Brad Mehldau’s approach to orchestration at the piano in a trio setting as demonstrated on “August Ending” (2004) and “Secret Beach” (2006)

Gabriel Fatin

Edith Cowan University

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Brad Mehldau’s Approach to Orchestration at the Piano in a Trio Setting as Demonstrated on “August Ending” (2004) and “Secret Beach” (2006)

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West Australian Academy Of Performing Arts
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Bachelor of Music Honours 2014
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Abstract:

Brad Mehldau is one of the most accomplished and original pianists playing today, and his musical output is met with a grand reception from critics and the public alike. Influenced predominately by the jazz piano lineage including Wynton Kelly and McCoy Tyner, rock music, and classical music, he has developed a highly unique way of playing, which early on was reminiscent of Bill Evans. One of the most striking aspects of his playing is in the way that he orchestrates his improvisations across the piano. He has the ability to play independent solo melodies in his left hand and right hand simultaneously, as well as coordinating chordal accompaniment. This dissertation identifies the orchestrational methods used in two of Mehldau’s improvisations. They are categorised into three main types: firstly, traditional right hand solo left hand accompaniment roles, secondly, linear improvisations in both hands, and thirdly, a three-part method where the two outer parts solo melodically and the inner part provides chordal accompaniment. The defining characteristics of each approach are identified, informing a discussion of their use. Extra orchestrational concerns are similarly discussed, where interesting patterns arise.
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Brad Mehldau, for his incredible music
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**Introduction:**

In almost every way the piano is a vast instrument. It is ubiquitous through all of Western Music, and contains the entire pitch range of an orchestra. It also has the ability to sound all of its pitches simultaneously, opening up a world of possibilities for the organisation of those pitches. There are many classical composers who have written for the vast capabilities of the piano (and other keyboard instruments such as harpsichord, organ and fortepiano) ever since its invention, yet there are very few jazz pianists who have delved as deep. The typical improvisation style for a contemporary jazz pianist stems from the imitation of horn players, where the pianist’s right hand will play a single note melodic line and the left hand will supply chordal accompaniment. This style is used so widely because, firstly, it allows technical freedom while improvising, as both hands have distinct roles and it can be played even with very basic technique, and secondly, it fits logically in the context of the usual jazz rhythm section (piano, bass, drums). Although this style has served generations of jazz pianists well, it leaves many of the capabilities of the piano untouched. One pianist who has explored these further capabilities is Brad Mehldau. He has a strong command of alternative orchestrations when improvising, and there are many recorded examples of him using them. However there is only a little written on his approach to the keyboard at all, despite his stature in the jazz community. This dissertation considers the following questions about Mehldau’s improvisations:

1. What are the different orchestral methods that Mehldau uses?
2. What are the characteristics and uses of each of these methods?
3. How do these methods relate to one another?
**Biography:**

Brad Mehldau was born in 1970 in Jacksonville, Florida. He began piano at a young age, and in 1988 moved to New York to attend The New School for Social Research. There he studied under Fred Hersch, Junior Mance, Kenny Werner and Jimmy Cobb. Initially he recorded as a ‘formidable’\(^1\) sideman for people such as Charles Lloyd, Joshua Redman, Peter Bernstein and Steve Davis. In 1994 formed his longstanding trio of Larry Grenadier and Jorge Rossy (replaced by Jeff Ballard in 2005), and in 1995 recorded his first album on the Nonesuch label, ‘Introducing Brad Mehldau’.

Mehldau’s most consistent output over the years has been in the trio format. He has also made ventures into large ensemble writing (‘Largo’ (2002), ‘Highway Rider’ (2010)), solo playing (‘Elegaic Cycle’ (1999), ‘Live In Tokyo’ (2004)) and recorded collaborations with vocalist Renee Fleming (‘Love Sublime’ (2006)), guitarist Pat Metheny (‘Metheny Mehldau’ (2006), ‘Quartet’ (2007)) and drummer Mark Guiliana (‘Taming The Dragon’ (2014)). A highly capable and respected musician, he has emerged as perhaps the finest pianist of his generation.\(^2\)

**Brad Mehldau’s Influences:**

Brad Mehldau’s influences are an oft-discussed topic, with critics and Mehldau having vastly different ideas about where his music comes from. Mike Hobart says it most concisely:

> “Pianist Brad Mehldau doesn’t so much stride between jazz, classical music and pop as swirl and eddy between them, absorbing traces as he goes. The American’s even-tempered independence reflects early classical training; his renowned interpretations of the jazz repertoire stem from a high school obsession. And he still loves pop and rock and roll. “I need to hear compressed, distorted guitars at least once a day,” [Mehldau] says. “It scratches an itch for me.”\(^3\)

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Early on his recording career Mehldau was very commonly compared to pianist Bill Evans (1929-1980), yet Mehldau denies the strength of this influence and argues against it vehemently. The liner notes to his trio release ‘The Art of Trio Volume 4: Back at The Vanguard’ (1999) begin like so:

‘The constant comparison of this trio with the Bill Evans trio by critics has been a thorn in my side. I remember listening to his music only a little, when I was 13 or 14 years old, for several months...’

In a 2012 interview, Fred Jung asked about the comparisons to Bill Evans and another pianist Lennie Tristano, wondering if Mehldau thought that those comparisons were fair. Mehldau replied,

‘The Lennie Tristano, I have gotten that a lot, and it’s always interesting because I really have not explored his music hardly at all...And the Bill Evans, I kind of checked him out, but he doesn’t really stand out, any more then McCoy Tyner, or Herbie [Hancock], or Wynton Kelly, or a whole host of others...I think it’s more that maybe there’s just sort of an overlap of a sensibility towards music in terms of an introspective quality that happens in ballads a lot.’

There have been many responses to Mehldau’s original point - his essay in the liner notes of The Art Of Trio Vol. 4 have been described as possibly the defining moment of his career. Ted Gioia writes that

‘In truth, Mehldau’s earliest recordings are peppered with reminders of Evans’ work in the pianist’s choice of material, in his approach to phrasing, and in the interactivity between piano, bass, and drums; yet by the time Mehldau was in the

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mehldau is also often compared to pianist Keith Jarrett (1945-). In ‘Motivic Strategies in Improvisations by Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau’, Timothy Page writes that

‘Recordings of the two pianists do in fact reveal clear points of comparison. Perhaps most immediately perceptible is a shared flexible rhythmic approach, and a comparable sound color [sic] in their pianism.’

Mehldau talks about early musical experiences involving Jarrett, where a friend gave him one of Keith Jarrett’s solo piano recordings ‘Bremen and Lausanne’. Mehldau says that:

‘It was kind of like, discovering that that was possible on the piano, what he was doing. I think I could relate to it, coming from the classical side of things.’

In a later interview Mehldau clarifies:

“'I think what I've said is that Jarrett is a major inspiration, although it may have gotten changed in print or taken out of context, as is often the case. There's a difference between inspiration and influence. I get inspired by greatness - he has it. But I don't think my trio sounds anything like his; I'm actually not really a fan of his trio; it's his solo stuff that moves me.'”

Good to note at this point is that Lennie Tristano, Bill Evans and Keith Jarrett have all undertaken intensive study of classical music. Chris Kelsey writes that,

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8 Timothy Page, "Motivic Strategies in Improvisations by Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau" (2009).
9 Jung, "A Conversation with Brad Mehldau".
'Tristano brought to the music of Charlie Parker and Bud Powell a harmonic language that adapted the practices of contemporary classical music' and notes his 'extensive use of counterpoint'.

Bill Evans speaks of drawing a lot from classical music, but says that

‘...it’s difficult to pin down exactly what. My heritage is classical...’

Keith Jarrett has even recorded a significant amount of classical music (often works by J.S. Bach), including *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and *The Goldberg Variations*.

The influence of classical music on these three pianists is relevant because of the huge influence that the classical repertoire has also had on Brad Mehldau. It seems that it is the unifying influence between all of these pianists, and is most likely the reason that they are all compared to each other. This could well explain Mehldau’s disdain when he is compared to them.

The way in which Mehldau assimilates the classical repertoire into his compositions and improvisations is one of the most significant elements of his style. In an interview in the Huffington Post he describes the influence of this music on his playing:

‘I draw on a lot of classical music...a lot of it filters out in my playing...I think of myself as an improvising jazz musician at the end of the day, and one of my talents I guess is assimilating all of that written stuff and making it part of what I do.’

He discusses this further when talking to John Fordham:

“I stopped listening to classical music more or less completely from 14 to around 23 - and when I now hear my playing from that time, I sounded like McCoy

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Tyner or Wynton Kelly, depending who else I was playing with. Then I went back to classical music again, and my playing changed.″

Finally, Mehldau draws considerable influence from pop music. Often this influence appears in his choice of repertoire, as Ted Gioia writes:

‘He is just as likely to draw on The Beatles and Paul Simon for his set lists as on Monk and Trane... That said, don’t expect to hear his versions on rock radio stations anytime soon. By the time Mehldau has refracted these compositions through his own house of musical mirrors, these former hit tunes have been turned into jazz art songs and bear the full weight of the pianist’s exploratory tendencies.’

