

Revisiting Thematic Improvisation and Form in Jazz:
Goal-Orientation in Brad Mehldau's *Unrequited*

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Abstract:

Melodic connections between the repeated, cyclical improvisations in a jazz tune and the head theme have been pursued as important steps toward the application of Schenkerian analysis to jazz. Yet goal-oriented facets of Schenkerian theory, facets that would seem to be an essential condition for its applicability, remain to be fully worked-out. This paper presents a compelling example that features the kind of goal-directed voice-leading trajectory that has made Schenkerian theory a powerful method for tonal analysis: Brad Mehldau's *Unrequited* (1998).

Recalling Gunther Schuller's notion of "thematic improvisation" through a motivic analysis of a Sonny Rollins blues solo, to Schuller a motive needn't have any connection to the head tune in order to cohere. By contrast, Henry Martin's use of Schuller's term is couched within Schenkerian theory, where he examines bebop solos of Charlie Parker. Martin's approach at times all too predictably demonstrates hidden voice-leading references to the structure of the head, a kind of motivic parallelism in Schenkerian terms. I argue that it remains to be seen how the head and solo section can work to form a broader musical discourse.

In my analysis of *Unrequited* I will illustrate during the solo section how structural melodic deviations from the head tune are important clues that reveal a predisposition towards a single, overarching goal, bringing together the head and solo sections. The analysis presented here demands a subtler approach to the Schenkerian analysis of modern jazz when the music features goal-directed voice leading over a repeated harmonic plan.

References

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Figure 1. Brad Mehldau, b. 1970, Biographical Sketch and Selected Quotes

- Raised in West Hartford, Connecticut
- First trained classically
- Discovered jazz by teens
- Graduated in 1993 from the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music (New York)
 - Notable teachers: Fred Hersch and Kenny Werner
- Formed trio and by late 1990s was touring worldwide
 - Larry Grenadier, bass
 - Jorge Rossy, drums
- Five of his earlier albums are grouped under the title *Art of the Trio*
 - *Volume 3: Songs* contains original composition, *Unrequited*, among several others
 - Also adapts modern music to jazz setting (Radiohead's "Exit Music [for a Film]," Nick Drake's "River Man")
- *Downbeat* (Jan. 2007), suggests Mehldau is the most influential jazz musician of his generation
- Outspoken on the compositional process:

"[The compositional process] came about as a result of studying a lot of the contrapuntal aspects of classical music. I tried to get away from a one-note melody and a chord under it, and tried to explore the relationships between several notes moving independently. . . . The idea of generating a whole composition from a small amount of thematic material is very alluring to me, and resulted from studying the compositions of great classical composers like Beethoven and Brahms."¹

- His conception of the autonomous artwork:

"[Mehldau] has a deep fascination for the formal architecture of music, and it informs everything he plays. In his most inspired playing, the actual structure of his musical thought serves as an expressive device. As he plays, he is listening to how the ideas unwind, and the order in which they reveal themselves. Each tune has a strongly felt narrative arch, whether it expresses itself in a beginning and an end, or something left intentionally open-ended".²

¹ *The Brad Mehldau Collection* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, n.d.).

² From his official website (<http://www.bradmehldau.com>)

Figure 2. Hypothetical structure in a jazz standard (after Schuller 1958)

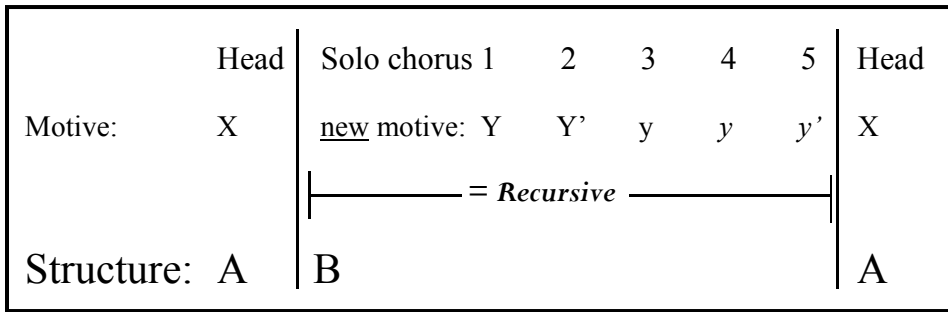


Figure 3. Hypothetical structure in Charlie Parker's music (after Martin 1996, 30-31)

