

Expanding the Boundaries: Compositional Approaches in the Music of Billy Strayhorn. A Case Study of *Isfahan*

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Cómo citar este artículo | How to cite this paper

Crowley, E. (2026). Expanding the Boundaries: Compositional Approaches in the Music of Billy Strayhorn. A Case Study of *Isfahan*. *Revista internacional digital de Artes interdisciplinarias y Música*, 2, 61-86. <http://doi.org/10.67280/ridaim.17>



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Expanding the Boundaries: Compositional Approaches in the Music of Billy Strayhorn. A Case Study of *Isfahan*

Ampliando las fronteras: enfoques compositivos en la música de Billy Strayhorn. Un estudio de caso de *Isfahan*

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Enviado: 17/02/2026
Aceptado: 23/03/2026

Abstract

The present article examines the integration of sophisticated harmonic and melodic techniques within the framework of popular song form in the music of Billy Strayhorn. Using the composition *Isfahan*, included in Ellington's *Far East Suite* (1967), as a case study, we focus on compositional strategies and techniques which are recurrent in Strayhorn's work. Subsequently, the use of these concepts is discussed in a comparative study with other Strayhorn staples, namely *Chelsea Bridge* and *Passion Flower*. The study shows how non-functional harmonic devices, including parallel harmony and constant structures along the minor third axis, as well as contrapuntal interplay between melody and bass line, are woven into the context of the functional harmony characteristic of the American Songbook, largely accounting for Strayhorn's unique musical language. The paper also focuses on how these techniques coexist with other concepts extracted from the jazz idiom, such as blue notes and dominant chains, and how his more harmonically complex works actually have more in common with more standard Ellington/Strayhorn staples, such as *Take the A Train* or *Don't get around much anymore*. In this sense, Strayhorn's music remains firmly grounded in the tonal and structural conventions of mid-twentieth-century jazz, illustrating his capacity to expand the expressive possibilities of popular song forms without departing from their accessibility.

Keywords: Billy Strayhorn; Musical analysis; Jazz harmony; minor third axis

Resumen

El presente artículo examina la integración de sofisticadas técnicas armónicas y melódicas en el marco de la canción popular en la música de Billy Strayhorn. Utilizando como caso de estudio la composición *Isfahan*, incluida en el disco *Far East Suite* (1967) de Ellington, nos centramos en algunas de las estrategias y técnicas compositivas recurrentes en la obra de Strayhorn. Posteriormente, se analiza el uso de estos conceptos en un estudio comparativo con otras obras fundamentales del compositor, concretamente *Chelsea Bridge* y *Passion Flower*. El estudio muestra cómo recursos armónicos no funcionales, como la armonía paralela y las estructuras constantes a lo largo del eje de terceras menores, así como la interacción contrapuntística entre la melodía y la línea del bajo, se entrelazan en el contexto de la armonía funcional característica del *American Songbook*, lo que explica en gran medida el lenguaje musical único de Strayhorn. El artículo también se centra en cómo estas técnicas coexisten con otros conceptos extraídos del lenguaje del jazz, como el uso de *blue notes* y las cadenas dominantes, y cómo sus obras más complejas armónicamente tienen en realidad mucho en común con temas más estándar de Ellington/Strayhorn, como *Take the A Train* o *Don't get around much*

anymore. En este sentido, la música de Strayhorn se mantiene firmemente arraigada en las convenciones tonales y estructurales del jazz de mediados del siglo XX, lo que ilustra su capacidad para ampliar las posibilidades expresivas dentro del marco de la canción popular.

Palabras clave: Billy Strayhorn; análisis musical; armonía jazz; eje de terceras menores

1.- Introduction

Duke Ellington is considered by many not only to be the greatest jazz composer, but also the greatest American composer of all time; some even go so far as to suggest that he is arguably one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century, in the light of the worldwide impact of jazz and its various stylistic ramifications and stylistic offspring (Green, 2015). Be that as it may, Duke Ellington's musical legacy is intricately related to, if not inseparable from, his closest collaborator, Billy Strayhorn. Over a collaboration that lasted several decades, Strayhorn collaborated on almost 600 scores that can be linked to recordings by Ellington's ensemble, as well as on hundreds more that were used in live performances (van de Leur, 2015). Strayhorn played a fundamental role in shaping the sound of Ellington's band (Gioia, 2011) and it is often remarked that it is impossible to determine where one individual's contribution ended and the other's began (Feather, 1984, p. 433). In Ellington's own words, "Billy Strayhorn was my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brainwaves in his head, and his in mine" (Ellington & Kennedy, 1973).

1.1. Analytical approach

Although it is undoubtedly true that Ellington's and Strayhorn's contributions to the music were heavily intertwined, there are certain strategies and devices specifically representative of Strayhorn's musical language, which are not only highly personal, but also decidedly innovative for the time. The present article focuses on some recurrent traits in Strayhorn's output through a comparative study of the composition *Isfahan* contextualised with other of his works.

A key aspect of the Strayhorn's idiom lies in his ability to integrate compositional devices that were relatively uncommon in jazz at the time –many of them associated with early twentieth-century Impressionist music– within the framework of popular song. This is of paramount importance when analysing Strayhorn's work. Therefore, we begin by providing prior context not only of the Strayhorn/Ellington collaboration, but also of the

main characteristics of the popular music of the time, often referred to as the *American Songbook*.

