)	-Polyrhythmic passages at 8:49 (3:2), 11:01 (nested 4:3; also a kind of grouping dissonance as the polyrhythm lasts three beats in a 4/4 meter), 12:11 (3:2) -Strumming textures throughout (ex: 5:36, 10:41, 13:43)
"Blackbird" The Beatles Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	-Changing meter (3/4, 4/4, 2/4)	-Changing meter (3/4, 4/4, 2/4) -Some hemiolas (ex: 0:17)
"Martha My Dear" The Beatles Cover version: *Live in Marciac*	Changing meter (3/4, 2/4, 4/4)	-Changing meter (3/4, 2/4, 4/4) -Polyrhythmic passage at 4:14

"Junk" Paul McCartney Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	—	—
"Exit Music (For a Film)" Radiohead Cover version: *Live in Marciac*	Changing meter (4/4, 2/4)	-Changing meter (4/4, 2/4) -Irregular groupings throughout -Strumming textures throughout
"Jigsaw Falling Into Place" Radiohead Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	-Tresillo grouping in the opening/main guitar riff -Grouping dissonance (ex: groupings of 3 at 2:59 in the high register of the guitar)	-Tresillo rhythms and grouping dissonance (see original) -Double tresillo rhythms throughout (ex: starting at 3:11) -Polyrhythmic passages (ex: 3:2 at 7:47)
"Knives Out" Radiohead Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*, "Version 2"	-Euclidean rhythm in the bass line (3+2+3) -Polyrhythmic passage at 2:00; 4:3 between quarter-note triplets in guitar and drum backbeat (although the kick-drum hits on the *and* of 2 and 3 instead of on beat 3)	-Grouping dissonance: 4-note pattern played in triplets at 5:02, 6:07 -Flexible meter -Strumming texture throughout
"Paranoid Android" Radiohead Cover version: *Live in Tokyo*	-Changing meter (4/4 x 2 to 7/4 at 5:47)	-Changing meter (4/4 x 2 to 7/4) -Polyrhythmic passages (ex: 4:3 starting at 9:40 mark; 3:2 starting at 10:57 mark) -Grouping dissonance, top voice at 10:40 -Strumming textures (ex: starting at 14:16)
"River Man" Nick Drake Cover version: *Live in Tokyo*	-Odd meter: 15/8 or 5/4 with triplets -Nearly Euclidean rhythms: 15/8 meter divided as 5+4+3+3 (strumming pattern of the guitar)	-Odd meter: 15/8 -Nearly Euclidean rhythms (see description of original at left) -Strumming texture 1:55-7:16
"Things Behind the Sun" Nick Drake Cover version: *Live in Tokyo*	—	Grouping dissonance + embedded hemiola (in the introduction)
"Lithium" Nirvana Cover version: *Live in Marciac*	—	-Clave rhythm at 2:58-3:02 -Grouping dissonance at 3:06 (groups of 3 sixteenth notes in 4/4) -(Extensive harmonic syncopation throughout)

"Smells Like Teen Spirit" Nirvana Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	— (Harmonic syncopation)	-(Harmonic syncopation) -Strumming textures (3:50, 7:02)
"Bitter Sweet Symphony" The Verve Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	—	-Unstable/changing meter until 2:28 (main riff arrival) and throughout thereafter whenever improvising/not playing the theme (ex: 3/4 at 3:32) -Tresillo rhythm at 5:43 (harmonic rhythm/accentuation) -Polyrhythmic passage at 6:55 (4:3) -Strumming texture (7:59-13:19)
"Dream Brother" Jeff Buckley Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	-Tresillo rhythm in the main guitar riff -Some polyrhythms (3:2) in the drum part (ex: 2:37)	-Tresillo grouping in the theme -Grouping dissonance (ex: groupings of 3 in the right hand at 7:19) -Other tresillo rhythms: in the top voice (5:04-5:06), also in the left hand at 6:34, accented high notes starting at 8:22, double tresillo rhythm at 12:11-12:14 -Harmonic rhythm of the ostinato bass line starting at 8:00: either tresillo or other Euclidean variations -Strumming textures (ex: starting at 3:57, 5:01) -Polyrhythmic passage (full of hemiolas) at 12:10-12:40
"God Only Knows" The Beach Boys Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	Somewhat polyrhythmic: vocal triplets over a quarter-note accompaniment (in the harpsichord, for example)	Fluid tempo leaves room for massive strumming textures throughout (ex: 2:18, 9:34)
"Hey You" Pink Floyd Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	- Somewhat polyrhythmic: vocal triplets over eighth-note accompaniment in the B phrase of the AABC verse -Implied Euclidean rhythm: 3+2+3 in the instrumental solo section starting at the 2:00 mark	-Same polyrhythms as original -Mehldau's articulation of the main riff outlines a tresillo rhythm -Changing meter at 3:04 (3/4) -Polyrhythmic passage at 4:17 (3:2)
"Holland" Sufjan Stevens	Odd hypermeter (7mm. groupings)	"-Same odd hypermeter as per original -Polyrhythmic passages (3:2) (ex:

Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*		7:32 mark) -Strumming texture begins at 6:58 mark (also marking a shift from swing feel to straight eighths)
"Interstate Love Song" Stone Temple Pilots Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	-Double tresillo rhythm in the main riff (first occurrence at 0:17)	-Double tresillo rhythms (see original) -Some hemiolas throughout (related to the first four attacks of the double tresillo pattern) -Strumming texture starting at 7:28 (repeated tonic pedal tone, eventually leading into strumming of fuller chords)
"La mémoire et la mer" Léo Ferré Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	—	Strumming texture throughout (2:48-9:05)
"Roses Blue" Joni Mitchell Cover version: *Live in Tokyo*	-Odd/changing meter (first two chords: 5/4, 7/4) -Odd hypermeter (10mm.)	-Odd hypermeter (as per original) -(Unstable meter throughout) -Strumming throughout
"Teardrop" Massive Attack Vienna concert* (unreleased) Youtube link: watch?v=5GNuMfQ1N0g	Somewhat polyrhythmic: vocal triplets against (duple) backbeat accompaniment	-Same polyrhythmic feel (see original) -Grouping dissonance: groupings of three in the right hand starting at 3:42 -Strumming texture starting at 3:54
"Waterloo Sunset" The Kinks Cover version: *10 Years Solo Live*	—	Somewhat polyrhythmic as Mehldau interprets the melody with a triplet feel over a duple accompaniment
"50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" - Paul Simon Cover version: *Live in Tokyo*	—	Strumming texture (4:23-5:35)

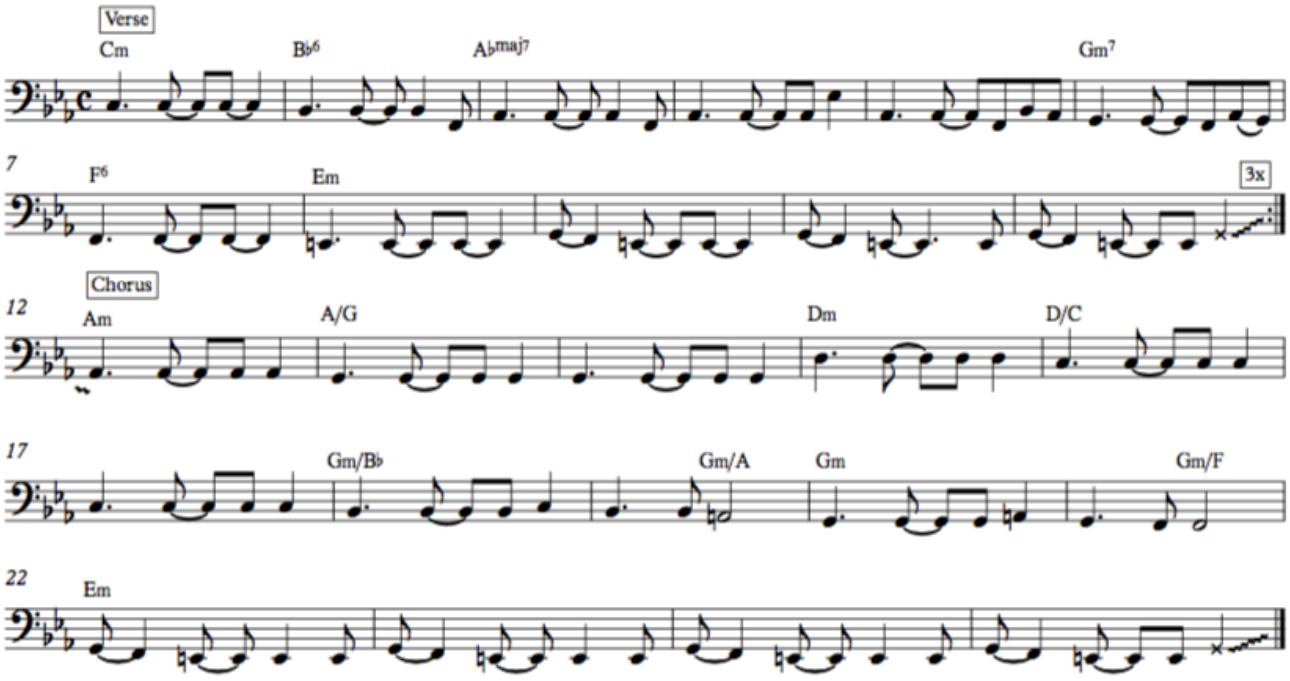
Odd-cardinality and changing meters

Of the 23 rock songs surveyed here, only three employ odd-cardinality meters: "River Man," "Roses Blue," and "Paranoid Android." The most notable example is the 5/4-meter of Nick Drake's "River Man, used throughout, which Mehldau arguably interprets as 15/8. On the surface, these two meters appear to be rather different, but given the swung quality of Drake's meter, the two are very similar (i.e. a swung 5/4 can sound like a straight 15/8). In "Roses Blue" and "Paranoid Android," odd meters are used only temporarily to create a destabilizing effect. "Roses Blue" opens with a bar of 7/4 followed by a bar of 5/4 before settling into a more comfortable and stable 4/4 meter. Radiohead truncates 2 measures of 4/4 into one measure of 7/4[2] towards the middle of the B section both times it occurs (at 2:09 and 5:47).

Some of the rock songs surveyed here exhibit odd hypermeters or phrase lengths. These include, for example, the 7-bar phrases in the verse of "Holland" (refer to the partial transcription in the appendix, p.119), the 10-bar phrase of "Roses Blue" (Figure 1.12), or the 11-bar verse in Radiohead's "Knives Out" (Figure 2.4). The effect of such hypermeters is not as immediately audible as the effect of odd meters, but it certainly takes away some of the squareness by which popular music is often characterized: a simple 4/4 meter throughout, emphasized by a backbeat, with phrases of 4, 8 and/or 16 measures. The unpredictable nature of odd meters and hypermeters seems to be an attractive rhythmic feature for Mehldau, who tends to avoid predictable phrase lengths when developing a theme (though the theme itself is always rendered in its original length).

[2] Or one measure of 4/4 into a 7/8 depending on one's interpretation of the tactus. This is, for example, Biamonte's reading (Biamonte 2014, Ex, 14b).

Figure 2.4 - "Knives Out" (bass line and chords of verse and chorus)



In addition to "Roses Blue" and "Paranoid Android," three other songs in Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers feature extensive use of changing meters: "Blackbird," "Martha My Dear," and "Exit Music (For a Film)." "Blackbird," uses a mixture of 3/4, 4/4, and 2/4 meter. Changing meters are used right from the onset of the song, which begins with a memorable introduction consisting of an unusually thin texture of solo acoustic guitar accompanied by a metronome-like ticking sound effect. This introduction is also memorable in part because of its duration of seven beats in total (3/4 + 4/4). The rest of the song is primarily in 4/4, with measures of 3/4 and 2/4 used to emphasize certain words in the text; the word "blackbird" from the phrase(s) "blackbird singing in the dead of night," is emphasized in the context of a 3/4 meter, while the short phrase "all your life" is set to a 2/4 meter, matching the natural rhythm of the words. The last phrase of the chorus, "into the light of the dark black night," is set to 5 beats (2/4 + 3/4) with a

pickup.

In Mehldau's covers, changing meters are occasionally used quite freely to instill a sense of instability. These can be hard to transcribe, or even interpret, because meters are not always clearly defined in Mehldau's covers, particularly in strumming textures in development-like sections,[3] where the tempo is quite malleable. Another issue is that changing meters are subjective and can often be interpreted in more than one way, for example as grouping dissonance or as a polyrhythm in a constant meter.

In general, odd-cardinality and changing meters are much more common in Mehldau's own compositions than in his covers. When it comes to rock, Mehldau is certainly attracted to odd-cardinality and changing meters; however, Mehldau never changes the meter of rock songs in his covers when playing the theme.[4] Instead, it seems that Mehldau preserves the original metric framework in order to keep the song recognizable while altering and enriching the rhythms.

Polyrhythms and grouping dissonance

Polyrhythms and grouping dissonance function similarly insofar as they are both expressed by the juxtaposition of two rhythmic layers: one that is consonant with the meter and one that is not. Grouping dissonance tends to resemble polyrhythm when the groups are of the same length and are repeated a sufficient number of times in a row; in

[3] Development sections in Mehldau's covers, which will be defined in more detail in the third chapter, occur between the statement of the theme and the recapitulation (the latter of which is most often present but not always). Development-like sections in Mehldau's covers feature harmonic and/or tonal instability, increased dissonance, and a focus on texture — via strumming textures, where chords or pedal tones are repeated in rapid succession — coinciding with a reduced emphasis on melody.

[4] The same is true of key: Mehldau always interprets rock songs (or at least the first statement of the core sections) in the original key.

this case the ear tends to interpret the groups as expressing a tactus of their own. Conversely, polyrhythms can be elaborated via grouping dissonance. In Figure 2.5, I provide a theoretical illustration of what I mean by this. In this model, the rhythms in m. 2 and m. 3 express grouping dissonance. Yet, as I show in the last measure, a simplified version of m. 2 or 3 is a 3:2 polyrhythm. In this way, grouping dissonance can be interpreted as a composing-out of a simple underlying polyrhythm, or a polyrhythm can be interpreted as a structural grouping dissonance — that is, the simplest form of grouping dissonance that has not yet been fleshed out. Thus, in this view, the relationship between grouping dissonance and polyrhythms is reciprocal, which I have expressed with a two-ended arrow in my model.

In Figure 2.6, I provide a concrete example of the abstract model suggested above. At 7:15 of Mehldau's cover of "Dream Brother" (mm. 173–177 of Lucke's transcription), Mehldau employs grouping dissonance by playing patterns of three rising sixteenth-note figures in succession. The highest pitch of each figure (or group) stands out of the texture and the lower notes do not change pitch, creating a slower-moving melody within the grouping dissonance. In the bottom portion of Figure 2.6, I reduce the passage by only including the high points of each figure. This uncovers the 4:3 polyrhythm, as four melodic notes occur every three beats (except for the second half of the second measure where the polyrhythm is briefly broken off).

Mehldau often employs rhythmic devices such as polyrhythms and grouping dissonance not present in the original songs, usually in the middle of the development-like sections of his interpretations. These devices are particularly effective when used within strumming textures, to provide rhythmic variety.