When Joseph Vella asks Mehldau about his repertoire he says that he,

‘...only plays the songs [he] loves - whether it’s Elliott Smith, The Beatles, Nick Drake, Radiohead, James Taylor or Cole Porter or whoever. It’s not because they’re pop tunes, though – they’re just what [he] thinks are good strong songs.’

Interesting to note though are his disparaging comments towards recent pop music, as found in his article called ‘Ideology, Burgers and Beer’. Mehldau asks,

‘Is my lack of enjoyment of most of what’s called pop music these days simply because it sucks, or is it because I’m unwittingly locked in the grips of a musical elitist ideology?’

It seems the same rigor that he applies the jazz and classical realms is applicable to his taste in pop as well.

15 Gioia, The History of Jazz.
16 Vella, "Interview with Brad Mehldau on the Art of Solo Piano."
This diverse musical background helps contextualise Mehldau’s unique style and leads us to a better understanding of the source of his improvisational and compositional techniques.

**The Concept of Piano Orchestration and its History in Jazz:**

‘Piano orchestration’ has the potential to be a vague term. This term is not of the author’s conception, and in this dissertation is used to describe the way in which a pianist constructs the music material across the piano. It pertains to range, intervallic construction of chords, melodic lines, harmonic concepts and the interplay between different ‘parts’ that the pianist chooses to sound.

The Oxford Dictionary of Music defines ‘orchestration’ as:

> ‘The art of combining instruments and their sounds in composing for the orchestra, or, more simply and practically, the act of scoring a sketch or an existing work for orchestral forces. By extension, the term may also be used in the context of music for chamber forces or even for chorus or solo piano, since the basic concerns of orchestration – with balance, colour, and texture – are common to music of all kinds.’

This dissertation uses this term in reference to solo piano, or, in the context of Brad Mehldau’s trio improvisations, the piano as part of a piano trio. Hence we arrive at the term ‘piano orchestration’, interchangeable with ‘orchestration at the piano’.

Furthermore, in Gioia’s writing on Mehldau, he refers to,

> ‘Mehldau’s advanced rhythmic conception and orchestral two-handed technique.’

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19 Gioia, The History of Jazz.
This ‘orchestral two-handed technique’ is referring to the same element of Mehldau’s improvising as this dissertation.

**Rationale:**

Mehldau receives consistent praise from critics and audiences alike. Nate Chinen from The New York Times describes him as the most influential pianist of the last twenty years\(^\text{20}\), and Michel Contat names him ‘the undisputed master of modern piano’.\(^\text{21}\) The Penguin Guide to Jazz Recordings reviews almost all of his albums favourably (the only exception being ‘Elegaic Cycle’), and names him as one of ‘the most keenly followed pianists in [jazz].’\(^\text{22}\) Despite his stature in the jazz community, little has been written in the way of analysis, and none of that analysis includes his orchestrational concepts.

Mehldau’s orchestrational concepts are also unique to his style of improvisation. It is true that other pianists have explored this aspect of the piano, but not in the depth that Mehldau has. Lennie Tristano’s overdubbed solo composition ‘Turkish Mambo’\(^\text{23}\) is heavily contrapuntal. Bill Evans uses question and answer, secondary melodies (also known as ‘inner voices’) and counterpoint in his solo playing\(^\text{24}\), and in his most famous trio recordings (with Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian) has sections where he performs linear improvisations with bassist LaFaro.\(^\text{25}\) Similarly, Keith Jarrett’s solo work contains many alternative orchestrational techniques\(^\text{26}\), and these more complex orchestrations appear irregularly in his trio playing\(^\text{27}\).

Mehldau uses many of these different orchestrational techniques in his solo playing, just like these other pianists before him\(^\text{28}\). However he has also forged a unique way

\(^\text{20}\) Nate Chinen, "Bluegrass and Jazz, Meeting in More Than the Middle," *The New York Times* 2013.
\(^\text{21}\) Michel Contat, "Taming the Dragon," *Telerama* 2014.
\(^\text{23}\) Album ‘Lennie Tristano’ (1955)
\(^\text{24}\) Album: ‘Alone’ (1968)
\(^\text{25}\) Album: ‘Portrait In Jazz’ (1960)
\(^\text{26}\) Album: ‘Koln Concert’ (1975)
\(^\text{27}\) Album: ‘Changeless’ (1992, recorded 1987)
\(^\text{28}\) Album: ‘Elegaic Cycle’ (1999)
of integrating it into his trio improvisation, which none of the other pianists have explored in a significant way. This is an exciting addition to the jazz piano language. When the piano is included in an ensemble (often with bass, drums and a melody instrument such as a saxophone), its improvisations often imitate those of horn players. Wynton Marsalis notes this point:

“...after Charlie Parker everyone started trying to play his melodies on his instruments. Trombone players started playing like Charlie Parker; bass players wanted to play Charlie Parker; piano players wanted to play Charlie Parker. Granted, a lot of piano players sounded great in that style, but one of the strongest advantages of the piano is the capacity to voice separate melodies simultaneously when playing with two hands. Now, because Charlie Parker played with a single voice instrument, no pianists are going to stride with two hands? Or take the three-horn New Orleans counterpoint? ‘Cause Bird didn’t do it, was it no longer worth doing?”

In Mark Levine’s ubiquitous ‘Jazz Piano Book’, Levine states that

‘...your left hand provides a harmonic cushion for your right hand to play a line over...’

This book covers the traditional approach that jazz pianists take when orchestrating their improvisations in a trio setting, an approach that is well documented. In Mehldau’s own words:

‘Of course, this division [of melody and accompaniment] is not in itself a bad thing, but to the extent that it becomes a fixed stylistic procedure, it at least implies an expressive limitation.’

These new orchestrational approaches conceived by Mehldau are exciting developments, and deserve to be documented in a similar way to the traditional approach.

Some preliminary writing has been done on his improvisations by other academics, but most of this writing has been done in general terms, often identifying common improvisational devices rather than focusing on a few examples and carrying out a detailed analysis. This dissertation will take a snapshot of Mehldau’s improvisation and examine the examples of his orchestrational approach.

The conclusions reached at the end of this dissertation will be of interest to fans of Mehldau’s music as well as being useful to other musicians, especially pianists. The study and practice of the techniques described will lead to the overcoming of certain technical challenges, a new perspective on how musical material can be orchestrated at the piano and an insight into the harmonic and rhythmic aspects of Mehldau's improvisation.

**Methodology:**

The method of research used in this dissertation is transcription and analysis. The solo on *August Ending* was transcribed already, and is available online (here it is used with permission). It contained several errors that were corrected by the author. The author also transcribed the solo on *Secret Beach*, and both are attached as appendices. The two solos have been chosen based on a very general set of criteria. Firstly, they are both performed in a trio context, and secondly, they both have extended use of these alternate orchestration techniques.

These solos will then be analysed with respect to the three main orchestrational methods used by

1. The traditional horn imitation technique where the melody is in the right hand and chordal accompaniment is in the left hand
2. An entirely linear approach where both the right and left hands are playing melodic lines
3. A three-part method, where he sounds an upper and a lower melodic part with a chordal accompaniment in the mid range i.e. between the two melodic parts.

Although the traditional approach is not unique to Mehldau’s improvising it will still be analysed because it is necessary to draw comparisons between all methods that he uses.

This methodology is used successfully in other dissertations that have also used the transcription and analysis method to arrive at categorisations of musical techniques. Nicholas Abbey’s 2011 dissertation ‘Aspects of Rhythm in The Music and Improvisations in Six Pieces by Bassist Avishai Cohen’ addresses the idiosyncratic elements of the Avishai Cohen Trio. Abbey presents the transcriptions, analysis, and identification of each major rhythmic technique used by the trio as well as his own compositions based off those techniques.

Jeremy Thompson’s 2013 dissertation ‘Lage Lund’s Use Of Harmony in Improvisations Where No Piano Is Present, as demonstrated on “Stairway to The Stars” (2011) and “I’m Getting Sentimental Over You” (2011)’ uses two transcriptions from guitarist Lage Lund and solely addresses his harmonic approach. Thompson analyses the solos and identifies Lund’s common harmonic traits, presenting them in the final chapter of his dissertation.

As well as these two dissertations, all of the academic writing on Mehldau found in the literature review below uses transcription and analysis to arrive at useful conclusions.

All terminology and chord symbols have been used in the same manner as found in Mark Levine’s ‘The Jazz Theory Book’. Further reading has been recommended where relevant.

32 Nicholas Abbey, "Aspects of Rhythm in the Music and Improvisations in Six Pieces by Bassist Avishai Cohen" (Edith Cowan University, 2011).
Literature Review:

Mehldau is a keenly followed musician, and there are many reviews and interviews with him available online. Academic writing is fairly limited, as would be expected when dealing with a contemporary artist. Fortunately Mehldau writes extensively about himself, and gives insight into aspects of his playing that many academic papers misinterpret or miss entirely. There are no books written exclusively about him, although he is mentioned in some recently released history books. There is also no book available pertaining to alternative orchestration methods in jazz. The literature review below is divided into three different categories: Academic Writing on Mehldau, Articles and Interviews, and Mehldau’s Own Writing.