These conventions are briefly illustrated in the Strayhorn/Ellington compositions *Take the A train* and *Don't get around much anymore*, after which we proceed to discuss key innovations associated with Strayhorn through an in depth analysis of *Isfahan*. Core aspects of Strayhorn's compositional approach are highlighted, including the interplay between functional and non-functional harmony, the use of chromaticism, and strategies of melodic cohesion based on chord-scale relationship and motivic development.

Finally, the study draws comparisons with other Strayhorn pieces in order to demonstrate the recurrence of these techniques across his work. Particular attention is given to the role of the minor third axis as a device of tonal organisation. The analytical approach integrates harmonic, melodic, and formal perspectives to provide a comprehensive account of Strayhorn's compositional language.

1.2. The collaboration with Duke Ellington

As well as being an expert jazz musician, Strayhorn was also an accomplished classical pianist, having received extensive formal musical education in his youth in Hillsborough, North Carolina, and Pittsburgh (Hosiasson, 2001). Early pieces from his formative years, such as the "chopinesque" composition *Vals*, show the extent to which Strayhorn had mastered the nineteenth-century European Romantic idiom and indeed foreshadow key concepts which would come to be associated with his compositional style, including an advanced use of harmony, a balanced form, and economy in the use of musical material (van de Leur, 2002, p. 8). This last trait is a key difference between Strayhorn's and Ellington's compositional approach, as noted by van de Leur (2015):

Strayhorn tended to work mostly from harmonic and melodic development and preferred an economical use of musical material. This led to long musical arches, with integrated transitory sections, smooth modulation, and thematically connected introductions and codas. Ellington's pieces tended to include sharper transitions, and contrasting sections replete with musical ideas (p. 193).

As we will discuss in the analysis section, Strayhorn's use of harmonic and melodic development was often very technical and sophisticated, constructing tunes through the variation of but a few musical ideas.

The collaboration with Ellington commenced in 1938 after Strayhorn applied to the bandleader for work as a lyricist, presenting his composition *Lush Life* as a credential (Encyclopaedia Britannica Editors, 2025). A work of startling maturity both from a musical and lyrical perspective, especially considering the composer's young age –23 at the time–, *Lush Life* has become part of the jazz canon, partly due to famous renditions by Nat King Cole (1961) and John Coltrane & Johnny Hartman (1963), amongst others. The Ellington band recorded Strayhorn's *Something to live for* just three months later, in 1939, featuring the composer himself on piano. That same year, the formation undertook its second transatlantic tour, during which time Strayhorn resided in Ellington's apartment in New York, where he had an opportunity to study the master's scores (Nicholson, 1999, p. 201). This allowed him to “crack the code” of Ellington's style (Hasse, 1995, p. 231), thereby absorbing many elements of the bandleader's musical approach into his own work, such as tailoring parts for specific musicians, cross-section voicings, as well as unusual combinations of instruments in his arrangements (van de Leur, 2002, p. 27). Gradually, Strayhorn's collaboration in the ensemble grew, taking on the form of composer, arranger, lyricist, and pianist.

Their musical collaboration would continue until Strayhorn's death in 1964. During his life, Strayhorn did not enjoy the celebrity status of Ellington. His overwhelming musical presence contrasts sharply with his absence from the public image, which was largely a consequence of living in a time when homosexuality was not deemed socially acceptable (Barg, 2017, p. 208). While there has been a certain degree of controversy as to the distribution of royalties and the general assumption that Strayhorn received less credit than he was due, his contribution to the Ellington orchestra is widely acknowledged, signing many of the ensemble's most memorable pieces, such as *Take the A Train*, *Lush Life*, *Lotus Blossom*, *Rain Check*, *A Flower is a Lovesome Thing* or *Chelsea Bridge*. In his autobiography, Duke Ellington does not hold back praise for his lifelong collaborator, stating that:

I am indebted to him for so much of my courage since 1939. He was my listener, my most dependable appraiser, and as a critic he would be the most clinical, but his background—both classical and modern—was an accessory to his own good taste and understanding, so what came back to me was in perfect balance. (Ellington & Kennedy, 1973, p. 156)

Their collaboration is considered one of the most important in jazz history and the resulting body of work has had a profound effect on the genre, with many of Strayhorn's

contributions to the Ellington repertoire being considered to be among the most structurally and harmonically sophisticated in the jazz canon (Hosiasson, 2001).

1.3. Musical characteristics of the American Songbook

For the majority of Ellington's and Strayhorn's career, jazz was not the niche artform it is today. For many Americans in the 1920s, the word "jazz" was synonymous with popular music. This continued into the 1930s swing era, when big band music was an important part of the music industry in which Ellington's ensemble in particular enjoyed an enormous commercial success; in 1942, for instance, the band played in every major city in America, with the exception of its southern States (Townsend, 2019, p. 73).

Being a form of American popular music, the jazz repertoire of this period is inseparable from what has come to be known as The American Songbook. Rather than a physical book, the American Songbook, or Great American Songbook, refers to a loosely defined canon of American popular songs written in the first half of the twentieth century, encompassing a vast number of tunes from different origins, such as vaudeville, Broadway shows, films, or the Tin Pan Alley songwriting industry (Sottosanti, 2025). Representative composers include Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, or George Gershwin, and the repertoire has come to be associated with a wide range of singers, such as Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, or Nat King Cole. Many popular tunes were reinterpreted by jazz artists and constitute an important part of the standard jazz repertoire. At the same time, many of the songs were heavily influenced by jazz, making them, in turn, ideal vehicles of expression within a jazz context.¹ The result is that in the 1930s, there was a solid interplay between jazz and the American Songbook (Williams, 2023, p. 270).