Figure 2.5 - Abstract model of grouping dissonance vs. polyrhythm

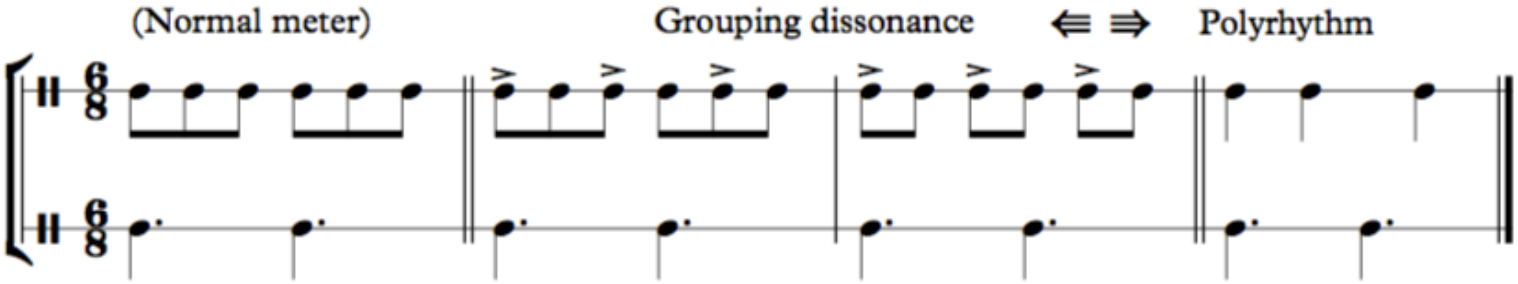
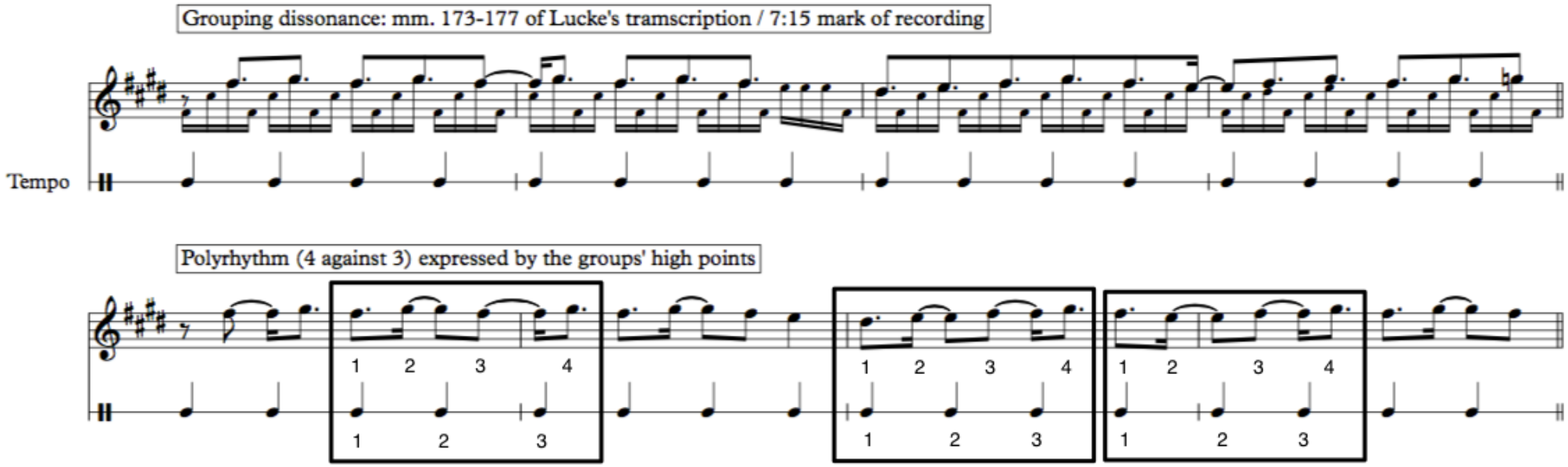
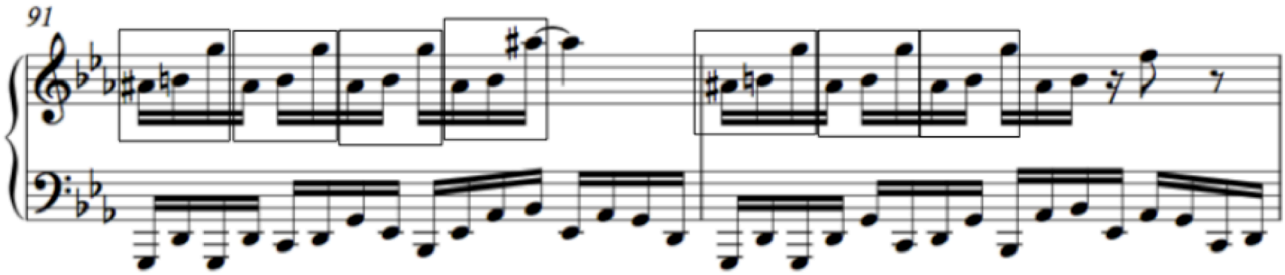


Figure 2.6 - Example of grouping dissonance as a composing-out of a polyrhythm in Mehldau's cover of "Dream Brother" (excerpt from Lucke's transcription)



Given that strumming textures are typically composed of a running stream of continuous sixteenth notes, rhythmic interest can be created by segregating this continuous stream into dissonant groupings. One example of this occurs in the development section of Mehldau's cover of Nirvana's "Lithium," as seen in Figure 2.7 (an excerpt from Vincent Sorel's complete transcription), where the sixteenth-note ostinato bass line is juxtaposed with a melodic line, also in sixteenth notes but segregated by contour into groups of 3, thus producing dissonance against the duple meter.

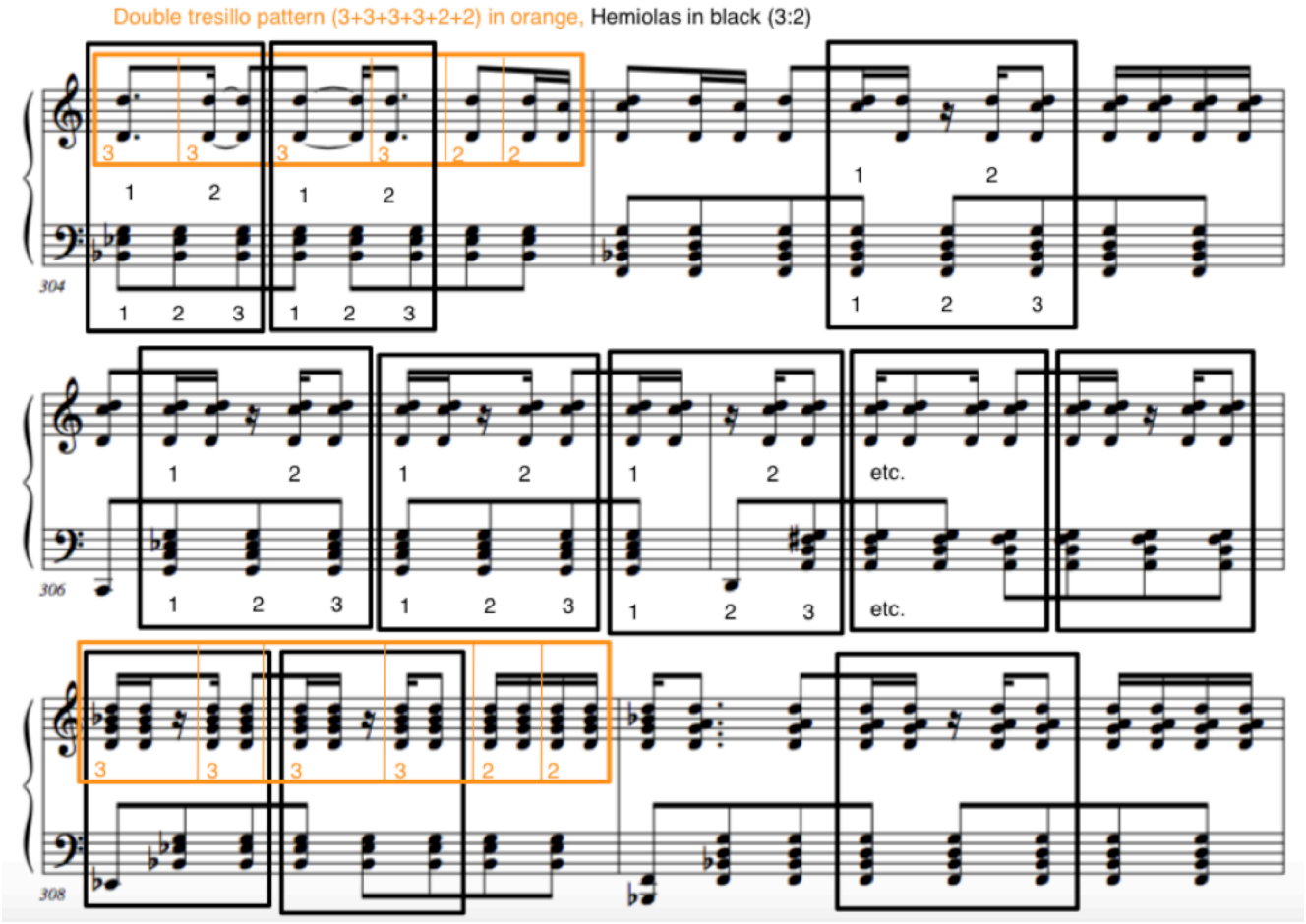
Figure 2.7 - Grouping dissonance at 7:19 of Mehldau's cover of Nirvana's "Lithium" from *Live in Marciac*: Groups of 3 sixteenth notes in the middle of the development section, over ostinato bass line. Excerpt from Vincent Sorel's transcription.



For an example of a polyrhythm of Mehldau's making — that is, a polyrhythm not present in the original song — consider Figure 2.8, an excerpt from Lucke's transcription of Mehldau's cover of Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother" (12:12–12:25 of the recording, corresponding to mm. 304–309 of the transcription). Given the narrative arch of this ternary-form cover, one could say that this passage occurs towards the very end of the development-like section, shortly before the recapitulation. There are multiple hemiolas throughout, which I have labeled in black; at first, the hemiolas in m. 304 are quite obvious, as they are bare polyrhythms of the simplest kind (3:2), yet later on, from m. 305, these structural hemiolas are composed out as grouping dissonances. In orange, I

have labeled a particularly prevalent rhythm in rock music: the double tresillo rhythm (Biamonte 2014, [3.3]). Tresillo rhythms are a type of Euclidean rhythm, which I will define and discuss in the next portion of this chapter.

Figure 2.8 - Polyrhythms (3:2) followed by composed-out variants (grouping dissonances) in Mehldau's cover of Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother" (excerpt from Lucke's transcription).



Another good example of a polyrhythm in Mehldau's covers is his introduction to Nick Drake's "Things Behind the Sun." In Figure 2.9, I reproduce an annotated excerpt from Sorel's transcription which shows the dissonance of 3-eighth-note groups within a 4/4 meter. Even more interesting about this example, however, is the embedded hemiola

within each dissonant group. In Figure 2.10, I have rewritten each metrically dissonant motive on two staves to show the underlying hemiola implied by each group.

Figure 2.9 - Mehldau's introduction to Nick Drake's "Things Behind the Sun" (excerpt from Vincent Sorel's transcription), featuring grouping dissonance

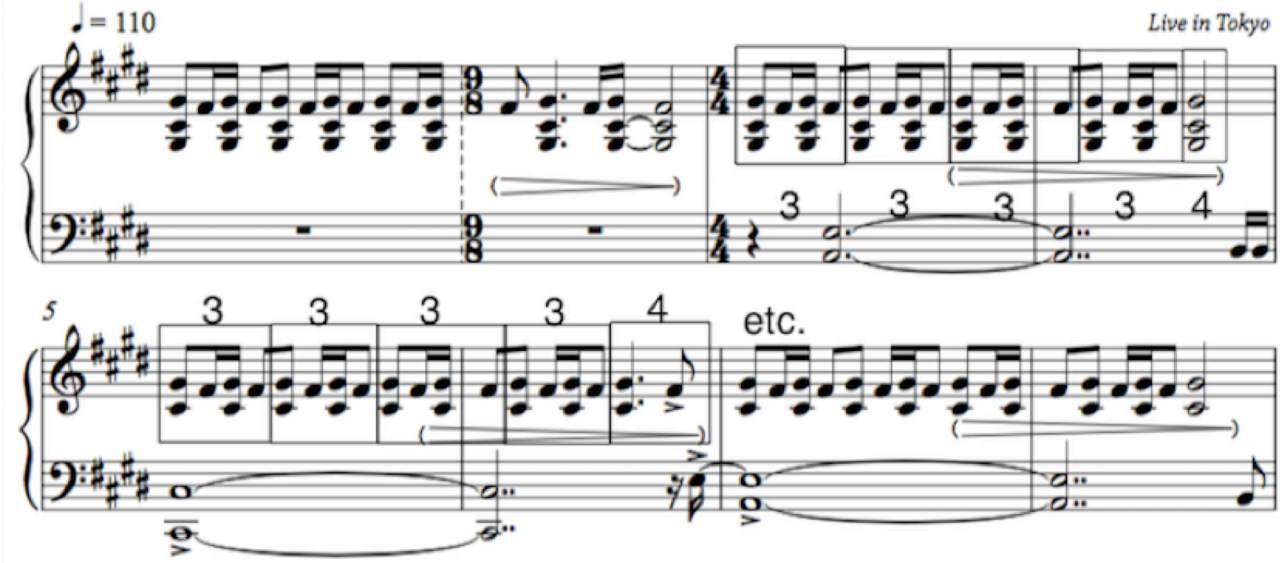
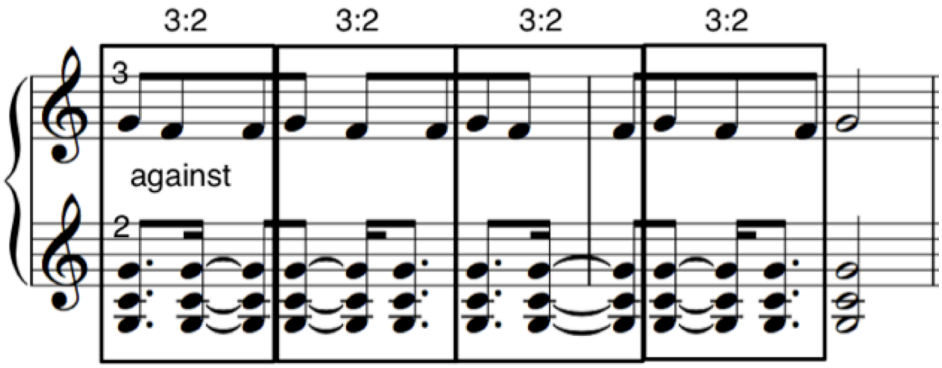


Figure 2.10 - Embedded hemiola within the grouping dissonance of previous example



In Figure 2.5 I presented a model in which grouping dissonance and polyrhythms can be conceived as two endpoints on a continuum; here, in the introduction to "Things Behind the Sun," the two rhythmic paradigms work in tandem.

Tresillo and other Euclidean rhythms

Euclidean rhythms are the *closest-to-even* distribution of onsets within a given number of time points (Osborn 2014, p.82). For a closest-to-even, yet not exactly even distribution of time points, the number of onsets in a measure must be co-prime with the total number of time points. For example, in 4/4 meter, there are 8 time points at the eighth-note level. The closest-to-even distribution of three attacks is 2+3+3 or any rotation thereof. Similarly, at the sixteenth-note level, 3 onsets can be distributed as 5+5+6, or 5 onsets as 3+3+3+3+4. Note that, in any Euclidean distribution, one ends up with two rhythmic values one integer apart.[5]

The tresillo rhythm is a particular kind of Euclidean rhythm, which groups 8 time points into 3 onsets as 3+3+2. The double tresillo pattern is most commonly two measures long[6] and duplicates the two sets of integers of the original tresillo pattern, hence, 3+3+2 becomes 3+3+3+3+2+2. The tresillo and double tresillo rhythms, along with other common clave-based rhythms in rock music, are illustrated in Figure 2.11 (Biamonte 2014). Note that the double tresillo pattern described above is not "maximally even" insofar as the onsets in time are not spaced as far as possible (i.e. the 2's are not spread out amongst the 3's, to the contrary, they are simply tacked on at the end of the rhythmic pattern). Since I do not care about this requirement, I prefer the term Euclidean rhythm, which Brad Osborn also uses for its slight differentiation from the more standard term of maximally even rhythm.

