
Chick Corea - A Style Analysis

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Biographical Background

For more than 35 years, Chick Corea's has been performing, composing, and recording music ranging from Straight Ahead Jazz, Free Jazz, Jazz Fusion to Classical Music with all variations in between. As one of the most versatile contemporary jazz pianists and composers, he has been a source of inspiration for many students of America's classical music.

Armando Anthony Corea was born June 12, 1941 in Chelsea/ Massachusetts. His father, a jazz trumpet player, was his first musical inspiration. After several years of exploring the piano and the drum set, Chick started piano lessons with concert pianist Salvatore Sulo. During short stints at Columbia University and Juilliard, he decided to pursue a professional career as jazz musician and took residence on Seventy First Street in New York. Soon he was busy playing with Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo, Herbie Mann, Elvin Jones, Stan Getz, and many others. With trumpeter Blue Mitchell Chick recorded his first original composition, called Chick's Tune on Blue Mitchell's LP "A Thing To Do". The first LP under Corea's own name, "Tones for Joan's Bones", recorded in 1966, features Joe Farrell (saxes), Woody Shaw (trumpet), Steve Swallow (bass), and Joe Chambers (drums) playing a mixture of Latin, Bop, and Free Styles. More Bebop oriented tunes are recorded on the 1968 follow-up "Now He Sings, Now He Sobs" with Miroslav Vitous on bass and Roy Haynes on drums. Shortly thereafter, Corea rose to international fame during a three year stint with the Miles Davis group.

With band mates Dave Holland (bass), and Jack DeJohnette (drums), Corea started exploring the world of Free Improvisation on the recording "Is". Several recordings with his group "Circle" document further experimentation with free forms. After a return to more melodic lines and harmonic progressions with his solo piano recordings "Improvisations I & II" for the ECM label, Corea decided to leave Circle and focus back on structure, melody, and harmony. In his Forward to the Warner Bros. publication "The Jazz Styles of Chick Corea", he explains his change in direction:

"In 1971, an incredible change occurred in my life, directly stemming from some initial studying I did of the works of L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, "says Chick. "The result was a seemingly new-found but actually old and hidden goal I had for a long time: to create and communicate the music I love."

The realization of this goal became his group "Return to Forever", one of the most influential groups of the Jazz Rock Fusion era. The original members include Stanley Clarke (bass), Joe Farrell (saxes, flute), Flora Purim (vocals, percussion), Airto Moreira (drums, percussion), and Chick Corea (keyboards). Their self-titled debut and the follow-up record "Light as a Feather" emphasize the fusion of jazz traditions with Latin-American music. The result are some of the most melodic compositions of jazz, such as Corea's probably most famous piece "Spain" or the playful "Sometime Ago." After replacing Florim and Moreira with Bill Connors (guitar) and Lenny White (drums) in 1974, the group became one of the forerunners of electronic jazz. RTF's progressive mixtures of jazz concepts, rock and latin-american rhythms, and classical forms are documented on "The Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy" and with guitar virtuoso Al DiMeola on "Where Have I Known You Before", "No Mystery", and "Romantic Warrior". The group went through several personnel changes until it's final break-up in 1980, including a 13-piece ensemble with strings and Gayle Moran, Corea's wife, on vocals. The various incarnations and Corea's extended compositions and arrangements are documented on "The Leprechaun", "My Spanish Heart", "Mad Hatter", "Friends", and "Secret Agent".

The years until 1985 were filled with a wide variety of activities, ranging from several duo projects with Herbie Hancock, Gary Burton, John McLaughlin, and Paco di Lucia among others, over acoustic collaborations with Michael Brecker, Eddie Gomez, and Steve Gadd on "Three Quartets", to performing Mozart's Double Concerto with Friedrich Gulda and the Concertgebouw Orchestra. Inspired by his classical performances, Corea composed his own concerto for piano and orchestra and released his Children's Songs, a collection of 20 short piano pieces reminiscent of Darius Milhaud's ragtime and tango influenced piano music.