The corpus of the American Songbook is characterised by a series of common structural and musical traits. First and foremost, the 32-bar AABA structure and the verse-refrain form, of nineteenth-century origin and popularised by Tin Pan Alley songwriters in the interwar period (see Julien (2018) and the references therein). In a jazz context, the verse section is usually omitted, especially in an instrumental context, meaning that what remains

¹ For further information on relevant compositions within the standard jazz repertoire, the reader may refer to Gioia (2021).

is the 32-bar AABA structure, consisting of two eight-bar phrases, in which the first is repeated twice at the beginning and once at the end, while the second serves as a bridge. Other common variants of the 32-bar form include AB, consisting of two 16-bar phrases – as in *How High the Moon* or *Just Friends*– or ABAC –as in *Stardust* or *Someday my prince will come*. Also recurrent are 16-bar forms –as in *Summertime* or *Mack the Knife*– and –especially in a jazz context– the 12-bar blues structure. In terms of harmony, the repertoire is often characterized by the use of seventh-chords, frequent appearance of the II-V-I progression, and secondary dominants. These harmonic procedures continue to be the core of the standard harmonic vocabulary of jazz and have been formalised in texts such as Nettles (1987), widely used in jazz education to this day.

1.4. The music of Ellington and Strayhorn

With the exception, perhaps, of their critically acclaimed extended works such as the *Deep South Suite* (1947) or *The Nutcracker Suite* (1957), Ellington and Strayhorn were generally not aiming to make avant-garde or art music, but operating within the format of the popular music of the time. In this sense, their music must be contextualised within the conventions of the American Songbook. Thus, most tunes adhere to standard 32- or twelve-bar song form and generally make use of the style of functional harmony and standard progressions that characterise the American Songbook. Staples of Ellington's repertoire such as Strayhorn's *Take the A Train*– the band's theme song– or *Don't get around much anymore* are perfect examples of this and help to illustrate some standard procedures used by both composers, that are characteristic of many popular songs of the period.

Both pieces are based on the aforementioned AABA 32-bar structure. The fundamental harmonic progression in the A section is similar in both cases. The first four bars consist of a tonic chord followed by a secondary dominant – V^7/V and V^7/II , respectively–, which is followed by a II-V-I progression in bars 5-8 (see Figure 1).

Take the A train - A section

Don't get around much anymore - A section

Figure 1. Ellington, D. Sections of *Take the A Train* and *Don't get around much anymore*

In both compositions, the melody resolves in measure seven, and the bridge transitions to the subdominant, as is often the case in popular tunes. This is not to say these pieces are a mere implementation of formulaic elements. Despite adherence to standard procedures, the music displays clear traits characteristic of the Ellington/Strayhorn idiom, such as the characteristic #4 in measure three of *Take the A Train*, or the chromatic and bluesy melodic resolutions in both cases, as well as the orchestration itself. At the same time, the songs are perfect examples of pieces written within the standard idiom of the time.

Yet, whilst most of Strayhorn's compositions do indeed operate within the framework of popular music, many exhibit a sophistication and complexity which was unique at the time and has proven to be highly influential on future jazz composers. Compositions such as *Chelsea Bridge*, *Lush Life*, *Passion Flower* or *Isfahan* are examples of Strayhorn's unique and highly personal harmonic and melodic approach. Yet, nonetheless, they are also crafted within the same framework of more standard compositions, such as *Take the A Train* or *Don't get around much anymore*. In the following section, we focus on certain recurrent strategies in Strayhorn's compositional style through a comparative analysis of *Isfahan* with others of his renowned works, such as *Chelsea Bridge* or *Passion Flower*, demonstrating how compositional devices uncommon in the jazz music of the time are skilfully woven into the framework of popular song.

2.- Analysis of *Isfahan*

Isfahan is part of the *Far East Suite* (1967) and was composed a month prior to Ellington's band visiting Iran as part of a world tour (van de Leur, 2002). As with other Ellington/Strayhorn works, such as *Concerto for Cootie*, written for trumpeter Cootie Williams, it showcases a particular soloist, in this case the alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges. Strayhorn's original sketch of the piece, under the preliminary title *Elf*, actually specifies Hodges' nickname *Rab'* (short for Rabbit) alongside the main melody, showing how the composition was indeed written with Hodges in mind (see Figure 2). In fact, the melody of many Strayhorn ballads written for Ellington's band –such as *Day Dream*, *A Flower is a Lovesome Thing*, or *Passion Flower*– is performed by Hodges in the original recordings. The saxophonist's rendition of the melody helps bring out its lyrical and expressive qualities, while, in the absence of a piano part in the original arrangement, the harmony is conveyed entirely by the horn backings and the bass, lending the performance a chamber-music-like quality.