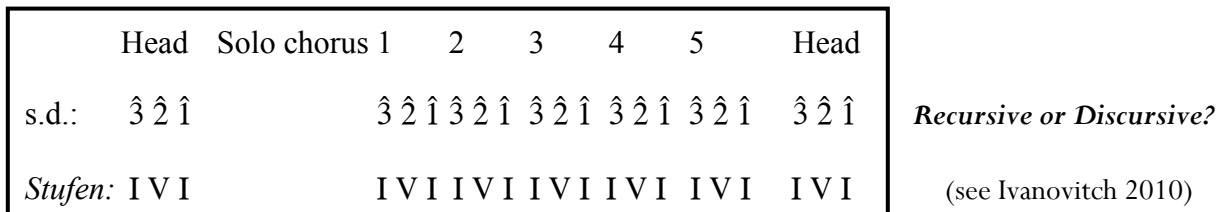
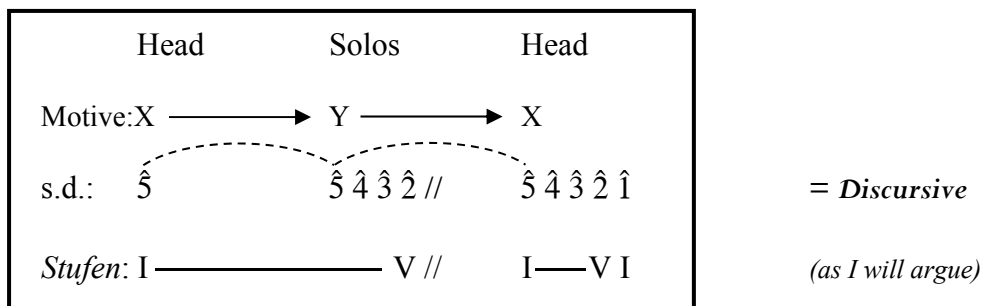


Figure 4. Schenker, *Free Composition*, p. 5:

In the art of music, as in life, motion toward the goal encounters obstacles, reverses, disappointments, and involves great distances, detours, expansions, interpolations, and, in short, retardations of all kinds. Therein lies the source of all artistic delaying, from which the creative mind can derive content that is ever new. Thus we hear in the middleground and foreground an almost dramatic course of events.... The *goal* and the course to the goal are primary. (Schenker 1979, 5)

Figure 5. Interrupted voice-leading structure in *Unrequited* (after Arthurs 2011, 136)



Example 1. A turn figure as a result of skewed harmonic durations in *Unrequited*, mm. 1–4

The analysis is presented in six stages (a-f) across five measures (m. 1 to m. 5):

- a) species model:** Shows a 4/4 species model with chords Em, C, Am, B, Cm. Fingerings are indicated as e: 5, 6, 6, 5. Hypermeter is marked as 1, 2, 3, 4, 1...
- b) skewed model (level 1):** Shows a skewed model with a Cmaj7 chord in measure 1.
- c) skewed model (level 2):** Shows a skewed model with Amin9 and B7(b9) chords in measures 3 and 4.
- d) surface (rhythmically simplified):** Shows a rhythmically simplified surface with notes grouped by parentheses and numbers (9), (8), (4-3). A turn figure is marked with a double squiggle symbol.
- e) transcription (piano only):** Shows a transcription of the piano part with a tempo of 160. Chords are Emin11, CMaj7, Amin9, B7(b9), and Cmin.
- f) voice-leading sketch:** Shows a voice-leading sketch with notes numbered 5, 9, 8, 4, 3, NN, 5. Roman numerals e: I, VI⁷, IV, V[#], VI^b are shown below.

