This case study-styled chapter engages with matters of performance and improvisation, fundamental questions about jazz with wide relevance and applicability, which are directed to music of the incomparable improviser, pianist, and composer Bill Evans (1929–1980). Central research issues concern the following: in what ways do recorded improvisations and other recorded performances relate and differ? How can one (re)perform an improvisation? How much spontaneity remains, and where might composition enter into this articulation? Beyond his jazz environment, “the subtle keyboard deployment and open, trusting expressivity of Evans’s music has attracted classical musicians and listeners” (Distler 1997, 8), and such “jazz–classical” interaction is pertinent to probe ideas of performance and improvisation that both connect and distinguish jazz from its classical “other,” or “outsider.” Thus, a transcultural prism is adopted that focuses on subsequent recordings of Evans’s music by the classically trained French concert pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet (b. 1961), who in Jed Distler’s view has “a genuine feeling for Bill’s idiom” (Distler 1997, 9). Conversely, for Thibaudet, Evans offered something of a “jazz utopia”: privileged access to an attractive but elusive world, beyond his direct experience. So Thibaudet performed his Conversations with Bill Evans (1997) in tribute to Evans’s highly innovative overdubbed piano album Conversations with Myself (1963).

In essence, this chapter posits that disciplinary boundaries or distinctions between performance and improvisation (jazz emphasis), as well as between improvisation and composition (classical emphasis), tend to become more blurred through the process of recording and fixing, complicated by the extraneous variables of studio recordings. Nonetheless, it argues that notable differences may be perceived between comparable performances of Evans and Thibaudet, with special attention being paid to Evans’s late output.

**Interpretive Approach**

It is prudent to offer at least working definitions of the main concepts and the mooted nature of their (inter)relations. Although performance and composition supposedly need no introduction, the same cannot be said about the more intangible, fluid realm of improvisation, and in fact nothing should be taken for granted.

Within this study, performance means the activity of being a pianist, whether jazz or classically trained. And in terms of our dual subjects, for Evans it denotes one crucial dimension of a multidimensional persona, whereas for Thibaudet it represents his main expressive outlet as a concert pianist. The interpretive approach to performance and improvisation that follows is informed by a consideration of musical practice and a contemporary theoretical framework, which provides a means of understanding the complex and dynamic nature of improvisation in jazz and classical music.
artist. For Evans, performance involves reifying the music of others and bringing to life his own creative thinking; for Thibaudet, it is exclusively a matter of interpreting and projecting the works of others, through his artistic prism. The focus in this chapter is on what happens beyond a first musical performance, especially one that necessitates, or is synonymous with, improvisation.

Improvisation is not exclusively a jazz-based notion, having been an acknowledged component of classical performance practice, whether involving singers’ ornamentation in baroque operatic arias or improvised cadenzas in early concertos, and still enjoys a circumscribed role today. In jazz studies, the idea of an entirely free and wholly spontaneous improvisation has long been debunked as a “myth” by figures such as Paul Berliner (1994, 1–17). Studies of Evans’s music have, however, sometimes bought into this myth; witness even Gene Lees in the original liner notes for Conversations: “Had this been written music, all carefully pre-planned, Bill’s performance would be amazing enough. When you remember that everything is improvised, it becomes unbelievable” (Lees 1963, n.p.). A basic improvisational typology has been outlined by the likes of Barry Kernfeld (1995, 119–158), who identifies solo, collective, “paraphrase” or thematic improvisation (after André Hodeir), formulaic, and motivic kinds (Mawer 2014a, 147). We might argue that improvisation represents a wonderfully liberated, yet highly demanding, mode of performance; or, more controversially, a circumscribed mode of composition, since parameters such as form, instrumentation, and melodic-harmonic framework may be predetermined. But this latter would be a negative, limiting view that downplays the importance of “liveness,” being of the moment. For Evans, the notion embraces a spectrum from high-order paraphrase improvisation of jazz/popular standards to more profound, almost mystical or spiritual, freer creation.