In Mehldau's rock repertoire, tresillo and double tresillo patterns are quite common. Paul McCartney's bass line in "And I Love Her," for example, utilizes simple

[5] Precisely because this is a *closest-to-even* distribution. Even distribution, by definition, would have even groups (hence only one duration).
[6] It can also take up only one bar in 16th notes; this is most common in funk.

tresillo rhythms throughout (see Figure 2.12). Moreover, the clave part of that song is a reverse tresillo pattern: 2+3+3 (the first rhythmic value is a rest). In "Knives Out," by Radiohead, a mixture of 3+2+3 rhythms in the verse and tresillo rhythms in the chorus — played primarily by the bass and the kick drum, as well as the rhythm guitar leading into the verse — are used as a groove (refer again to Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.11 - Tresillo and other common clave-based rhythms in rock music (Biamonte 2014, Ex. 8)

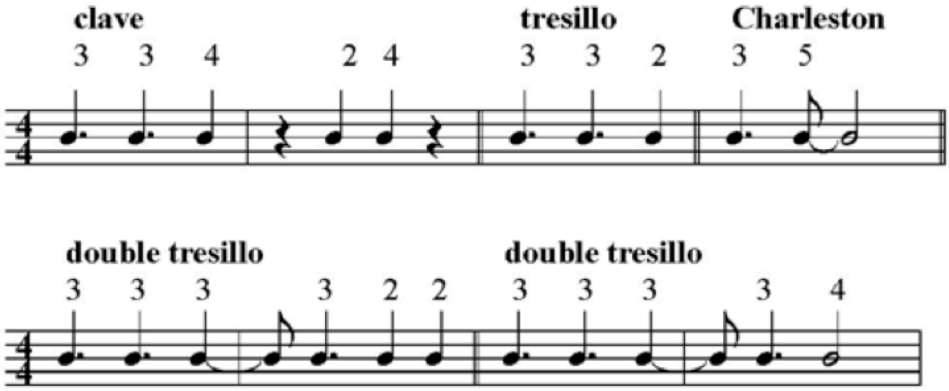
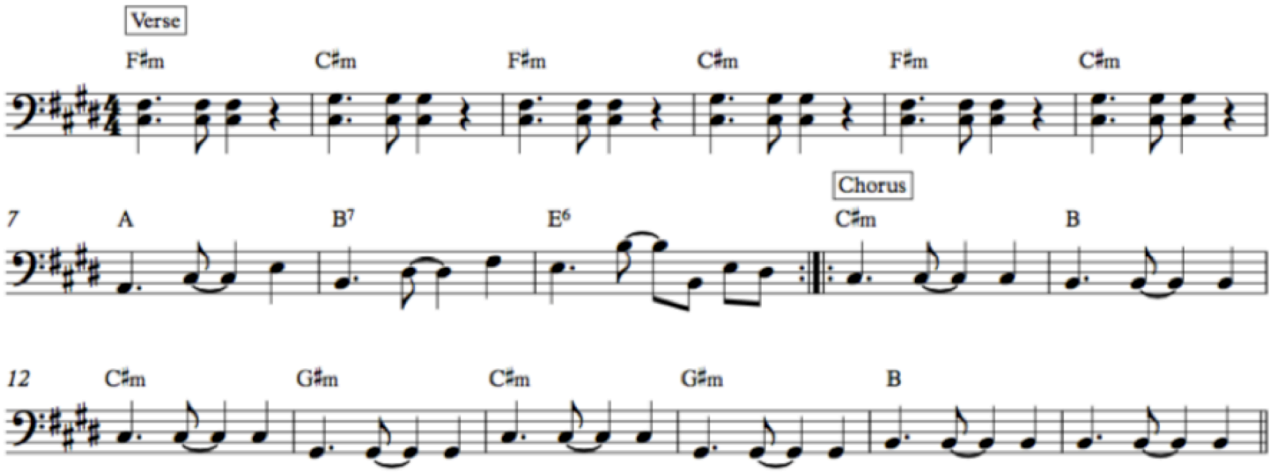


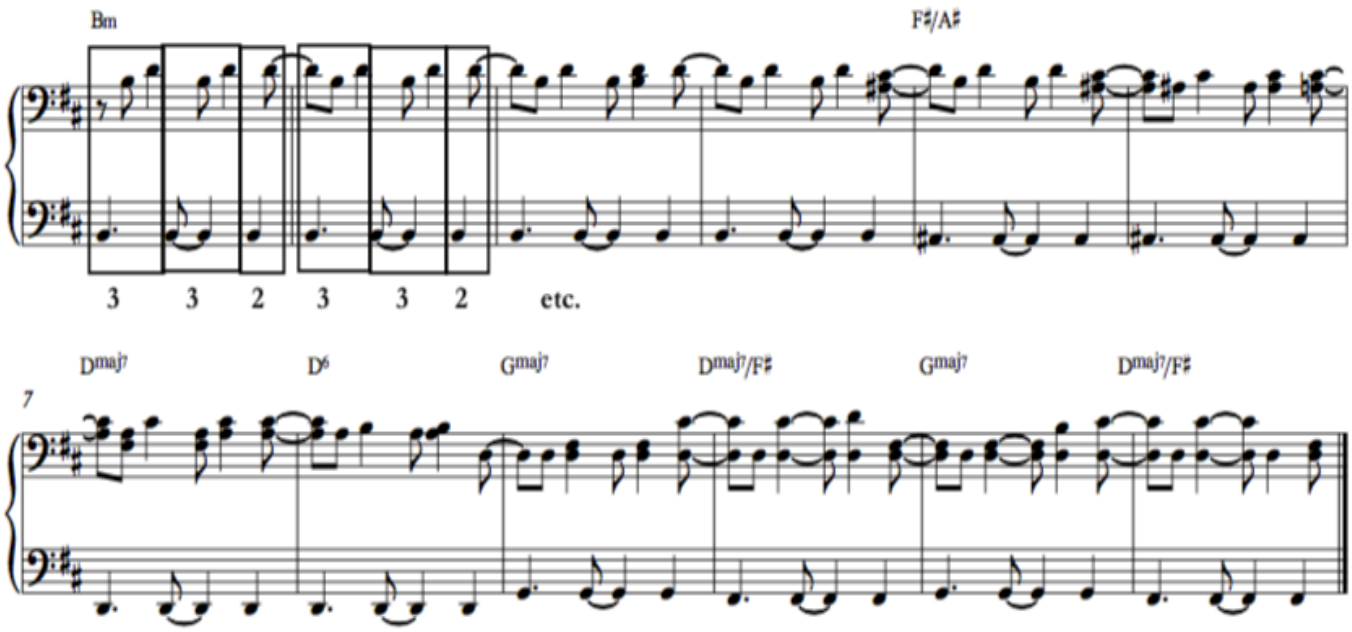
Figure 2.12 - Paul McCartney's bass line in tresillo rhythms from "And I Love Her"



The 3+2+3 rhythm of the groove in the verse is a Euclidean rhythm, which interacts with the otherwise square and even rhythm in the guitar arpeggios. Thus, the rhythmic

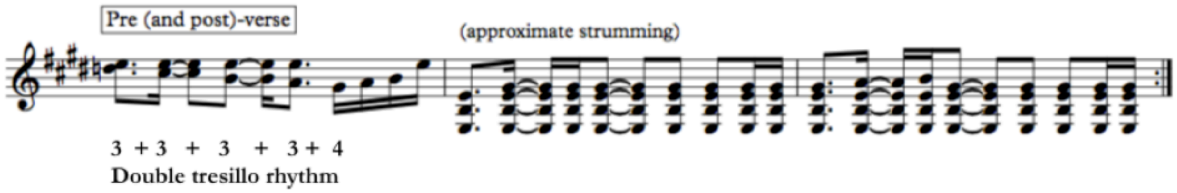
interplay or rub between the rhythmically even guitar work and the closest-to-even rhythmic distribution in the drum and bass parts provides a groove-based framework on top of which Thom Yorke can float, singing rhythmically simple lines, mainly consisting of long notes in a high register. Radiohead's music in general is well known for its use of Euclidean and maximally-even rhythms (see Osborn 2014 and 2017). One other prominent example from Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers is "Jigsaw Falling Into Place," whose 4/4 meter is grouped in a tresillo pattern in the introduction (refer to Figure 2.13 for the opening of "Jigsaw Falling Into Place"). In this Radiohead song, the tresillo grouping is featured in the introduction only, which is texturally thin compared to the verse and chorus. The rhythmic dissonance created by this tresillo rhythm *resolves*, so to speak, when the duple regularity of the backbeat drops out at 0:17. Tresillo rhythms do not recur later in the song, but they do anticipate the extensive grouping dissonance that begins around the 3-minute mark and remains until the very end.

Figure 2.13 - Opening of Radiohead's "Jigsaw Falling Into Place," featuring tresillo groupings



A good example of a double tresillo pattern occurs in the main riff of "Interstate Love Song" by the Stone Temple Pilots. In Figure 2.14, I have transcribed this riff, which precedes every verse in the song. Here, the rhythmic distribution is 3+3+3+3+4 at the sixteenth-note level (see the first measure of Figure 2.14), a slight variation on the 3+3+3+3+2+2 pattern. The function of this double-tresillo pattern is not unlike the tresillo grouping in the introduction of "Jigsaw Falling Into Place"; the dissonance created by this grouping provides contrast with the squareness of the verse that ensues, making its arrival all the more satisfying. There are no other clave-based patterns used in this song, which makes the riff from Figure 2.14 stand out as being particularly important. Mehldau's cover of this song spends a great majority of time on this riff alone, so much so that the rhythmically square verse-chorus material takes up only about 12% of the duration of the entire cover.

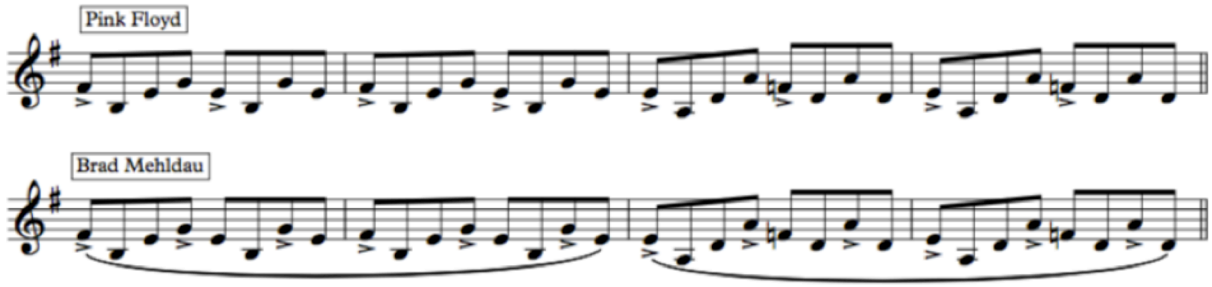
Figure 2.14 - Double tresillo riff in "Interstate Love Song," by the Stone Temple Pilots



My claim regarding the prevalence of tresillo patterns in Mehldau's aesthetic is not limited to his choice of rock songs to cover; tresillo patterns are also an integral part of Mehldau's own idiolect. Consider the opening riff of Pink Floyd's "Hey You," which is played as an unambiguous 4/4, with slight accentuation on beats 1 and 3, i.e. the strong beats of the measure. On the other hand, Mehldau's articulation of this riff (in his cover

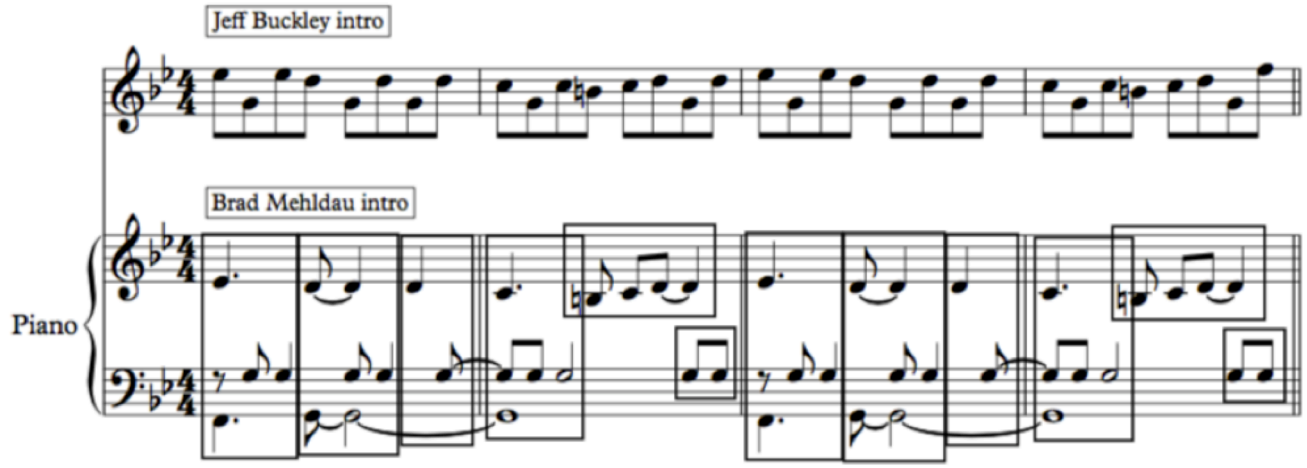
on *10 Years Solo Live*) clearly emphasizes the groupings of a tresillo pattern, which is a simple but effective way to provide rhythmic interest without altering the original pitch content. In Figure 2.15, I provide a comparison of Mehldau's articulation of the main riff vis-à-vis the original.

Figure 2.15 - Comparative articulation of the opening riff from Pink Floyd's "Hey You"



A similar but slightly more subtle realization of a tresillo pattern occurs in the opening of Mehldau's cover of "Dream Brother" from *10 Years Solo Live.* In Figure 2.16, I compare Mehldau's opening four bars (on the grand staff) to the opening guitar riff in the original recording (treble staff). While the original guitar riff can arguably be heard in a 3+3+2 pattern, Mehldau's slightly altered version—which uses a pedal G in the middle voice throughout and simultaneously stresses the high points as melodic notes—is organized in a clear and succinct tresillo pattern.

