

Statement of Research Intent for Doctoral Study (1000 words excluding bibliography)

Title of research topic or research area:

Brad Mehldau's stylistic innovations and their implications for jazz piano performance.

Introduction/background:

Bradford Alexander Mehldau (born August 23, 1970) is an American jazz pianist and composer. Though Mehldau's early training was primarily classical, his interest in jazz began at an early stage of his life. He played in his high school jazz band and won Berklee College's 'Best All-Around Musician Award' while still in his junior year of high school.

After moving from Connecticut in 1988 he started jazz study at New York's New School for Social Research under Fred Hersch, Junior Mance, Kenny Werner, and Jimmy Cobb. Cobb soon hired him to play in his band, Cobb's Mob before forming his own trio in 1994 and recording his first album, 'Introducing Brad Mehldau' (Warner Bros) in 1995. Mehldau has been performing and recording with his own trio ever since. Mehldau has performed as a sideman with internationally renowned jazz artists such as Pat Metheny, Wayne Shorter, Joshua Redman, Christian McBride, Michael Brecker, Chris Potter, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Jimmy Cobb, and also classical vocalists Renee Fleming and Anne Sofie von Otter.

Mehldau's Contemporary Repertoire

Brad Mehldau has expanded the piano trio repertoire by regularly introducing material from contemporary pop artists such as Nick Drake, Radiohead, The Beatles, Paul Simon and Oasis. The researchers assumption from listening to (and also by completing some formal postgraduate study of) these performances is that Mehldau's improvisational treatment of these pieces is highly original and therefore worthy of further investigation. For example, he often employs seemingly complex harmony over original changes of a pop song and in doing so, creates part of his signature sound. Mehldau's intelligent arrangements of these contemporary vehicles also serve to heighten his reputation as a respected jazz innovator.

Mehldau's Compositions

Brad Mehldau's compositions are complex in form, meter and concept and require an advanced understanding of harmony to be able to perform (and improvise upon). The researchers assumption from listening to these compositions is that there is an intelligent methodology contained within, which is often derived from Mehldau's classical roots.

Aims and objectives of the research:

What question(s) or problem is your research seeking to answer? Why do you think this project is worth doing?

This DMA proposal is aimed at increasing the body of knowledge on the subject of Mehldau's approach to improvisation and performance throughout his career. The researcher is particularly interested in technical aspects of melody, harmony, rhythm and arrangement and how they can be utilised to influence development of my own individual style. e.g. To what extent do Mehldau's harmonic innovations suggest new jazz improvisational approaches? This project is worth doing as it will be used to: -

- Add to the relatively slim body of knowledge documented on Brad Mehldau's music.
- Help springboard my own direction as a unique voice in jazz piano.

Exegesis

- Investigate and document stylistic elements found in Mehldau's jazz improvisation and compositions.
- Document Mehldau's contextual background and potentially his contribution to the development of the modern jazz piano style.
- Inquire into Mehldau's personal and artistic creative approaches and intentions to performing and improvisation.

Performance

- Develop jazz compositions and improvisations using aspects of Mehldau's stylistic concepts to formulate original and innovative directions in jazz performance.
- Demonstrate by way of recordings and live performances a range of personal interpretations of Mehldau's pieces and my own composition/adaptation.

Research design:

What information is required? What major methods or procedures will be used to collect and analyse the information? What is your expected mode of delivery for assessment (exegesis, performance, exhibition etc)?

- Reflect on (with the help of performance supervisor) both positive and negative aspects of the researcher's performance attributes by way of listening to past recitals and other recorded material, taking into account technical agility, improvisational style and harmonic advancement. Establish and formalise elements that require further study/practise; this will be an ongoing part of the degree program to ensure that progress meets/exceeds the DMA performance requirements.

- With specific focus on the Brad Mehldau trio albums, form a list of Mehldau's contemporary repertoire. Develop a listening journal of Mehldau's works and improvisations to determine aspects of stylistic interest. Transcribe excerpts of exemplary piano improvisations. Use observations as a springboard to direct the focus of the researchers own performance practise.
- Prepare for the first recital, a piano trio (mainly piano, bass and drums with occasional guest performer) performance based on arrangements of selected works.
- Using the analysis of Mehldau's contemporary repertoire, shortlist suitable vehicles (contemporary songs) for arrangement applied from research to date. Prepare for the second recital, a piano trio performance of contemporary melodies and improvisation inspired by Brad Mehldau's treatment of his contemporary repertoire.
- Investigate Mehldau's compositions and determine areas of stylistic interest. Prepare for the third recital, a piano trio performance of the compositions of Brad mehldau.
- Apply for ethics approval for an interview with Mehldau, offically approach Mehldau and seek permission for interview (he has informally agreed already). Prepare and conduct an initial interview with Mehldau (issues of informed consent will be addressed). Interview material will be used to document Mehldau's personal and artistic approaches and intentions (3rd aim) in the exegesis.
- Using the analysis of Mehldau's compositions as a source of inspiration, compose tunes inspired by the research to date; focus should be on developing the research into something practical that can be applied to form some sort of compositional methodology, again helping to springboard creative originality.
- Prepare for the fourth recital, a piano trio performance of compositions written by me inspired by compositions of Brad Mehldau. [I would prefer to complete a recording project in lieu of this recital if allowed by the DMA regulations].
- Write the final draft of a 25 - 35,000 word exegesis detailing all elements of study. The precise structure of the exegesis will become apparent after the initial exploration of Mehldau's oeuvre, however it is expected to consist of writing on his contextual background, history, discography, key influences, transcription, some straightforward harmonic analysis, and interview findings.

- Prepare for the fifth and final recital that fulfils the requirements of the DMA by relating directly to the exegesis. This is not limited to a style but can cover all of Brad's oeuvre.

Transcription will be aided by the use of a computer program Transcribe. This program has the ability to slow down an excerpt of audio without losing pitch. Transcribe also has a limited ability to analyse very small segments of music to provide the user with a list of individual frequencies heard. This is particularly useful in analysing dense chordal-based passages to determine voicings etc.

Computer notation software Finale will be used to notate Mehldau's solos. The analysis of these solos will also be added to the score using the same program and, when necessary, the researcher shall export excerpts of solos to be included in relevant paragraphs of the final exegesis.

In addition to working with my immediate supervisors and interviewing Mehldau himself, I will look to interview jazz historians and practitioners in NZ and abroad who will be able to help situate and corroborate my findings and research outcomes.

Select Bibliography

(Approximately 1 page)

Books

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