By 1985, Corea joined forces with young virtuosos John Patitucci (bass), Dave Weckl (drums), and Scott Henderson (guitar) to form The *Chick Corea Electric Band*. In an interview for Keyboard Magazine, July 1986, Corea explained that the use of electronic instruments opens up new possibilities of expression and allows him to communicate with sounds currently familiar to a broader audience. A recording contract with the GRP label resulted in a series of tours and recordings, such as the self-titled debut, the grammy winning "Light Years" with Eric Marienthal (saxes), and Frank Gambale (guitar), "Eye of the Beholder", "Inside Out", and "Beneath the Mask". The Electric Band era concluded in 1993 with the release of "Paint the World", featuring the Electric Band II with Gary Novak (drums), Jimmy Earl (bass), Mike Miller (guitar), and Eric Marienthal (saxes).

During the 90ies, many jazz musicians discarded the world of electronics and focused on using acoustic instruments and interpreting the traditional standard repertoire. Already during the late 80ies, Corea, Patitucci, and Weckl, had toured and recorded as an acoustic trio. Recording now for his own label, Stretch Records, Corea returned to his acoustic roots with "Time Warp", a tribute to Bud Powell, and duo recordings with Bobby McFerrin and Gary Burton, recorded between 1994 - 1997. In addition, he further explored the world of classical music with "The Mozart

Sessions", conducted by Bobby McFerrin. Most recently Corea formed the sextet "Origin", a new outlet for his compositions and arrangements.

Corea never seems to sit still, always looking for new, unexpected adventures. But even in the most diverse projects, such as his free-style recordings with "Circle" compared to the jazz fusion of the "The Chick Corea Electric Band," Corea's piano style is easily recognizable and well-defined. While incorporating the traditions of jazz, the ultimate goal of any jazz musician is to develop a personal, recognizable approach to playing by defining some basic conceptual principles. Those principles provide the unifying threads throughout Corea's eclectic projects. Following is a discussion of some of those characteristic of a great artist.

Stylistic Characteristics

Although any great musical product is larger than it's parts, an understanding of the components leads to greater appreciation and inspiration to emulate such greatness. Therefore this chapter is an attempt to present some of the characteristics of Chick Corea's piano style and compositions, categorized by technical, rhythmic, melodic and harmonic aspects.

1. Technique

In one of his poems from his music poetry, Chick writes: "Discipline your body, discipline your instrument...". His clean and clear attack and mastery of his instrument demonstrates such principles. His articulation is always precise and clean no matter if he plays a Steinway grand piano, a Fender keyboard, or his Yamaha strap-on keyboard. His keyboard solo on "Got A Match" on *The Chick Corea Electric Band* is exemplary for his clear articulation even at extreme speeds.

Corea's touch can be very powerful, using the piano foremost as a percussion instrument. One example is on *An Evening With Herbie Hancock*, where he plays the vamp figure of "La Fiesta" at the beginning so forceful and with minimal key contact, that it sounds more like a drum groove than a piano vamp.

On the other hand, he can be very sensitive and tasteful. Some examples are his romantic soloing on "Where Have I Known You Before" on the similarly titled album and his interpretations of his own "Children's Songs."

He doesn't limit his palette of sounds to conventional means of playing the piano keys. Especially during duo or trio performances one can frequently observe Corea plucking the strings inside the piano and experimenting with different ways of preparing the strings. Such experimentations were personally witnessed during his concerts at the 1996 IAJE convention and can also be heard on "Fragments" and "Duet for Bass and Piano No. 2" on the record *Circling In*.

Corea's use of baroque-like embellishments are heard rather frequently in his playing. Sometimes he'll just fill out melodic intervals chromatically as in the following example.

Example 1--Spain--(Takase,1979)



Or he might connect intervals diatonically.

Example 2 Where Have I Known You Before (Corea, 1973)



Furthermore circling embellishments can be found.

Example 3 Now He Sings, Now He Sobs (Takase, 1979)



Finally he might approach notes from different interval jumps above or below, as in the following examples.