Academic Writing on Mehldau

Kirsten MacKenzie has written an article dedicated to identifying appearances of classical influence in Mehldau’s improvisation, and is available online in an article simply entitled ‘Kirsten MacKenzie’s Article on Brad Mehldau’. In her conclusion MacKenzie writes,

‘Mehldau has superb technical facility, is able to play very difficult passages, such as double handed single line improvisation, left hand soloing against right hand arpeggios... He employs many question and answer phrases, sequences, and contrapuntal lines from the classical language.”

This dissertation uses MacKenzie’s writing as a point of departure. The double handed improvisation, left hand soloing, question and answer, sequential ideas and contrapuntal lines are all addressed as part of the idea of ‘orchestrating at the piano’.

Timothy Page’s dissertation entitled ‘Motivic Strategies in Improvisations by Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau’ provides an analysis of Brad Mehldau’s solo on ‘I Didn’t

Know What Time It Was’, as well as a Jarrett solo. Through the analysis of the solo, Page shows,

‘Mehldau’s tendency to use motivic material as [a] point of reference to bind longer spans of music together...,’ ³⁶

This tendency was also noticed in the transcriptions addressed in this dissertation.

Another paper based around an analysis of Mehldau’s improvisation is Daniel Arthur’s ‘Reconstructing Tonal Principals In The Music Of Brad Mehldau’. Arthurs makes reference to Mehldau’s orchestrational techniques, discussing,

‘...the contrapuntal idiosyncrasies that have come to define Mehldau as a composer and performer...’ ³⁷

However, Arthur spends much of the paper discussing Mehldau’s playing through a Schenkerian lense, then extrapolating on the concepts found in his recorded work.

Articles and Interviews

There are many sources on information online through newspaper articles, which often involve interviews. They provide quotes from Mehldau but also insights from those examining him, which together provide a balanced perspective on his work.

Mehldau speaks about his alternative orchestrations in an article for JazzTimes called Brad Mehldau: Keyed In, which was published in 1998, six years before the recording of August Ending. It shows an interesting insight into his process when conceiving these new orchestrational ideas:

“It’s definitely one of those things that’s in progress...in the sense that it still feels like it’s not quite natural...it’s still something...I feel like I’m forcing myself into

³⁶ Page, "Motivic Strategies in Improvisations by Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau."
³⁷ Daniel J. Arthurs, "Reconstructing Tonal Principles in the Music of Brad Mehldau" (Ph.D., Indiana University, 2011).
so I can find something else; sort of put it out there so I don’t get bored. And then of course the thing is to find out how do I relate this to the other guys…But it’s exciting because it just opens things up more…38

This was close to when the first recorded evidence of these new techniques began, in the midst of The Art Of Trio recordings. The most interesting aspect of this quote is Mehldau’s desire to ‘open things up more’, which reveals the artistic motive for the creation of these different styles.

Another interesting article from the JazzTimes Magazine called Brad Mehldau: Anything Goes shows interesting insight into the role of the trio in Mehldau’s musical life. He holds that “the trio created [his] identity”39, which help to explain this unique approach of his especially when playing with his trio.

Something that often arises in discussion about and with Mehldau is his attraction to the German Romanticism exemplified by Brahms, Schubert and Schumann. Adam Shatz from the New York Times writes:

“…Mehldau's passion for the brooding, metaphysical sensibility of German Romanticism is unusual in jazz, in which classical influences tend to be French, and casually held.”40

In Mehldau’s words:

“If there's any German ethos that attracts me, it has to do with the incredible amount of welled-up emotion that's being conveyed. There's a kind of longing that you feel in the literature and in the music of Schubert and Schumann.”41

Although not being directly related to the mechanics of his music it is an interesting insight into the emotional and philosophical background to his art.

41 Ibid.
In another article written for The New York Times, Ben Ratliff writes on the differences between the different trios containing Jorge Rossy and Jeff Ballard, saying,

“A working band with a strong, original sound is a rare thing in jazz, and when it changes a member there can be a minor trauma; it's suddenly a different organism.”\(^{42}\)

Ratliff also notes that:

“In the changeover between drummers, Mr. Mehldau has performed a lot of solo shows. Alone, he has had to be his own rhythm section, so he has evolved new rhythmic devices, which have seeped into his trio playing as well. When he looks at a chord now, it's as if the first thing he sees is pure hammered-out rhythm.”\(^{43}\)

This is of interest because the two solos in questions straddle this change of line-up. It is suspected by the author that the number of transcriptions will make this point difficult to show, but would be an interesting point for further research.

Something else that appears regularly is Mehldau’s interest in compositional aspects of his own music. Allan Kozinn describes Mehldau as

“grappling with formal notions of structure and thematic development, and seeking a balance between the precisely defined gestures of composed music and the freedom and spontaneity of improvisation.”\(^{44}\)

This idea is addressed in Mehldau’s own writing on saxophonist Sonny Rollins, which can be found in the next section of the literature review.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
\(^{44}\) Allan Kozinn, "Brad Mehldau Is a Jazzman in a Classical Mood," ibid. 2010.
Amongst these useful articles about Mehldau there are also many which are vague interpretations of his music by reviewers. An example of such a phrase is found in a review by John Fordham addressing the trio album ‘Live’:

“Black Hole Sun passes through Spanish-tinged ruminations and develops into a percussion dialogue, while the lazy Latin tick of Secret Beach is as casual as somebody idly whistling.”

Or this review from The Los Angeles Times, referring to Mehldau and saxophonist Joshua Redman:

“As the song turned back to Mehldau, he bent its central melody into a funhouse mirror of ugly beauty before Redman returned to slice through Mehldau's stormy chords.”

This kind of vagueness is common in reviews, and although evocative it is not useful in the analysis of Mehldau’s work.

**Mehldau’s Own Writing**

Mehldau’s website displays several articles and essays that Mehldau himself has written. There is writing from his liner notes, jazz publications such as JazzTimes Magazine and essays for their own sake that are published solely for the website.

The liner notes to House On Hill (the album August Ending is from) contain many important insights into Mehldau’s conception of the music on that album. He talks about his orchestrational approach alongside discussions of polyphony in J.S. Bach’s music:

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“Glenn Gould, for instance, championed Bach’s keyboard works, but did not hide his disregard for...piano music [that] often divided melody and harmony into a single melodic line and a chordal accompaniment...Mainstream jazz piano playing has for the most part followed this model of melody and chordal accompaniment in the right hand and left hand respectively. Of course, this division is not in itself a bad thing, but to the extent that it becomes a fixed stylistic procedure, it at least implies an expressive limitation.”

It seems to be an active goal of Mehldau’s to remove himself from the model of ‘melody and chordal accompaniment’ in order to reach past this ‘expressive limitation’. He goes on to discuss his composition Boomer (very similar to August Ending, with it’s flowing left hand accompaniment) as describes it as:

“…my attempt at that stealth polyphony of Brahms in a jazz improvisational context: [the left hand] supplies the harmonic information that underpins the melodic content of the right hand, yet has a melodic flow in the stepwise movement of the sixteenth notes. As we played this tune and it developed in performance, I opted to keep the written left-hand figure as part of the solo section for roughly the first six or seven bars, blowing over it, before moving to a more chordal approach in the left hand for the remainder of the chorus; that’s the approach we take here. Throughout the record, there are compromises of this sort, where a provisional balance between the written material and the improvised sections is reached.”

It would seem then that the alternative orchestrations present in the composed parts of August Ending heavily influence Mehldau’s treatment of the rest of the solo. This attention to bridging the gap between improvisation and composition will no doubt be observed in the two transcriptions.