So to composition, the third element of this complex overlapping triangulation, which also comes with associated baggage. It is not solely a classical phenomenon, and jazz would not be the rich domain that it is without the compositional masterpieces of Duke Ellington, George Russell, Gunther Schuller, Dave Brubeck, and many others. Jazz is a sufficiently broad church to embrace composition as one specific practice, and to evaluate any connections or resonances with classical (or popular) music on their own merits. For Evans, such reciprocity and generosity are crucial, especially when it proves challenging, even futile, to determine where improvisation and composition end and start. For an expansive, thoughtful addressing of the complexities of the compositional–improvisational axis, we may refer to the valuable work of the late-lamented Steve Larson (2005). Moreover, various commentators on Evans readily invoke the term composition, for instance, “to a program of mainly standards, he added one new composition of his own, ‘Peri’s Scope’” (Pettinger 1998, 93), in a positive, complimentary spirit, in no sense downplaying Evans’s jazz credentials.

Finally, the elephant in the room is recording, the effects of which often impose a greater finality and fixedness (authority?) on any combination of the elements above than may be desirable. Obvious problematics include the limits of technologies, distortion, the perils of remastering, editorial “interference,” and so on. And yet, for all these caveats, recordings still offer an aural window on another time and place and, while rarely neutral (pace Nattiez 1990), an invaluable ontological trace and source for analytical interpretation, supplemented by even less neutral transcriptions and testimonies of artist and critic, shaped by their positioning and experiences. And for Evans himself, that certain recordings, notably his overdubbed ones, could not readily be recreated in “natural live performance” did not reduce them to mere “gimmick”; rather, he felt it important “to state my firm belief in the integrity of the idea” (Evans 1963, n.p.).

Two sets of case studies follow that employ an accessible analytical approach, combining aural analysis of recordings with discussion of music transcriptions to enable close comparative readings. (In pitch and chordal groupings, separation by a comma denotes a neutral listing, whereas conjoining by means of the sign “–” denotes a progression, either linear as in voice-leading, or harmonic.) The ensuing interpretations are best read in tandem with rehearing the precious recorded legacy.
Evans (Re)Performing Evans (Conversations 1)

In the spirit of Evans’s Conversations and Further Conversations with Myself (New York: Verve V6-8727) of 1967, this biographical conversation explores music from the contemporaneous albums Kind of Blue and Portrait in Jazz (1959), with the Bill Evans Trio, in relation to the entwined questions posed in the introduction. This initial “control” focuses on comparing Evans’s own re-performing with a slightly nuanced variant of the second question: in what ways do Evans’s re-recorded improvisatory pieces differ from their “originals”?

The iconic “Blue in Green” has been selected, albeit that credit for the creation of this “brooding masterpiece” was initially contested between Evans and Miles Davis (Pettinger 1998, 82; Khan 2000, 118–119); Evans asserts simply that “I took a tune of mine called ‘Blue in Green’” (Hennessey 1985, 9). Relevant to our agenda, the harmonies of “Blue in Green” were prefigured by Evans at the start of “Alone Together,” featuring the trumpeter Chet Baker and recorded on the album Chet in December 1958: “the resemblance [between them] is too close to admit coincidence” (Pettinger 1998, 74; Khan 2000, 119). “Blue in Green” was developed by Evans and Davis in Kind of Blue (spring 1959) and re-recorded twice on Evans’s Portrait in Jazz in December 1959.

A later recording from around 1974, with Evans’s second trio lineup of Eddie Gomez and Marty Morell, was also released posthumously in 1991 by his manager/producer Helen Keane on the album known as Blue in Green (Milestone M-9185). And here can be identified subtle new finds: “a sense of adventure in the choice of voicings” and “the varied tone attached to them: perhaps a single note would be given more center as it stood out over a sparse harmony, while a thicker chord might spread its tone more evenly from bottom to top” (Pettinger 1998, 225). This insightful critique offers a nicely nuanced response to the delicate, eloquent nature of Evans’s rethinking of his own work and an apt launch pad for our enquiries. The recorded performances and transcriptions used as main sources are given in Figure 27.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(A) Recording artist, performers</th>
<th>Album details</th>
<th>Recording date, place</th>
<th>Duration (take, track)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(B) Transcriptions</th>
<th>Publication details</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 27.1 Sources consulted for Evans (Davis), “Blue in Green”
Figure 27.1 shows a pattern of shortening performance durations (5:37, 5:23, 4:26), accompanied by a reduction in ensemble size (Kind of Blue: sextet including piano; Portrait in Jazz: trio including piano) and an increasing sense of the piano’s primacy. Both the instrumentations and “orchestrations” are differentiated. Immediately, the evidence supports a supposition of significant change in Evans’s re-performing of this improvisatory material, born in part of its “bordering on absolute minimalism” (Khan 2000, 121). This may be supplemented by two distinct transcriptions, which—even allowing for a generous measure of notational interpretation and inaccuracy—reveal substantial re-voicing and modifying of chordal constructs and overall form. Indeed, the essence of this material is its “ten-measure circular form” (Evans 1959, n.p.), which thereby conflates start and finish, neatly disorientating the listener.