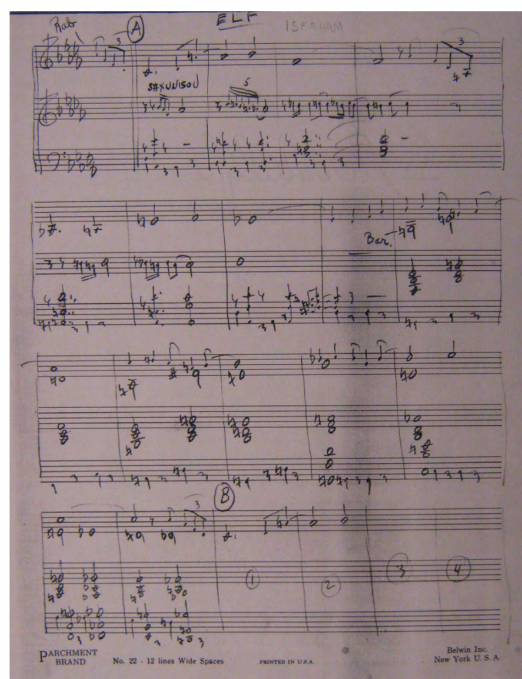


Figure 2. Strayhorn, B. Original hand written manuscript of *Isfahan* (taken from (Strayhorn, n.d.))

2.1. The A Section

The tune follows an ABAC structure. The harmony, whilst decidedly functional, is enriched through intermodal exchange, secondary dominants and non-functional harmony. A prime example occurs in the opening bars, where the tonic chord, Dbmaj7, is followed by a Bbmaj7 in the second bar, a clear instance of parallel movement between similar chord structures at the interval of a minor third. As we will see further on, parallel harmonies, particularly around the minor third axis, are a recurrent feature of Strayhorn's musical palette. The Bbmaj7 chord changes into a dominant Bb7 in the second half of the bar, resolving to Eb7, which functions as a secondary dominant (V7/V) in Dbmaj7 (see Figure 3). The resolution to Ab7 is delayed in measure five by a bVI maj7 chord, derived through intermodal exchange from the parallel minor mode.

The musical score for the A section of Strayhorn's 'Isfahan' is presented in two staves. The key signature is B-flat major (three flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The first staff contains measures 1 through 4. Measure 1 starts with a triplet of eighth notes (Bb, Ab, Gb) over a Dbmaj7 chord. Measure 2 features a Bbmaj7 chord in the first half and a Bb7 chord in the second half. Measure 3 has a triplet of eighth notes (Eb, D, C) over an Eb9 chord. Measure 4 has a triplet of eighth notes (Bb, Ab, Gb) over a Dbmaj7 chord. The second staff contains measures 5 through 8. Measure 5 starts with a sharp sign (F#) and an Amaj7 chord. Measure 6 has an Ab13 chord. Measure 7 has an Ab13(b9) chord with a triplet of eighth notes (Ab, Gb, Fb). Measure 8 ends with a Dbmaj9 chord.

Figure 3. Strayhorn, B. *Isfahan* – A section

As shown in Figure 4, the major seventh of the Bbmaj7 chord in the second bar is played in the melody, whereas the background in the trombone section merely sounds a major triad. Thus, one might interpret the A natural in the melody merely as a chromatic passing tone to the following note, Bb, despite its prolonged value.

The musical score for the first two measures of the first chorus of 'Isfahan' features three staves: J. Hodges (melody), Saxophones, and Trombones. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major). The first measure contains a triplet of eighth notes in the melody and saxophones, with a dotted quarter note in the trombones. The second measure contains a dotted half note in the melody and saxophones, and a half note in the trombones. Chord symbols above the staves are D \flat maj7, B \flat maj7, and B \flat 7. The saxophone part includes a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure and a quintuplet of eighth notes in the second measure.

Figure 4. Strayhorn, B. Arrangement of *Isfahan* in the first two measures²

Yet, while the pitch may indeed function in this manner, the arrangement of the same passage in the following chorus –where the saxophone section clearly articulates a B \flat maj7 chord in the soli before Hodges’s brief solo– points to the composer’s harmonic intention behind the chord change, beyond the mere melodic implications of the A natural in the main melody (see Figure 5).

The musical score for the first two measures of the second chorus of 'Isfahan' features four staves: Alto sax 2, Tenor Sax 1, Tenor Sax 2, and Bari Sax. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major). The first measure contains a triplet of eighth notes in all saxophone parts. The second measure contains a dotted half note in all saxophone parts. Chord symbols above the staves are D \flat maj7, B \flat maj7, and B \flat 7. The saxophone parts include triplets of eighth notes in the first measure and dotted half notes in the second measure.

Figure 5. Strayhorn, B. Arrangement of *Isfahan* in the first two measures of the second chorus

² Chord symbols are merely a reference, since there is no piano on the original recording.

Given the brevity of Hodges' solo on the original tune, the saxophonist does not actually improvise over these particular changes. But other versions, such as Joe Henderson's rendition on his Grammy-winning verve album *Lush Life: The Music of Billy Strayhorn*, show how this harmonic change may be used to great effect in melodic improvisation. Being a duo rendition with bassist Christian McBride, it is essentially in Henderson's hands as an improviser whether or not to highlight the movement from maj7 to dominant, which he chooses to do every time throughout his solo, as shown in Figure 6.

The figure displays four staves of musical notation in G-flat major (three flats). The first staff (measures 17-20) shows a progression from E-flat major 7 to C major 7, with a melodic line featuring triplets and a chromatic descent. The second staff (measures 33-36) continues the progression from E-flat major 7 to C major 7, with a melodic line that includes a chromatic ascent. The third staff (measures 41-44) shows a progression from B-flat 7 to E-flat major 7, then C major 7, and finally F 7, with a melodic line that includes a large interval leap. The fourth staff (measures 49-52) shows a progression from E-flat major 7 to C major 7, then C 7, and finally F 7, with a melodic line that includes a chromatic ascent.

