

From *First Light* to *The Last Signal*: jazz and pop connections in the music of Stuart Greenbaum

article by Stuart Greenbaum, April 2006

The term 'pop music' has not always had stood for the same undifferentiated style of music. Pop in the new millenium tends to be associated with Kylie Minogue, Britney Spears, Destiny's Child and boy bands.¹ It smacks of karaoke, dance routines and expensive production. This was not always the case. So-called 'pop' music in the 1970's might have included David Bowie, Queen, ACDC and The Eagles. In most cases the musicians on the video clip were mostly responsible for what was heard. A band like ACDC would have generally been referred to as 'rock' – perhaps even 'heavy rock' but this could also come under a larger banner of 'pop' which in Australia was presented on radio stations such as 3XY or TV programs like Countdown. At that time, it was all 'pop'.

Jazz, by contrast, perhaps enjoys a less convoluted terminology. Certainly jazz music has evolved and has many sub-branches, but it still refers to musicians who can improvise over given chord changes and rhythmic grooves with backbeats and references to various types of 'swing'. Jazz is part of the larger term 'popular music', though it is not really 'pop'. The fluidity of terminology makes using simple words like 'rock' and 'pop' increasingly difficult if one wants to be clear. Precisely because it is a mainstream, public culture, its definition does not really lie in the hands of academics. The growth and development of the genres has been too fast for the terminology to follow logically and with – at this point – widespread consensus. For the purposes of this paper, 'pop' refers to a fairly wide range of vocal popular music from the Beatles to Paul Simon; from Led Zeppelin to Madonna and beyond.

As a child, I grew up with pop music concurrently with classical music. In my later teens, jazz became a powerful influence also. In my own music, classical, pop and jazz were relatively separate interests. My earliest undergraduate pieces were influenced by composers like Britten and Stravinsky, and later again by Steve Reich. By 1988 (my final undergraduate year) I was beginning to incorporate jazz elements into my scores and by 1994 I was experimenting with orchestrating overt pop songs. In retrospect, these were not sudden decisions but the gradual removal of what I increasingly saw as artificial stylistic boundaries. This paper looks at two works being presented at the 2006 Aurora Festival: a timely comparison of a solo piano piece, *First Light*, from 1997 and a larger work, *The Last Signal*, written in 2005 for solo piano with large ensemble. These two works have some things in common, despite being written eight years apart.

Of the two works that will be considered, harmonic and rhythmic elements are clearly influenced by jazz and pop language. The sound of electric guitars and vocals are absent, though in *The Last Signal* there is significant use of percussion without actually using a drum kit. There are some structural influences, but no wholesale adoption of either pop or jazz forms. Therefore, the crossover aspects are taking place at the level of musical language and gesture, but not necessarily in recreating the sound-world normally associated with jazz or pop. Both works feature the piano (either by itself or with ensemble) and some idiomatic piano-writing style is borrowed from pop and jazz; but it is perhaps worth noting that the piano is a fairly universal instrument (in Western terms) and allows for an easy accommodation of both classical and popular techniques. This makes the piano an effective vehicle for many crossover approaches.

¹ Roy Shuker, *Popular Music: The Key Concepts*, Routledge Key Guides, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005).; and Brian Longhurst, *Popular Music and Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995).

First Light

First Light is a solo piano work that draws equally on the classical piano tradition of Chopin as well as more modern aspects of jazz and pop. The larger structural scheme is more comparable with traditional Western classical music in the sense that it establishes motivic material in a home key (C) and then develops it through modulation and phrase variation before returning to the main motive in clear fashion. The final return, however, is up a semitone in D^b . One might stop short of calling it D^b major - though in isolation it could appear that way. Perhaps D^b Ionian is a truer description because the piece operates around modes and modal alternation rather than traditional tonality. In any event, while the final return is a semitone higher, it might take a listener with perfect pitch to notice. Given the surrounding harmonic context, the D^b return *feels* like a home key return.

In addition to the overall harmonic structure, some of the modulations use the 'Chopin-esque' technique of modulating up a 4th by flattening the 7th degree. A good example of this can be found in bars 62-70:

Example 1

The image displays three systems of musical notation for Example 1, spanning bars 62 to 70. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The first system (bars 62-64) shows a modulation from C major to D^b major. The second system (bars 65-67) continues the piece in D^b major. The third system (bars 68-70) shows a further modulation to E^b major. Dynamics include *mf*, *pp*, and *mp*. Flattened 7th degrees are circled in the first system.