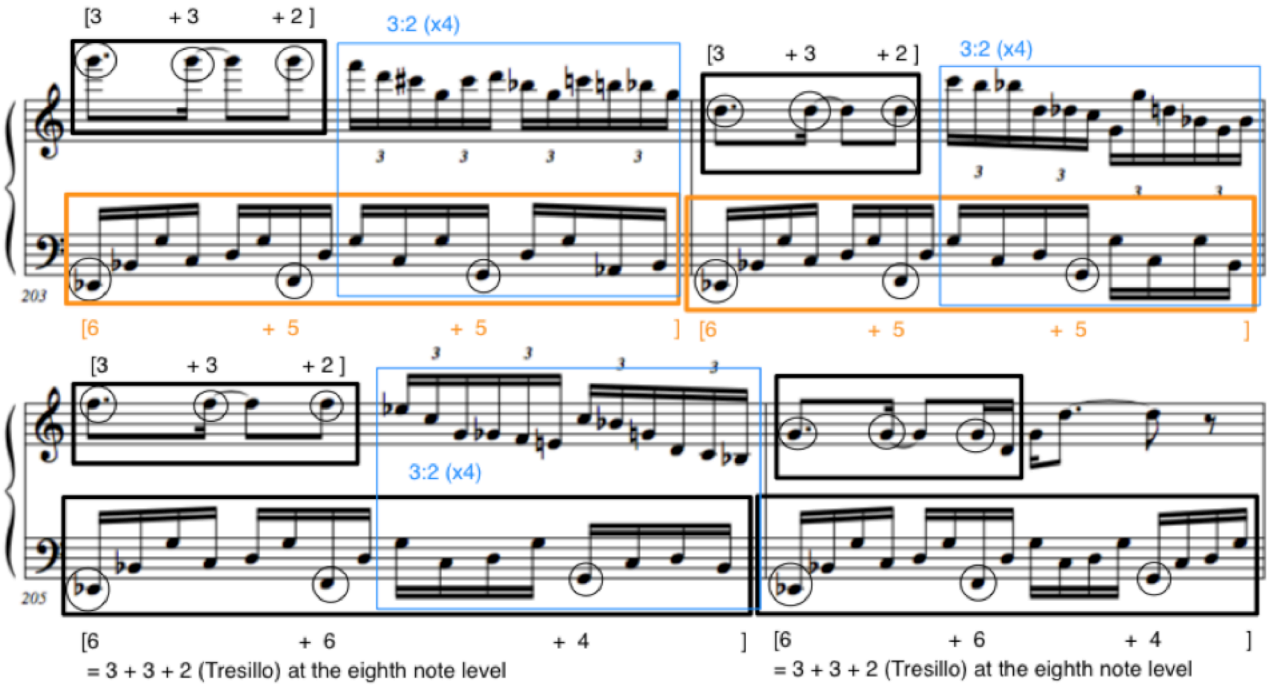
Figure 2.16 - Comparative realization of the opening riff from Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother"



Tresillo rhythms are also used in improvised development-like sections of Mehldau's covers. In Figure 2.17, I reproduce a short excerpt from Michael Lucke's transcription of "Dream Brother" (mm. 203-206), which corresponds to 8:22-8:31 in the recording, in the middle of the development-like section of the cover. In this example, tresillo rhythms are used on two hierarchical levels. The first and perhaps more obvious tresillo rhythm occurs on the surface, in the first half of every measure, where repeated notes are played in a salient register in a 3+3+2 pattern at the sixteenth-note level. The second tresillo rhythm occurs on a deeper level in the left hand of mm. 205-206 of the example. Here, the bass line Eb–F–G, which occurs at time points 1, 7, and 13, forms a 6+6+4 pattern of sixteenth notes equivalent to a 3+3+2 tresillo at the eighth-note level. However, this is not the case in the first half of the example (mm. 203-204), where the bass line is arranged in a 6+5+5 distribution, which is not a tresillo rhythm, though it is a Euclidean rhythm nonetheless. The excerpt presented in Figure 2.17 is only a representative fraction of a larger section of music from 8:00 to 8:40. Throughout this passage, an ostinato bass line is used — much like in the "Lithium" cover discussed earlier and excerpted in Figure 2.7 — whose harmonic rhythm follows a Euclidean distribution most of the time, using the patterns shown in Fig. 2.17 (6+6+4=3+3+2 and 6+5+5). Two more analytical points, unrelated to Euclidean rhythms, are worth making regarding this example. The first is the use of surface-level 3:2 polyrhythms in the second half of every measure in Figure 2.17, a recurring rhythmic device in Mehldau's idiolect discussed earlier. The second point has to do with harmony: the progression expressed by the ostinato bass line in 8:00-8:40 of Mehldau's cover implies an Aeolian progression in the key of G (Eb–F–G as scale degrees b6–b7–1). The original of "Dream Brother" by Jeff Buckley features no such

Aeolian progressions, so this is another instance of Mehldau's incorporation of characteristic rock harmony.

Figure 2.17 - Tresillo (in black) and Euclidean rhythms (in orange) on two structural levels: melody + harmonic rhythm, in "Dream Brother" cover (mm. 203-206 of Lucke's transcription) + 3:2 polyrhythms (in blue)

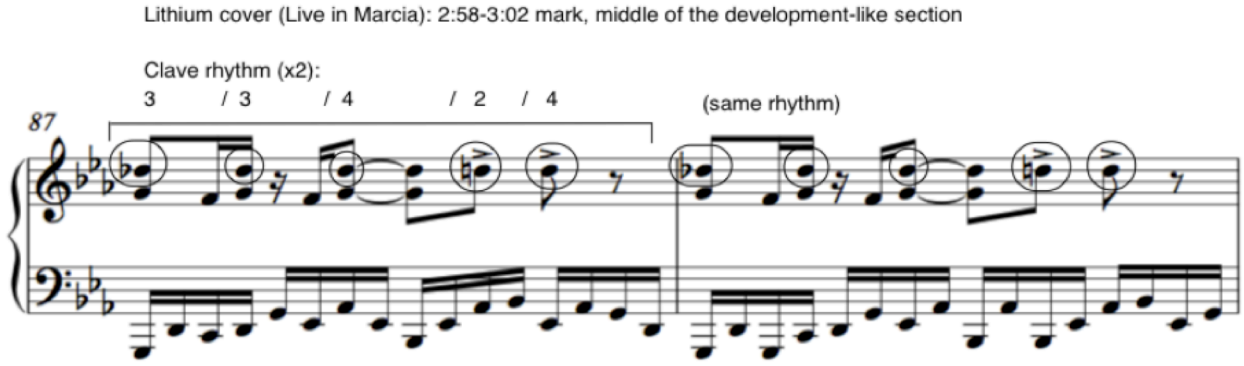


It is interesting to note that, in swung contexts, the tresillo pattern is no longer maximally even, as it becomes 5 + 4 + 3 triplet-8ths — this most likely explains why I haven't encountered a single tresillo rhythm in a swing rhythm in Mehldau's covers (or even his compositions), to the extent of my knowledge and scope of this research.

Another common rhythm in rock music, the source of the tresillo and double-tresillo rhythms, is the clave rhythm (refer to Figure 2.11, reproducing Example 8 from Biamonte 2014). The clave rhythm is usually two measures long in common time and divides 16 time points (16 eighth notes in this case) into 5 onsets: 3+3+4+2+4. This rhythm is not a closest-to-even distribution and therefore not a Euclidean rhythm. The

clave rhythm doesn't appear frequently in Mehldau's interpretations; it certainly is not a recurring archetype like the tresillo and double-tresillo patterns, which occur both on surface and deeper levels of structures in Mehldau's interpretations as well as their corresponding originals. However, one clear example of a clave rhythm exists in Mehldau's cover of "Lithium," by Nirvana. In Figure 2.18, which is an excerpt from Sorel's complete transcription, a complete statement of the clave rhythm is heard twice in succession, in the development-like section of the cover. The original song by Nirvana, by comparison, does not feature any form of clave rhythm. Unlike Figure 2.11, Mehldau's clave rhythm in “Lithium” occurs within the span of a single measure, rather than two as in the traditional model (in other words, the time points occur at the sixteenth-note level rather than the eighth-note level). Though I do not have empirical evidence to support this claim, it is interesting to note that the clave rhythm, which is much less common in Mehldau's covers than the tresillo pattern(s), is more frequent in common-practice jazz than the tresillo.

Figure 2.18 - Clave rhythm in "Lithium" cover (excerpt from Vincent Sorel's transcription)



2.3 Strumming textures

The idea of "strumming" as a way to describe a marked texture in Mehldau's music comes from two distinct origins. Strumming, of course, refers to the strumming of

the guitar, the emblematic instrument of rock music. But for me the idea of strumming also refers to the minimalist "Strumming Music" (1974) of pianist Charlemagne Palestine. In Palestine's music, strumming is achieved by rapid repetition of block chords (usually in sixteenth notes or a similar, regular rhythm), so as to produce a kind of sound mass. In his approach, derived from his experience as a carilloneur, strumming is used to explore overtones.

In Mehldau's approach, on the other hand, strumming textures are often employed to mimic the strumming of the guitar, and they can mimic the orchestration of the rock ensemble as a whole. In general, strumming textures can manifest themselves in three different ways in Mehldau's music; (1) as a repeated pedal tone (usually but not necessarily the tonic, in any voice); (2) as a rapid succession of block chords in an even rhythm (sometimes with a mixture of two rhythmic values); or (3) as a series of arpeggios. In Figures 2.19, 2.20, and 2.21, I give one example of each kind of strumming pattern, from Mehldau's covers of "River Man," "Teardrop," and "Dream Brother," respectively.

Figure 2.19 - Strumming texture as pedal tone, 1:55-2:16 of Mehldau's cover of "River Man" from *Live in Tokyo*

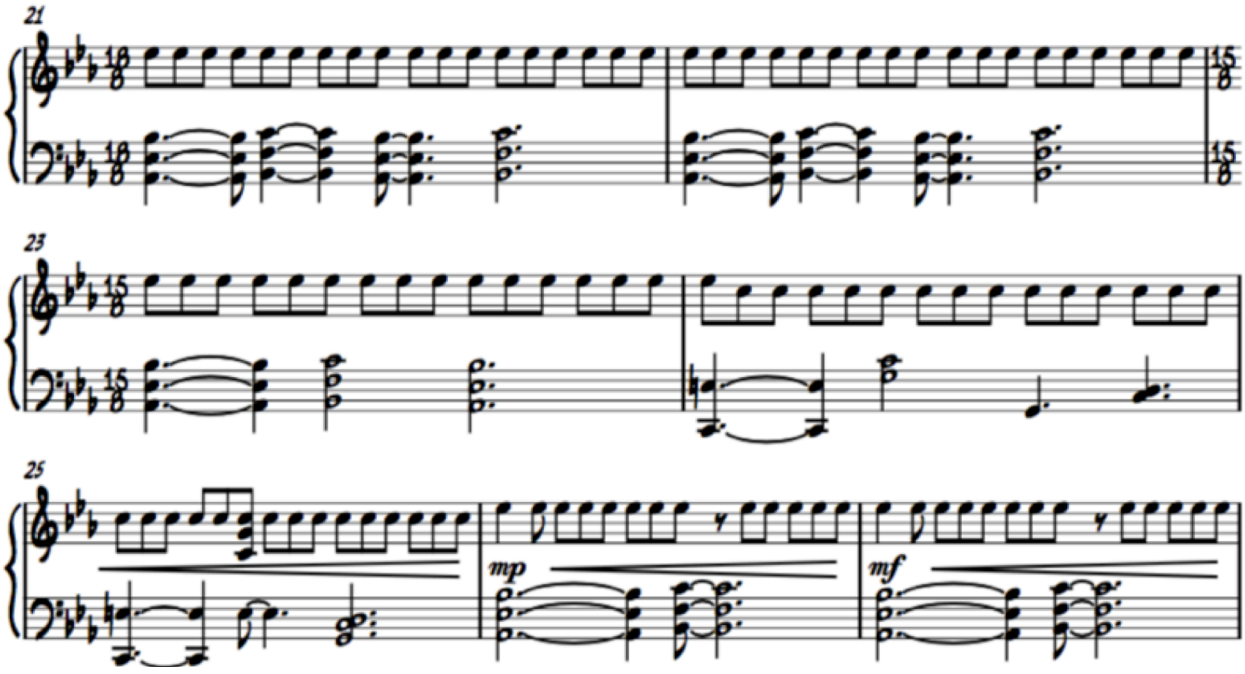


Figure 2.20 - Strumming texture as repetition of block chords, 4:06-4:14 of Mehldau's cover of "Teardrop" in Vienna (2010), excerpt from Vincent Sorel's transcription.

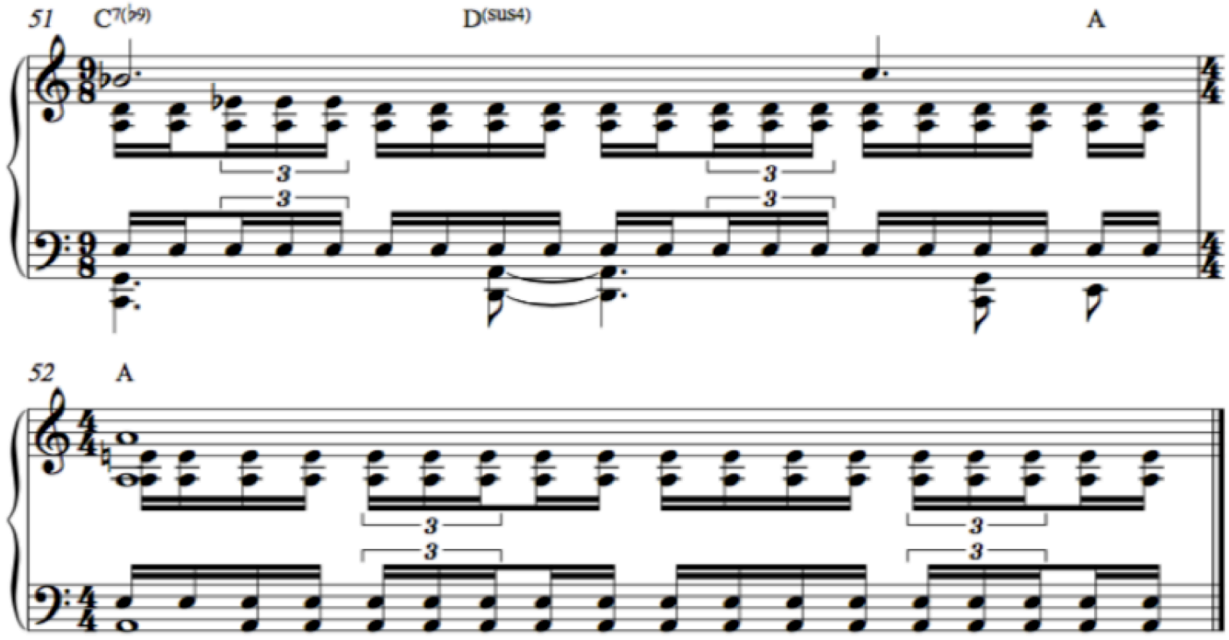
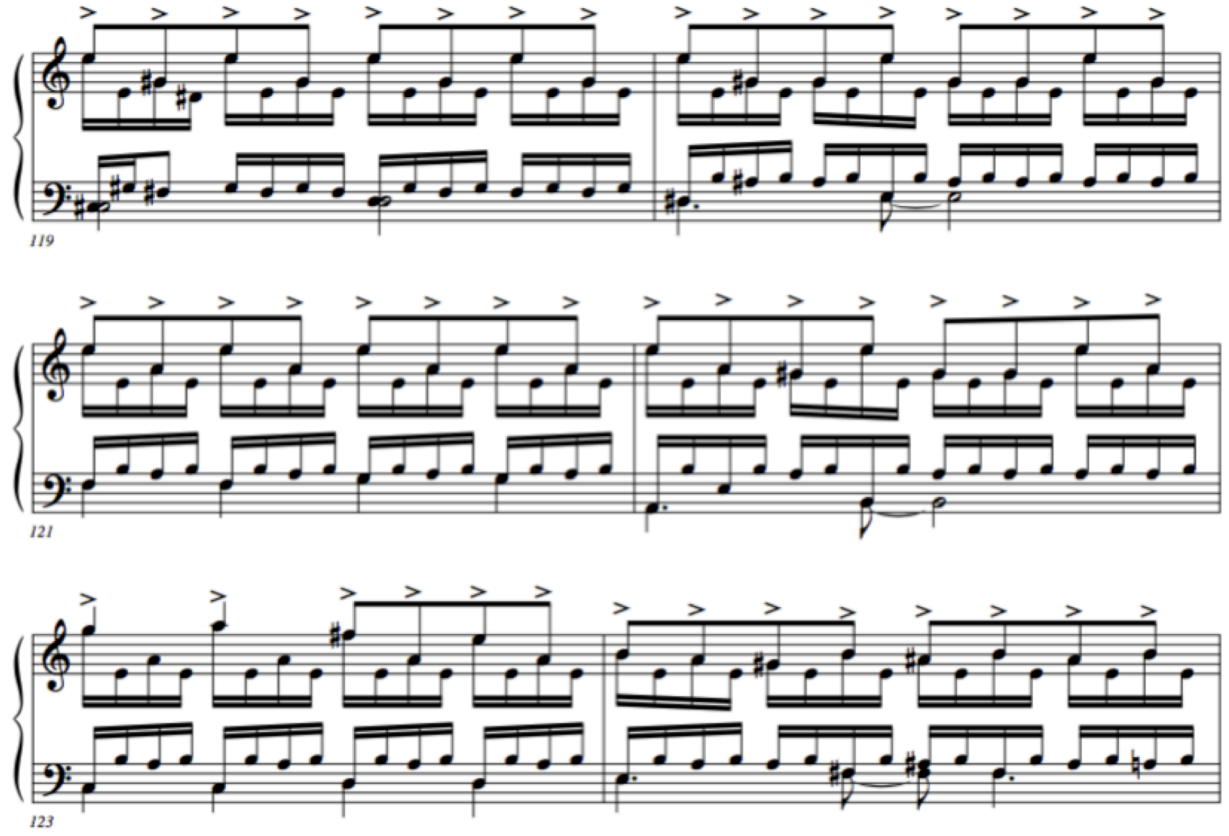


Figure 2.21 - Arpeggiated form of strumming texture, 5:11-5:25 of Mehldau's cover of "Dream Brother" from *10 Years Solo Live*. Excerpt from Michael Lucke's transcription.