Figure 6. Excerpts from Joe Henderson's solo on *Isfahan* taken from (der Moezel, 2013)

The inclusion of brief moments of non-functional harmony within a progression that is otherwise functional is a trademark of Strayhorn's style, which is often described as *Impressionist*, as such techniques, present in the work of early twentieth-century French composers, such as Ravel or Debussy, were not widely employed in the jazz music of the time.

The melody throughout this section is also artfully crafted, consisting of two closely related phrases. The initial phrase 1 consists of a descending arpeggio leading to the major seventh of the chord, followed by the tonic. As shown in Figure 7, this gesture is repeated in the following phrase, maintaining the exact chord-scale relationship in measures 1 and 5, respectively. In the second bar, the general contour and melodic direction of phrase 1 is mimicked in phrase 2—a large interval leap followed by a chromatic ascending motion—and whilst the two phrases cease to be identical, they both resolve to the major 9th, resuming their similar chord-scale relationship at the pivotal points of the phrase. Maintaining a similar

chord-scale relationship provides both melodic cohesion and variation, given that literal repetition is avoided due to the differing underlying harmony in both phrases. This is most effective as Strayhorn uses the concept freely, by maintaining a similar chord-scale relationship at key points, but varying the sections in between.

Figure 7. Strayhorn, B. *Isfahan*: A section – Melodic analysis

At first glance, the first eight bars of *Isfahan* may seem quite different from compositions like *Take the A Train* or *Don't get around much anymore*. The harmonic and melodic richness and density of the former results in a completely different mood from the more harmonically straightforward and at times bluesier feel of the latter pieces. But, in fact, they share many common traits. As highlighted previously, *Isfahan's* harmonic progression is enriched through non-diatonic chords and intermodal exchange. But, stripping it down to the most basic underlying progression shows that it is simply a variation of the *Take the A Train* changes. Without the transition to B♭maj7-B♭7 in the second measure, the first four bars consist of a I maj7–V7/V progression, and the bVI maj7–V7–I in mm. 5-8 can be easily interpreted as a variation of a standard II-V-I (see Figure 3). But the similarities do not reside in the harmony alone.

As shown in Figure 3, the melody in *Isfahan* is also structured in a standard fashion, being divided into two phrases where the second phrase ends on measure seven of an eight-bar progression. Furthermore, the chromatic ascending gesture in measure six at the end of phrase 2 is similar in pitch-content to the closing phrase in the A section of *Don't get around much anymore*. Both phrases are based on the chromatic ascending line b3-3-#4-5, with respect to the main key, a typical passage in a blues context which includes two blue notes, the b3

and #4/5. Whilst the melody in *Don't get around much anymore* resolves to the tonic, *Isfahan* resolves to the major 9th of the tonic chord, more in keeping with the overall sonority of the piece. Yet the melodic gesture draws from a similar set of pitches to resolve the melody at an identical point of the tune (see Figure 8).

(Melodic analysis with respect to the main key)

Figure 8. Strayhorn, B. Melodic resolutions in *Isfahan* and *Don't get around much anymore*

So, although the opening eight bars of the three tunes are very different in terms of sonority and mood, as well as in terms of their compositional approach, they operate, both from a melodic and harmonic perspective, within a similar framework. In this sense it is worth pointing out that neither the Bbmaj7 in measure two nor the Amaj7 in measure five are indispensable for harmonising the melody. The melody notes in measure five work perfectly well over the V7 chord, whereas the A natural in measure two could have easily been harmonised in a more standard fashion with an F7, creating a dominant chain, similar to tunes such as *All of me*. It is Strayhorn's use of harmony and technical approach to melodic development that accounts for the originality of this passage.

2.2. The B Section

The harmony in the B section consists mainly of two II-V-I progressions at the distance of a whole-tone. Once more, Strayhorn develops the melody through chord-scale relationship. In the first four measures, the same melody is literally transposed by a whole-tone. The motif is an excellent example of an effective use of chromaticism, employing all pitches within its ambitus of a perfect fourth. It is also a clear example of structuring the melody around a guide-tone line, as can be seen by the melody's target tones, highlighted in Figure 9. The last two bars of the section present an interesting case of non-functional harmony, namely a chromatic descent of similar maj7 chords from the newly established

tonal centre, F, to the main key, Db. The oblique movement this creates between the sustained note in the melody and the chromatically descending harmony is especially noteworthy. While the harmony approaches the first chord of the following passage chromatically, the sustained C in the melody is the first pitch of the melody's anacrusis, meaning that both melody and harmony prepare the transition to the following section in different but complementary manners, thereby creating a strong sense of forward motion leading back to the A section.

The musical score for the B section of Strayhorn's 'Isfahan' is presented in two staves. The first staff shows a chromatically descending harmony line with a sustained C in the melody. The chords are: Gm7(b5), C7(b9), Fm7, Am7(b5), D7(b9), Gm7. The second staff shows the continuation of the harmony line with chords: Gm7(b5), C7(b9), Fmaj7, Emaj7, Ebmaj7, Dmaj7. The melody includes triplets and a sustained C note.