The website also contains an article that addresses the influence of Brahms on his own music. He begins by saying,

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48 Mehldau, "House on Hill". Accessed 21/5/14
49 Ibid.
“...duality is what I love about Brahms, so it might pop out in an improvisation or a composition of mine.”^{50}

He goes on to obliquely reference those who seeks to categorise him as a Bill Evans clone:

“...the audience is free to roam in their interpretations. Ideally, no specific bill of goods is being sold to them, so they might not register "Brahms" at all. They might register the Beatles or Bill Evans or maybe nothing specific, save a familiar, strong sentiment.”^{51}

In another article written for the Jazz Times Magazine called Ideology, Burgers and Beer he reveals a pre-occupation with compositional logic within his improvisations. This comes out in a re-enacted dialogue about the musical worth of two saxophonists Sonny Rollins and Sonny Stitt:

“On one particular night...we fell into one of those dead-end ‘who’s better’ discussions...The pair in question was Sonny Rollins/Sonny Stitt...the majority of the group went with Rollins, but a few chose Stitt...Rollins’ winning greatness for us...was his double attribute: Not only are his improvisations so inspired, but Rollins’ solos often have a compositional logic that compels you to listen in a different manner...Rollins wasn’t just blowing an inspired improvisation. He was building an edifice, erecting something that would stay standing through time because of the internal logic holding it together. To cement our argument in favor [sic] of Rollins, we dropped the big ‘P’ word: Profound.”^{52}

It seems that as well as placing great importance on improvising with the composition in mind Mehldau also feels that developing ideas through an improvisation is also of great importance. This compositional logic is present in the two solos analysed in this dissertation, and is discussed where relevant. Further examples can be found in

^{51} Ibid.
^{52} "Ideology, Burgers and Beer".
Timothy Page’s paper entitled “Motivic Strategies In Improvisations by Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53} Page, "Motivic Strategies in Improvisations by Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau."
Chapter 1: August Ending

1.1 Context:

This track is from the album ‘House On Hill’, which is a 2004 recording of Brad Mehldau’s trio with Jorge Rossy (drums) and Larry Grenadier (bass). It is played using a straight 8ths groove, with a double time feel. Mehldau utilises all three different orchestration methods within his one and a half chorus solo.

1.2 The Composition:

*August Ending* is in AABC form. The final section C is based off the material in the A sections, but is an extended, more harmonically complex version that begins in a different key.

As discussed in the literature review, this composition is informed by Mehldau’s study of Brahms’ music. Mehldau plays a very strict part in the composed melody, using a complex, four-part orchestration method. He uses two outer melodic parts, a cluster accompaniment and a flowing quaver line that often moves between two notes either a tone or semitone apart (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** The four parts, used in the A sections of the melody

![Figure 1: The four parts, used in the A sections of the melody](image)

As the piece develops this inner flowing line is harmonized in major thirds or a perfect fourth. The cluster accompaniment is replaced by this thicker moving part (Figure 2 overleaf).
Figure 2: The three parts, used in the B and C sections of the melody

The Brahmsian influence comes to the fore in this inner flowing line: this is what Mehldau describes as his

‘...attempt at that stealth polyphony of Brahms in a jazz improvisational context’.¹

The flowing line underpins the dominant melody in the highest part.

These compositional devices inform the use of the three-part orchestration method found in Mehldau’s solo. The main difference between the improvised form and its composed form is that the flowing quaver line present in the melody is not present in the improvised three-part method. This is because, in Mehldau’s words,

‘Trying to use a pre-existing contrapuntal format as a vehicle for improvisation is like serving a steak with a big scoop of ice cream on top of it; it is adding to something that is already effectively complete.’²

To avoid this conundrum, Mehldau removes the flowing quaver line when improvising.

² Ibid.
1.3 Orchestration Type One: Traditional Approach

This refers to the traditional way in which jazz pianists divide the left hand and right hand roles into accompaniment and melodic parts respectively. Initially it was thought by the author that there was only one way in which Mehldau used this method, but it was found after closer analysis that there are actually two distinct approaches used in this solo.

The first is the ‘standard approach’, where the left hand chords are entirely supportive of the melodic content of the right hand. The second is the ‘conversational approach’, where the left hand provides chordal accompaniment exclusively within the gaps of the right hand lines, providing rhythmic interest as well as harmonic support. This creates two distinct characters that are taken on by each hand, resulting in a ‘conversation’ between them.

1.3.1 Standard Approach:

This approach to orchestration is the most common among jazz pianists, dividing the right and left hands into melody and accompaniment roles. In this solo, Mehldau uses it across section with fast-moving chord changes. The explicitly stated semiquaver subdivisions and lack of space in the right hand make it entirely dominant over the left hand.

Figure 3: Example of the standard approach
The right hand often outlines advanced harmonic ideas such as anticipation and superimposition of other chords. A good example can be observed in the third and fourth beats of the third bar shown in Figure 3. Beats one and two of that bar contain melodic material consistent with F7(sus4). In beats three and four however, Mehldau anticipates the C7 chord in the fourth bar, implying C7 altered harmony using a Gb major triad on beat 3 and an Ab major triad on beat 4. These are both upper-structure triads that belong to C7alt. Looking at the fourth bar we can see that there are more examples of superimposition. The left hand chord implies a C augmented chord, yet the right hand implies C9(sus4) on beat one, Cmaj on beat two, C13#11 on beat three and Emin/C on beat four. This further demonstrates the ability for the right hand to superimpose other chords in this orchestrational style.

The harmonic freedom in the right hand relies on the support of the left hand. In this orchestrational style the left hand is relegated to outlining basic harmonic information, such as the simple E7(sus4) voicing in bar two of the figure, made up of the notes E, F#, A and D. The same is true of the F7(sus4) voicing in bar three, and the C augmented triad in bar four. One possible exception is the lack of an A in the B7 voicing at the start of the figure. The author believes that this voicing is still consistent with the term ‘basic harmonic information’, because the notes still strongly imply a B half/whole scale. Furthermore, the left hand is all but indiscernible to the listener, emphasising its subordinate role.

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5 For further reading: Ibid.
1.3.2 Conversational Approach:

Mehldau uses this orchestrational approach in sections using repeated chord progressions, such as in Figure 4 where the G7-C7 movement is repeated once.

**Figure 4:** Example of conversational approach

The melodic content of the right hand is the aural focal point in this style. Like the traditional style it works mostly off the semiquaver subdivision, except it uses it in a much more syncopated fashion. This syncopation manifests itself in little rhythmic cells that are developed over time to create a melodic narrative. As can be seen in the figure above, the rhythm played in the first two beats is altered slightly with each repetition. Below is another good example.

**Figure 5:** Further example of idea development in right hand
It is clear to see in Figure 5 that the first idea in the first bar is repeated and altered with each repetition. This figure also uses repeated chord changes, as observed in Figure 4.

The character of the left hand in this style is not so much a subordinate part as it is a contrasting part to the right hand. In this conversational style it plays almost exclusively within the gaps of the right hand lines, which accounts for its ‘conversational’ qualities. The left hand also outlines a longer subdivision than the right hand, generally using quaver-based rhythms. This contrast in rhythm is the basis for the ‘conversation’ between the hands, as the use of different subdivisions gives each hand a distinct rhythmic character.

Although more active in this approach, the left hand still provides the same support that it does in the standard approach. In both of the above figures the left hand outlines the basic harmonic information, alleviating that responsibility from the right hand. This allows the right hand to be silent for several beats at a time, facilitating the use of small, syncopated rhythmic cells and extended idea development. Although the harmonic information is supplied by the left hand, there are no cases of superimposition of harmony in the right hand. This is because the hands are required to play simultaneously if superimposition is to take place, and so makes it impossible in the conversational approach.
1.4 Orchestration Type Two: Linear Approach

In this approach both hands play melodic lines, usually playing around each other but occasionally playing simultaneously. It was found that there were two different linear orchestration methods that Mehldau used in his solo on *August Ending*. The first is a ‘shared’ soloing method, where both hands play melodic lines that are always of equal importance, leaving space to allow the other hand to play the same role. The second is a more common method where the left hand will play a short interjective line that ‘interrupts’ the right hand line.

1.4.1 ‘Shared’ Soloing Method:

The defining aspect of this orchestral style is that the hands are of equal importance. They allow space for the other to fulfill the same role, but at a different time.

**Figure 6:** Example of ‘shared’ soloing method

As can be seen in Figure 6, the right hand and left hand are always balanced in their output. Through most of the figure they play in a question and answer fashion, with each ‘answering’ line being of equal to its corresponding ‘question’ line. For example, the left hand line in the third bar lasts two and a half beats, and is then followed by a right hand ‘answer’ that lasts for two and a half beats. In the case of the second bar of the figure where they play simultaneously, it is clear that although they are both playing at the same time they are still equal. The two lines are played in the
same rhythm and use very similar triad based material, moving in contrary motion. Importantly, they are still both audible as distinct parts in this bar.

Both hands incorporate long semiquaver lines with little rhythmic diversity, and the pitches are predominately diatonic, which is a by-product of having no chordal part to express the basic harmonic information. The aural interest here comes from the rapid movement through the piano’s vast range, featuring large interval leaps (in the third bar the left hand covers almost two octaves in two beats) and sudden changes of octave (in the third bar the right hand begins its ‘answer’ two and a half octaves higher than where the left hand finished). The effect produced is something of an argument between the hands, with the listener’s attention being pulled suddenly to each line as it is played.

1.4.2 Interjectory Left Hand:

This approach to orchestration has many similar characteristics to the ‘shared’ soloing method: it features fast movement through a large range, continuous semiquaver rhythms and diatonic note choice.