Whether they consist of pedal tones, repeated block chords, and/or arpeggios, strumming textures are a trope in Mehldau's idiolect and can be found in nearly every cover, regardless of whether or not the original song features similar textures. Strumming textures can function either as an end in themselves, as a particular kind of solo piano texture within Mehldau's idiolect, or formally and rhetorically as a method to produce sound masses and/or as a formal marker framing development sections within his interpretations (this is discussed further in the chapter on form). Hence, there are three functional types of strumming; (1) instrumental strumming, a mode of accompaniment on top of which Mehldau can improvise, which often but not always imitates the rock ensemble; (2) textural strumming, i.e. strumming for the sake of strumming throughout a cover, a marker of Mehldau's personal style; and (3) formal/rhetorical strumming, used as a developmental device for the materials introduced in the theme, and as a way to delineate the boundaries of a development-like section within the overall form.

In Table 2.2, I tabulate Mehldau's use of the three functional types of strumming textures in his repertoire of rock covers. One can infer from this table that strumming textures are very common in Mehldau's covers, as more than 80% of Mehldau's covers from the sample analyzed here employ at least one type of strumming texture. This table also shows that type 3 strumming (formal/rhetorical) is the most common, which suggests that the main purpose of strumming textures is to give cover songs a more complex form with a sense of departure or development from the original theme, and often a sense of return at the end.[7] Strumming textures allow Mehldau to provide a formal trajectory to otherwise cyclical and repetitive songs. This stands in contrast to formal

[7] Though there is not always a sense of return to the opening material; Mehldau's covers of "God Only Knows" and "Knives Out" [version 1] from *10 Years Solo Live* are devoid of a recapitulation. Instead, they end abruptly with a sound mass resulting from strumming textures.

Table 2.2 - Three functional types of strumming in Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers			
	Instrumental	Textural	Formal/Rhetorical
"And I Love Her"			✓ (5:15-15:00)
"Bitter Sweet Symphony"		✓	✓ (7:59-13:22)
"Blackbird"	—	—	—
"Dream Brother"			✓ (starts at 3:54)
"Exit Music (For a Film)"		✓	
"God Only Knows"		✓	✓ (from ca. 9:00)
"Hey You"			✓ (7:35-9:59)
"Holland"			✓ (6:58-10:20)
"Interstate Love Song"			✓ (from ca. 6:04)
"Jigsaw Falling Into Place"	✓		✓ (starts at 5:07)
"Junk"	—	—	—
"Knives Out"		✓	
"La mémoire et la mer"	✓ (2:48-4:42)		✓ (4:42-9:06)
"Lithium"		✓	
"Martha My Dear"	—	—	—
"Paranoid Android"	✓		
"River Man"		✓	✓ (1:55-7:15)
"Roses Blue"		✓	
"Smells Like Teen Spirit"	✓ (from ca. 7:02)		✓ (from ca. 3:50)
"Teardrop"			✓ (ca. 6:04-12:40)
"Things Behind the Sun"		✓	
"Waterloo Sunset"	—	—	—
"50 Ways to Leave Your Lover"	✓ (4:23-5:35)		

procedures in common-practice jazz, which are normally limited to a theme-and-variations model. Strumming textures are also a frequent marker of Mehldau's pianistic style, and perhaps surprisingly, are least commonly used as an accompaniment.

As shown in Table 2.2, only four covers examined here do not employ any kind of strumming: "Blackbird," "Junk," "Martha My Dear," and "Waterloo Sunset." Of these four, the last should perhaps not be counted, because it is covered only briefly — that is, for the last 2 and a half minutes of a 16-minute performance — as an epilogue to Mehldau's cover of "Bitter Sweet Symphony." As for "Martha My Dear," a highly contrapuntal texture replaces the potential use of a strumming texture throughout.[8] Texturally and rhythmically, Mehldau's covers of "Junk" and "Blackbird" are the least adventurous, perhaps due to the relative complexity of the original harmony and the brevity of the original recordings.

To summarize, in this chapter I have described three common rhythmic paradigms and one particular kind of texture that are specific to Mehldau's idiolect: odd and changing meters, grouping dissonance and polyrhythms, tresillo and other kinds of Euclidean rhythms, and strumming textures. In the latter portion of this chapter, I categorized three different functional types of strumming textures: instrumental, textural, and formal/rhetorical. All strumming textures play an integral role in Mehldau's idiolect, which is unique in the jazz world with regards to texture.

This chapter was *not* an exhaustive summary of Mehldau's rhythmic language; instead I have focused on rhythmic paradigms that are not characteristic of common-

[8] The second version of "Knives Out" from *10 Years Solo Live* also features a highly contrapuntal texture throughout.

practice jazz. For example, I have not discussed harmonic and melodic syncopation, even though syncopation is prevalent in Mehldau's approach and the rock repertoire in general. However, syncopation is a defining a feature of jazz, and is thus not an idiosyncratic stylistic marker of Mehldau's sound world.

Early on in this chapter, I pointed the reader's attention to Table 2.1, which summarizes some of the rhythmic processes in Mehldau's covers and their corresponding originals. I encourage the reader to take another glance at this table, now that all the terminology has been explained and demonstrated with examples. From my analytical findings, I do not wish to make any gross generalizations besides the obvious claim that all of Mehldau's covers studied here, with the sole exception of "Junk," make use of at least one rhythmical or textural device discussed in this chapter.

This line of research on rhythm and texture in Mehldau's music could be pushed much further by focusing on Mehldau's own compositions, and Mehldau's work in a trio setting.

CHAPTER 3
THREE FORMAL ANALYSES

In this third and final chapter of my thesis, I provide more complete analyses of three songs covered by Mehldau and side-by-side formal comparisons vis-à-vis their original rock recordings. I have purposely chosen songs with different forms: the first, "La mémoire et la mer" by the French singer-songwriter Léo Ferré, is an unambiguous strophic form; while the other two songs, Nirvana's "Lithium" and Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother," are two different takes on the verse–chorus–bridge structure typical of rock.

Mehldau's attraction to such popular songs lies in their formal looseness. As he states:

> "With more contemporary pop tunes, pop tunes past the sort of golden era that some people call the American Songbook, all of a sudden there are no rules any more.... In the songs of Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hammerstein and Jerome Kern, there's a verse and then the song itself, which is often in an AABA form, something within the bridge, and then that something again with the coda. These forms often keep you thinking in a certain way about what you're going to do when you're blowing on the music. When you get out of that, it becomes sort of a wide-open book, *with often the possibility for a lack of form to take place* [my emphasis]. I try to take some of these more contemporary songs and somehow impose my own form on them in the improvisation." (Panken 2008)

This potential for "lack of form" that characterizes popular music is a good source of inspiration for Mehldau's improvisation, as it provides him the opportunity to mold the forms of these songs to his own liking. This "lack of form" is directly related to the repetitive and cyclical nature of popular music. My claim in this chapter is that Mehldau's covers are *sonatizations* or *linearizations* of rock songs that are primarily *cyclical* in their repetitive nature, whether their forms are strophic or variants on the verse–chorus–(bridge) rock framework.

I invoke the term *sonatization* more specifically for its connotation of *narrative* and the temporal functions of beginning, middle, and ending. Mehldau's classically influenced formal approach stands out from the pervasive theme-variations-theme framework characteristic of jazz music. Mehldau speaks of his formal conception of "narrative" in an interview with Ludovic Florin:

> "(...) literature certainly has given me inspiration in my music. Formally, most of all: The flow of a fiction novel is a good model for a piece of music; *I think of music as an abstract narrative* [my emphasis]. A narrative implies movement through time — beginning, development, ending; also, all of the memory and anticipation that goes with that. The dramatic effectiveness is determined by those temporal factors, and it is also so with music."[1]

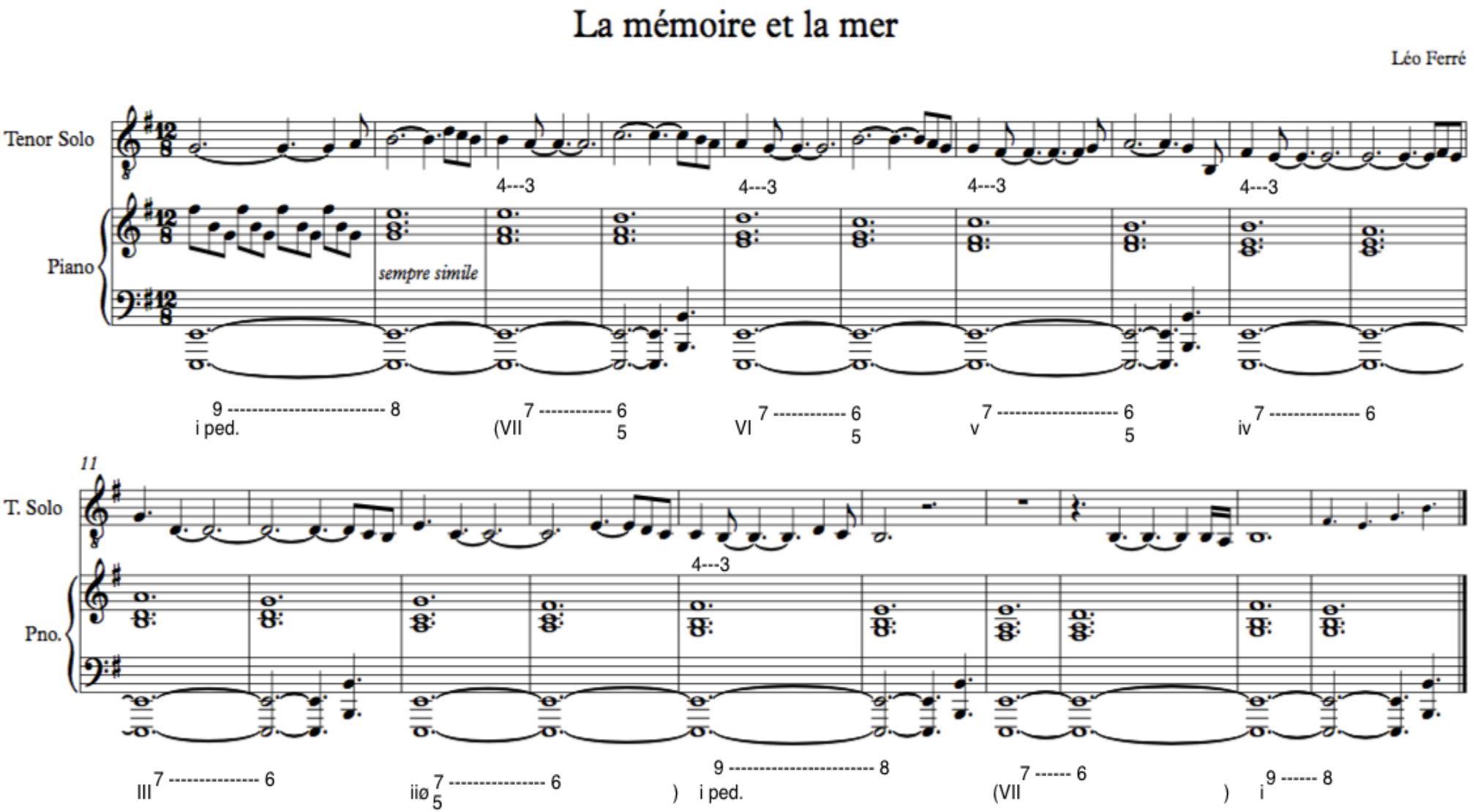
Typically, rock songs do not convey a sense of "development"; they may not even have beginnings or endings. This is the case when a song segues directly into another song, or (less commonly) fades in and/or (more commonly) fades out, as if the song had begun long before its onset, and/or will continue for perpetuity — though this is not the case for the three songs analyzed here. In this chapter, I uncover three different ways in which Mehldau consciously superimposes musical narratives for three different songs that are originally cyclical, and thus do not convey such a clear sense of beginning, development, and ending in their structural organization.

3.1 Léo Ferré's "La mémoire et la mer" and its cover

In Ferré's original song, each verse of text is set to the same pitch and rhythmic material; in this sense it is a strophic form. In Figure 3.1, I provide the reader with a reduction of this material. For the sake of clarity, I have simplified the vocal line by

[1] Ludovic Florin, interview with Brad Mehldau, in Philippe André, *Elegiac Cycle: Complete Transcription and Analysis* (Paris: Outre Mesure), 20.

Figure 3.1 - Reduction of the verse from Ferré's "La mémoire et la mer"



representing immediately repeated notes as sustained. With regards to harmony, the progression of this song is akin to a fauxbourdon in E minor, which descends through the entire octave and is decorated via 7-6 suspensions, all the while floating above a low tonic pedal in the double bass and piano. In my reduction, I point to the numerous suspensions throughout, which produce much tension. In particular, the 4-3 suspensions in the melody are particularly jarring, as the orchestra plays the resolution tones of these suspensions before the melody resolves.

My reduction, however, does not provide the whole picture. The poignant text and varied orchestrations of the verses, each more intense then the last, articulate a kind of culminating linearity within the overall repetitive or cyclical nature of the strophic song. In Table 3.1, I provide a formal overview of Ferré's song with regards to its orchestration.

There are two significant differences between Mehldau's cover, the form of which I summarize in Table 3.2, and its original. First, Mehldau's cover traverses a number of key areas, shifting down chromatically from the original E minor to C minor. Ferré's song, on the other hand, remains firmly grounded in E minor throughout. The second difference has to do with form. As shown in my formal outline of Mehldau's cover, three sections of music contribute to an overarching ternary ABA form with an unstable, development-like middle section.

In my formal interpretation of Mehldau's cover, the exposition section comprises the theme and three variations, which is roughly analogous, in form and duration, to the first four verses of Ferré's song (Ferré's song as a whole contains 5 verses).

With regards to harmony, the exposition section is completely unified; Ferré's harmonic framework is audible throughout. Mehldau's version of the theme is a faithful

and precise depiction of the original, and the first variation essentially imitates, albeit in a different way, the change of orchestration in the second verse of the Ferré recording. In Mehldau's cover, the melody is played in a higher range, above the chords rather than below (the original theme is played in Ferré's tenor register). This variation indirectly mimics the effect achieved in the orchestration of the original, where high and low tonic pedals are used to widen the register in the second verse.