Figure 9. Strayhorn, B. *Isfahan* – B section

2.3. The C Section

The C section moves to the subdominant, which, as noted previously, is common in many songs. Hence, the preceding A section concludes on a Db7 chord, functioning as the secondary dominant V7/IV. The final two bars of the second A section are particularly rich in their melodic and harmonic implications and deserve special attention. The melody in the second A resolves to the #11, as opposed to the major 9th as in the first A, creating a tension which is not resolved until the anacrusis of the C section, where the melody continues its ascending motion until hitting Bb in the first measure of C, the third of the subdominant chord (see Figure 10). This ascending motion –which stretches over four bars, commencing on measure six of the second A section on E natural–, is a prime example of the use of chromaticism to gradually build up melodic tension. The sustained #11 over the Db7 chord in mm. 7-8 also serves a different function, being a blue note with respect to the tonal centre.

This is particularly relevant, since the C section that follows makes extensive use of blues sonorities in various ways –a usage pre-empted by the sustained #11 that precedes it.

Figure 10. Strayhorn, B. *Isfahan* – C section

Yet the countermelody in the baritone part of the original carries a different melodic implication entirely. Although the piece is named after the Iranian city, it largely avoids explicit or obvious oriental or exotic sonorities, save for Hodges’ phrasing at certain points, most notably in the short solo section at the beginning of the second chorus. The one clear exception is the countermelody at hand, in which the augmented second is clearly reminiscent of an Arabic sonority (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Baritone sax countermelody in the last two bars of the second A section

So, on the one hand, the melody points towards the bluesy passages to come, whilst the countermelody simultaneously draws from another melodic language altogether, in line with the composition’s title. The resulting vertical sonority is an altered dominant with both #11 and b9, characteristic of the harmonic richness we associate with the Ellington/Strayhorn universe.

The actual C section, after commencing on the subdominant degree, moves through a dominant chain from the V7/III all through the cycle until the V7, a progression which is recurrent in other Strayhorn compositions, as we will discuss in the following section. The first three bars exhibit a distinct blues feel in each measure, achieved through the use of blue notes in the melody. In the first bar (see Figure 10) the melody emphasises the #9 on the strong beats resolving to the major third of the chord. The use of the minor/major third of the chord in this manner is very common in a blues context and is reinforced by Hodges' expressive phrasing throughout the section. In the second bar, the melody again targets the #9 of the chord, which, in light of the overall mood of the passage, works as a blue note. The resolution of the phrase in measure 3 clearly evokes an F minor blues scale sonority (see Figure 10).

In this way, the melody is structured around the blue notes of the chords which form the progression. The bluesy approach in this section provides an interesting contrast to the piece's previous more lyrical quality. At the same time, the tension created by the sustained blue notes against the underlying harmony increases the sense of forward motion of the dominant chain, which leads us to the melody's resolution. The final melodic statement, following the increase in tension throughout the first half of the C section, is preceded by a complete tacet, left unfilled except for the anacrusis of the final phrase, masterfully executed by Hodges. This moment of total silence is both sparse and purposefully intense, very much in line with the general orchestration and intention throughout. The last phrase reiterates the opening melody –though the harmony is inverted, moving from the V7/V chord to the tonic, as opposed to the other way round, as in the opening statement– which rounds off and concludes the melody in a most satisfying and effective manner (see Figure 10).

In conclusion, although *Isfahan* is more complex in its harmonic and melodic approach than standard pieces, such as *Take the A Train* or *Don't get around much anymore*, this analysis shows that they have more in common than is immediately apparent, sharing the standard form, melodic placement, at times similar underlying harmonic progression, and the use of blues sonorities. The direct parallels between the three tunes show that even in pieces like *Isfahan*, Strayhorn is working within the framework both of the popular music of the time, as well as that of the ensemble for which he is writing. In the following section we will reinforce the key concepts raised throughout the analysis of *Isfahan* by drawing parallels with other Strayhorn compositions.

3.- A comparative analysis

As with many influential artists, Strayhorn's work is both highly original and forward-thinking for its time, as well as very recognisable. The composer makes reiterative use of certain concepts and strategies, which result in a musical language that defines the sonority of many of his compositions.

3.1. Parallel harmonic motion: the minor third axis

Parallel harmonic movement, often structured around the axis of a minor third, is one of Strayhorn's recurrent approaches that gives his music this sonority. An axis system of tonalities at the distance of a minor third, where the dominant chords can be substituted by the same diminished chord, has been explored by twentieth-century composers, most notably by Béla Bartók (Lendvai, 1971).

As detailed in the previous section, *Isfahan* makes brief use of parallel movement between similar chords, yet other pieces use the concept more extensively. Take *Chelsea Bridge*, a piece often described as *Impressionist* (Schuller, 1989). In the introduction, performed by Strayhorn himself, the harmonic sequence moves from Dbmaj7, the composition's tonal centre, to a bVIIImaj7 chord (Cbmaj7), an intermodal exchange from the Mixolydian mode (see Figure 12). From then on, the progression makes use of parallel harmony, first to Gmaj7 and then through the minor third axis, bringing us back to the Db major / Bb minor tonality, where the piece begins (see Figure 12). This is a perfect example of non-functional parallel harmony that is, in effect, very reminiscent of the Impressionist composers.

The musical score for the introduction to *Chelsea Bridge* is presented in 4/4 time. It features a sequence of chords: Dbmaj7, Cbmaj7, Gmaj7, Emaj7, Diatonic to Db major, and F+7(#9). The notation shows the piano part with treble and bass staves.