Figure 7: Example of interjectory left hand (between the two bars)

The primary difference between the two styles is that the hands are not equal. The left hand plays a single linear interjection, and is then superseded again by the melodic content of the right hand. In Figure 7 the left hand begins by using chordal accompaniment under the right hand line, interjects with its own line, and then is taken back under the right hand line, doubling it in the final beat and a half.
1.5 Orchestration Type Three: Three-Part Method

This is the most intricate of the orchestration types, and is informed by the written head of *August Ending* that precedes the solo, as discussed in chapter 1.2. It is used to colour static harmony, and features extended development of ideas in the two melodic parts. It is a highly unique way of expressing basic harmony. In Figure 8 the treble staff shows the higher melodic part (part one), the upwards pointing stems in the bass staff belong to the accompaniment part (part two) and the downwards pointing stems in the bass staff belong to the lower melodic part (part three).

**Figure 8:** Example of three-part method:

The highest part is the freer of the two melodic parts. It is the sole responsibility of the right hand, which is the usually the more technically advanced hand among jazz pianists. Given this technical freedom it utilises the faster subdivisions, almost always outlining the semiquaver pulse. This part contains the most ‘colourful’ notes, which are juxtaposed with the basic harmonic information in the left hand. A good example is the Db (the flattened 5th) held over the Gm7 chord (containing a natural 5th) in the fifth bar of Figure 8.
Although Figure 8 doesn’t demonstrate the use of idea development, it can be shown in the figure below, which shows the next phrase played by the right hand immediately after Figure 8:

**Figure 9:** The right hand material in the next six bars after Figure 8

![Figure 9](image)

When one compares the two figures, it is obvious to see that there are many similarities. The long tritone between C# (enharmonically Db) and G in Figure 9 corresponds to the long Db in Figure 8, that the rising semiquaver line in Figure 9 corresponds to the opening line of Figure 8, and that the conclusion of that line in Figure 9 corresponds to the final idea in Figure 8. More concisely: every idea that Mehldau uses in the first eight bars returns in the second phrase of eight bars in a new form. This concept of idea development is a key attribute of the three-part method.

The second part in the mid range is an accompaniment to the two outer melodic parts. It contains some of the basic harmonic information of each chord, and is constructed most often in clusters. These clusters often incorporate chord extensions, such as in Figure 8 where the Bb and A over the C7 chord represent the flattened 7 (basic harmonic information) and the natural 13 (colourful chord extension) respectively. These clusters are also quite interesting in their intervallic construction: they are mostly made up of dissonant major or minor seconds. Furthermore this part uses non-repetitive quaver rhythms, which gives it a playful quality. Figure 10 shows a further example.

**Figure 10:** Further example of accompaniment part, exhibiting discussed qualities

![Figure 10](image)
Although it is not shown in any of the written figures it is very important to note that this part is played quietly in comparison to the two melodic parts. This solidifies its role as a supportive accompaniment, albeit colourful and rhythmically playful.

This rhythmic playfulness comes from the intertwining of the accompaniment part and the lower melodic part. Both are played by the left hand, and both work off the quaver pulse exclusively. Together they provide a rhythmic undercurrent for the right hand melody to spring from, which enables the right hand to take on its darting rhythmic qualities.

The most distinct quality of the lower melodic part is its stately, repeated melodic ideas. In Figure 8 it moves between two target notes (D and E) over each repeated two bar pattern, and in Figure 10 it moves between F and E. Over each two bar pattern it takes a different route to its target note, using non-repetitive rhythms and passing notes. This shows the use of idea development in the lower melodic part, as was shown to also exist in the higher one.

Another important aspect of the lower melodic part is its role in expressing further basic harmonic information. The two target notes informing the melodic content are essential to the sound of each chord: D and F are important to the sound of Gm7 and E is important to the sound of C7. When this harmonic information is coupled with the harmonic information in the accompaniment part a full chord is formed. Given this harmonic and rhythmic support in the left hand it can be safely said that the right hand is still the dominant hand in this style.
1.6 Mehldau’s Approach To Switching Orchestration Types

There is a pattern that Mehldau follows when switching from one orchestration type to another. Put simply, the three-part method can move to a traditional method, which can then move to a linear method. It follows the same pattern in the reverse. The most striking example is shown in Figure 11, where Mehldau moves from the ‘shared’ soloing approach (linear) to the conversational approach (traditional) to the three-part method in only six bars.

**Figure 11:** Example of a fast change through orchestration types

The table in Figure 12 (overleaf) shows clearly where each style changes over the course of the solo, and demonstrates how Mehldau follows the pattern stated above.
Figure 12: Table showing chronological appearance of orchestration types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bar numbers:</th>
<th>Orchestration Type Used:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-24</td>
<td>Three-Part Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-37</td>
<td>Conversational Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38-41</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42-46</td>
<td>‘Shared’ Soloing Method (Linear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47-48</td>
<td>Conversational Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49-54</td>
<td>Three-Part Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>Conversational Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-68</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69-72</td>
<td>Conversational Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73-79</td>
<td>Three-Part Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79-88</td>
<td>Conversational Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89-94</td>
<td>Chordal Focus, closest to Conversational Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95-96</td>
<td>Frantic, ‘Shared’ Soloing Method (Linear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97-98</td>
<td>Conversational Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99-101</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-102</td>
<td>Left Hand Interjection (Linear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>102-103</td>
<td>Double Handed Line, exception (Linear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
<td>Conversational Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This pattern occurs because certain orchestrational styles have strong similarities to other certain styles, informing logical ways to switch between them. For example, the intervallic construction in the left hand of the three-part method is similar to the left hand construction of the conversational method. Hence it is logical to switch between them, and examining the table above we can see that the three-part method is always entered and exited using the conversational method. Overleaf there is an example and an explanation.
Figure 13: Change from three-part method to conversational method

Figure 13 begins in the three-part method: in the first bar we can observe the lower melodic voice and the cluster accompaniment as distinct parts. In the second bar they are again working independently, except the cluster accompaniment is now harmonised with another note, below the range of the lower melodic part. This anticipates the switch to a more chordal approach a few bars later. Simplifying the rhythm of these independent parts gives the following result, shown in Figure 14:

Figure 14: Simplified left hand from bars one and two of Figure 13

This gives us two chords. As Mehldau switches to the conversational style in the final three bars of Figure 13 the left hand begins to play these chords, which are constructed in exactly the same way as the complex left hand parts at the beginning of the figure. This is a clear demonstration of the similarities between the two styles, and explains why the three-part method is always entered and exited using the conversational method.
Another such example is how Mehldau switches from the traditional approaches to the linear approaches. These styles both incorporate long semiquaver lines, which facilitate a logical change between them. Figure 15 is a good example.

**Figure 15:** Change from conversational, to standard, to ‘shared’ soloing

In the first two bars of Figure 15 Mehldau uses the conversational approach, allowing the left hand to play alone for one and a half bars. In bar three the right hand begins a very long line (it plays the line in the bass clef in bars four and five as well) that covers a large range, anticipating the large leaps in range used in the ‘shared’ soloing method. In bar six the left hand plays a single supportive chord in the traditional style, but then in bar seven begins to play lines along with the right hand, typical of a linear style. It is clear to see that the long semiquaver line beginning in bar three facilitates the switch to the ‘shared’ soloing method in the final two bars of the figure, a method in which long semiquaver lines are featured. This demonstrates the reason that the linear styles are always entered and exited using one of the traditional styles. The table in Figure 12 confirms this observation.

Upon aural analysis it was observed that the different orchestration types occupied different levels of relative intensity. This is because each style has its own strengths and its own limitations, so as Mehldau builds or lowers the intensity there is an orchestral style more suited to the desired level of intensity.
The differences between each style are due to two main factors: the intensity is greater when, firstly, the semiquaver pulse is explicitly stated, and secondly, the left hand takes on a supportive harmonic role, which allows the right hand to superimpose dissonant harmonic substitutions.

The styles occupy the following levels of relative intensity, from least to most: three-part method, conversational method, left hand interjection, ‘shared’ soloing, then standard method.

The standard method can be said to be the most musically and emotionally intense because it incorporates very active, relentless semiquaver based ideas that superimpose advanced harmonic concepts. The interjectory left hand is of a mild intensity, as it outlines the semiquaver subdivision explicitly, but the pitches are all diatonic due to the lack of basic harmonic information in the other parts. The three-part method is the least intense because it rarely explicitly states the semiquaver subdivisions, and the two melodic part focus on idea development, rarely playing a non-diatonic note.
1.7 Intervallic Concerns

Another important area of orchestration is the intervalllic construction of chords, which is a concept that is non-specific to any of the orchestrational styles discussed earlier in the chapter.

Throughout the whole solo there are many different types of left hand chords that are used, mostly constructed out of relevant harmonic information with arbitrary intervals used. Below are some examples, rhythmically simplified.

**Figure 16:** Chords expressing harmonic information with arbitrary intervals

![Image of chords expressing harmonic information with arbitrary intervals]

The only exception is in the intervalllic similarities between the three-part left hand and the conversational method left hand, as discussed in Chapter 1.6.

Something that does leap out though is Mehldau’s frequent use of dissonant intervals\(^6\) in the right hand passages, resulting in a spike in the intensity of the music. Figure 17 shows an example.