Example 4 Now He Sings, Now He Sobs (Takase, 1979)

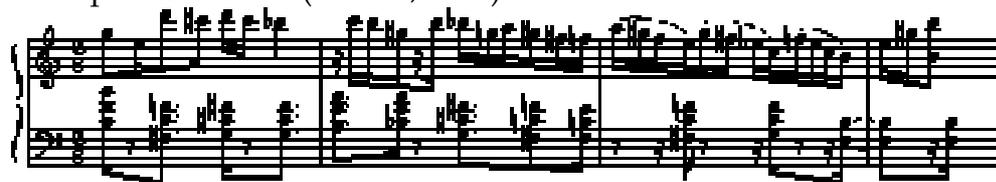


Example 5 Where Have I Known You Before (Corea, 1973)



His complete independence of right and left hand is also a strong component of Corea's technique. Such independence enables him to provide bass ostinatos and rhythmic accents complimentary to right hand melodies. A short excerpt from his solo on "La Fiesta" exemplifies this ability.

Example 6 La Fiesta (Takase, 1979)



2. Rhythm

Corea's preference for latin-american rhythms has become a trademark of his style. The choice of song titles, such as "La Fiesta," "Spain," "My Spanish Heart," "Samba Song," or "Senor Mouse" already indicate such preferences. His piano accompaniments often combine latin-american rhythms with jazz harmonies.

Example 7 Sea Journey (Dobbins, 1990)



Example 8 La Fiesta (Takase, 1979)

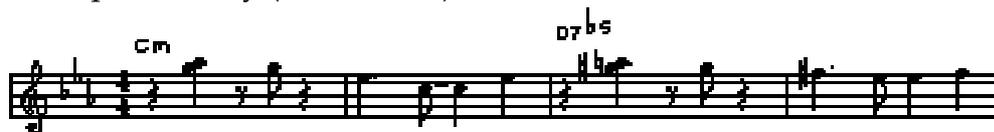


Example 9 Central Park (Bauer, 1983)

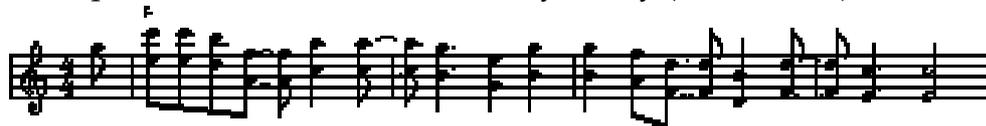


Similarly many of Corea's melodic lines display syncopated rhythms and sixth or octave doubling, based on latin-american styles.

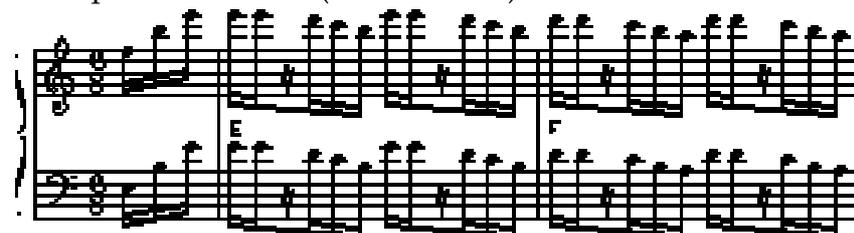
Example 10 Sicily (Bauer, 1983)



Example 11 What Game Shall We Play Today (Corea, 1973)



Example 12 La Fiesta (Takase, 1979)



Sophisticated rhythmic interplay and precise timing are very prominent in Corea's comping and soloing. Being an accomplished drummer, he has a wide repertoire of rhythms and the ability to execute them with confidence and perfect timing. Such rhythmic variety adds interest and excitement to his music.

Example 13 King Cockroach (Cullen, 1987)

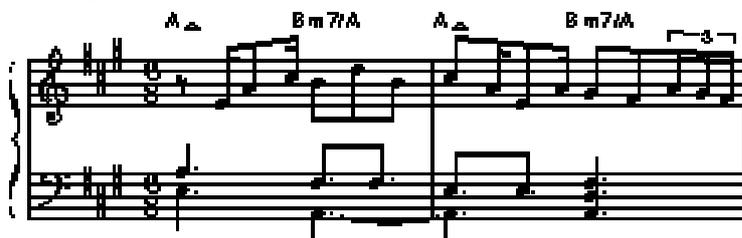


Often his syncopations and his ability to play different rhythms with each hand create polyrhythmic effects, as exemplified in the following excerpts.