The Kind of Blue, 87-measure transcription works in the “one-flat” key of D minor, in 4/4 meter marked “Slowly,” and offers a basic formal guide. Evans plays a four-measure introduction, followed by Davis’s full trumpet solo (A: 20 mm.); Evans again (B: 10 mm.), Coltrane’s intricate scalar solo (C: 10 mm.); Evans’s “Double time (Rubato)” (D: 10 mm.), plus Davis’s detailed solo (E: 20 mm.); ending with Evans’s “Rubato” tune postlude (F: 13 mm.). Meanwhile, the Portrait in Jazz, 104-measure transcription is also notated in D minor, but in an expanded common time (MM = 66). It identifies the main tune (T–1: 10 mm.), followed by a characterization using dyads of thirds and eighth-note triplets (T–2); a more scalar rendition (Fig. 1: 10 mm.); a focus on quarter-note and eighth-note triplets (Fig. 2); right-hand sixteenth-note diminution (Fig. 3); left-hand punctuating offbeat chords, followed by right-hand diminution and punchy triplet chords (Figs. 4–5: 5 + 5 mm.); the climactic tutti, with left-hand dense four-pitch chording (Figs. 6–7); and a more spacious portion (Figs. 8–9: 10 mm.), leading to the final return of the tune, finished with a four-measure postlude.

The chordal sequence for these two versions is that common ten-measure pattern of four simple progressions onto a tonic, whose creative potential can be demonstrated by charting the rich, composite harmonies obtained (Table 27.1). Nevertheless, the surface (and upper middle ground) presentations—those melodic decorations, arpeggiations, rhythmic and textural characterizations, plus some pitch/chordal contents—are notably differentiated.

Crucially, these findings are congruent with critical aural analyses of the Kind of Blue and Portrait in Jazz recordings. Interestingly, that observation about shortening performance times is compounded by an aural pattern of increasingly slower tempi: = 66; 63; 58. The Kind of Blue sextet recording is very much jazz ensemble music, which foregrounds the dynamic persona of Davis, emphasizing the solo trumpet even in its initially muted metallic characterization supported by hi-hat and bass punctuation. Sonically, this version enjoys an episodic symmetry leading from trumpet (via piano, with distinct shades of “Peace Piece” in its right-hand arpeggiation) to Coltrane’s central solo, and back out again. There is, however, a gradual crescendo of virtuosity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chords (Key) (mm. 1–5)</th>
<th>IV— [I: Gm]</th>
<th>V—</th>
<th>I (I: Dm)</th>
<th>II—</th>
<th>V—</th>
<th>I (I: Bb)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harmonies (mm. 1–5)</td>
<td>Gm(7^{(13/11)/9})</td>
<td>A(^{b}_7)(^{b}_9)</td>
<td>Dm(^7)</td>
<td>Cm(^7)(^{(11/9)})</td>
<td>E(^7)</td>
<td>B(_{3})(^{b}_7)(^{(11/9)})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chords (Key) (mm. 6–10)</td>
<td>V—</td>
<td>I (I: Dm)</td>
<td>II—</td>
<td>V—</td>
<td>I (I: Dm)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmonies (mm. 6–10)</td>
<td>A(^7)</td>
<td>Dm(^7)(^{(11/9)})</td>
<td>E(^7)</td>
<td>Am(^7)</td>
<td>Dm(^7)(^{(11/9)})</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 27.1 “Blue in Green”: Chordal progressions and composite harmonies (mm. 1–10)
Performing Improvisation

through the first two solos to Davis’s second culminating solo, which combines Coltrane’s intricate scalar athletics with a more expressive melodic sustaining.

Although the two *Portrait in Jazz* trio versions share this overall feel and melodic-harmonic framework, they exhibit significant freedom that results in substantial change. In Take 1, a greater melody-line emphasis is balanced by bass punctuation, but, in what was Davis’s first solo, richer textures occur with the piano’s inner-part voicings. As in *Kind of Blue*, there is a process of increasing ornamentation/elaboration (the equivalent of Davis’s second solo is notably lively), coupled by a confident directness. Take 2, particularly, features a piano-focused incisiveness, attractive energy, and light-heartedness. Toward their closes, however, both trio versions partake of a much more subdued, introspective quality.