After the first variation, a brief pause ensues, followed by a radical change of texture: at 2:48 of Mehldau's cover the second variation on the theme begins, played in a typical strumming texture. Strumming textures are often used to delineate development sections, which I have termed functional type 3–formal/rhetorical, in section 2.3 of chapter 2. Here, however, the strumming functions as a form of accompaniment (functional type 1), since the theme is heard clearly with little variation. Thus, despite the short pause and change in texture, there is a sense of continuity between the first and second variations. In my formal outline in Table 3.2, I indicate this change within continuity as a two-part exposition section. The exposition concludes with a final variation on the theme, which pursues the strumming texture established in the previous variation. The melody is now heard, once again, above the accompaniment rather than below. In the exposition as a whole, the melody thus alternates its registral position vis-à-vis the accompaniment (below–above–below–above).

At 4:42, a new strumming texture begins, this time of functional type 3, formal/rhetorical. Here, the strumming doesn't function as accompaniment, as there is no audible melody; rather, it seems that strumming is employed as an end in itself, as a way of initiating a departure from the traditional theme-and-variations approach established in

Table 3.1 - Form/orchestration of Ferré's "La mémoire et la mer"

Time	Form	Orchestration
0:00	Intro	-Descending piano arpeggios begin (see reduction). These are played throughout the song.
0:06	Verse 1	-High E pedal in violins -Low tonic pedal: double bass + piano -Countermelody in the English horn
1:04	Verse 2	-High and low pedals drop out -Bass becomes pizzicato (low piano pedal continues) -Countermelody: mid-range sustained strings
2:03	Verse 3	-Horns enter on pedal tones, playing the notes of the 7-6 suspension-resolution chain -Strings play countermelody in higher range
3:03	Verse 4	-Strings alone -Richer harmonies (return to mid-range, but wider generally)
4:04	Verse 5	-Climax: brass and strings reach a loud, fuller texture -Followed by general diminuendo, rallentando
5:16	Final chord	-Quiet, lush orchestration of Emin9

Table 3.2 - Formal outline of Mehldau's cover of "La mémoire et la mer"

A SECTION (Exposition - Part 1)	E MINOR	0:11	Intro
		0:24	Theme (= "verse 1") Played very close to original version, with rubato. Melody and accompaniment treated as rhythmically separate layers.
		1:38	Variation 1 (= "verse 2") Melody in higher range, above the chords rather than below. Minimal changes are made melodically and harmonically.
A SECTION (Exposition - Part 2) Strumming texture begins		2:48	Variation 2 (= "verse 3") Strumming texture, rapid arpeggiated chords, melody underneath
		3:48	Variation 3 (= "verse 4") Similar strumming texture with floating melody above this time (slightly more elaborated). Pedal tones.
B SECTION (Development) All in strumming texture Increasing intensity in terms of density and dynamics followed by general diminuendo starting at ca. 8:30.	E-/Eb-	4:43	Transition/chromatic clash
	Eb-	5:03	Eb minor texture and theme (Theme same as original)
	Eb-/D-	5:53	Transition/chromatic clash
	D-	6:01	D minor texture and theme (Theme same as original)
	D-/C#-	6:47	Transition/chromatic clash
	C#-	7:04	C# minor texture and theme in the left hand. Clearest statement of the theme in the development section
	C#-/C-	7:52	Transition/chromatic clash
	C MINOR	8:00	C minor texture and theme
A' SECTION Recapitulation (in different key)		9:07-10:29	Restatement of the theme in C minor, in its original texture (= "verse 5"?) Chromatic fragments in the melody recall the key areas of the development section.

the exposition. Initially this strumming texture expresses an Em9 chord (the first chord in the original harmonic framework presented in Figure 3.1), but this harmony is blurred when it becomes chromatically inflected around 4:51, when chromatic lower neighbours to the Em9 sonority are introduced. This results in a chromatic juxtaposition of clashing E minor and Eb minor diatonic sound worlds, serving as a modulatory transition to Eb minor, which becomes recognized as the new tonic around 5:00. Mehldau then plays an Eb-minor version of the thematic material with melodic morsels here and there, woven within the strumming texture.

This process of chromatic juxtaposition followed by a restatement of the thematic material down a half-step is repeated three more times in succession within the development section, thus ultimately reaching the key of C minor at 8:00 (refer to Table 3.2). This sequential transposition of thematic material in the development section is not unlike the sequential transposition of the "core" in the development section of a sonata. What is unlike sonata form, however, is the level of transposition (down a semitone), and more importantly, the fact that here, the core consists of the same material as the main theme from the A section. Abstractly speaking, this chromatic descent in key areas resembles a large-scale realization of a lament bass from tonic to the submediant.

Concerning the form of the development section, a few words are in order. The first two key areas and themes in Eb minor and D minor are similar; together, they establish a new thematic model, which is shorter in duration and more textured than the thematic model from the exposition, though they are both based on the same harmonic and melodic content. The latter two key areas of the development section, C# minor and C minor, express together a climax in the work through the depth of register, harmonic

density and velocity of the strumming.

An interesting formal feature of Mehldau's cover of "La mémoire et la mer" is its internal proportions. Putting aside the larger formal sections of the cover for a moment, one can observe in Table 3.2 that the cover essentially consists of the theme followed by 8 variations, all of comparable length (ranging from 46 seconds to 1:14). In this sense, Mehldau's cover is a fairly traditional jazz structure; on the surface, the cover is in fact a kind of theme and variations, typical of jazz practice. Yet, despite the cyclicity of the thematic material repeated in more or less equal proportions, Mehldau succeeds in projecting a sense of linearity. This is made particularly evident by the fact that Mehldau's cover ends in a different key than it begins; thus linearity is evoked, quite literally, by starting and ending at two different places (the same way that a line segment is defined by two discrete points). This linearity is further emphasized by the tripartite form of the cover, which consists of an exposition-like section firmly grounded in the home key of E minor, a development-like section featuring sequential transposition of the thematic material driving towards a climax, and a recapitulation-like section which on the one hand resembles the original theme in its harmony, texture, and rhythm, but on the other hand, is in a different key, and comments on the development section in its use of chromatic melodic fragments.

3.2 Nirvana's "Lithium" and its cover

In Table 3.3, I outline the form and harmony of Nirvana's "Lithium" from their 1991 opus *Nevermind*. The song's tempo is 124 beats per minute, and it is in a modally mixed key of D. All the chords in the guitar part are power chords: chords with no thirds, played easily

on the guitar when tuned a specific way (typically when the lowest string, E, is tuned down a major second, known as “drop D” tuning).

Table 3.3 - Formal outline of Nirvana's "Lithium"

D major, 123 BPM
Total: 129 mm. x 4 beats = 516 beats
NB: Chord labels are for the guitar part, which uses power chords throughout (though some chords in the clean texture do have thirds, especially in the second half of the progression). The harmonic rhythm is two chords per bar (the only exception is the 2-bar extension at the end of the bridge, where the rhythm is 1 chord per bar).

verse and chorus: | D5 F#5 | B5 G5 | Bb5 C5 | A5 C5 |
bridge: | G5 Bb | G5 Bb | added after 8th iteration: | C5 | A5 |

0:00	0:08	0:37	1:03	1:32	1:57
intro	verse 1	chorus 1	verse 2	chorus 2	bridge 1
4 mm.	16 mm. (4x4)	12 mm. (3x4)	16 mm.	12 mm.	18 mm. (8x2 + 2)

2:32	2:40	3:09	3:34
bass solo	verse 3	chorus 3	bridge 2
4 mm.	16 mm.	12 mm.	19 mm. (8x2 +2 +1*)

*One added bar of tonic as final cadence

The song is organized in a cyclic fashion, consisting of three verse-chorus pairs, with the latter two followed by a bridge. The first and third verses are preceded by an instrumental introduction consisting of the harmonic progression that underlies the verse and chorus. A somewhat unusual feature of "Lithium" is the fact that the song ends with the bridge rather than the chorus or verse.

The chord progression of the verse and chorus is: | D5 F#5 | B5 G5 | Bb5 C5 | A5 C5 |. When adding all these verticalities together, the resulting pitch collection is the following scale: D–E–F–F#–G–A–Bb–B–C–C#–D, or in other words, D major with

flexible scale degrees 3, 6, and 7. However, since the chord roots are more important than the fifths, one could say that the song is based on D mixolydian with flexible scale-degree 6 (D–F#–G–A–Bb–B–C). The bridge is a subdominant prolongation comprising only G5 and Bb5 until the very end, where C5 and A5 (borrowed from the end of the verse/chorus) function as dominants leading us back to D in the following verse.

Rhythmically, the instrumental section of "Lithium" is rather square: the drummer plays a quarter-note backbeat with an 8th-note ride rhythm, the bassist plays a simple line consisting of a mixture of dotted rhythms and eighth notes, and the guitarist plays power chords at a constant harmonic rhythm throughout, as arpeggios with a clean guitar sound in the verses, and block chords with full distortion in the chorus and bridge. Cobain's vocal line, which features extensive syncopation and (harmonic) anticipations, particularly in the verse, complements this instrumental section.

Now that I have provided a formal outline of Nirvana's "Lithium," I will compare Mehldau's cover from *Live in Marciac* to the original. In Table 3.4, I present a formal account of Mehldau's cover, with timings and measure numbers from Vincent Sorel's complete transcription.[2] Like the original, Mehldau's cover is in D, played at a slightly slower tempo (approximately 110 beats per minute). Mehldau's cover begins with an introduction, just like the original, though twice as long, as Mehldau cycles through the main harmonic progression twice. Mehldau's harmony is richer than the original power chords: Mehldau opts for triads rather than power chords, and freely adds chordal seconds and fourths.[3] Chordal sevenths are used sparingly (only for the G chord), which

[2] Available here: http://sorwellz.free.fr/jazz-transcription/mehldau-lithium%20marciac.pdf
[3] In Mehldau's cover, as is normal in rock practice, these added dissonances are not expected to resolve.

Table 3.4 - Formal outline of Mehldau's cover of "Lithium" (*Live in Marciac*)

EXPOSITION		
0:00	m.1	**Introduction (8 mm.)** [Dadd4 – F#/C#] [Bmadd2 – Gmaj7] [Bb/F – C/G] [Asus4] Strumming texture established from the start (block chords)
0:17	m. 9	**Verse 1 (4 x 4 = 16 mm.)** Melody close to the original; however, sharp dissonances are added freely in both the melody and the accompaniment (mainly chordal 2nds, 4ths, some 7ths, a few 6ths)
0:49	m. 24	**Chorus 1 (3 x 4 = 12 mm.)** Texture similar to Verse 1, with fewer dissonances and less rhythmically active
1:18	m. 37	**Interlude (4 mm.)** Chord progression from the verse played once, with a distinct neighbouring motion in the right hand. Interlude's function akin to a re-introduction for the second verse.
1:27	m. 41	**Verse 2 (3 x 4 =12 mm.)** Overall much looser compared to Verse 1: melody much less recognizable (significant improvisation and fragmentation in Verse 2). Left hand plays wide-ranging arpeggiated figures rather than block chords.
1:49	m. 52	**Chorus 2 (3 x 4 =12 mm.)** Left-hand arpeggios continue. Chorus melody is slightly freer rhythmically with active inner voice.
DEVELOPMENT		
2:15	m. 65	**Pre-bridge / Link (10 mm.)** Left-hand arpeggios are replaced by an ostinato bass line vaguely referencing Nirvana's chord progression in the bridge [G5 - Bb5]. New melodic line of Mehldau's own making (not in the original Nirvana song).
2:35	m. 75	**Bridge (34 mm.)** First clear melodic reference to the bridge of the original. Left hand still playing the ostinato bass line from pre-bridge.
2:47	m. 81	Free improvisation on ostinato bass line from bridge
3:22	m. 99	Reprise of the theme from bridge
3:33	m. 105	Transition 2 bars of C followed by 2 bars of A (1 + 1 in original)
CODA		
3:41	m. 109	**Outro (9 mm.)** Reprise of the introduction (block chords, strumming texture).
4:00	117 mm. total	END/APPLAUSE

is somewhat surprising considering that the seventh is emblematic of jazz harmony.[4] Figure 3.2 shows the 8-bar introduction (an excerpt from Sorel's transcription). Mehldau's voicing of the Bb and C harmonies of m. 3 as six-four chords produces a bass line that rises to the A harmony: F–G–A, which vaguely recalls the bass line of an Aeolian progression (except that the Aeolian progression arrives on tonic, while this progression arrives on dominant). Unlike the original song, Mehldau ends the progression on A, a stronger dominant than C, which follows it in Nirvana's version.

With regards to rhythm and texture, a strumming texture in block chords is established right from the introduction, and extensive harmonic syncopation is used throughout. Although harmonic syncopation is not a device I discuss in my rhythm

Figure 3.2 - Introduction from Mehldau's cover of "Lithium" (excerpt from Vincent Sorel's transcription)

[4] Mehldau's use of fairly simple harmonies seems appropriate, reflecting the stripped-down aesthetic of grunge, which was heavily influenced by punk and typically features unadorned harmonies such as triads or power chords.

chapter — since it is extremely widespread in common-practice jazz — its effects here are undeniably conspicuous.

Mehldau's first verse-chorus pair follows Nirvana's proportions exactly. The original melody is preserved more or less exactly, but the accompaniment is not; salient features from the introduction, such as added harmonic dissonance and strumming, are preserved and even accentuated. Towards the end of the verse, the strumming pattern eventually dissolves into a series of arpeggiated figures. In general, Mehldau's chorus is less rhythmically active than the original and feels more tight-knit as a result.

Following the first verse-chorus pair, a brief interlude is played at 1:18, akin to a second introduction. Here, however, the chord progression is played only once, and a distinct neighbour figure in the right hand is added. This brief interlude is followed by the second verse-chorus pair (1:27), which is essentially a variation on the first verse-chorus, which Mehldau uses as a framework for improvisation. Together, the first two verse-chorus pairs are treated as a theme and variation, where the variation (the second verse-chorus pair) is a freer, more dissonant, and perhaps less recognizable realization of the original theme. Together, these verse-chorus pairs comprise an exposition-like section, in which the second verse-chorus pair replaces the subordinate theme—here, contrast is achieved by the change of texture, rather than key.

Where Mehldau really stands out as a jazz pianist, at least as far as form is concerned, is in the way he devises development-like sections, where he diverges from variation-based approaches in favour of harmonically and texturally freer materials. In middle sections, Mehldau typically departs from the melodic and harmonic framework provided by the original song, and instead improvises on his own harmonic patterns

(which are only partially connected to the original harmony) played in idiosyncratic strumming textures.

In his cover of "Lithium," Mehldau's development-like section is constructed around Nirvana's bridge. This section begins at 2:15 of Mehldau's recording, where a kind of irregular ostinato bass line is introduced that vaguely expresses Nirvana's original harmony [G–Bb]. Nirvana's harmony is conveyed primarily through the use of G and Bb as bass tones which occur on beats 1 and 3 respectively (though not always precisely on the beat, as Mehldau's left hand pattern involves syncopation). In my formal outline of this cover, I've labeled this first portion of the development-like section as "pre-bridge," because Nirvana's bridge melody only makes an appearance 10 measures later, at 2:35. The pre-bridge features a distinct tune in Eb minor which does not exist in the original; its function as a link between the end of the exposition-like section and the theme from the bridge, as well as a preamble to the core of the development section, is somewhat analogous to the pre-core in a typical sonata form. The bridge begins with a statement of the original Nirvana melody over a continued bass ostinato in the left hand (the ostinato is played until the transition at the very end of the development-like section). The statement of the bridge melody is followed by an improvisatory section before returning to the bridge theme (3:22, m. 99). Unlike a typical sonata form, in the development-like section of "Lithium," there is no sequential repetition of the bridge theme (the "core" or core-like portion of Mehldau's development section); sequential repetition is effectively replaced by improvisation on the same ostinato bass and harmonic pattern, followed by a return to the bridge theme. Mehldau concludes the development-like section with a short transition consisting of two bars of C-major harmony followed by two bars of A-major

harmony, borrowed from the end of the harmonic progression in the verse and chorus. This dominant arrival (3:33, m. 105) is strikingly similar to the typical half cadence at the end of a development section in sonata form.