Example 2. Voice-leading analysis of the theme of *Unrequited*

Bkg

Em: I V I

Mg. 1

Em: I⁵ I⁵ NN

Mg. 2

Em: I III^b #VI⁷ II⁷ #IV⁷ V⁷ I

Fg.

Em: V I VI IV V[#] VI^b Gm: IV^b V (I⁶ VI IV) V I Cm: #VI II⁴ V⁴-I I⁷ Em: #VI⁷ IV⁷ II⁷ V⁷ I #II

Simplified Score

① ⑨ ⑰ ⑳ ㉓ ㉔ CODA

Example 3. Piano transcription of *Unrequited*, from *Art of the Trio, Volume 3: Songs*, 0:00–1:25

$\text{♩} = 92$

The image displays a piano transcription of the piece "Unrequited" by Brad Mehldau. It is organized into three systems of music, each consisting of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. Above the treble clef, chord symbols are written for each measure. Measure numbers are indicated in circles above the first note of the treble clef staff. The first system contains measures 1 through 10, with chord symbols: E-, C^{Δ7}, A⁻⁶, B^{7♭9}, C⁻⁶, G/B, A⁷, D^{7#11}, G^{Δ7/B}, and E^{Δ7}. The second system contains measures 11 through 21, with chord symbols: C⁻⁶, D^{7♭9}, E^{-Δ7add9}, B^{Δ7/F}, D^{7♭9/F#}, G-, A^{b-add9/G}, A^{b-7/Gb}, F^{-7,11}, F^{7♭5}, and B^{-add9}. The third system contains measures 22 through 31, with chord symbols: F^{#-6}, A^{Δ♭5/E}, C^{-/E}, D^{#-7,11}, D^{#7♭5}, G^{#7sus9,4♭13}, G^{#7♭9}, C⁻, A-, F^{7♭9}, and B⁷. A circled measure 25 is highlighted with a red circle, and a circled measure 29 is highlighted with a red box. The music is in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature.

1 E- C^{Δ7} A⁻⁶ B^{7♭9} 5 C⁻⁶ G/B A⁷ D^{7#11} 9 G^{Δ7/B} E^{Δ7}

11 C⁻⁶ D^{7♭9} 13 E^{-Δ7add9} B^{Δ7/F} D^{7♭9/F#} G- 17 A^{b-add9/G} A^{b-7/Gb} F^{-7,11} F^{7♭5} B^{-add9}

22 F^{#-6} A^{Δ♭5/E} C^{-/E} 25 D^{#-7,11} D^{#7♭5} G^{#7sus9,4♭13} G^{#7♭9} 29 C⁻ A- F^{7♭9} B⁷

Example 3 continued

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The first system (measures 33-42) features chords: E-, C^{Δ7}, A⁻⁶, B^{7b9}, C⁻⁶, G/B, A⁷, D^{7#11}, G^{Δ7/B}, and E^{Δ7}. The second system (measures 43-53) features chords: C⁻⁶, D^{7b9}, E^{-Δ7 add9}, B^{Δ7/F}, D^{7b9/F#}, G-, A^{b-add9/G}, A^{b-7/Gb}, F^{7#11}, F^{7b5}, and B^{-add9}. The third system (measures 54-63) features chords: F#⁻⁶, A^{Δ5/E}, C^{-/E}, D#^{-7#11}, D#^{7b5}, G#^{7 sus 4b13}, G#^{7b9}, C#-, A-, F#^{7b9}, and B⁷. A circled measure 57 is highlighted. The final measure (63) is marked "bass solo".