Figure 12. Strayhorn, B. Introduction to *Chelsea Bridge*

It is also very appropriate within the overall context of the piece, the first four bars of which, being based on parallel movement between two similar $\text{min}^{\text{maj}7}$ chords, have been compared to Maurice Ravel’s *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (van de Leur, 2001).

Yet the introduction is not the only section of *Chelsea Bridge* based on the axis of a minor third. In fact, a broader view of the piece shows how the minor third axis acts as a major organisational principle of the overall structure. The tonal centre of the A section is Db major. At the beginning of the bridge, the progression modulates to E major, a minor third above the main key. After transitioning to the key’s subdominant in the fifth bar, the harmony modulates a further step up the minor third axis, to Gmaj7, from which the progression takes us back to the initial chord, $\text{Bbm}^{\text{maj}7}$, thereby completing the minor third axis, albeit on a $\text{m}^{\text{maj}7}$ chord, as opposed to a $\text{maj}7$ (see Figure 13). In this sense, the general harmonic structure moves through the same minor third axis as the introduction, but in the opposite direction. Such a level of sophistication and technique is surely a large part of why Strayhorn is considered a great influence by later jazz composers, such as Gil Evans, who once stated that all he ever did was to do what Strayhorn did (Hajdu, 2013, p. 87).

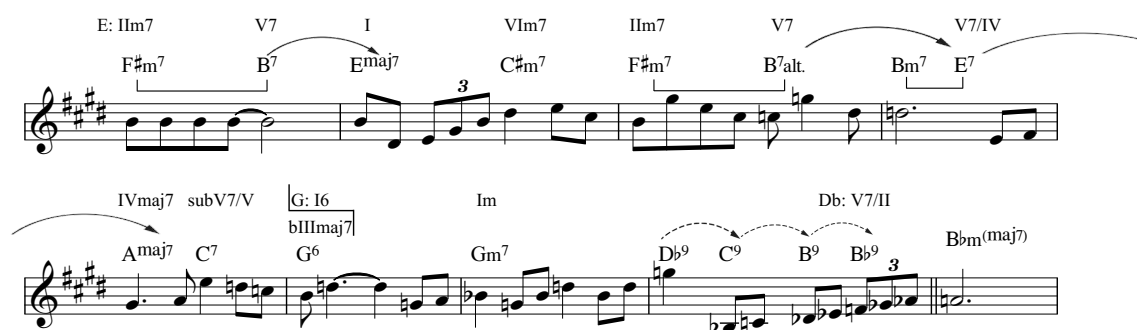


Figure 13. Strayhorn, B. *Chelsea Bridge* – B section

A further example of Strayhorn’s use of the minor third axis can be found in one of his most acclaimed works, *Lush Life*. In the passage shown in Figure 14, taken from the fourth bar of the verse, the harmony briefly transitions from the main key, Db, to E, by

moving through the diatonic chords of both tonal centres in step-wise fashion, providing a smooth transition between both tonal centres. What is truly remarkable about this section is the way in which the harmony and the lyrics intertwine. The increase in harmonic rhythm and rapid change of tonalities lead up to “the wheel of life”, emphasising the sense of motion, which falls in register to hit the blue note precisely coinciding with the word “jazz” in the lyrics.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Lush Life" by Strayhorn. It consists of two staves of music in a key signature of three flats (B-flat major / D-flat minor). The melody is written in a treble clef. The lyrics are: "where one re - lax - es on the ax - is of the wheel of life____ to get the feel of life_____ from jazz and cock - tails". Above the first staff, the chords are labeled: D \flat maj7, E \flat m7, E maj7, F \sharp m7, G \sharp m7, and D¹³. Above the second staff, the chords are labeled: Fm7, D⁹(\sharp 11), and D \flat m⁹.

Figure 14. Strayhorn, B. Minor third axis in *Lush Life*

3.2. Motivic development

Strayhorn employs various techniques of motivic development that play a central role in the cohesiveness of his compositions. In the previous section, we discussed melodic development through similar chord-scale relationship, as well as through chromaticism and blues sonorities. While in *Isfahan* a melody is developed by maintaining a similar chord-scale relationship over different harmonies, in *Passion Flower*, the opposite occurs, namely that the actual pitches of a motif are repeated over different chords, resulting in the reiteration of a similar motif producing a varying chord-scale relationship with respect to the underlying harmony.

Figure 15 shows how a single two-bar motif accounts for the entire A section. The motif, though subject to rhythmic variation, is maintained but in one pitch in the fifth measure, where the D natural is substituted by an E \flat to accommodate the harmony. The melody then, similarly to the A section in *Isfahan*, resolves to the major 9th of the tonic chord. Maintaining a similar melody over different changes, with minimal adjustments in order to accommodate the changes, also occurs in the B section of Strayhorn’s perhaps most famous tune, *Take the A Train*.

Figure 15. Strayhorn, B. *Passion Flower* – A section

The simple three-note motif in the A section of *Passion Flower* is subsequently inverted and applied in the melody throughout the bridge. Here too, the motif is repeated three consecutive times over a changing harmonic background, meaning that the variation of one single three-note motif constitutes the tune's entire melody (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Strayhorn, B. *Passion Flower* – B section

Furthermore, regarding the melody on the whole reveals that it is in fact completely diatonic to the octatonic diminished scale, save for the descending chromatic transition in the last measure of the bridge. The tonal centres of the A and B section, Db and G, are a tritone away, which, as with the octatonic scale, also relates to the minor third axis. In this way, as in the case of *Chelsea Bridge*, the minor third axis, whilst not immediately obvious or explicitly stated, works as a fundamental organisational principle and a key part of the overall compositional strategy.