Example 14 500 Miles (Takase, 1979)



Example 15 La Fiesta (Takase, 1979)



The rhythmic organization of his melodic lines, often referred to as phrasing, also displays his rhythmic mastery and versatility. Although the typical strings of eighth notes dominate Corea's soloing, he knows how to place rests and other rhythmic values effectively to create logical, congruent lines.

Example 16 Friends (Sprague, 1992)

Musical notation for Example 16, "Friends" by Sprague (1992). The score consists of three staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff has chords F#m/C, C#m, D/C, and Bm/C. The second staff has F#m6/C and C#m. The third staff has F#m/C, C#m, D/C, and E#m/B. The melody features eighth notes and triplets.

C. Melodic Characteristics

One main aspect of jazz improvisation is to create interesting melodic lines in relation to a repeating harmonic structure. Therefore the pitch content of melodic lines needs to be discussed in reference to the underlying harmonies. As a result some aspects in the analysis of melodic and harmonic elements will overlap.

The melodies of Corea's compositions are very lyrical and memorable, many of his songs have become part of the standard repertoire of jazz musicians. Some examples are "Spain," "Windows," or "Humpty Dumpty". During his improvisations he combines such lyricism with complex rhythmic and harmonic twists. Some of his most lyrical improvisations are captured in his "Piano Improvisations I & II" and his solo rendition of "Where Have I Known You Before."

Rooted very much in the Bebop tradition, Corea's improvised lines are dominated by long strings of eighth notes shaped in the sinoid waveforms. Especially at faster tempos such dominance of eighth note values is apparent.

Example 17 Humpty Dumpty (Sprague, 1992)

Musical notation for Example 17, "Humpty Dumpty" by Sprague (1992). The score consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff has chords A7, F#m, Bb#m, and Bbm7. The second staff has (Bbm7) and Dm7. The melody is characterized by long strings of eighth notes.

Corea often prefers lydian and altered scales to add tension and color to his improvised lines. Especially diminished scales (half step/ whole step alternating) used in relation to dominant chords can be frequently detected in his solos.

D. Harmonic Characteristics

Studying the classical literature and composition has influenced Corea's harmonic vocabulary. Similarities to the harmonic innovations of the French romantics such as Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel can be detected. Corea displays preferences for wide, open sounds with frequent uses of Ma7#11 chords,

Example 24 The One Step (Sprague, 1992)

The musical notation for Example 24, 'The One Step' by Sprague (1992), is presented in two staves. The first staff shows a C major chord (CΔ) and a Bb minor 7 chord (Bbm7). The second staff features A major 7 #11 (AΔ#11), Gb major 7 #11 (GbΔ#11), and Bb minor 7 (Bbm7) chords. The melody is characterized by wide intervals and a chromatic descending line in the second staff.

During his years with John Coltrane, pianist McCoy Tyner developed a new harmonic approach by using voicings based mainly on the interval of a fourth. This technique became the essence of the modern piano sound. Similar voicing techniques can be detected in Corea's playing.

Example 25 Tale of Daring (Corea, Sprague, 1991)

The musical notation for Example 25, 'Tale of Daring' by Corea and Sprague (1991), is presented in two staves. The notation shows complex harmonic structures with many accidentals and wide intervals, characteristic of McCoy Tyner's style.

Example 26 Noon Song (Dobbins, 1990)

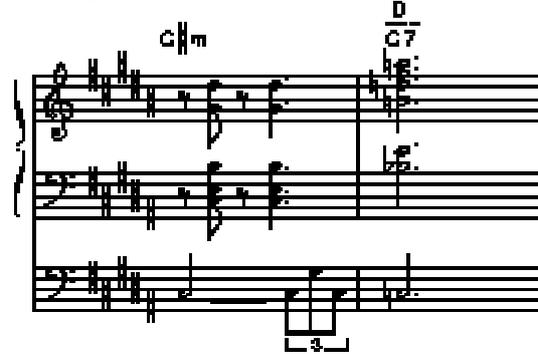
The musical notation for Example 26, 'Noon Song' by Dobbins (1990), is presented in two staves. The notation shows complex harmonic structures with many accidentals and wide intervals, characteristic of McCoy Tyner's style.