In general terms, the first bridge of Nirvana's song is composed out by Mehldau to comprise the entire middle section of the cover. A crucial formal difference between the original and Mehldau's cover is the absence of a second bridge. Mehldau avoids ending his cover with the bridge as in the original, because this goes against the ternary design of his version; ending with the bridge would mean ending with a development section. In fact, in the recapitulation-like section, Mehldau omits even the third verse-chorus pair that precedes the second bridge, ending instead with a brief outro. Hypothetically, Mehldau could have played a third verse-chorus pair in the recapitulation, omitting only the bridge, without compromising the ternary aspect of his cover. In this sense, Mehldau's cover of "Lithium" is a linearization (ABA) of the original cyclical form (verse–chorus/verse–chorus–bridge/verse–chorus–bridge). In Table 3.5, I provide a side-by-side formal comparison of these two forms. This formal comparison visually demonstrates the linearization of the original cyclical form; here, one can see that, despite the similarity in length between the cover and its original, the two formal trajectories are fundamentally different. Notice also that Mehldau initially preserves the internal proportions of the verse and chorus at 16mm. and 12mm. respectively (see first half of the exposition), but does not follow the original proportions in the remainder of the cover.

Table 3.5 - Side-by-side formal comparison of "Lithium" and its cover

NIRVANA (123 BPM)			
	0:00	Intro	4 mm.
A	0:08	Verse	16 mm. 4 x 4 mm.
B	0:37	Chorus	12 mm. 3 x 4 mm.
A	1:02	Verse	16 mm. 4 x 4 mm.
B	1:32	Chorus	12 mm. 3 x 4 mm.
C	1:57	Bridge	18 mm. 8 x 2 mm. + 2 mm. extension
	2:32	Interlude	4 mm.
A	2:40	Verse	16 mm. 4 x 4 mm.
B	3:10	Chorus	12 mm. 3 x 4 mm.
C	3:34	Bridge	19 mm. 8 x 2mm. + 2mm. extension + 1m. cadence

BRAD MEHLDAU (110 BPM)			
EXPOSITION (A): tight-knit	0:00	Intro	8 mm.
	0:17	Verse	16 mm. 4 x 4 mm.
	0:50	Chorus	12mm. 3x4mm.
EXPOSITION (A'): progressively looser, theme and variations approach	1:18	Interlude	4 mm.
	1:27	Looser Verse	12 mm. 3 x 4 mm.
	1:50	Looser Chorus	12 mm. 3 x 4 mm.
DEVELOPMENT: loosest section	2:15	Pre-bridge	10 mm.
	2:35	Bridge	6 mm.
	2:47	Free improv. *on ostinato bass line from bridge*	18 mm.
	3:22	Bridge	6 mm.
	3:33	Re-transition	4 mm.
CODA (="recap.") tight-knit	3:41	Intro material	9 mm.

3.3 Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother" and its cover

So far, I have discussed two different forms of sonatizations. In the first cover analyzed in this chapter, "La mémoire et la mer," Mehldau adopts a fairly traditional theme-and-variations method, where the theme is a pianistic rendition of the verse from the original strophic song by Ferré. Despite this traditional approach, Mehldau succeeds in projecting a larger sense of linearity through the use of strumming textures and sequential transposition in the middle section. In the second cover discussed here,

"Lithium," sonatization is achieved by composing out Nirvana's bridge into a full-fledged development-like section, and by recasting the original cyclic form into an ABA shape (in this case, by replacing the last verse–chorus–bridge with a brief recapitulation of the introduction section as an outro). In Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother," originally released on the 1994 album *Grace,* Mehldau approaches the process of sonatization by providing a contrasting middle (or development-like section) consisting entirely of improvised materials; the verses, choruses, and bridges of the original song are reserved for the outer sections. In fact, by ignoring Mehldau's development section, outlined in Table 3.7, the original form of Jeff Buckley's recording (Table 3.6) can easily be recognized: verse–chorus–verse–bridge–chorus–verse. In this view, Mehldau's development section is almost like an extraneous interruption in Buckley's second verse.

In Table 3.6, I provide a brief formal outline of Buckley's "Dream Brother," including key areas and chord progressions. This song employs the G Phrygian mode with flexible scale degree 3 (Picardy thirds are used frequently throughout), with a brief passage in C minor (also a key of three flats), and its parallel key, C major, in the bridge. The underlying form of "Dream Brother" is a typical verse-chorus form, ending with a verse. This basic scheme is elaborated via the addition of an unmeasured introduction — which sets the atmospheric mood and establishes the Phrygian modality — and the use of a bridge before the second chorus, whose modulatory shift instils variety.

In Table 3.7, I outline the complete ternary structure of Mehldau's cover. By comparing the measure numbers in Table 3.6 and 3.7, one can observe that Mehldau preserves the proportions of the first verse and chorus exactly (and that the unmeasured introduction is omitted). At 2:20, however, Mehldau starts improvising on the content of

Table 3.6 - Formal outline of Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother"

Tempo: quarter note = 95 bpm
115 bars of 4/4 meter (from 0:24)
NB: " Gphr#3" = G Phrygian major

0:00	(unmeasured)	Gphr#3	INTRODUCTION Unmeasured introduction establishes the mode of G Phrygian major. [D-Eb-D-C-D] and [G-Ab-G-F-G] melodic figures.
0:24	m. 1		VERSE (intro) Prolongation of G as tonic with a neighbouring b6-5-4-5 pattern over the pedal. Guitar riff only.
0:35	m. 5		Bass and drums enter
0:45	m. 9		VERSE Voice enters
1:15	m. 21		Second half of the verse
1:51	m. 35		CHORUS [Gm/Bb – Aø7/C – D7 – Eb]
2:11	m. 43		VERSE (instrumental) With some vocal improvisation, but un-texted. Added reverb.
2:53	m. 59	Cm	BRIDGE [Cm – F – G]
3:13	m. 67	C	 [Cmaj7 – F]
3:28	m. 73		CHORUS *Chorus chord progression played over a pedal bass line:* [pedal G – Eb – pedal D – Eb]
3:48	m. 81		Second half of chorus (increased intensity). *Normal bass line returns.*
4:09	m. 89	Gphr#3	VERSE (intro)
4:30	m. 97		VERSE
5:28	(115 mm. total)		END

the verse, departing from the original form. This departure does not indicate the onset of the development section just yet, because Mehldau remains in the home key, which he confirms at 2:59 (m. 66) with a quasi-cadence: a VII–I (F–G) motion in the bass, a harmonic motion borrowed from the very beginning of the verse, where VII functions as a modal dominant.

Table 3.7 - Formal outline of Mehldau's cover of "Dream Brother"

EXPOSITION

0:00	m. 1	Gphr#3	VERSE (intro)
0:24	m. 9		(melody enters)
0:58	m. 21		(second half of verse)
1:36	m. 35	Gm	CHORUS
1:58	m. 43	Gphr#3	VERSE
2:20	m. 51		Improvisation on verse material
2:30	mm. 55-65		Linear bass progressions, reminiscent of the Bb-C-D-Eb bass line in the first chorus of the original song [Db-C-B-Bb-A-G]
2:40	m. 59		[Ab-Bb-B-G/Ab-Bb-C-G]
2:51	m. 63		[E-F-G-Ab-Bb-C]
2:59	m. 66		G minor confirmed via 7–1 motion in the bass

DEVELOPMENT

3:02	m. 67	Eb-	Strumming texture (pedal tone) in Eb- begins (emphasis on i–VI–iv)
3:27	m. 77		Eb- confirmed via VII–I cadence
3:33	m. 79		*Improvised material (no strumming) - minor pentatonic melody harmonized somewhat chromatically*
3:50	mm. 85-86		Eb cadence (Db-D-Eb bass line)
3:54	m. 87		New strumming texture begins (brief transition to E minor)
4:05	m. 92		[Aadd2–Eadd4–Esus2/G–Esus2/C = IV–I–i^6–VI]
4:15	m.96		Transitional material
4:38	m.105		G# pedal tone foreshadows arrival in C# minor
4:52	m. 111	C#-	C# established as new tonic (repeated note figure in low register)
5:01	m.115		Strumming texture (arpeggiated) begins
5:16	m.121		Transition towards E minor
5:20	m.123	E-	E minor with modal mixture and blues scale [VI–VII–I–II]
5:48	m. 135		Prominent 3-4-5-1 bass (alternating with half step above)
6:24	m. 151	Eb-	New strumming texture begins (block chords)
6:34	m. 155		Tresillo pattern begins, prominent 3–4–5–1 bass line
7:01	m. 167	C#-	New strumming texture begins (block chords, followed by arpeggios)
			Bass line [G#-A-B-A]
7:24	m. 177	D-	Aeolian pendulum in D minor
7:42	m. 185		(Transition)
7:51	m. 189	Gphr#3	VII-I progression from verse
8:00	m. 193		Aeolian progression in G- (Eb–F–G)
			Ostinato bass line in Euclidean rhythms, improvisation in right hand, mainly blues scale.
8:40	m. 211	G#-	New strumming texture begins
			G# established as tonic through an incomplete Aeolian progression followed by a VII–I motion in the bass.

Table 3.7 (continued)

RECAPITULATION

8:58	m. 219	Gphr#3	VERSE
			Only the first portion of the verse harmonically.
9:15	m. 227	C-/+	BRIDGE
9:39	m. 237	Gm	CHORUS
10:16	m. 253		EVADED FINAL VERSE
			Instead: Improvisation on chorus progression
			[Bbadd6/F, Cm/G, Dsus4/A, Eb/Bb]
11:11	m. 277		(low bass, hand crossover, interaction between high/low registers)
11:43	m. 291		(new strumming texture)
12:40	m. 317		("cadential 6/4")
12:10	m. 303		(grouping dissonance/polyrhythm)
12:50	m. 321	Gphr#3	VERSE (intro)
13:17	m. 328		END/APPLAUSE

The onset of the development section is signalled a bit later, at 3:02 (m. 67), by a modulatory shift to Eb minor coupled with a strumming texture. What follows is a developmental material, which traverses a number of key areas, rich in harmonic and rhythmic devices typical of Mehldau's idiolect (discussed in chapter 1 and 2). I will not discuss these here because they are outlined in sufficient detail in Table 3.7, and since the entirety of the material in this section is of Mehldau's own making, there is no basis for comparison to the original recording.

Mehldau's A' section begins with a reference to the verse, which uses only its first portion harmonically: Abmaj7/F – G – Gsus4 – G. Mehldau's progression is slightly modified and consists of an Fm9 chord (sometimes with added fourth) followed by either G minor, Gsus4, or G major in the very last instance; here, the G-major triad (which is used consistently in the verse of the original) is reserved strategically for the very end of the verse material, acting as a dominant to the C-minor modality of the bridge.

Mehldau's bridge is very close to the original, although the first half (the C-minor portion) is cut in half. In the chorus that follows, Mehldau's cover retains the exact proportions (16 mm.). Instead of playing a final verse after the chorus, however, Mehldau evades the final verse at 10:16 (m. 253), and begins improvising on the harmonic progression of the chorus for a total of 68 measures. This significant inflation of the final chorus is balanced out by an abbreviated final verse in which Mehldau only plays the harmonic introduction to the verse, very much in the same way that he concluded his cover of "Lithium." In this sense, the final verse feels like a kind of coda, or a recapitulation *within* the recapitulation section as a whole, rather than a verse properly speaking. As a whole, Mehldau's cover of Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother" projects a ternary form in which the development-like contrasting middle is composed-out of improvised materials, acting as a prolonged interruption of the original Jeff Buckley material played in the outer sections of the ABA form.

In this chapter, I have shown some of the ways in which Mehldau develops materials typical of rock music to create larger-scale formal structures that convey a sense of beginning, development, and ending. In this regard, Mehldau's approach to form as a solo pianist differs from that of other musicians covering pre-existing songs. In jazz practice, covering a song typically means playing the theme and then improvising on the song's chord changes. In the world of popular music, covers typically either strive to be as close as possible to the original (this is the objective of a cover band, for example), or consist of personalized adaptations. In the latter case, parameters such as orchestration,

tempo, harmony, and style more generally speaking may be altered, but often, the melody and the formal structure remain the same.

I do not wish to claim that all of Mehldau's covers are influenced by classical ternary form; Mehldau's covers of rock songs in trio settings, for example — as well as many of his compositions — are much more jazz-like in their use of the fundamental theme–variations–theme framework. A vast majority of his covers as a solo pianist, however, feature a more open-ended fantasia-like approach. For reasons of scope, I have only presented three examples here, but there are of course many more; essentially all the covers that feature strumming textures (refer back to Table 2.2) are good examples of abstract narratives superimposed onto the structures of the original songs.

To summarize, in the first cover examined in this chapter, Ferré's "La mémoire et la mer," Mehldau's approach to form is informed by a traditional theme–variations–theme framework which he molds into a ternary form via the use of strumming and sequential transposition of a thematic core in the development section, and the use of chromatic melodic fragments in the A' section, thus simultaneously reflecting on the A and B sections, which considered together in retrospect express a narrative or movement through time consisting of a beginning, middle, and end. In his cover of "Lithium," Mehldau's formal approach is a recasting of the original form by Nirvana; by composing out the original bridge into a complete development section, and by substituting the last verse–chorus–bridge of the original song with a restatement of the introduction, Mehldau effectively linearizes Nirvana's cyclical form. Finally, in his cover of Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother," Mehldau produces a large ternary form by devising an entire development section constituted of idiosyncratic harmonic, rhythmic, and textural

gestures (such as Aeolian progressions, grouping dissonance, and strumming, for example) only loosely connected to the original song.

Overall, these analyses demonstrate three somewhat different formal approaches, though they all achieve the same result: a linearization of cyclic forms. Not every cover by Mehldau follows this pattern, and there may be other approaches to linearization in Mehldau's repertoire of covers (even as a solo pianist) that have not been discussed here; this is a large topic that could alone constitute an entire thesis. Nonetheless, I believe that these three examples alone sufficiently demonstrate the essence of Mehldau's classically influenced fantasia-like (and un-jazz-like) approach to form in his work as a solo pianist.

CONCLUSION

When Mehldau covers a rock song, he does much more than merely "jazz it up." What I mean by this is elusive, and so I will clarify by way of comparison: Mehldau's "covering" is unlike the work of someone like Jacques Loussier, for example, who is well known for his jazz interpretations of pieces by J. S. Bach. When Loussier plays Bach, the original music is modified to incorporate the stylistically marked, sometimes clichéd attributes of another genre, in this case jazz. The addition of a walking bass line, a swing rhythm, and an enriched harmonic vocabulary that emancipates the dissonances of chordal sevenths, ninths, eleventhes, and thirteenths: all these elements in Loussier's music can be summarized as "jazzing it up." In other words, it is as if the music is merely transposed, not into a new key but into a new genre. As a result, the listener to Loussier's music simultaneously recognizes the original music by Bach, and the added-value jazz. On the other hand, when Mehldau covers or interprets a rock song, often his covers do not sound particularly like jazz, nor like rock for that matter. It is precisely in this way that Mehldau's approach to covering is *symbiotic*.

Before extending this idea further, consider the following quote from an interview with Ludovic Florin, published in the preamble of Philippe André's complete transcription of *Elegiac Cycle*. Here, Mehldau is asked to discuss his approach to "the problem of form in improvisation."

