Invention, Design, Technique In 2 Bars

Pianist Danny Grissett's beautiful tone, expressive lyricism and exquisite time seem to stem from a musicianship that is made up of equal parts intellect and intuition (see "Players," page 22). I find gems of inventiveness and design at all levels of his playing, and a few bars of a Grissett solo can keep a music analyst like me occupied for a long time.

Accordingly, this article's analysis will look at but *two measures* of a passage that begins at the 4 minute, 56 second point on Grissett's "Waltz For Billy" (hear the passage at thinkingmusic.ca/grissett, and the tune itself at tinyurl.com/grissett). Although the passage sounds utterly effortless and blows by in an instant, it is brimming with invention, design and technique. Figure 1a illustrates it, as performed by Grissett (piano), Vicente Archer (bass) and Kendrick Scott (drums, omitted from this transcription).

The melody is a highly elaborated three-stage sequence in which arpeggiated triads, each a major third above the other, form the basis of the design. Figure 1b shows how it appears when stripped of all rhythmic and melodic embellishment: The melody's three-stage, sequential structure is clearly visible, as are the arpeggiated triads of which it consists: A♭m, Cm and E (F♭). Grissett elegantly integrates these as chord extensions within the IV–II–V (A♭m/add2–Fm11–B♭7♭9♭5) progression. We see that while the melody moves in ascending major thirds, the harmony does not, making this a purely *melodic* sequence.

We also see that the sequential stages naturally articulate the melody in groups of two beats each, rather than the accompaniment's three-beat meter. Grissett has placed his sequence within a polymetric framework: The two-bar melodic phrase is really one bar (of 3/2) that sounds against the accompaniment's 3/4 (fig. 1c). This juxtaposition creates an entirely new and rich musical dimension; it imparts a special magic to the solo, while creating new relationships on all levels.

Meanwhile, Archer's bass and Grissett's chord voicings (second bar) employ rhythms that, while clearly in 3/4, are also suggestive of yet another polymeter: 6/8 against 3/4. While their swing eighths don't align perfectly with 6/8, their rhythms are close enough to suggest it (fig. 2a). While 3/4 and 6/8 have a three-against-two relationship (3/4's three beats to 6/8's two), 6/8 creates a more intricate three-against-four relationship with the melody's 3/2 (fig. 2b). The resulting triple polymeter is very rich.

This sophisticated design is where Grissett *begins*. Let's now look at the techniques he uses to develop his basic melodic content, elevating it from the commonplace to the exquisite (fig. 3):

1) Grissett pulls the entire first stage of his sequence back by a third of a beat so that it begins just before the downbeat. But rather than play its first note as a pick-up, he articulates the figure as though it had never been shifted. The result is not a redefining of each note's role (something that would have weakened his melodic sequence), but rather the creation of a metric conflict that generates momentum, engages our attention and provides the rhythmic geometry necessary for the phrase ending that Grissett has in mind.