Corea's harmonic progressions often depart from the traditional functional harmony, which depends mainly on the II-V-I relationship. One technique for harmonic expansion is the use of polychords, which consist of harmonies with foreign bass notes or two harmonies layered on top of each other. Following are examples of such progressions.

Example 27 The Ant & The Elephant (Corea, Sprague, 1995)



Example 28 Windows (Takase, 1979)



Other techniques for harmonic expansion are the use of ostinati and pedal points. Both techniques are apparent in Corea's compositions and performances. Pedal points provide a suspended feel to the harmonic movement and create tension to be released with the departure from the pedal point.

Example 29 All Love (Bauer, 1983)



Especially in his cycle of "Children's Songs", Corea frequently uses ostinati to create accompaniments.

Example 30 Children's Song No. 1 (Corea, 1984)



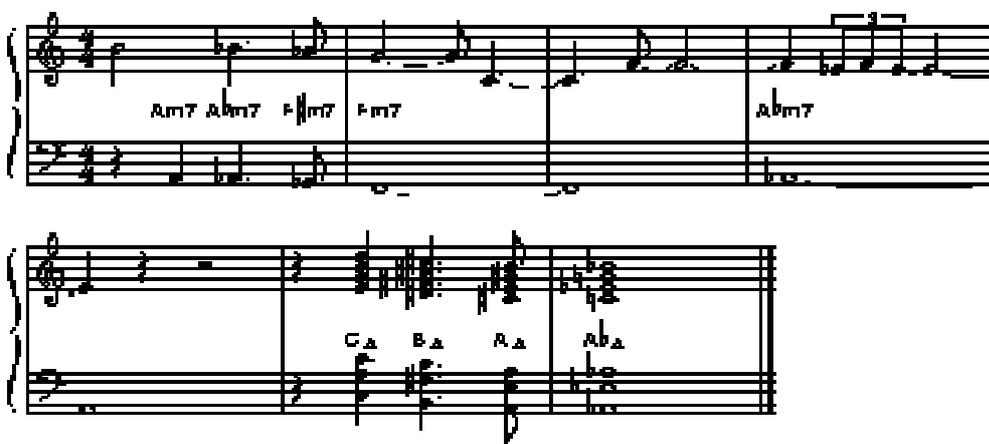
Another application of ostinato techniques is the use of vamp figures. Corea uses such vamp figures especially for his latin-influenced compositions.

Example 31 La Fiesta (Takase, 1979)



Finally, Corea often employs parallel movement of harmonies of the same quality. This is another technique to avoid functional harmony while still creating logical harmonic movement.

Example 32 Paint the World (Corea, Sprague, 1995)



Chick Corea's Arrangement and Solo on "It Could Happen to You"

Following is a transcription of Chick Corea's arrangement and two solo choruses on the standard "It Could Happen to You" by Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Burke. This performance with Corea's most recent group "Origin" was captured in February 1998 during an engagement at New York's jazz club "Blue Note". Many of Corea's style characteristics discussed earlier are apparent in this transcription. The following analysis will focus on these special characteristics.

"It Could Happen to You" is a 32-bar song, composed in two similar 16-bar sections. After a rubato solo piano introduction, Corea states the head supported by Avishai Cohen on drums and Adam Cruz on drums. Steve Davis on trombone, Bob Sheppard on tenor sax, and Steve Wilson on alto sax join for the last four measures.

In order to reinforce his liberal treatment of the melody, Corea adds, deletes, and substitutes some of the original harmonies. In measure 3, Corea adds an Am passing chord, then proceeds chromatically up to C. Furthermore, a string of chromatically descending, parallel dominant chords substitutes for the original tonic - subdominant

progression in measure 5 and 6. Instead of the regular ii-V Turnaround in measures 15 and 16, Corea harmonizes the melody in triads to a step wise descending bass line, a technique discussed earlier under harmonic characteristics. Finally, he suspends the resolution to the tonic in measure 31 by laying a C-pedal point for the final 6 measures of the head.