Chopin's *Trois Études* No.2 in A^b major modulates in this way also (see bars 1-5). It is a piece that my mother, Elizabeth Scarlett, played when I was a boy and the influence can be seen in this passage from *First Light*. The flattened 7ths are circled in this example and show the influence of tonal schemes in a modal context.

At a more basic micro level, however, the harmonic materials have a closer connection to jazz and pop. This lies in both the note content of chords and pitch sets, but also in the actual voicing of the chords. These features include harmony based around the jazz system of stacked 3rds. Within such a system, one can add or remove certain degrees as well as chromatically alter them. In fact, the first 4 bars of the piece clearly establish the type of harmonic chords and progressions that will ensue.

Example 2

Example 2 shows a piano score for the first four bars. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 112. The chords are C, Amin11, Dmin9, and G/Eb. The dynamics range from *mp* to *f*. There are markings for 'piano' and 'ppp' with 'ped.' (pedal) markings below the bass line.

The opening features a standard C major chord followed by minor seventh chords on A and D with added notes (11ths & 9ths). The final chord in that opening sequence is somewhat more complex – G over an E^b bass. This may be viewed as a momentary bi-tonality (though it is sustained for 6 bars). Such bi-tonal voicings can be found in the music of composers such as Britten and Stravinsky², though they are also featured consistently in contemporary jazz and this idiom connects more clearly to the rest of the piece. The G chord with the altered E^b bass is exploited in a more extended way from bars 46 to 49:

Example 3

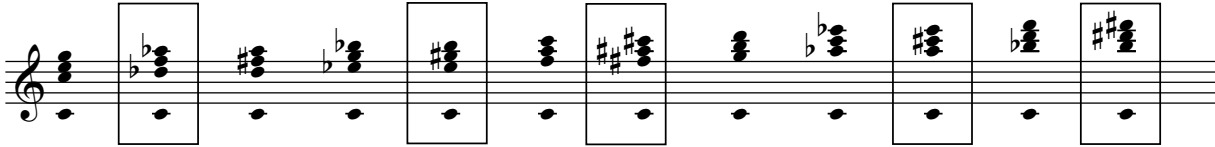
Example 3 shows a piano score for measures 46 to 49. The dynamics range from *grad. cresc.* to *ff*. There are markings for 'ped.' (pedal) and 'Sost. Ped. (until bar 56)'.

The effect therefore is somewhat dissonant and builds tension – however, it works as a progression, mainly due to the strong pull of contrary motion (an essentially ‘classical’ influence) and partly due to the rhythmic sequence of offbeat quavers (the influence of jazz). This is a clear example of the hybridisation of different genres. These tense, climactic crescendos usually subside to a quieter and clearer modal state.

² Examples might include the ‘Sea Interludes’ from Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes*, and the famous *Petrouchka* chord from Stravinsky’s ballet score of the same name which superimposes two major triads a tritone apart.

Example 3 also contains four of the five possibilities for dissonant altered bass notes against any given major triad. The other seven bass notes are relatively consonant, as shown below:

Example 4



This shows the 12 possible major triads that can be superimposed against a fixed bass note of C. The five chords in boxes are the ones that are less easily accommodated within traditional tonal theory and therefore viewed as bi-tonal. These are the chords being exploited in Example 3. It is important to note that while bi-tonal chords are possible using minor triads, they are not as noticeably bi-tonal as those created with major triads.

At times, *First Light* is less chromatic and perhaps more closely aligned with 'pop' harmony. An overt example of this is the repeated section from bar 126 to 128:

Example 5

The image shows a piano score for Example 5, starting at bar 126. The music is in 4/4 time and features a complex, rhythmic texture. The bass line consists of semiquaver figures, while the treble line has more melodic movement. Dynamics range from *pp* to *mp*. A crescendo instruction 'cresc. each time' is present. The section ends with a repeat sign and a 'x 3' marking.

Harmonically the mode is D^b Ionian; however, the bass progression deliberately avoids sounding the note D^b in order to build tension. Rhythmically, the texture is effectively 'drumming at the keyboard', to borrow the terminology of Steve Reich.³ This means that the semiquaver figurations are often split in alternation between the left and right hands (particularly the thumbs). This style of playing also connects to the comping, chordal style of pianist song-writers such as Elton John and Billy Joel. It is a pianist's way of achieving what guitarists do with strumming, though on the piano repeating the full chordal voicing in semiquavers can be clunky and repeating just one or two of the notes between the hands makes it easier to achieve a 'groove'.

Finally, in bars 127-128, a reverse dotted rhythm flows across the barline into a standard dotted rhythm:

³ Steve Reich, *Writings About Music*, pg.69, Canada, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press, 1974.