> One big issue is harmony: How much is too much? The more specific it becomes, the less room the soloist has to truly improvise. So we have the paradox that what makes the composition itself richer and more detailed makes the improvisation more confined; the effectiveness of composition and improvisation seem to move in inverse directions. The trick is to find a balance, and the process of finding the balance is for me a dialectical process: This tension between composition and improvisation can be understood in

> broader terms, as an antagonistic yet symbiotic relationship between form and content. The improvisation depends on the form of the composition to express itself because the form gives a context to its expression; we could say it gives a language to an otherwise completely abstract utterance. The composition, on the other hand, depends on the content of the improvisation to express itself; it is merely a womb or structure that will house that content. In ideally unified expression, the form and content merge and become one and the same.[1]

In light of this passage, I posit that Mehldau's covers sound like neither rock nor jazz precisely because their forms and contents have merged; they are representations of the "ideally unified expression" that Mehldau strives for in his playing. One could say, by contrast, that in Loussier's work, form and content have not completely merged; rather, they are in dialogue.

My task with this thesis, now put into other words, was to break apart Mehldau's unified expression, to point out the disparate yet recognizable elements — both in the composed forms (i.e. the rock songs being covered) and their improvised contents — which, when viewed in isolation, offer us a better comprehension of what constitutes Mehldau's idiolect as a whole.

To summarize, I have achieved this by examining the parameters of harmony, rhythm, and form on separate terms. With regards to harmony, I have shown that the use of lament-bass progressions, Aeolian progressions, modulatory shifts (particularly to VII), modal mixture, and emphasis on IV are not only common traits in Mehldau's repertoire of covers, but are also ubiquitous in his own compositions. In other words, the harmonic devices discussed in chapter 1 are formal containers — neither too simple nor too complex — which lay a fertile ground for improvisation. Part of Mehldau's

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[1] Ludovic Florin, interview with Brad Mehldau, in Philippe André, *Elegiac Cycle: Complete Transcription and Analysis* (Paris: Outre Mesure), 20.

originality as an improviser lies in his predilection for (composed) harmonic progressions that are not commonly associated with jazz. With regards to rhythm, I first pointed to the influence of rock and classical music in Mehldau's thinking via his own writings on the matter, on odd meters and polyrhythms. I proceeded to discuss these rhythmic devices as they appear in Mehldau's repertoire of rock covers, expanding on odd meters and polyrhythms to incorporate changing meters and grouping dissonance, and adding a third category consisting of tresillo and other Euclidean rhythms, a stylistic marker of rock music commonly found in Mehldau's playing. Following my discussion of these three rhythmic devices, I also briefly addressed the parameter of texture; I employed the term "strumming texture" to identify a particular textural trope in Mehldau's playing as a solo pianist, which is found in nearly every one of his rock covers and typically serves to establish development-like sections within Mehldau's formal (re)-interpretations of rock songs. Speaking of development, I address the question of form in Mehldau's solo covers in my third and final chapter; here, I provided three formal analyses, comparing Mehldau's forms to their corresponding originals. By doing so, I demonstrated three different formal approaches to a singular end: the linearization of the cyclical, that is to say, the composing-out of a simple repetitive structure into a narrative work containing a clear sense of beginning, development, and ending.

I conclude my thesis by sketching out further lines of possible scholarship connected to this research. Harmonic analyses of Mehldau's compositions are still lacking, and the analytical study of more recent work in particular, such as *After Bach* (2018), would be interesting, especially in this case because of the direct connection to the classical repertoire. Furthermore, analytical and archival work on particular covers,

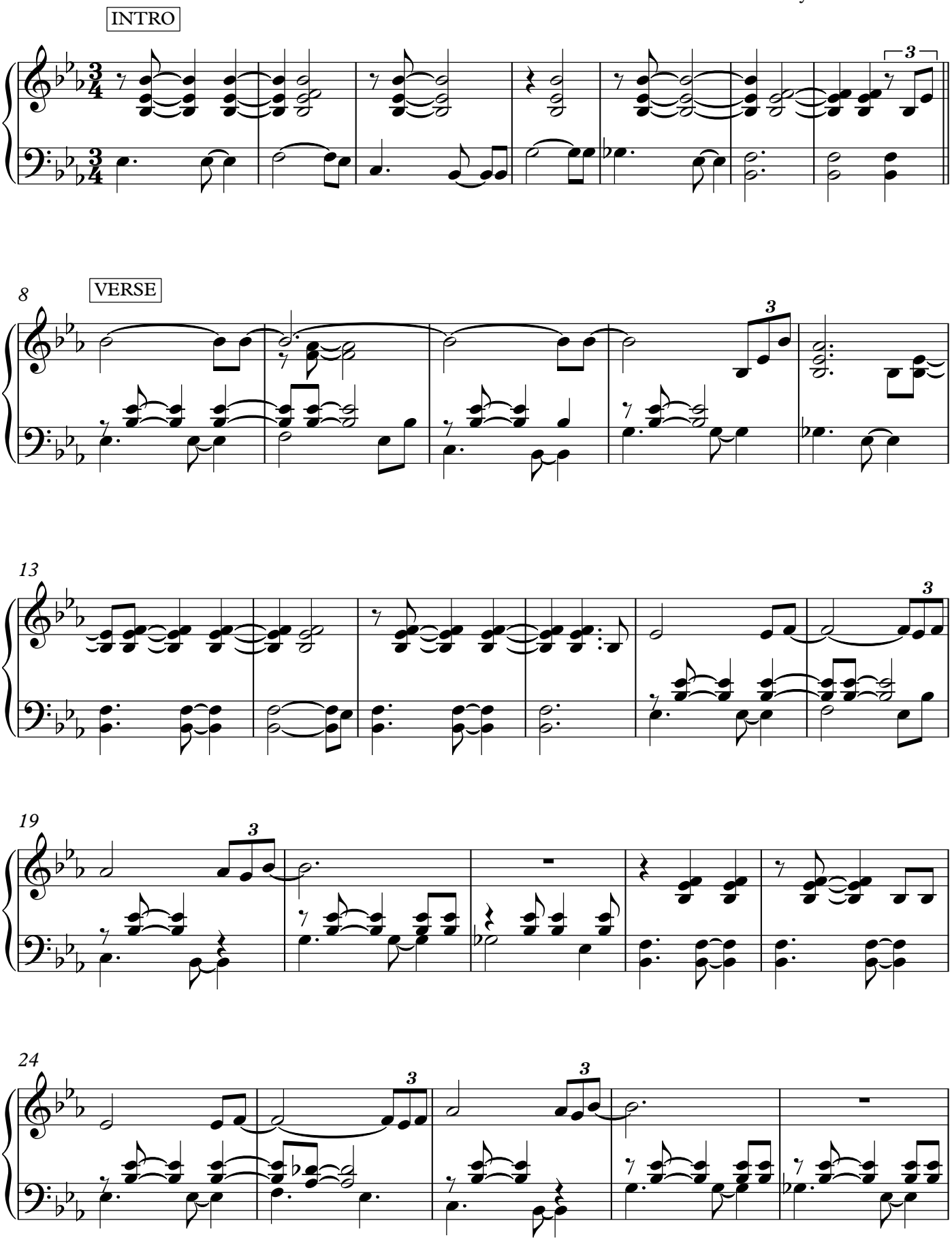
their frequency in live concerts and their evolution over time (with regards to harmony and other formal parameters), would provide a rich area of exploration. With regards to rhythm, further research could study the rhythmic interplay of Mehldau's trio, possibly in comparison with Mehldau's style as a solo pianist, or look for similarities and differences in Mehldau's rhythmic language when playing rock covers in comparison with jazz standards. Finally, with regards to formal analyses of Mehldau's rock covers, I was quite constrained, in my last chapter on form, by the scope of this project both in detail and in the number of covers analyzed; I certainly hope that this topic will be explored further in future music-theoretical scholarship.

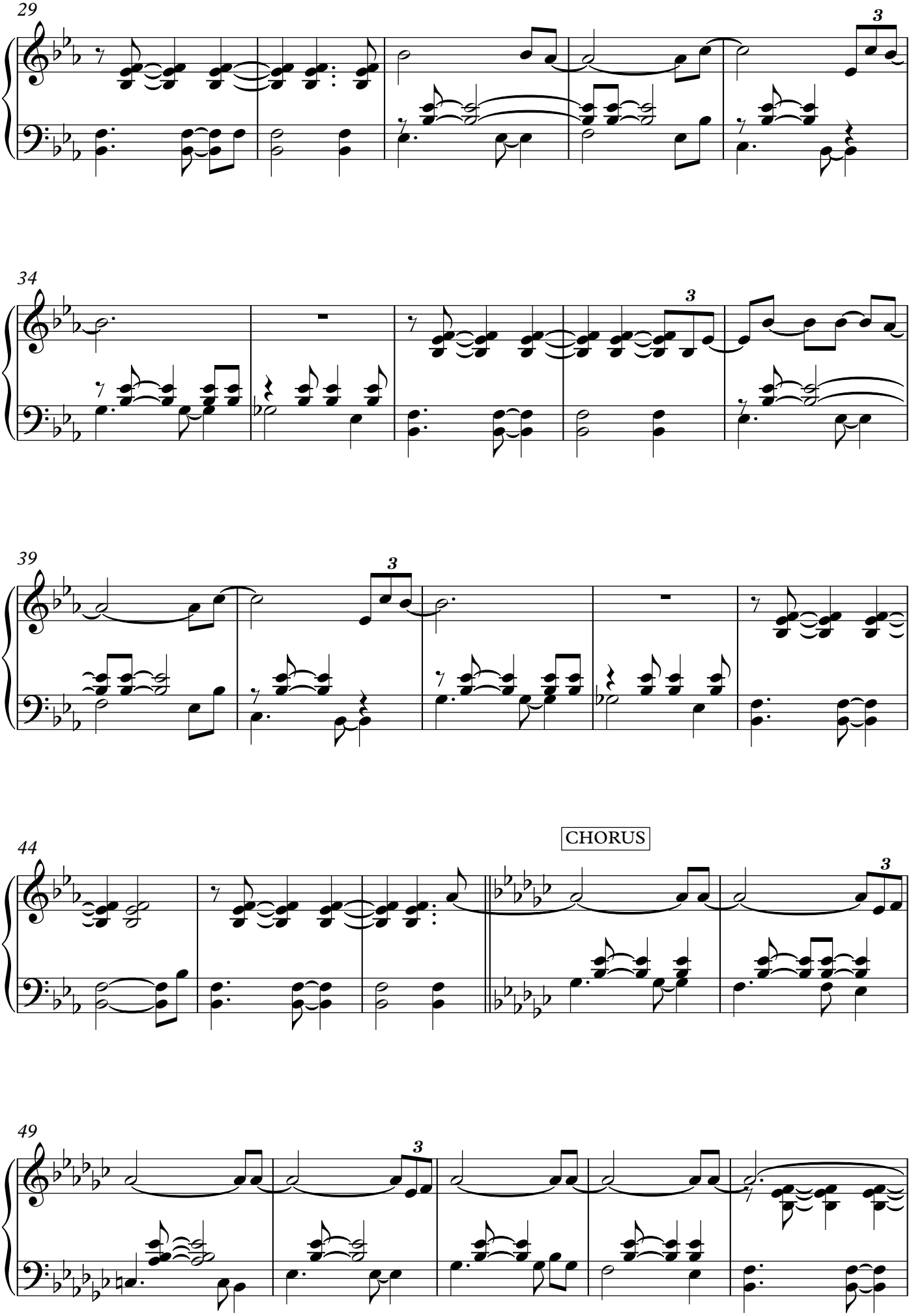
Holland - Brad Mehldau

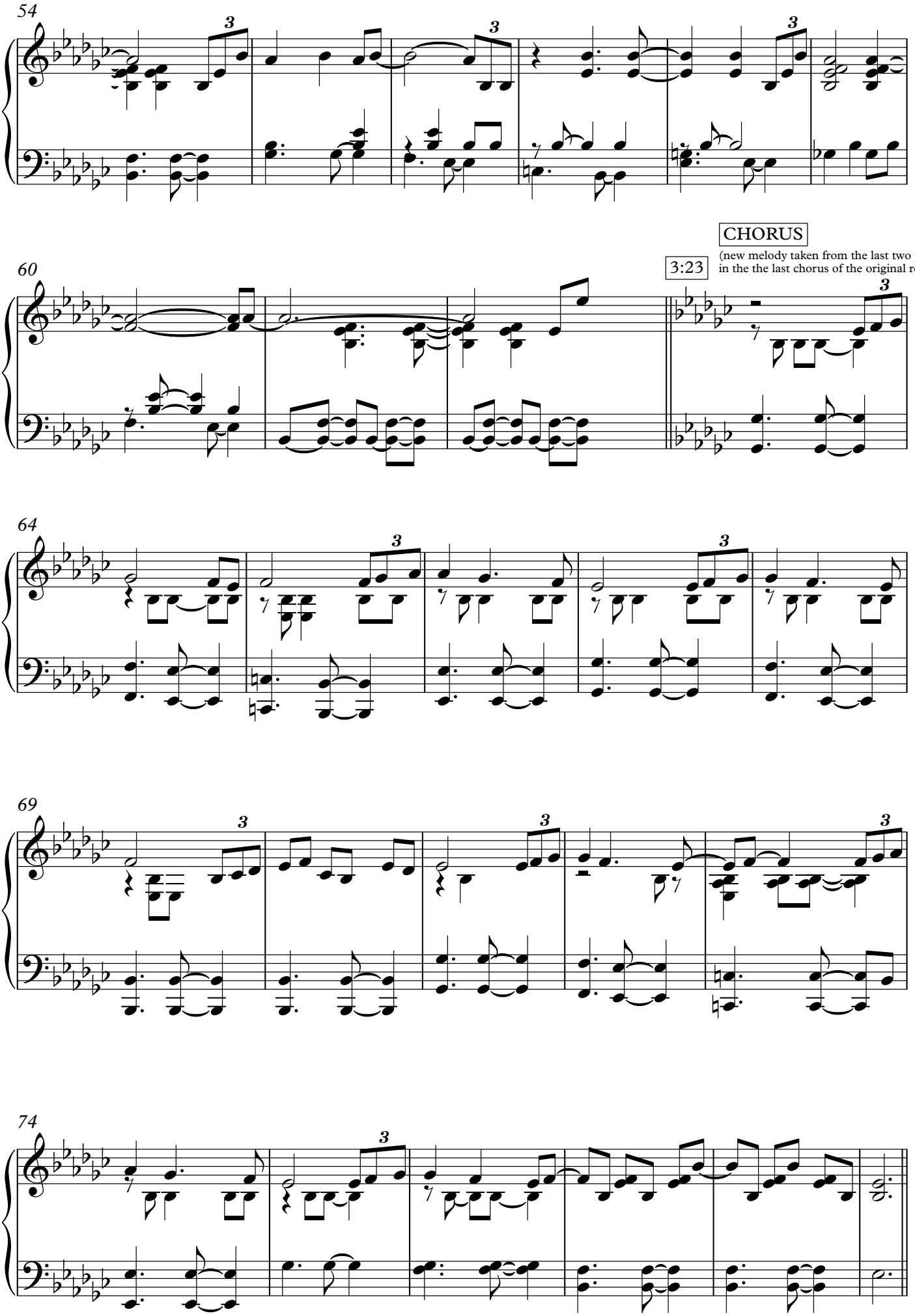
from *10 Years Solo Live*

Sufjan Stevens
arranged by Brad Mehldau
transcribed by Maxime Fillion

Swing eighths ♩=100




29
34
39
CHORUS
44
49


54
60
3:23
CHORUS
(new melody taken from the last two phrases
in the the last chorus of the original recording)
64
69
74
etc.

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