**Figure 17:** Example of dissonant right hand intervals

![Image of example of dissonant right hand intervals]

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\(^6\) The Oxford Companion to Music states that, ‘in the context of modal or tonal composition, some intervals (3rds, 6ths, and all perfect intervals) are consonant, and others (2nds, 7ths, and all augmented or diminished intervals) are dissonant. See: "The Oxford Companion to Music," in *The Oxford Companion To Music*, ed. Alison Latham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
In Figure 17 Mehldau is playing a melodic line harmonised with diatonic major seconds. This is not a dissonant harmonic sound, but the dissonant intervals used give the line a unique sound quality that is potentially surprising to the listener, and is used by Mehldau to increase the intensity of the music. Figure 18 shows another example, in which Mehldau uses dissonant right hand intervals to bring the whole solo to its peak.

**Figure 18: Further example of dissonant right hand intervals**

![Figure 18: Further example of dissonant right hand intervals](image)

In the figure he is playing an interval of a major seventh between the natural fifth degree (D) and flattened fifth degree (D flat) of the Gm7 chord (the ninth and flattened ninth on the C7 chord). Juxtaposing the fifth and flattened fifth (similarly with the ninth and flattened ninth) is a harmonically dissonant sound, and when combined with the intervallic dissonance of a major seventh interval it becomes a very intense sound.
Chapter 2: Secret Beach

2.1 Context:

This solo is taken from a live recording of Brad Mehldau’s trio at The Village Vanguard (appropriately titled ‘Live’), this time with Jeff Ballard on drums instead of Jorge Rossy. The piece is played at a much slower tempo than August Ending, but still uses a straight semiquaver subdivision.

2.2 The Composition:

Secret Beach has two solo sections, and hence Mehldau’s solo is divided into two parts. The first part of the solo is played over the same form that the composed melody is played over, and Mehldau uses traditional orchestration methods with occasional left hand interjections. Upon reaching the end of this solo the last four bars of the melody are reiterated, then the trio begins to play a repeated eight bar chord progression first heard in the introduction to the piece. Mehldau solos over this repeated progression using the three-part method, with occasional interjections from the left hand. Many of the orchestration methods previously discussed are used, but in significantly different ways. The two parts of the solo are quite distinct, so they are presented separately.
Chapter 2a: Mehldau’s Solo Over The Form

2a.1 Orchestration Type One: Traditional Approach

The two contrasting traditional approaches (standard and conversational) discussed in reference to August Ending are not as easily separated in this solo. The traditional approach used here is best described as: right hand melodic lines that often leave long stretches of silence, in which the left hand accompaniment takes on more complex and interactive qualities. This left hand accompaniment functions as a playful ostinato, providing a rhythmic ‘drive’ otherwise difficult to attain at this slow tempo. The analysis below is divided into strict examples of the standard approach, followed by examples of the interactive left hand.

2a.1.1 Standard Approach

The right hand often plays short phrases in this solo, and leaves a lot of space between each one. When it does play it takes aural precedence over the choral material of the left hand, which typifies the standard approach. This is achieved by sounding the right hand lines over the top of the left hand chords coupled with the occasional superimposition of other harmony onto the basic harmonic information of the left hand. Figure 19 shows an example of this superimposed harmony, and exemplifies the short phrase lengths used in the right hand.

Figure 19: Example of superimposition in right hand line

In the figure above, the right hand anticipates the Emaj9 chord using the notes E, G# (enharmonically Ab), and B over the Eb7(sus4) and Eb7 chords in the left hand.
Figure 20 provides another example, this time incorporating a longer phrase length.

**Figure 20:** Further example of standard approach

![Figure 20](image)

Similar to Figure 19, the right hand line plays over the top of the left hand chords, incorporating advanced harmonic ideas. The last five semiquavers in the first bar anticipate the Dm7 chord, most clearly in the use of G natural and F natural, which are both alien to F#m11/E.

2a.1.2 Conversational Approach (more correctly: Interactive Left hand)

As discussed, the left hand becomes more interactive when the right hand is silent, which warrants a comparison to the conversational style. However, this conversational quality only appears every few bars, and so does not strictly fall into the ‘conversational approach’ category.

**Figure 21:** Example of interactive left hand, latter two bars

![Figure 21](image)

In these stretches of right hand silence, the left hand often takes on more complex melodic and rhythmic qualities. In the last two bars of the above figure, the highest pitches of the left hand chords have a more noticeably melodic quality than the ones
in the first bar. The first bar maintains the C at the top of the chord, which has a very basic melodic quality. In the next two bars this sense of melody in the top note is heightened in the resolution of the A in the second bar to the G# in the third bar, which then flicks up to the B using a semiquaver rhythm. Figure 22 shows another example of the interactive left hand, this time more rhythmically focused.

**Figure 22:** Further example of interactive left hand, second bar

![Musical notation](image)

The semiquavers and on-beat crotchets used in the second bar are in contrast to the usual off-beat quavers that dominate the left hand accompaniment. In the third bar the left hand is once again superseded in importance by the melodic content of the right hand.

There is a major difference in the use of these conversational elements in comparison to their use in *August Ending*. In Mehldau’s solo on *August Ending* it was observed that the right hand focused on development of melodic ideas when the left hand played in a conversational manner. The development of melodic ideas is still a concern within this solo, but it is not specific to any orchestral style. In the context of this solo it is therefore outside the scope of this research.
2a.2 Orchestration Type Two: Linear Approach

This style is barely represented in this solo. There is no section that uses the ‘shared’ soloing method, and there are only a few linear interjections from the left hand. These interjections are remarkably different to those used in Mehldau’s solo on *August Ending*.

2a.2.1 Left Hand Interjections

The left hand interjections in *August Ending* moved rapidly through a large range, using continuous semiquaver rhythms and diatonic pitches. This is quite different to the way that Mehldau uses these interjections in this solo over the form of *Secret Beach*: the only shared characteristic between the usage in the two solos is the presence of diatonic note choices. Below is an example in context.

**Figure 23:** Example of a left hand interjection, latter two bars

These interjections have two defining characteristics. Firstly, they are direct responses to the right hand statement made immediately before them. The interjection in bar two of Figure 23 repeats the same pitches that the right hand plays in beats three and four of the first bar (they are written enharmonically: B, B flat, B and A flat in the right hand correspond to B, A sharp, B and G sharp in the left hand response). The interjection augments the rhythm of the original right hand statement, thus responding in a developed form.

The second defining characteristic of these interjections (in the context of the other parts) is the continuation of the chordal accompaniment whilst the left hand is ‘interjecting’. The left hand plays both the accompaniment and the melodic response. This accompaniment was not played through the interjections in *August Ending*, no
doubt due to the technical demands made on the left hand at the faster tempo. The simpler interjections used in this solo over the form of Secret Beach enable to left hand to continue this accompaniment.

This warrants a comparison to the three-part method, which also plays an accompaniment part in the left hand whilst also incorporating a melodic line below it. In the example shown in Figure 24 however, the interjection sounds above the left hand chords, making it distinct from this three-part method. Furthermore, these interjections are direct responses to the right hand material immediately preceding it, something that does not apply to the left hand statements of the three-part method.

**Figure 24:** Further example of a left hand interjection, latter two bars

In Figure 24 the repeated B in the latter two bars is a rhythmic response to the last three beats of the right hand phrase preceding it. Notice how the right hand rhythm beginning on beat four of the first bar is the same as the interjection rhythm beginning on beat four of the second bar.

For the sake of clarity these left hand lines have continued to be referred to as ‘interjections’ through this chapter. The term works well in the context of August Ending, but in Secret Beach these ‘interjections’ are much more like echoes or answers to the right hand material. They are much more subdued and overtly melodic than the left hand lines in August Ending, which demonstrates the versatility of this orchestration style.
2a.3 Mehldau’s Approach To Switching Orchestration Types

As previously stated, this solo is bound together by the rhythms of the left hand, which are generally based around offbeat quavers. This accompaniment remains present throughout, regardless of changes in orchestral style. It is important to note that the ‘Interactive Left Hand’ titles in the table below correspond to the conversational method, now with their more correct title.

**Figure 25:** Table showing chronological appearance of orchestration types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bar numbers:</th>
<th>Orchestration type:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>Interactive Left Hand (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>Interactive Left Hand (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Left Hand Interjection (Linear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-17</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Interactive Left Hand (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-31</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Interactive Left Hand (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33-38</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Left Hand Interjection (Linear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-46</td>
<td>Left Hand Interjection (Linear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47-56</td>
<td>Standard Method (Traditional)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the analysis of *August Ending* an ordered list of the relative intensity levels of each orchestral style was made. Each style’s place in that list was influenced by their ability to outline the smaller subdivisions and to express advanced, dissonant harmony.
Upon aural analysis of this solo it was observed that the intensity does not go through any extremes. It starts at a low level of intensity, very gradually rising till the end of the form, which is concluded with a large rise in the last four bars before the brief reiteration of a fragment of the melody. Using the table we can make observations in keeping with the analysis of *August Ending*.