So, the balance of evidence on this small canvas is that Evans, with his varied supporting players, does reconceive his own improvisatory material from one occasion to the next, beyond mere surface or foreground level, at least to an underpinning upper middle ground. Against expectation, perhaps, Evans does not resist his own discoveries undergoing quite a deep process of rethinking.

**Thibaudet Performing Evans (Conversations 2)**

This second, posthumous conversation between Evans and Thibaudet, and potentially others, extends the cultural terrain and temporal span to enable further analytical exploration of, and emergent scope from, those same underlying questions. While very different in nature, an important inspiration for this current transcultural study has been the supremely well, if rather strictly, executed Schenkerian analyses by Larson (2009) of the jazz composition “Round Midnight” created by Thelonious Monk (together with Cootie Williams, Davis, and others), then reinterpreted both by Oscar Peterson and Evans. The vehicle for investigating these complex (inter)relations of artist, musical locus, genre, and technique is that of the comparative case studies below. Several loci are presented within a loosely chronological sequence that encompasses early and late output: “Peace Piece” (1958), “Waltz for Debby” (1956), “Song for Helen” (*New Conversations*, 1978), and “Your Story” (1980), the various sources for which are given in Figure 27.2.

**“Peace Piece” (1958)**

I have previously touched on this Evans–Thibaudet jazz–classical relationship, noting Thibaudet’s “beautifully finessed, yet curiously literal, performances of Evans’s improvisations” (Mawer 2014a, 240, 2011, 87), while students on an elective course about *Musical Intertextuality and Borrowing*, taught at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire in 2014 and 2015, have compared and critiqued Evans’s 1958 recording of “Peace Piece” with Thibaudet’s 1996 equivalent.

The immediately obvious difference concerns the recorded durations: Evans’s 6:43, against Thibaudet’s much more extended 7:32, performed from Jim Aikin’s standard transcription of 1980. (By contrast, a 2012 transcription of Evans’s improvisatory “take” by William Hughes is either much more meticulous or overly literal, dependent on one’s stance. For instance, Hughes captures Evans’s *tempo rubato* with notated ties across bar-lines. It is a question about how much of the notation captures “Peace Piece” as composition; and how much represents Evans as one performer on one occasion, so as to leave space for potential reinterpretation in future performance.)

Thibaudet’s performance of Evans is at a slower overall tempo and, even within those bounds, employs much more *rubato*. A second audible distinction concerns piano tone: touch and sonority. While in a jazz milieu Evans’s tone is typically regarded as soft-edged, refined, and reminiscent of the sound-world of Debussy and Ravel, and their interpreters, when compared with Thibaudet
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical locus</th>
<th>(A) Evans recordings</th>
<th>(B) Thibaudet recording</th>
<th>(C) Transcriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Bill Evans: His Last Concert in Germany</em> (details as above). Track 7. Trio. Duration: 4:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 27.2* Comparative sources consulted for Evans and Thibaudet performances
Performing Improvisation

(and acknowledging major differences of piano, period, and recording techniques), Evans's sound has a compelling directness, at times bursting out into a raw energy, coupled by passion and an occasional hard-edged sonority. Thibaudet, meanwhile, obtains the most exquisite, velvety tones, the ultimate in distilled refinement; but maybe yet too controlled and circumscribed, also verging on the slightly self-indulgent. Arguably, no longer jazz? Might Thibaudet’s well-intentioned hommage and nostalgic yearning to capture a precious jazz utopia, ironically, have destroyed something at the heart of his source?

Unsurprisingly perhaps, and despite our attempts to avoid preconception and maximize open-mindedness, we tend to appreciate and value that with which we are most familiar. Almost invariably, those Conservatoire students responded according to type: classically trained pianists much preferred and so rated more highly Thibaudet’s interpretation, which was in their own image; jazz aficionados remained true to the Evans source.