Example 6

127 *cresc. each time*

The image shows musical notation for Example 6. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a 3/4 time signature. The middle staff is a grand staff with a 2/4 time signature. The bottom staff is a single staff with a 2/4 time signature, labeled 'resultant bass drum/snare pattern'. Vertical dashed lines connect the piano notes in the top two staves to the drum pattern in the bottom staff, indicating the rhythmic relationship. The piano part includes a 'cresc. each time' instruction.

This rhythm appears only toward the end of the piece and bears the influence of funk drum kit figurations.

Disparate stylistic elements in *First Light* are, therefore, clearly discernable. Yet the nature of the 'cross-over' is not so easy to describe. We can see that different stylistic elements are closely woven into the same fabric, but the overall effect of that mixture is complex – driven by the developmental needs of the musical discourse more than by any conceptual desire to mix genres. Ideally, one hears the sum of the parts more than the technical separation of elements from different genres.

The Last Signal

Around eight years later (in 2005) I was commissioned to write a piece for solo piano and large ensemble.⁴ The title refers to NASA's 1972 space probe, Pioneer 10, which has been drifting further out into deep space and by 2005 had lost contact with Earth, having received (very faintly) the last discernible signal. In programmatic terms, the piece is a mixture of nostalgia – the silencing of communication – but also wonderment at human exploration in space and in general.

The solo pianist, Mark Isaacs, is known as a performer and composer of both jazz and contemporary classical music and knowing this allowed me to exploit both. In any event, I had *First Light* in mind as a stylistic starting point, so it is not surprising that some similarity should exist – at least in the solo piano writing. *First Light* is fully notated and while the instrumental parts of *The Last Signal* are also fully notated, about 40% of the solo piano part is improvised. The improvisation itself can be further divided into different categories. The most obvious is the piano 'solo' from letter E, which is the longest continuous improvised section. Here the soloist is given chord changes, in jazz style, to improvise over.

Example 7

The image shows musical notation for Example 7. It features a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a 4/4 time signature. Above the staff, there is a box containing the letter 'E'. Below the staff, the text 'SOLO:' is followed by four measures of chord changes: 'C (add 9)', 'A^bmaj7 / E', 'C (add 9)', and 'B^b / E^b Fadd9 / A'. The piano part is represented by a series of diagonal lines in both the treble and bass staves, indicating improvisation over the chords.

In other places, however, there are descriptions like that found at letter R which calls for “fast, furious semiquavers / triplet semiquavers; parallel and contrary motion”. Here the emphasis is linear, and while a chord symbol is given, it is really more of a pitch set than a progression. Furthermore, the pianist is occasionally asked to ‘ad lib.’ extra detail within otherwise fully notated sections. My interest in this was to blur the distinctions between what *is* and what is *not* notated. Mark Isaacs rightly points out that *The Last Signal* is not a ‘jazz’ piece. Jazz is merely one of a number of influences or techniques (together with minimalism) that are brought to bear on the overall piece.⁵ So there is a jazz influence but it is not really a jazz structure. As with *First Light*, the overall structure is only marginally influenced by popular music culture.

Smaller scale aspects of the content, however, do connect with a number of popular music styles. The main harmonic progression that underlines the first half of the piece is gradually built up and by bar 37, its 4-bar phrase is fully formed:

Example 8

37
41

The musical notation for Example 8 consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The treble staff shows a series of chords with some notes beamed together. The bass staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a triplet. The piece is in 4/4 time and has a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

This notated groove equates to the same chords changes that will later appear for the pianist to solo over as shown in the previous example (refer back to Ex.7). The main chord of interest is the E^b major triad over an E natural bass. As with *First Light*, this is one of the five possible bi-tonal bass notes against that triad. When the C bass follows, there is an ambiguous major/minor 3rd quality that partially relates to a standard dominant 7(#9) chord that is often found in blues, jazz and some rock (especially Hendrix). Essentially, though, the voicing found here is less usual and more likely to be found in the contemporary jazz piano voicings of Lyle Mays or Herbie Hancock. In this way, *The Last Signal* can be seen as a continuation of harmonic interests found in *First Light*.

This harmonic progression moves into the ensemble and the piano creates new layers against it using modal alternation (with shared pivot notes). Chromatic alterations are also created through the use of parallel shifts, or ‘planing’ as seen at bar 60:

Example 9

60 (with brass)

The musical notation for Example 9 consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The treble staff shows a series of chords with some notes beamed together. The bass staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a triplet. The piece is in 4/4 time and has a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The dynamic marking 'mf' is present.

