

# George Russell: A Lydian Odyssey

*The Music Division of The Library of Congress commissioned this essay for inclusion in the program for George Russell's May 1999 concert in the Library's historic Coolidge Auditorium in Washington DC.*

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George Russell is a singular figure in American music. He is a rarity among major jazz composers, as he is not an influential instrumentalist. Only the likes of Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus possessed a comparable ability to write orchestral music that conveys the spark of improvisation. Yet, what truly sets Russell apart is his half-century application of a single radical compositional principle, which he has evolved through the creation of such American masterworks as "Cubano Be/Cubano Bop," "All About Rosie," and "Electronic Sonata for Souls Loved by Nature."

It is impossible to discuss the music of George Russell without placing his treatise, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* (1953) at the center of the discussion. Often cited as the great American jazz theory, the Lydian concept has received surprisingly little detailed commentary in jazz publications over the decades, as it defies the reductivist impulses of jazz critics. Composer Toru Takemitsu has stated that the Lydian Concept "is not simply a musical method -- we might call it a philosophy of music, or we might call it poetry." Therein lies the reason that the Lydian Concept can not be transmogrified into a few buzzwords.

Unlike the rules of serialism or minimalism, the Lydian Concept does not determine the emotional projection of a composition, or even its stylistic orientation; rather, it effectively encompasses everything from pure diatonicism to extreme chromaticism. Russell's oeuvre is proof; over the course of six decades, he has applied the Lydian Concept to everything from pyrotechnic bebop to beautiful ballads, and from ethereal choral statements to funky struts. Russell uses the Lydian Concept to express himself, not a system. Subsequently, it is Russell's odyssey as a composer that sheds the most light on his development of the Lydian Concept.

To understand the origins of the Lydian Concept, it is useful to place Russell in the New York jazz scene of the late 1940s, a hot house of musical innovation. In his early '20s, the Cincinnati-born Russell had already played drums with saxophonist Benny Carter, and written charts for both Carter's and pianist Earl Hines' big bands, when he ceased performing to concentrate on composing. Russell then became part of a legendary circle of musicians, including trumpeter Miles Davis, pianist John Lewis, and saxophonist Charlie Parker. Members of this group regularly held wide-ranging discussions about music at composer-arranger Gil Evans' apartment. They also attended concerts and rehearsals

conducted by Robert Craft and Dimitri Mitropoulos, giving them insights into works by Stravinsky and Hindemith, among others.

Both Parker and Davis provoked the direction of Russell's investigations into tonality. Russell was fascinated by Parker's practice of ending tunes on what Russell not as a flatted fifth, as the bebop harmonic innovation was widely purveyed, but as a raised fourth. This is a crucial distinction that looms large in Russell's subsequent critique of Major scales. Contemporaneously, Davis and Russell spent hours together at Davis' piano devising new chords, prompting Russell to think in terms of an overarching tonal system that would allow improvisers full expressive capabilities in new compositional environments.

Yet, of the beboppers, it was with trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie that Russell first gained notoriety, through the 1947 piece, "Cubano Be/Cubano Bop," considered to be jazz's first modal composition. Routinely credited solely to Russell as jazz's first modal composition, it was actually a collaborative effort between Gillespie, Russell, and Cuban drummer Chano Pozo. Gillespie wrote the first movement's 16-bar theme, and teamed with Pozo to devise the montuno and vamp that underpin the second. Still, the massive chords and propulsive rhythm of Russell's 24-bar introduction in the first movement, as well as his scoring of the piece's exultant climax, created a new synergy between bold structural design, imaginative orchestration, jazz lyricism and rhythmic excitement. The Lydian Concept aside, these are the hallmarks of Russell's compositional style.

A 16-month hospitalization for tuberculosis beginning in 1948 gave Russell the opportunity to fully explicate the Lydian Concept. Even after his recovery, Russell curtailed his activity to develop his treatise. By the mid-'50s, his reputation rested on a relatively slim recorded output, primarily clarinetist Buddy DeFranco's Big Band's reading of "A Bird In Igor's Yard," which fused Stravinsky-like polytonality with bebop, and saxophonist Lee Konitz's take on the dazzling bop sprint, "Ezz-thetic" (named for champion boxer Ezzard Charles, who Russell knew in Cincinnati).

During this period, Russell focused on the ladder of fifths that produced the Lydian scale (he never uses the phrase, "Lydian mode"). Not only is the ladder of fifths integral to the original church mode, it is also the basis of the pentatonic scale, a ladder of five fifths that is the core scale of many ancient musics. The Lydian scale, he discovered, possessed a tonal gravity absent in Major scales. Almost anyone, Russell contends, would hear the 'C' in the interval 'C' to 'G' as the stronger tone. No matter how many additional fifths were added to the ladder, the original 'C' remains the obvious tonic, the gravitational center, of the ladder.