“Waltz for Debby” (1956)

The pattern of Thibaudet’s 1996 rendition taking much more time than Evans’s original continues and is more acute in the jazzed “Waltz for Debby” than for “Peace Piece”: 1:57 (almost half as long again), as opposed to 1:20. Strikingly, though it is Evans’s last concert recording in Germany from August 15, 1980, subtly supported by Marc Johnson and Joe LaBarbera, which totally transforms the territory, remaking his own piece at c. 7:05—incorporating a reference to “Your Story,” Johnson’s late solo, plus a little audience applause, and functioning as an extended finale. So while both artists take their time when revisiting “Waltz for Debby,” Thibaudet’s is essentially a slower rendition of that original, whereas Evans’s is profoundly reconceived and re-improvised.

In more depth, Evans’s initial tempo (1956 recording) approximates to \( \frac{3}{4} = 69 \), against Thibaudet’s much slower, variable tempo that ranges from around \( \frac{3}{4} = 44 \) to 58. Both artists generate increased momentum for the central B section (m. 33ff. of Reilly’s transcription), where Evans creates a cantabile emphasis upon the melody. By contrast, Thibaudet brings out the tenor line, also exaggerating a pensive slowing of the repeated descending treble phrase (Reilly, mm. 37–41): D–C–B, A [G–F]; D–C–B, A [B–A], balanced by a quickening ascent (m. 43). Although some jazz commentators felt Evans had a problem with swing (Knox 1966, 6), in the subsequent reprise of section A (m. 49ff) such swing is still much more apparent in Evans’s original, while Thibaudet finds more dynamic variety, working from piano via a crescendo to a much stronger marking of the penultimate climactic peak (m. 61). In starting the coda, both performers keep the character con moto, pushing forward to the majestic peak (fortissimo in Thibaudet; m. 70), before a final slowing and sonic reduction al niente. Reinforcing earlier impressions, therefore, Evans’s original has a directness and simplicity; Thibaudet’s tribute is sophisticated but slightly mannered and inevitably fixed.

“Song for Helen” (1978) and “Your Story” (1980)

So do similar durational/tempo patterns apply when comparing examples of Evans’s late output, as re-recorded by Thibaudet using Distler’s notated arrangements? Where “Your Story” is concerned, the answer is affirmative. Evans’s July 1980 trio recording from Ronnie Scott’s is 3:56, while Thibaudet’s solo piano tribute is a full 5:37. Revealingly, however, just as with “Waltz for Debby,” Evans’s last concert of August 15, 1980 with his same trio yields a duration of 4:30, a good half-minute longer than his version from the previous month. Evans’s tempo for this ballad composition is appreciably faster than Thibaudet’s, and despite both players varying the speed, Thibaudet again ranges much more widely (from c. \( \frac{3}{4} = 50 \), up to 76). Apropos Conversations, Gene
Lees was deeply impressed by Evans’s highly accurate maintenance of pulse across a large temporal span, so that beginnings and endings matched up almost exactly (Lees 1963, n.p.).

By contrast, “Song for Helen” (Keane, Evans’s record producer and friend) proves an exception to the rule, though partly due to its rather different nature. This is Evans’s overdubbed track par excellence, a substantial composition for piano and electric piano of 7:48 rather than an improvisation, since it is essentially predetermined by virtue of its layered electronic recorded processes. As Larson notes, certainly “Conversations with Myself problematizes the traditional distinction between composition and improvisation” (2005, 241, 272). And the basic principle of “Song for Helen” is still that employed in the first Conversations: as “an artificial duplication of simultaneous performance,” Evans would perform on a second track while listening through headphones to the previous one, and then on a further track while hearing the previous two (Evans 1963, n.p.). In the main liner notes to Conversations, Lees writes aptly about the sense in which Evans’s persona was divided stereophonically into three: “Bill Left,” “Bill Center and Bill Right,” each contributing to an artistic whole. The third track typically involved the greatest embellishment. Meanwhile, for Evans himself, the experience was like being in a trio ensemble, but with the added plus that he could please himself (Evans 1963, n.p.). Thibaudet’s version, while also overdubbed, is determined primarily by its conformance to Distler’s piano transcription and comes in at just over half the length (4:13).