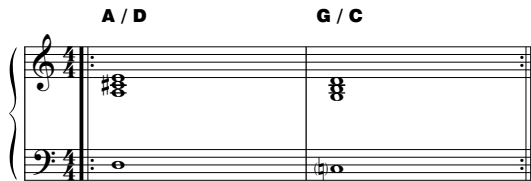
⁴ Australia Council commission through the Australian Youth Orchestra’s New Music Now ensemble.

⁵ Mark Isaacs, email to Stuart Greenbaum, 15 January 2006.

This last voicing effectively results in a cross-relation with the B^b in the left hand immediately followed by a B natural in the right hand. It has a particular contemporary sound to it and arguably one that is influenced more by so-called 'pop' music than by jazz. An example of cross-related harmony in modern pop caused by parallel 'planing' can be found in the verse harmony of *You Get What you Give* (1998) by the band, New Radicals:

Example 10

(author's harmonic reduction)



That song also shares the idea of a dominant chord superimposed over a tonic bass which is shifted by a tone, resulting in a cross-relation (here C[#] to C natural). The previous example from *The Last Signal* (refer back to Ex.9) not only has the tonic bass but a full tonic triad superimposed against a full dominant triad. Because this then results in stacked 3rds, it could also be analysed as parallel major 9th chords and this then connects more strongly to jazz theory. Either way, it stretches the confines of traditional tonality since that is predicated on the hierarchical progression of dominant to tonic. Having both at the same time can be seen as somewhat nullifying the gravitational pull of that hierarchy.

Jazz itself is not a fixed idiom. Musicians such as Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays are jazz-trained, but also take an interest in pop dance forms with fast electronic beats. The Pat Metheny Group's 1995 CD, *We Live Here*, includes sequenced drum machine programming, together with live acoustic drum kit performance. It is tempting to see crossover as a linear chronological phenomenon, whereas increasingly, influences can flow from one genre to another and return in a further modified form. Pop comes out of jazz, rock and R&B, which comes out of the blues; but then jazz starts being influenced by pop (and so forth). In all, there is a clear Metheny/Mays influence on *The Last Signal* and their music is itself a form of crossover. So by definition, *The Last signal* might be seen to be mixing different crossover styles. Does this make it 'hyper-crossover'? I think not. I would view it more in evolutionary terms and indeed it strikes me that much new music has occurred in this way since the advent and accessibility of recordings.

In noting further comparison with *First Light*, the progression from bar 69 to 71 also features unresolved chords (major triads with altered bass notes) on offbeat quavers:

Example 11

The bass notes are not as dissonant as found in the *First Light* example (refer back to Ex.3) but the presence of major triads superimposed a 5th higher than the bass (E^b / A^b) connects back to examples 9 and 10. Additionally, the offbeat quavers moving in expanding contrary motion remains. Certainly the unresolved cadential sequence is also left hanging.

In *The Last Signal*, the idea of a backbeat extends beyond offbeat quavers. Offbeat crotchets are found in the percussion throughout and also in the bass in the lead up to letter E. Simultaneously, offbeat minims are also present in the triangle. Essentially, the backbeats are proportionally the same but have different augmentation values. The shorter the rhythmic value, the more intense the propulsion. The longer the value, the slower the pulse. But what occurs when such different values are superimposed? In the leadup to E backbeats can be found at the level of the quaver, crotchet and minim simultaneously and this combined texture arguably results in a poly-temporal effect:

Example 12

The musical score for Example 12 is set in 4/4 time and spans four measures. It features three staves: clarinet in B^b, solo piano, and contrabass. The clarinet part, labeled 'triangle', consists of four minims: B₄, A₄, G₄, and F₄. The piano part, labeled 'solo piano', has a right hand with chords and a left hand with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The contrabass part, labeled 'contrabass', consists of four minims: E₃, F₃, G₃, and A₃. Dynamics include 'p' for piano and 'mp' for mezzo-piano. A 'gliss.' marking is present in the contrabass part. The text 'leading into...' is written above the piano part in the fourth measure.

In this example, the offbeat crotchets are in the bass and the offbeat minims in the triangle (played by the clarinet). The piano doubles the bass (LH) but also features offbeat quavers, in all creating a 3-dimensional pulse-grid.

Steve Reich was once asked why he wrote only fast music and replied that it depended on how you listened; that fast music could exist along with slow music at the same time.⁶ Multi-proportional backbeats can also provide a sense of ambiguous tempo. It should be noted that the 'listener' cannot be taken out of the equation. This is essentially an issue of perception and any intended ambiguity relies not only on the score and the performer's ability to communicate the score's intention, but also on the ability or willingness of the listener to perceive any such ambiguity.