At the beginning of the solo there is a lot of chordal left hand interaction, up until bar nineteen. This is reflective of the low level of intensity found in the conversational method observed in the solo over *August Ending*. The interjection at bar thirteen is very subtle, and does little to raise the mood at that moment. From bar nineteen onwards the standard approach is the dominant form used, with the occasional interjection from the left hand. This was observed to be a more intense form of the two traditional approaches in *August Ending*, which is maintained here.
2a.4 Intervallic Concerns

As observed previously in *August Ending*, this solo exhibits unique intervallic ideas in the right hand.

**Figure 26:** Example of intervallic concerns in the right hand, third beat first bar

[Music notation showing the chord Am(add9) following D7]

The chord of interest in Figure 26 is constructed using two A’s an octave apart, with the bottom A harmonised with the G below it and the top A harmonised with the G# below it. This forms multiple dissonant intervals within this chord: a major second between the low A and G, a minor second between the top A and G#, a minor ninth between the G and the G#, and a major seventh between the low A and the high G#. This results in a very dissonant group of notes, which here is used as a dramatic end to a right hand phrase. Another example is shown in Figure 27.

**Figure 27:** Further example of intervallic concerns in the right hand, first bar

[Music notation showing the chord D7/A following E7]

In Figure 27 the first group of notes played by the right hand is dissonant, due to the clash between the C# and the D in the top two notes, which form a minor second. This interval is very exposed in the high range, so it receives a lot of attention from the listener’s ear. This is also true of the two other examples within that bar: the major second between the A and B just before beat three, and the minor second between the E and the F on beat four. As in *August Ending* these intervals serve to create excitement and spike the intensity of a given part of the music.
Chapter 2b: Mehldau’s Solo Over The Vamp

This solo is played over a repeated vamp first heard in the introduction to *Secret Beach*. The introduction is shown in Figure 28.

**Figure 28**: Solo piano introduction to *Secret Beach*

As can be seen in the figure above there are two distinct parts: the bass clef is played with the left hand and the treble clef with the right hand. The chords in final bar are E(sus4) and E, which resolve to the melody beginning on an Amin chord.

The vamp is restated once after the solo over the form, before Mehldau begins his solo over this vamp. The restatement is shown overleaf in Figure 29. Here, Larry Grenadidier plays the root notes, explaining their absence in Mehldau’s voicing. Chord symbols have been added to show bass movement. Note the difference in the last bar: instead of the E chords there is a progression leading back into the Fmaj7#11 chord that begins the vamp.
**Figure 29:** Repeated vamp re-stated just before Mehldau’s second solo begins

This vamp again has two essential parts. This means that when Mehldau begins to solo over it there are then three parts at work, thus the three-part method is used almost exclusively over this whole solo.

This also demonstrates how the three-part method is informed by the compositional elements of *Secret Beach*, as it was informed by the compositional elements of *August Ending* when it was used in that context. They stem from different sources however: there is no mention of Brahms’ music when *Secret Beach* is discussed. The three-part method used here is simply used to incorporate the written vamp into the solo over this repeated progression.
2b.1 Orchestration Type Three: Three-Part Method

At the onset of this solo the three-part method exhibits many of the characteristics that it displayed when Mehldau used it in his solo on *August Ending*. It is used to colour the static harmony of this vamp, and facilitates extended development of ideas. The highest part is the dominant melodic part, the middle part is an accompaniment containing basic harmonic information and the lower part is a stately, subdued part with a repeated melodic idea.

There is something very unique about the way that Mehldau plays this section of the solo: he uses the sostenuto pedal (underneath the keyboard of the piano) to maintain the lower melodic part. This pedal sustains only those notes that are being held down when the pedal is depressed, allowing future notes played to be unaffected. In the figure above, we can see that Mehldau uses it to sustain the C in the lower melodic part (C# in the seventh bar of Figure 30). This allows his left hand to work solely on the complex middle part, which would be impossible to do if the lower part was not sustained with the pedal. This is a unique solution to this problem that Mehldau has created. The figure below shows the three parts and the use of the sostenuto pedal.

**Figure 30**: First eight bar section of Mehldau’s solo on the vamp

![Figure 30: First eight bar section of Mehldau’s solo on the vamp](image-url)
Mehldau’s solo on this vamp is the longest addressed in this dissertation, being about five minutes in length. Over the course of this solo there is a large build in intensity, which results in many characteristics of the formerly low intensity three-part style changing drastically.

One characteristic that becomes very noticeably different is the gradual lessening of space each melodic part allows the other as the solo builds in intensity. Initially the two melodic parts mostly play around each other in a question and answer fashion, but after several repetitions of the vamp they are consistently sounding at the same time. This can be shown in the two figures below.

**Figure 31:** Melodic parts playing around each other, early in the solo

![Figure 31](image1)

**Figure 32:** Melodic parts sounding at the same time, late in the solo

![Figure 32](image2)

All other developments are specific to each part, and so will be discussed separately hereon in.

The higher melodic part develops ideas over both the short and long term. Many of the short term ideas that the right hand states are based off the A minor pentatonic or A blues scale, both of which are ‘blanket’ scales\(^7\) that can be used over the whole

\(^7\) For further reading: Levine, *The Jazz Piano Book*. 

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progression. These ideas are quickly replaced: rarely does Mehldau return to the same one once an eight-bar cycle is over. Figure 33 is an example.

**Figure 33:** Example of a blues based idea developed over a short amount of time

There is one main idea that returns throughout the whole solo, and is developed over a long period of time. It is a repeated note with rhythmic emphasis. The first time is it introduced is in Figure 31 (a few figures back), where he plays an A in a syncopated rhythm, which he develops a little immediately after. As the solo continues, this idea returns bearing new developments each time. Below are examples with explanations of the developments made.

**Figure 34:** Syncopated, melodic idea, entwined with dissonant interval
Figure 35: Syncopated, rapid repetition, entwined with dissonant interval

Figure 36: Part of a dense right hand chord, containing dissonant intervals

As the solo develops, the higher melodic part also begins to include long lines that superimpose dissonant harmonic substitutions. This is something that has been observed in the standard approach to orchestration, as the presence of a chordal accompaniment allowed the superimposition to take place. It has not previously been observed in the use of the three-part method. As this solo on the vamp develops these long lines in the high melodic part flow over the middle accompaniment part, and so they gain this new harmonic freedom.

Figure 37: Example of superimposition, beat three of first bar to beat three of second

The superimposition begins in beats three and four of the first bar of the figure, outlining a C#maj7 chord, using the notes C, C#, F and G#. This is followed by an F# major triad in the first beat of the second bar, created with C#, A# and F#. These tense superimpositions are then resolved by the descending chromatically in semiquaver triplets to an Amin7 arpeggio on beat three of the second bar of the figure. Another example is overleaf.
Figure 38: Further example of advanced harmonic ideas in right hand

Figure 38 shows one of the most intense moments of the solo, with the right hand playing a rhythm that is focused around the shifting between the harmonically dissonant Ab minor triad (constructed from the Eb, Ab and B in the first two semiquavers of the first beat, first bar) and the harmonically consonant G major triad (constructed from the D, G and B in the first two semiquavers of the second beat, first bar). In the third beat of the second bar it rises to an A minor triad, also harmonically consonant, using E, A and C. This harmonic complexity further demonstrates the changes made to the higher melodic part at the solo progresses.

The lower melodic part also develops over the course of the solo. This part is limited in its technical facility due to its reliance on the use of the pedal. The first way in which it develops is where it ‘fills’ before the C (or C# over the A major chord) is struck and sustained. Figure 39 shows a basic example.

Figure 39: Example of a ‘fill’ before sustained C
Figure 40 shows a more complex version:

**Figure 40:** Example of two complex ‘fills’ into the sustained C (first and third bars)

The first ‘fill’, in the first bar, is both rhythmically and harmonically simple, playing entirely within the key area and with six consecutive semiquavers leading to the sustained note. The second is more complex, and contains pitches entirely out of the key area as well as being much more syncopated than the first.

This shows many similarities to the left hand interjection method, to the point where the titles seem interchangeable. If standing by strict rules we could say that the semiquavers are left hand interjections and that the sustained Cs are three-part method, but this would be counterintuitive, as it, firstly, ignores the blend between the two styles, and secondly, ignores the fact that these complex ‘interjections’ are actually developed versions of the little ‘fills’ that were present in lower part of the three-part method earlier in the solo. This blurs the line between the two, and demonstrates how the active lower part has many similarities to the left hand interjection method.

Overleaf is a figure demonstrating another common device used to develop the lower part. The fourth and fifth fingers of the left hand take control of the lower part, gradually raising the pitch underneath the right hand melody. This is still limited in its technical facility, as the part is controlled with only two fingers.
Figure 41: Example of the raising of the lower melodic part (downwards stems)

In Figure 41 only the left hand parts are shown, simply to make it easier to pick out the lower melodic part. The right hand melodic lines are not shown, but are active over the top of this. As can be observed in the figure above, the lower part is raised in pitch over the four bars, beginning with the sustained C. In the second bar of the figure the fingers take control, and they stay in control until the end of the figure.