Figure 1

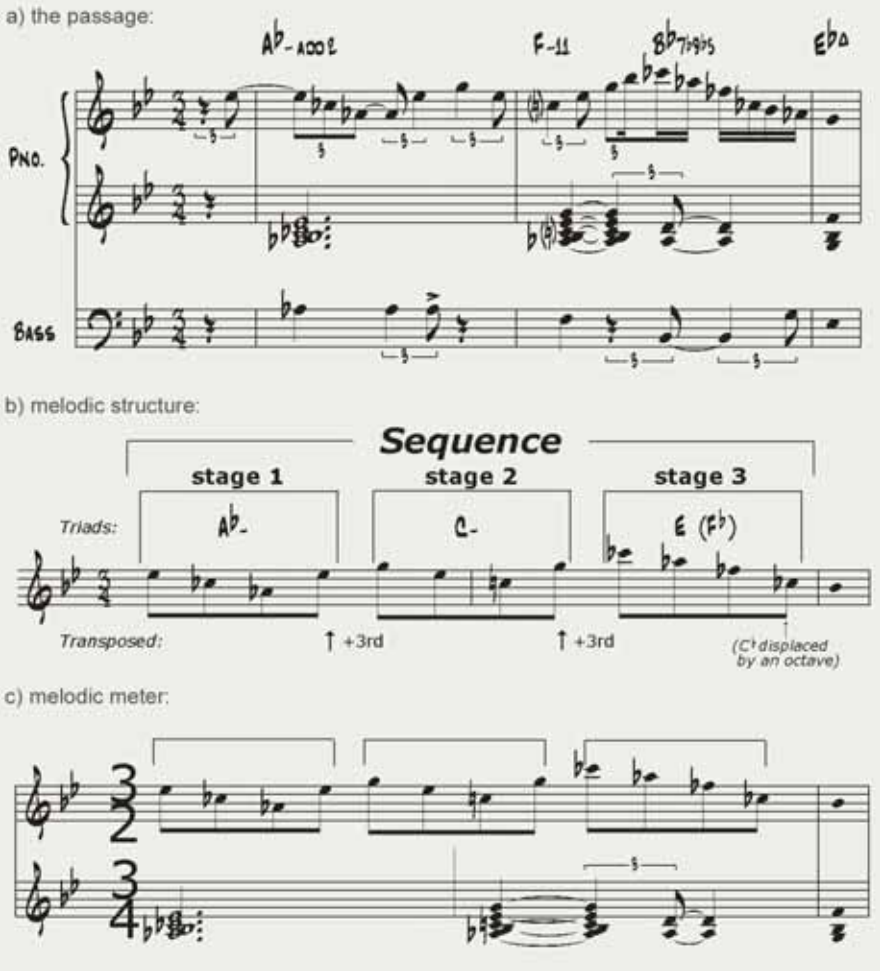


Figure 2

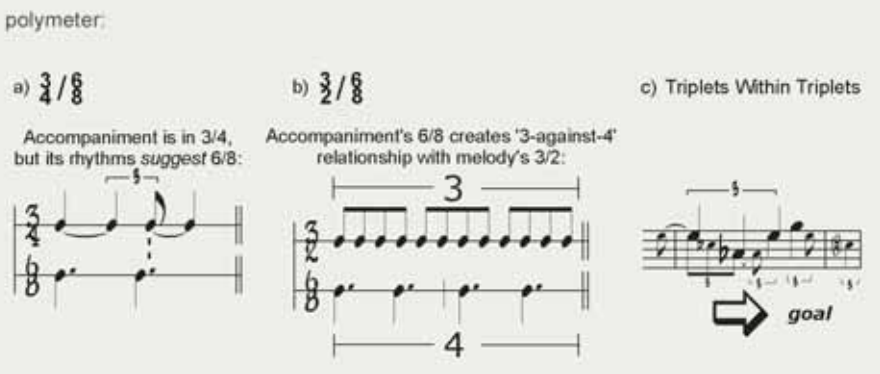
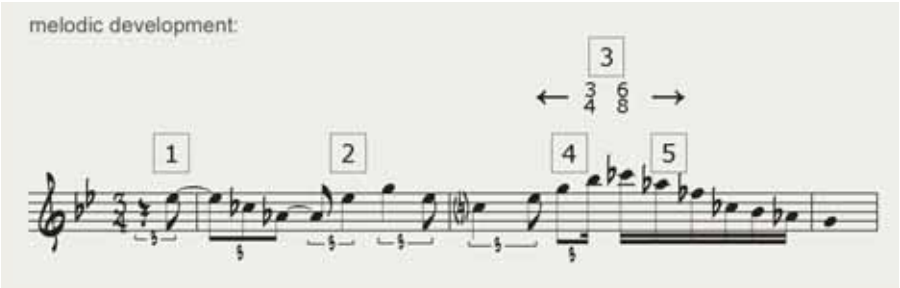


Figure 3



2) Grissett gives this note (E♭) double the duration it usually receives within the motive. This shifts everything forward by a third of a beat, and thus cancels the phase shift. The effect is brilliant: First, it places the subsequent note (G, the first note of "stage 2") squarely on the beat, which—being beat two of the melody's 3/2—provides enough of that metric design to allow its perception. Second, the return-to-phase itself creates an asymmetry that, like a sudden video edit, accelerates our forward movement. Last, the lengthened E♭ has more rhythmic weight, which reveals that it is also the last note of a hidden quarter-note triplet rhythm (fig. 2c). The quarter-note triplet drives us powerfully forward to the beginning of stage 2; in fact, it acts as the pickup to stage 2.

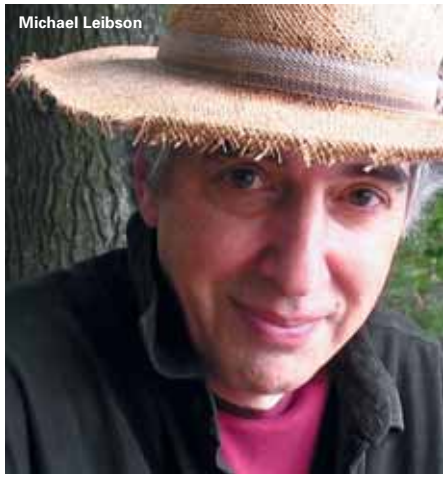
3) Grissett heightens the acceleration to phrase climax by using a 3/4–6/8 hemiola to move to shorter beats and faster time values.

4) He adds two notes to the pickup, which lengthens stage 2 by 25 percent, and makes us wait for that climax, at C♭—the highest pitch of the phrase, and the beginning of stage 3.

5) He applies diminution to the motive and closes the cadence with additional notes.

Through these "local" techniques—phase shift, quarter-note triplets and 3/4–6/8 hemiola—Grissett really performs a series of rapidly changing time signatures and tempi, and he does it fluidly, with coherence and rhythmic meaning. Musical time is perhaps jazz's most esoteric dimension, and Grissett has clearly mastered it.

This passage contains as much creative invention in terms of pitch as it does of time — a topic that we'll have to leave for another occasion. However, as I'm a music teacher, I'll end this Woodshed session with both a hint and an assignment: Grissett employs a particular scale-type in a most sophisticated way—can you spot it? (Email your discoveries to michael@thinkingmusic.ca.) **DB**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