That passage leads into the piano 'solo' at letter E. For structural reasons, it is intentional that much happens before arriving at the main solo section. I am fascinated by good improvisation but I was also mindful of attempting to integrate improvisational elements into the structure cohesively. This therefore involved altering

⁶ Steve Reich, 'Interview with Jonathan Cott', CD Liner notes for *The Desert Music*, (Nonesuch 979101-2), 1985.

the degree and extent of solo piano improvisation, together with working out proportionally where such improvisation could naturally be expected to flow out of fully notated areas in a fluid, organic way.

The main 'solo' builds towards a return of the C-based modality at letter H, which in turn dissolves and leads to entirely new material at letter i:

Example 13

This material is deliberately designed to be contrasting and even surprising. *First Light* is a shorter work and does not really feature such a noticeably contrasting approach. In *The Last Signal*, however, the music has been flowing in a relatively legato fashion and the staccato notes of this middle section make for a pungent contrast. The soloistic nature of the instrumentation also provided a good vehicle for antiphonal contrasts between the piano solo and the ensemble. The metrical patterns are being continuously altered and this asymmetrical formation is designed to contrast the symmetrical (mostly) 4-bar phrases that lead up to letter i. Regarding possible influences, this may be compared with the middle section of *Minuano (Six Eight)* by The Pat Metheny Group.⁷

After this section builds and runs its course, there is a kind of recapitulation of the solo piano motive at letter M. This time, however, it appears up a 4th in an F-based alternating mode and this might be seen to connect to the Chopin-esque treatment of modulations by a 4th as found in *First Light* (refer back to Ex.1), here in a macro-structural context. As with the opening, this is allowed to repeat, mantra-like, building not only in instrumental density but also with the direction for the pianist to “very gradually embellish towards letter N”. The piano part is notated, so the embellishment will retain most of the notated part, but with an increasing level of improvised figurations between the written notes.

If letter M is a recapitulation of the main harmonic motive, then letter O represents a melodic recapitulation. It is slightly compressed in phrase length, and then picks up the end of the phrase and repeats it three times in a compressed 3-bar phrase:

Example 14

⁷ From their CD, *Still Life (talking)*, Geffen, 1987.

The chord symbols reflect the harmony in the ensemble texture and the piano ad libs on this perhaps differently each of the 3 times it is repeated. The repetition of a reduced 3-bar phrase toward the end of a piece or section of a piece is a technique found in the music of the Pat Metheny Group. Indeed the entire piece owes something to the writing partnership of Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays. From letter P, however, the structural flow is designed as a coda, with rising modulations transforming into a heavy minimalist groove of repeated notes that relate back to the middle section at letter i. There is some piano improvisation in this coda area, although the final pages are fully notated for the piano and concentrate on the antiphonal 'concertante' relationship between solo piano and ensemble. The penultimate piano chord which is allowed to ring for 4 bars suggests bitonality – F# major over a D bass – and while there is a more open D voicing to punctuate the very end, there is an implication of non-resolution, programmatically linked to the idea of the space craft, Pioneer 10, floating off into the blackness of deep space, beyond communication.

Conclusions

Both *First Light* and *The Last Signal* are influenced by certain rhythmic and harmonic features closely associated with jazz and pop. What becomes evident, however, in attempting to pinpoint exact influences, is that modern jazz can be quite 'poppy' and modern pop can be quite 'jazzy'. And this in turn brings the subject back to the whole idea of cross-over. Perhaps 'crossover' is most closely associated with the 1970's. Perhaps it took a number of decades before the effect of widespread communications media (like radio and recordings) had an inevitable 'seep-through' effect on composers. In any event, it is clear that composers have always been influenced by that which surrounds them. That which surrounds composers by the turn of the new millenium is indisputably vast. My own experience might be described as the legitimisation of musical materials absorbed from an early age. While *First Light* and *The Last Signal* were written eight years apart (and the latter piece perhaps shows some additional influences), both can be viewed as tapping into a rich seam of musical heritage that draws jazz and pop elements into a contemporary classical context.

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Abstract

Australian composer, Stuart Greenbaum, examines two of his own compositions that feature solo piano. He looks at these works in the context of the influence of jazz and pop styles on his own music and the extent to which his music might subsequently be thought of as belonging to the 'crossover' genre. In *First Light* (1997) and *The Last Signal* (2005), the composer identifies harmonic and rhythmic influences that range from chord content and voicing to the use of backbeats. The extent of crossover in other recent music is also considered.