Mehldau sometimes concludes this rising of the lower voice with a melodic left hand interjection, common to the ones seen in the solo over the form. This is another example of the similarities between the active lower melodic part in the three-part method and the lines of the interjectory left hand. Consider Figure 42:

Figure 42: Example of left hand interjection, in the final bar (downwards stems)

As can be observed above, the lower melodic part rises in the first three bars and is then taken over by a left hand ‘interjection’ in the fourth bar. The ‘interjection’ is more of a continuation of the rising lower part as well as a melodic response to the repeated A in the right hand phrase preceding it. Once again the active lower part and the left hand interjections are inseparable. This is in direct contrast to the treatment of these two styles in *August Ending*, where they never flowed into one another.
2b.2 Intervallic Concerns:

Similar to the other solos, Mehldau plays interesting intervallic structures in his right hand to spike the intensity of the music. Below are two examples.

**Figure 43:** Example one of intervallic concerns: dense diatonic chords

![Figure 43](image1)

**Figure 44:** Example two of intervallic concerns: minor ninth and octave intervals

![Figure 44](image2)

Although these two examples have not been seen before, they are using the same concepts that have been noticed previously. The use of the dense diatonic chords including major seconds is interesting though, as the major seconds were previously used to harmonise a melodic line in clusters. These intervallic ideas are very malleable, and once again are not specific to a certain orchestrational style.
Chapter 3: Summary of Findings

This dissertation is concerned with the examination of two improvised solos performed by Brad Mehldau, in particular the way in which he orchestrates these improvisations over the piano. The findings from each solo were quite different, and they each used their own methods in a unique way. The findings are presented in the order that each solo was analysed.

Brad Mehldau’s Solo on *August Ending*:

Mehldau used five distinct orchestration methods in this solo. They are presented here with a description of their common characteristics:

1. Standard Method

The left hand outlines the basic harmonic information via chordal accompaniment, while the right hand plays melodic lines over the top. To achieve higher levels of intensity the right hand lines superimpose advanced harmonic material onto the left hand chords, and uses rhythms that explicitly state the semiquaver pulse of the piece.

2. Conversational Method

The right hand plays shorter, syncopated lines while the chordal left hand plays in the gaps, also in a syncopated fashion. The right hand ideas develop in this style as the solo progresses; it is rare for Mehldau to play an idea only once.

3. ‘Shared’ Soloing Method

The left and right hands both play melodic parts, using long semiquaver lines that move quickly through the range of the piano. They are always of equal importance, either playing the same rhythm together or in strict question and answer.
4. Left Hand Interjections

The left hand plays a melodic line that interrupts the right hand melodic line. This features many of the characteristics of the ‘shared’ soloing, except the left hand only plays one line before assuming a chordal role again.

5. Three-Part Method

The right hand plays a melodic part, and the left hand plays an accompaniment as well as a second melodic part below it. Idea development is a major concern of both melodic parts, and they often incorporate a sense of question and answer.

Mehldau switches between the orchestrational styles in a logical way, taking into consideration similarities between certain styles as well as the level of intensity inherent in each style. This level of intensity is dependent on each method’s ability to express superimposed harmony, as well as their ability to explicitly state the underlying semiquaver subdivisions.

Brad Mehldau’s Solo on Secret Beach:

Mehldau’s solo on Secret Beach did contain orchestrational styles that were found in August Ending, but they were found to be a lot less distinct in their forms and usage, which resulted in difficulty in categorising each one and finding patterns between the two solos.

The ‘conversational method’ has no distinct presence, instead being combined with the ‘standard approach’, which resulted in short right hand phrases which play over the left hand’s chordal accompaniment, but also leave space for the left hand chords to respond in a melodic or rhythmic way.

The left hand ‘interjections’ were in fact direct responses to concluded right hand phrases, and more overtly melodic than those used in August Ending. There was no example of the ‘shared soloing approach’ either.
The ‘three-part method’ dominated the second half of this solo, and ended up having vastly different characteristics to the same method used in *August Ending*. It incorporated harmonic substitutions in the right hand, and a very active lower part closely linked to the left hand interjections.

The paths taken when switching between orchestration methods were logical in this solo as well, but the different context meant that there were different reasons to switch. Most notably, the three-part method showed a close relation to the interjectory left hand in this solo, where the opposite applied in *August Ending*.

**Patterns Present in Both Solos:**

It was found that in both solos Mehldau used dissonant interval structures to create excitement in the right hand. These structures included harmonisations of a melodic line in major seconds, playing intervals such as a major seventh or minor ninth without any other supporting notes, and constructing large diatonic chords constructed in major seconds (and spaced in perfect fifths). These are not specific to any orchestral style, but are an orchestral concern none-the-less.

Specific identification of other patterns is difficult, given the diversity of the orchestral methods used in the solos. It can be said though that there is a large emphasis on the role of the left hand as an interactive part. The chordal conversational method, linear left hand interjections/responses and the lower melodic part of the three-part method all give the left hand a much more soloist-focused than commonly seen in the jazz world, especially in the context of a piano trio.

Furthermore the use of the improvised three-part method in both solos was informed by the compositional elements of each piece. In *August Ending* the Brahmsian written melody informed it, and in *Secret Beach* the vamp in the introduction informed it. However this does not imply a steadfast rule that Mehldau holds to his improvisations, merely an interesting similarity between the two solos.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

Brad Mehldau is a jazz pianist who has been heavily influenced by his study of classical music. As a direct result of this study he has developed new improvisational techniques that have resulted in a very individual style. One of the most strikingly original of these techniques is his approach to orchestrational at the piano.

Through the analysis of two of his solos that feature these different orchestrational methods it was found that there were several different orchestrational methods used, but in many different ways. It was also found that Mehldau utilises many dissonant interval structures in the right hand, which spike the intensity of the music.

Future research could include:
- Analysis of more Mehldau solos, to expand this list of alternative orchestration techniques and to find patterns. Extended research could be undertaken to identify and categorise all orchestrational techniques used in Mehldau’s recorded trio work.
- Analysis of the approaches taken by Larry Grenadier, Jorge Rossy and Jeff Ballard to compliment Mehldau’s different orchestrational approaches
- Analysis of Mehldau’s compositions that include these orchestrational approaches, possibly culminating in an exegesis
- Writing a set of technical exercises that would better equip a jazz pianist to handle these new additions to the jazz language
- A comparison of Mehldau’s rhythmic approach before and after the change of drummer in his trio, following Ben Ratliff’s observations in the literature review.

This dissertation has enabled the author to explore concepts that they have been interested in for several years, and has shown them to be much deeper than anticipated. The analysis has cleared the way for the author to begin to practise these concepts and include them in their own improvisations. The author also found that learning the Secret Beach solo improved their co-ordination between right and left hands, as well as informing their use of the sostenuto pedal.
It is hoped that the results of this thesis are found to be a stimulating, and that it may be of interest to other musicians who may wish to continue exploring new ideas and approaches to jazz piano orchestration.
Bibliography:


Appendix 1: Brad Mehldau's Solo on August Ending

\( \text{\textcopyright B. Mehldau} \)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{\textcopyright B. Mehldau} \\
\text{A1 section: top of first chorus} \\
\text{Gm}\,^7 & \quad \text{C}\,^7 & \quad \text{Gm}\,^7 \\
\text{C}\,^7 & \quad \text{Gm}\,^7 & \quad \text{C}\,^7 & \quad \text{Gm}\,^7 \\
\text{C}\,^7 & \quad \text{Fm}\,^7 & \quad \text{Bb}\,^7 & \quad \text{Eb}\,^7 \\
\text{D}\,^7(\text{sus4}) & \quad \text{G}\,^7 & \quad \text{C}\,^7 & \quad \text{G}\,^7 \\
\text{C}\,^7 & \quad \text{Gm}\,^7 & \quad \text{C}\,^7 & \quad \text{Gm}\,^7 \\
\end{align*}
\]
A(add2)  G(add2)  A(add2)

G(add2)  A(add2)  G(add2)

A(add2)  B7  E7(sus4)  F7(sus4)

C7  G7  C7

A1 Section: top of second chorus
Gm9  C13
On to B section melody:
Appendix 2: Brad Mehldau's Solo On Secret Beach

Form solo:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Am(add9)} & \text{E7/G}\# & \text{Gm9} & \text{D7/F}\# \\
&\text{B7} & \text{E7} & \text{Fmaj7} & \text{F#7} \\
&\text{Cmaj7/G} & \text{G7} & \text{E7/G}\# & \text{Am(add9)} \\
&\text{D7} & \text{F7/Eb} & \text{Em(add4)} \\
&\text{A7(sus4)} & \text{A7} & \text{Bbmaj7} & \text{B7} & \text{Fmaj7/C} \\
&\text{D7} & \text{F7/Eb} & \text{A7/E} \\
\end{align*}
\]