Example 4. Solo voice leading choices compared to thematic voice leading (mm. 16–32)

System 1 (mm. 16-20):

- Score:** G, A \flat -ADD 9 /G, A \flat - 7 /G \flat , F 7 $_{\flat 5}$, F 7 $_{\flat 5}$
- Chord-to-Scale Conversion:** scale: G melodic minor [side-slip] → A \flat melodic minor; G $^+$ major; A \flat melodic minor; F Mixolydian (bebop scale) or F blues (as in Mehldau's solo)
- Thematic Voice Leading:** g: I 5 , b \flat : VI 5 , IV $^{\flat 6}$, V $^{\flat 4}$
- Annotations:** "...TEMPORAL DISJUNCTION..." (mm. 17-18); "A \flat is basis for improvisatory decisions (as informed by chord symbols)..." (m. 17); "...yet A \flat occurs nowhere in the theme" (m. 17); "avoid note" (m. 20)

System 2 (mm. 21-24):

- Score:** B \flat -ADD 9 , F \sharp - 6 , A Δ 5 /E, C \sharp -/E
- Chord-to-Scale Conversion:** B \flat melodic minor; F \sharp Dorian; A Lydian; C \sharp melodic minor
- Thematic Voice Leading:** b \flat : I, c \sharp : #VI, II \S , (II \S)

System 3 (mm. 25-28):

- Score:** D \sharp - 7 $_{\flat 5}$, D \sharp 7 $_{\flat 5}$, G \sharp 7 sus 4 $_{\flat 9}$, G \sharp 7 $_{\flat 9}$
- Chord-to-Scale Conversion:** scale: F \sharp melodic minor; D \sharp /E \flat mixolydian (bebop scale); G \sharp Phrygian (E major) [Levine, 61]; A melodic minor
- Thematic Voice Leading:** c \sharp : II $^{\flat 7}$, V $^{\flat 4}$
- Annotations:** "(cf. mm. 19-20)" (m. 26); "avoid note" (m. 26)

System 4 (mm. 29-32):

- Score:** C \sharp -, A-, F \sharp 7 $_{\flat 9}$, B 7
- Chord-to-Scale Conversion:** C \sharp natural minor; A Dorian; B harmonic minor; E harmonic minor
- Thematic Voice Leading:** c \sharp : I 7 , c \sharp : VI 7 , IV, II 7 , V 7

Example 5. Temporal disjunction in mm. 17-21 as parallelism of voice-leading structure in mm. 1-16

The image displays two musical staves in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff covers measures 1, 2, 5, 8-15, and 16. Above the staff, a line with arrows indicates a progression from $\hat{5}$ to $\flat\hat{5}$. Below the staff, a curved line connects the notes in measures 1-2 (labeled 5 - 6) to measures 8-15 (labeled 7 4 - 3). A horizontal arrow below the staff shows the chord progression from **em** to **gm**. The second staff covers measures 16, 17, 18, 19-20, and 21. A similar curved line connects the notes in measures 16-17 (labeled 5 - 6) to measures 19-20 (labeled 7 4 - 3). A horizontal arrow below the staff shows the chord progression from **gm** to $\flat\flat\mathbf{m}$.

A temporal disjunction in mm. 16-21 warps time by "fast-forwarding" through the same progression as mm. 1-16

Example 6. Larry Grenadier's bass solo in *Unrequited*, with voice-leading analysis (chorus 1) (note transformation from turn figure to 'blues' motive)

chorus 1

Voice-Leading

Drums

Bass solo

Annotations: \S , 3rd down, boundary play, 3rd up, \S , (turn motive), attempt 1..., attempt 2...