As for other dimensions of these outputs, “Song for Helen” involves the development of a repeated twenty-measure composition in D\textsuperscript{7} major. Before the entry of the main stepwise, sequential ascending line (F–G\textsuperscript{7}–A; A–A–B; B–C–D; mm. 1–6) with its emotive harmonies, Evans creates a prelude (c. 31”) featuring bell-like, pentatonic sonorities, while Thibaudet’s opening flourish (c. 39”) already brings in overdubbing. At the balancing other end, Evans’s postlude yields intense scales and a flourish to the top. In terms of a jazz–classical agenda, Evans’s song is an expressive vehicle not unlike a classical étude or set of variations, whereby each revisiting of the main material (notably the third time) enables a greater level of virtuosic ornamentation and resetting of the registral space, especially an octave higher. One nice touch in Thibaudet’s modified version, as arranged by Distler, is a final incorporated quotation from Chopin’s Berceuse, in turn noted as a model for “Peace Piece” (Mawer 2014a, 230–233). With reference to Reilly’s skeletal score (which uses the basic TRO transcription), we can appreciate Evans’s improvisatory interpolations and markedly spread chords, occasionally reminiscent of Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue (c. 1:50; c. 5:00). Both artists create a rhapsodic quality using tempo rubato, with Thibaudet again reading much detail into Evans’s cross-measure phrasings, articulated by gradations of dynamic. But, despite any lack of a Steinway, it is the second half of Evans’s original that exhibits a much more animated syncopation and swing, with full piano bass, confident and extensive in its own overdubbed conversations, echoes, and ensemble effects with the electric piano.

Finally, we have “Your Story” as Evans’s own story. In its last poignant recording, this is inextricably bound up with, and literally embodies, the philosophical question of “lateness,” as pursued by the likes of Said (2006) and Straus (2008, 2009; Mawer 2014b), notwithstanding recent caveats (McMullan and Smiles 2016). Lateness is a complex, paradoxical—even contradictory—concept of a powerfully intense, spacious utterance of one fully in command, wise, and somehow knowing of finality, yet coupled by sheer struggle or difficulty, not least in the face of physical, bodily frailty. It is a way of thinking still highly applicable to Evans’s case: with his last trio, he

found renewed energy to lift performances and explore new avenues. He also knew that his health was deteriorating fast with doctors expressing surprise that his liver was still functioning at all. He was still deeply distressed by his brother’s death.

(Hennessey 1985, 12)
Although the character of Evans’s playing is rhapsodic and contemplative, its sound quality maintains a familiar incisive clarity and directness. (Sadly, the sound in this live recording of August 1980 suffers at the start from distortion and consequent wandering of pitch.) Brought into renewed relief here is the song-like nature of “Your Story,” with a beguiling simplicity and poignancy born of experience, and a seemingly heightened spirituality. Paradoxically perhaps, that incisiveness too is intensified (at the B section, m. 17ff.; see TRO transcription reproduced by Reilly): a sense of outdoing and defying, at least temporarily, an inevitably failing body. There is an insistence to the relentless motivic mordent, and a packing of hard-edged punch, which leads in the coda (m. 49ff.) to a most impassioned playing that at times borders on the frantic. Evans’s fellow trio players give discreet support with soft brush sounds (LaBarbera) on the repeat, and hints of bass punctuation (Johnson) in the coda. After the flow comes the ebb and, like the early “Waltz for Debby,” the music fades al niente, ending with Evans’s quirky oriental, pentatonic flourish.

Thibaudet’s more extended performance of Evans’s composition exhibits his softer-edged, more mellow sound, but it also constitutes a very thoughtful, surely consciously felt, tribute. His in-depth reading maximizes the contrasts inherent in “Your Story.” As he acknowledges: “I’m playing the notes Bill played, but I channel them through my own feelings about dynamics and embellishments” (Distler 1997, 9). Overall, his phrasing is very subtle and beautifully shaped, while his complete pianistic facility means that those restless mordents at times approach a trill-like oscillation. At the reprise of section A (m. 33ff.), he achieves an Evans-style directness with a big bass sound; similarly the augmented coda with its fortissimo shares in Evans’s passion and displays a most impressive technique. At the other extreme, Thibaudet accesses the intimate, harmonically remote moments—with their “heartbreaking inner voices” (Distler 1997, 10)—most apparent in the reprise and coda, especially the second time where the sound is laid hollow and bare (una corda, m. 53): a reflective sotto voce. Fittingly, the final chord has no third.

In short, Thibaudet’s reading has a melancholic, ethereal quality. His quest is investigative and he treads lightly, but the tone is almost regretful: the inescapability of history and Evans’s imminent death. Evans’s own performance of his composition is contradictory: stronger, fuller, and yet glass-like; it is edgy and could break. This risk-taking arguably makes it the more compelling.