Corea begins his solo with a melodic sequence, emphasizing the #11 of F-Major in measure 37. The sequence continues with embellishments until measure 41. For the turnaround in measure 46 and 47, Corea chooses to use a D-Major Scale, brightening up the sound of the F-Major harmonic basis from one flat to two sharps. In order to lead back to the F-Major tonic, Corea moves up chromatically, implying E-Major during measure 48. Similar to the tonic-subdominant substitution with a string of dominant chords during the head in measure 21-24, Corea plays a descending, chromatic sequence from Bb13 to G13 in measure 54. He completes his first chorus with a C-pedal point. During m. 61-64, Corea melodically implies a progression of Dm7, Ebm7, Ab, G7b9 over the C-pedal point as a turnaround to the F-Major tonic in m.65.

During the second chorus, Corea concentrates more on rhythmic aspects for his improvised lines. In m. 67/ 68, he crosses the bar lines with a hemiola, leading to a syncopated repetition of C's doubled at the octave over the course of the following three measures. Echoing the thought, Corea states a series of B's in measure 75 and 76. In relation to the F Major harmony in measure 75 , B is the #11, one of Corea's favorite harmonic option to brighten up major chords. Again, he implies a series of triads over an ascending bass line to close the first half of the second chorus. Block harmonies characterize the improvisational approach for the second half of the chorus. Instead of the C-pedal point, Corea increases tension and intensity by leading into the third solo chorus with an ascending B-Major scale, accented by syncopated, ascending fourths in the left hand.

In closing this discussion of Corea's piano style, the following basic principles can be extracted from the analysis. With a clear touch, a clean technique, and a very strong sense of rhythm, Corea is well-equipped to realize his quest for communication through his music. Some of his most prevalent melodic techniques are the frequent use of embellishments, lydian and altered scales, and some typical chromatic patterns. Harmonically, Corea frequently uses voicings based on the interval of a fourths, polychords, non-functional progressions, pedal points, and ostinati. In summary, Corea's artistry is based on a strong command of his instrument and contemporary harmonic techniques. Naturally there is a deeper level to artistry than just the surface of technique, rhythm, melody, and harmony. Personal attributes such as creativity, inventiveness, spontaneity, or flexibility are just as important as musical characteristics. Nevertheless the previous analysis can be helpful for students of jazz piano and jazz in general in developing their own, personal concepts. Not only jazz performers may benefit from such an analysis but also listeners of jazz in order to develop a stronger appreciation and understanding of one artist's accomplishments.

It Could Happen To You

Head

1 Gm7 B♭ E7♭9

FΔ A♭ D13♭9 Gm7 Am7 Bbm7 B-

2 B♭Δ A♭ D7♭9 Gm7 B♭Δ

FΔ C13 B13 B♭13 Dsus D7♭9 Gm7 B♭Δ

11 G7 Gm7

FΔ E♭ A7 Dm7 Gm7 A♭7 ||11 F/D♭ G/E♭

12 B♭ E7♭9

C7 D/E E/F || FΔ Gm7 A♭ D7♭9 Gm7 Am7 Bbm7 D13♭9

The image displays a musical score for the song "It Could Happen To You". It consists of four systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system is labeled "Head" and begins with measure 1. The second system starts at measure 5. The third system starts at measure 11 and includes a double bar line with a repeat sign. The fourth system starts at measure 12. Chord symbols are placed above the treble staff, and some are also placed below the bass staff. The key signature has one flat (Bb), and the time signature is 4/4.

21 $F\Delta$ $C13$ $Bb\Delta$ $B13$ $A\flat$ $Bb13$ $D13b9$

22 $Gm7$ $Bbm7$ $B\flat$ $C7b9$ $F\Delta$ $Bb7$ $A\flat$ $D7b9$

25 $Gm7$ $C7$ $C13b9$ $F\Delta$ $Dbb7$ $Gm7$ $C7$

Csus

33 $F\Delta$ $A\flat$ $D7$ $Gm7$ $B\flat$ $E7$ $F\Delta$ $Bm7$ $E7b9$

solo **chorus 1**

38 $Am7$ $D7$ $Gm7$ $Bbm7$ $F\Delta$

43 $E\flat$ $A7$ $Dm7$ $A\flat$ $F10b$ $G7Eb$

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