Chord Progression (Bass Staff): E, C Δ 7, A $^{-6}$, B $^{7/9}$, C $^{-6}$, G/B \flat , A 7 , D $^{7/11}$, G Δ 7/B \flat , E Δ 7, C $^{-6}$, D $^{7/9}$

Chord Progression (Voice-Leading Staff): e: I, g: IV \flat , VI \flat , II, V, (I 6 , \flat VI, II \S) V

Annotations: motion into an outer voice, NN, g: V, \flat : IVI, I, V, c#: IVI, II \S

Chord Progression (Bass Staff): E \flat - Δ 7/ADD 9 , B Δ 7/F, D $^{7/9}$ /F \sharp , G, A \flat -ADD 9 /G, A \flat -7/G \flat , F 7 / \flat 11, F $^{7/5}$, B \flat -ADD 9 , F \sharp -6

Annotations: turn motive becomes blues note motive ...fragmented..., ...attempt 3 completes phrase

Annotations: 5th up, 5th down, NN, \S 4 3 2 1

Chord Progression (Bass Staff): A Δ 5/E, C \sharp -/E, D \sharp 7/ \flat 11, D \sharp 7 5 , G \sharp 7sus $^{4/13}$ / \flat 9, G \sharp 7 9 , C \sharp

Chord Progression (Voice-Leading Staff): e: \flat VI, 7 IV, II, V, I

Annotations: (cf. example 2), (open)

Example 6 continued (chorus 2)

chorus 2

Voice-Leading

Bass solo

e: I VI¹ g: IV¹ II V (I⁶ bVI II⁵) V

E- C^{A7} A-⁶ B^{7b9} C-⁶ G-/Bb A⁷ D^{7b11} G-^{A7}/Bb Eb^{A7} C-⁶ D^{7b9}

melody becomes suppressed, linear progression becomes doubtful . . .

g: V b: bVI I V I c#: #VI II⁵

Eb-^{A7}ADD⁹ B^{A7}/F D^{7b9}/F# G- g^{ua} A-^{ADD9}/G Ab-⁷/Gb F-^{7b11} F^{7b5} Bb-^{ADD9} F#⁶

... bass line becomes primary focus

... but melodic closure completes linear progression

c#: II V I e: #VI IV II V I

A^{A5}/E C#-/E D#-^{7b11} D#^{7b5} G#^{sus4}/b3 G#^{7b9} C#- A- F#^{7b9} B⁷ E-

Example 7. Mehldau's solo, chorus 1, mm. 1–16; following Grenadier's solo, Mehldau immediately transforms the same turn figure into a blues motive

unusually strong closing gesture

blues figure from Grenadier's solo (chorus 2)

"wrong" note

recomposed:

from:

10 E^bA^7 C^{-6} $D^{7\#9}$ $E \flat A^7 ADD^9$ $B \flat A^7 / F$ $D^{7\#9} / F^\#$ G

Example 8. *Unrequited*, piano solo, chorus 1, transcription and voice-leading analysis

The score is divided into two systems, each with piano and voice-leading staves. The piano staff shows chords and melodic lines, while the voice-leading staff shows voice-leading lines and annotations like "reaching over", "expansion of neighbor-note", and "5th-prog.". Measure numbers 1, 5, 9, 13, 16, 17, 21, 25, 29, and 32 are circled.

System 1 (Measures 1-16):

- Chords:** E, C^{A7}, A⁻⁶, B^{7/9}, C⁻⁶, G/B^b, A⁷, D^{7/11}, G^{A7/Bb}, E^{A7}, C⁻⁶, D^{7/9}, E^{bA7/ADD9}, B^{bA7/F}, D^{7/9/F#}, G.
- Annotations:** "3" above measure 1; "NN" above measure 5; "bifurcation (see ex. 9)" between measures 9 and 10; "pt" above measure 10; "5th-prog." above measure 13; "7-6", "5-4", "4-3" above measures 13-15.

System 2 (Measures 17-32):

- Chords:** A^{b-ADD9/G}, A^{b-7/Gb}, F^{7/13}, F^{7/15}, B^{b-ADD9}, F^{#-6}, A^{A5/E}, C^{#-E}, D^{#-7/13}, D^{#7/15}, G^{#sus4/13/9}, G^{#7/9}, C[#], A, F^{#7/9}, B⁷, E.
- Annotations:** "reaching over" above measure 17; "expansion of neighbor-note" above measures 21-25; "(follows bass)" above measure 29; "3" above measure 32.