Conclusion

It is appropriate now to summarize the main case study findings in terms of the research questions posed. In testing how recorded improvisations and other recorded performances relate, substantive differences have been revealed between the performance styles, artistic personae, and sound-worlds of Evans (as jazz “insider”) and Thibaudet (as jazz “outsider”), even when treating what was, in theory, the same musical material, having made suitable allowance for “up-to-date sonics” (Distler 1997, 10). Of course, this issue of material is itself not “neutral” or straightforward and relates to matters of ontology: Evans’s first recording of any given number inevitably assumed the status of “source,” but theoretically there could be multiple valid sources. Evans’s late oeuvre constitutes a particularly precious resource.

By extension, we come to the conundrum about (re)performing an improvisation. For Evans, this was successfully achieved by remaking his materials, such as “Blue in Green,” so creating quite far-reaching changes (reflective of much imaginative spontaneity) across his own re-recordings. But for Thibaudet, this proved something of an impossibility since in attempting to do so the improvisatory element largely ceased to be. In “Peace Piece,” Evans’s improvisatory hallmarks or licks (his clusters of seconds, fourths, fifths; his squashed octaves and mordents) are essentially
replicated by Thibaudet. Nonetheless, Thibaudet’s typically slower tempi and delicate pianistic touch help to lend an exploratory pensiveness to his renditions of Evans’s improvisations: a sense that his performance is still “feeling its way”; that at any moment, the fixity of the whole is not yet inevitable, albeit this is an aural illusion, confirmed by the pre-existence of music transcriptions. To be fair, Thibaudet did find occasionally, as when working with an overdubbed version of the “Love Theme” from *Spartacus*, that:

In trying to sync up those fast 32nd note runs, I suddenly began inventing my own lines. It wasn’t planned, I just did it on the spur of the moment, playing all kinds of things based on what Bill originally played.

*(Distler 1997, 10)*

Through Evans’s exemplar, he experienced a rare sort of freedom where he almost felt outside of himself.

As for the place of composition, the case study findings have generally supported the main tenet of this chapter that generic boundaries do become more blurred through the fixing process of recording. What emerges is a spectrum of practice: performance–improvisation–composition, with improvisation lying at its heart and itself embracing a further spectrum. This argument serves to extend a music theory stance on composition–improvisation whereby “all musical creation really lies on a continuum between these poles,” with privileged status afforded to improvisation *(Larson 2005, 242, 273)*. And the boundary issue constitutes a particular challenge in studying an artist like Evans, whose original work so deftly defies easy categorization, being simultaneously performance, improvisation, and composition.

Moreover, that blurring is further compounded (confounded?) when the cultural frames of reference are shifted from those within a jazz milieu to those of the classical music world: that jazz–classical progression. Ironically, perhaps, while classical music once led the way in improvisational terms, especially in the nineteenth-century romantic era of the virtuoso performer, such modern classical performance of Evans effectively transforms some of his improvisational work into composition (as remarked on earlier, other Evans output is already acknowledged as composition). From one perspective, this might be perceived as raising its artistic status and broadening its (trans)cultural appeal: for Thibaudet, “after all, the music is so wonderful, and what better way to expose classical audiences to the riches of jazz” *(Distler 1997, 8)*. From another, however, it is more deeply problematic since, in not being “of” or “in the moment,” some might claim it effectively ceases to be jazz. But that might of course be deemed completely in keeping with Thibaudet’s elusive, if not impossible, pursuit of his idealized jazz: utopia.

As intimated at the start, there is much scope for future studies along these lines: for instance, other artists’ recordings of Evans’s improvisatory–compositional work, such as those by Hughes; or comparative re-recordings of compositions of Duke Ellington (embracing Thibaudet’s 1999 album: *Reflections on Duke*, Decca 460 8110–2), which undoubtedly remain as exceptional jazz. And while it is likely that similar patterns of congruence–divergence and blurring of categories would emerge in case studies drawn from the musics of other jazz artists, the real fascination—as it is hoped has been conveyed here—lies in the intricacy and beauty of the musical details.

**Note**

1. A short paper version of this chapter was delivered at the fourth *Rhythm Changes Conference: Jazz Utopia*, Birmingham City University (April 14–17, 2016); an expanded written version is being developed to further the music theory agenda.
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References