The similarities between the A and B section of *Passion Flower* do not only reside in the melody but also in the harmony. Though the harmonic rhythm is different and the A section commences with a rather deceptive progression between F7 and Gb7, in which F almost seems to be fleetingly implied as a tonal centre, both sections can be said to consist of a

dominant chain progressing by descending semitones, moving from the V7/III of each respective tonality –F#7 in the case of the A section in G major, C7 in the case of the B section in Db major (compare Figures 15 and 16). It is worth pointing out that this progression is virtually identical to that of the C section of *Isfahan* (see Figure 10), showing how Strayhorn manages to apply similar concepts in quite different musical situations.

Overall, it can be said that the highly strategic approach behind *Passion Flower's* harmonic and melodic development, in which a single three-note motif and one similar harmonic progression are developed throughout the totality of the piece, is a perfect example of Strayhorn's craftsmanship and technique as a composer.

3.3. Chromaticism

Chromaticism is an important part of the jazz language and is often present in Strayhorn's music. We have already discussed the bluesy use of chromaticism in *Isfahan* and *Don't get around much anymore*, as well as the descending chromatic dominant chain in *Passion Flower*. The A section of *Take the A Train* is also a prime example of how a chromatic line serves as the general structure of the melody. Taking away melodic ornamentation, the melody basically presents an ascending chromatic line from notes G to C, which, incidentally, is approached chromatically from above by the preceding Db (see Figure 1).

Another sophisticated use of chromaticism in Strayhorn's work is often found at the end of a section, serving as the transition to another. We previously discussed how a descending chromatic chord progression coupled with a sustained note in the melody provides an effective transition at the end of the B section of *Isfahan*, as well as an interesting oblique movement between the melody and the harmony (see Figure 9). A similar process can be found in the last bar of the middle eight of *Chelsea Bridge*. Here, a descending chromatic dominant chain leads to the first chord in the A section, creating contrary motion in relation to the ascending melodic line. Both the descending chromatic bass line and the ascending Bb minor scale in the melody lead to their respective target tones on the first beat of the last A section, providing a strong sense of forward motion and resolution (see Figure 13).

Such transitions can be found in many of Strayhorn tunes functioning as transitions and resolutions. In the last bar of the bridge in *Passion Flower*, the descending chromatic melody line is juxtaposed with the bass line which moves through the cycle of fifths. Again,

both the dominant chain in the harmony and bass and the chromatic descending melody lead to the next section and create an interesting counterpoint between the melody and the bass line (see Figure 16).

Similarly, in the final phrase of *Lush Life* the chords descend chromatically, first from E^{maj7} to D^{maj7}, then from E^bm⁷ to D^bm^{aj7}, while the melodic line ascends chromatically from B to F.



Figure 17. Strayhorn, B. Last two bars of *Lush Life*

This use of chromaticism and contrary or oblique movement as an effective way of creating contrapuntal interest and forward motion at pivotal points of the tune is often exploited by Strayhorn in his work.

4.- Conclusion

The present analysis shows different aspects of Strayhorn's musical language, highlighting strategies that were innovative within the context of jazz at the time. Many of these concepts, such as the use of symmetric and parallel harmonies, would be exploited by later musicians and are today commonplace in modern jazz. Yet it is important to consider that when Strayhorn was writing these tunes, jazz was, in fact, a form of popular music. A key factor of Strayhorn's music is how he succeeds in incorporating sophisticated compositional devices within the framework he was working in. This is also the case in van de Leur (2001), which presents a detailed analysis of *Chelsea Bridge* in which many similar harmonic devices are employed. In this sense, Strayhorn's music, particularly his use of strategies such as the minor-third axis, may be considered a precedent for the innovations of later post-bop composers such as Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, and Chick Corea, discussed in Waters (2019).

Musicians such as Joe Henderson would take some of these concepts further, in tunes such as *Inner Urge*, where the use of parallel motion or constant structures between similar chords accounts for the entire progression. Yet Henderson was writing at a time when jazz

was decidedly embracing the avant-garde. These devices in Strayhorn's music, on the other hand, were artfully woven into the functional harmony of 1930–40s popular song. In this way, he employed highly sophisticated compositional strategies to enrich the standard musical language of the time in several ways, as discussed throughout the previous sections. In *Chelsea Bridge*, the minor third axis governs the tonal layout of the entire piece; in *Passion Flower* the melody is drawn exclusively from the octatonic diminished scale. Yet, on the whole, these pieces are completely tonal and functional; the extent to which these devices are employed is not immediately apparent. Unlike with *Inner Urge*, where constant structures constitute the piece's entire harmonic progression, their application in Strayhorn's music is more subtle. And in the cases where non-functional harmony is employed – *Isfahan* and *Lush Life* both present short passages of non-functional harmony, as does *Chelsea Bridge*– it is but a fleeting deviation from functional harmony; a way of enriching the music, but not an omnipresent characteristic of the composition. This is one of the most captivating aspects of Strayhorn's musical language and possibly one of the reasons that many of his compositions are part of the jazz canon and are still being performed to this day.

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