Example 9. Bifurcation of harmony in chorus 1, mm. 8–16

Example 10. *Unrequited*, chorus 2, middleground (see example 11 for foreground)

Example 11. *Unrequited*, piano solo, chorus 2

l.h.: B — 3rd-prog up — C — boundary play — D — 3rd-prog down — C — B^b

voice-leading: l.h. 5, 9-8, 3rd-prog

Bass: e: I, VI^b, g: IV^b, II^b, V, (I^b, VI^b, IV^b, V^b), VI^b

Piano: E, C^{A7}, A⁻⁶, B^{7/9}, C⁻⁶, G/B^b, A⁷, D^{7/11}, G^{A7/B^b}, E^{A7}, C⁻⁶, D^{7/9}, E^{b-A7/ADD⁹}, B^{A7/F}, D^{7/9/F#}, G

17 — 3rd-prog. reaching over — 21 — ant — 25 — 29 — 32

voice-leading: 10, 5, 10, IN, 4, 3

Bass: b^b: VI^b, VI^b, I^b, C^b: VI^b, II^b, I^b, III^b, VI^b, I

Piano: A^{b-ADD⁹/G}, A^{b-7/G^b}, F^{7/13}, F^{7/5}, B^{-ADD⁹}, F^{#-6}, A^{A15/E}, C^{#/E}, D^{#-7/13}, D^{#7/5}, G^{#7/sus⁴/13}, G^{#7/9}, C[#], A, F^{#7/9}, B⁷, E-

bravura continues with sixteenth notes

Example 12. *Unrequited*, piano solo, chorus 3

voice-leading

Bass:

e: I

g: IV¹/_{VI¹}

II¹

V

I⁶

bVI

E

C^{A7}

A⁻⁶

B^{7/9}

C⁻⁶

G-/B^b

A⁷

D^{7/11}

G^{A7}/B^b

E^{bA7}

Piano

new bravura figure

3rd-prog. (superposition)

6th-prog.

3rd

11

17

sideslip

3rd prog. echo

g: IV¹

C⁻⁶

V⁷

D^{7/9}

E^{bA7}/ADD⁹

B^{bA7}/F

D^{7/9}/F[#]

G

b: bVI¹/_{I¹}

V⁷

A^b-ADD⁹/G

A^b-7/G^b

F⁻⁷/G[#]

F^{7/5}

sideslip (E major)

lower-neighbor sideslip

upper-neighbor sideslip

Example 12 continued

Musical score for Example 12 continued, measures 21-25. The score is written for piano and includes treble and bass staves. Measure numbers 21, 23, and 25 are circled. Annotations include "bifurcation" and "g: I'". Chord symbols are provided below the bass staff: $Bb-ADD^9$, $c\sharp: \#VI$, $II\sharp$, I^6 , $II\sharp$, and $V\sharp$. Further chord symbols are listed below the piano accompaniment: A^{4-5}/E , $C\sharp/E$, $D\sharp-7\sharp$, $D\sharp^{7-5}$, and $G\sharp^{7sus4}\sharp$. The piano part features complex rhythmic patterns with triplets and sixteenth notes.

Musical score for Example 12 continued, measures 28-32. The score is written for piano and includes treble and bass staves. Measure numbers 28 and 32 are circled. Annotations include "End solos//" and "Head out...". Chord symbols are provided below the bass staff: $c\sharp: V\sharp$, $e: \#VI$, IV , II , V , and I . Further chord symbols are listed below the piano accompaniment: $G\sharp^{7-9}$, $C\sharp$, $A-$, $F\sharp^{7-9}$, B^7 , and $E-$. The piano part features complex rhythmic patterns with triplets and sixteenth notes.

(cf. chorus 1, n. 28, right hand)

(chorus 1 - 2 reference, left hand)