Distinctive Features Of Jazz Music

Posted on October 18, 2019

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African American Origins and the Improvisational Character of Jazz

Jazz is an improvisational music form that was developed by African Americans and has impacted both the African rhythms and the European harmonic structure. Partially, this genre was established from the blues and ragtime and is typically characterized by polyphonic ensemble playing, syncopated rhythms, deliberate pitch deviations, varying degrees of improvisation, and the application of natural timbres. This essay will focus on the elements that make it a distinct form of music.

The features that render jazz a distinct genre are primarily derived from West African musical sources that were exported to North America by the slaves. The slaves preserved these elements despite all challenges in the plantation belief of the American South. However, the elements are not unidentifiable since they were undocumented until the mid-19th century. Consequently, the slaves were brought from various West African cultures with varying musical norms. Therefore, a significant range of black musical characteristics were exhibited on American soil. In turn, this encountered European musical characteristics, such as shape-note hymn tunes and simple dance and entertainment music, which were dominant in the early 19th century in North America.

Music evolved to jazz following a broad-ranging, gradually integrated incorporation of white and black folk music and the famous styles with their origins in both Europe and West Africa. The only derivatives from the West African customs are the slight oversimplification asserting that structural and rhythmic features of jazz and some attributes of its customary instrumentation, such as guitar and percussion or banjo, while the European inputs are seen in both the harmonic language and its application of conventional instruments such as trombone, trumpet, and string, saxophone piano, and bass.

Syncopation, Ragtime, and the Rhythmic Foundations of Jazz

The jazz syncopations were not entirely new but rather acted as the primary attraction of one of its forerunners known as ragtime, which was present in the older minstrel music as well as in the art of

Creole artist Louis Moreau Gottschalk. The nonblack listeners were struck by jazz syncopation as fascinating and novel since there was no such type of syncopation in European classical music. In truism, the ragtime and jazz syncopations were a result of simplifying and reducing the already complex, multilayered, polymetric, and polyrhythmic structures natural to all sorts of West African ensemble music and cultural dance. In another explanation, there was a drastic simplification of the earlier accentuations of numerous vertically competing meters to the syncopated accents.

Jazz exhibits a more obscure melody provenance in tune, motive, theme, and riff. In all probability, jazz music was developed from a simple mixture and residue of African and European voice elements intuitively established by Africans in America in the 1700s and 1800s. (Bogdanov et al.) For instance, work songs and unaccompanied field hollers relate to the social status of the blacks. The widely dominant emphasis on pentatonic structures was mainly from West Africa, while the more chromatic, formerly diatonic melodic elements of jazz developed from the late 19th to the early 20th century European antecedents.

Among the last aspects of music in Europe that African Americans incorporated was harmony. However, once achieved, harmony was used as an additional resource in music and religious writings, resulting in steady spiritual development borrowed from the white spiritual revival gatherings that blacks in most regions of the South attended. One significant result of these musical developments was the establishment of the blue scale by the blacks with its blue notes, which flattened the 3rd and 7th scales. The scale can neither be specifically European nor specifically African, but instead, it obtained its distinct modality, ranging from inflections in pitch typical to most numbers of the West African dialects as well as musical forms. These highly impressive, in influence and in African considerations very significant, deviations in pitch were established on the diatonic degree typical to almost all European vernacular and classical music.

American History and the Distinctive Development of the Genre

The idea that jazz evolved uniquely in America, rather than in South America, the Caribbean, or any other region where the blacks were taken in large numbers, is fascinating and historical. Most African Americans in those territories were often freed by the years around the 1800s and hence were liberal people who actively took part in the norm enhancement of their own states. For instance, in Brazil, the slaves were very socially and geographically alienated from the white settlements; thus, they just were able to uphold their traditional musical norms and traditions in a partially purified form. Therefore, it is ironic that jazz music would likely never have developed were it not a result of the slave business, which was specifically done in America.

Jazz developed from the African American slaves who were barred from retaining their original musical beliefs and thus felt the necessity of substituting some home-nurtured structures of the musical genre. Some artists, for example, Jose Mauricio Nunes Garcia of the Brazilian mulatto were

completely absorbed in the musical developments of their error that were taking shape in Europe and composed music in correlation to the dominant styles and traditions of that time. American slaves, on the contrary, were limited not only in their working situations and spiritual beliefs but also in their recreational and leisure participation, which included music composition and making. Despite the fact that slaves playing instruments such as horn, violin, and oboe were exploited due to their musical talents and capabilities, they were exceptionally treated well in cities such as South Carolina and Charleston.

Conclusively, jazz is a music genre that is largely related to the slave trade and slavery practices in Europe and America. (Riggs) The music was typically developed by the blacks trying to uphold and recap their cultural backgrounds. However, jazz contained features from both the West African nations, where the slaves had been bought and Europe, where they worked.

References

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