Not so with the Major scale. Its arrangement of whole tones and semitones (t t s t t t s or, as expressed in the tones of C Major: c d e f g a b c' ) precludes the explicit tonal gravity Russell finds in the Lydian scale. In Russell's view, the Major scale confirms its tonic tone only upon completion, while the Lydian scale does so constantly. One central component in the Major scale's method of suspending the revelation of its tonic tone is the use of a semitone as the fourth tone. In the Lydian scale, the fourth is a whole tone above the third. In essence, Russell's expanded tonality incorporated Parker's raised fourth.

The second half of the 1950s was pivotal for Russell. Albums released in a RCA series entitled The Jazz Workshop were particularly influential: one led by saxophonist Hal

McKusick included Russell's "The Day John Brown Was Hanged;" another, led by Russell, who had returned to performing (not as a drummer, but as a pianist), included "Ballad of Hix Blewitt." What is immediately impressive about both compositions is not the deft implementation of the Lydian Concept, but the poignancy Russell brings to his respective subjects (Blewitt was a journeyman saxophonist who suffered the indignity of leaving his false teeth behind in a hotel room while on tour).

The joining of the two works with his classic early '60s arrangement of "You Are My Sunshine" in "An American Trilogy" (commissioned in 1997 by the Glasgow International Festival) creates a rich, multiple perspective of the pathos ingrained in the American experience. Complementing the eternal historical baggage of slavery and the Civil War, and the woes of an obscure individual, is the story of a depressed Pennsylvania mining town that inspired the arrangement of "You Are My Sunshine." Russell and vocalist Sheila Jordan performed the tune for unemployed miners in Jordan's hometown, earning Russell a citation from labor leader John L. Lewis. Russell's treatment shoots the usually buoyant ditty through a prism, breaking it down into deep, saturated colors -- a cool groove; a mournful dirge; a blustery outburst -- his subtle use of accelerating and decelerating tempo reinforcing an air of uncertainty. While Russell's stock was rising in intellectual jazz circles due to the Lydian Concept, a cornerstone of his legacy was cemented by the humanity expressed in the works that comprise "An American Trilogy."

Russell's mid-'50s resurgence coincided with the advent of such experimental sub-genres as the Third Stream, a composer-led faction that sought to meld jazz with other musical traditions. He had key supporters in Third Stream principals John Lewis and composer Gunther Schuller. Lewis brought Russell to teach at the influential School of Jazz at Lenox, Massachusetts, for the 1958-59 terms. Schuller aided and abetted in the commissioning of "All About Rosie" by Brandeis University for their seminal 1957 concert of works by composers ranging from Milton Babbitt to Jimmy Giuffre. While the highly theoretical basis of Russell's music played into the Third Stream's promotion of an advanced, if not academic jazz aesthetic, "All About Rosie" succeeds on such man-on-the-street criteria as earthy swing and lyricism.

Based on a motif from the southern African-American children's song-game, "Rosie, Little Rosie," "All About Rosie" is comprised of three movements. Both the first and third movements contain dazzling writing. The concise first movement alternates between fast 2/2 and 3/2 time, as Russell uses repeated and sequenced phrases rippling through various parts of the orchestra to create a simmering tension that stops short of boiling over. The briskly paced third movement is an excellent example of how serpentine lines remain distinct strands in the intricate weave of his scores. Yet, it is the languorous, bluesy second movement where Russell makes his most portentous statement; initially sidestepping the establishment of a specific tonality, Russell slowly brings several seemingly disparate lines into crisp tonal focus, demonstrating the pan-tonal implications of the Lydian Concept.

March 1959 was a crucial month in jazz history for several reasons, not the least of which was the completion of Russell's New York, N. Y., a concept album for Decca featuring texts written and recited by Jon Hendricks. Saxophonist John Coltrane's contribution to the album is noteworthy for his bringing the first session for the album the previous September to a halt for more than an hour to prepare a solo that met the demands of the music. Coltrane

also recorded his magnum opus, "Giant Steps," in March 1959, and the album commonly credited with the popularization of modal jazz, Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* (which featured pianist Bill Evans, who also performed on the original "Ballad of Hix Blewitt" and "All About Rosie"). Therefore Davis and Coltrane's roles in the creation of modal jazz can be traced to the Russell connection. Conversely, Russell acknowledges Davis's role in his 1983 arrangement of "So What," where Davis used the Dorian mode to improvise over Major scale chords. Russell recasts "So What" entirely in the Lydian scale, bringing their relationship full circle.

While he recorded a series of excellent albums for Riverside in the early 1960s (the last, *The Outer View*, recorded in 1962, featured Jordan on "You Are My Sunshine"), and performed at the 1964 Newport Festival, Russell spent much of the decade living in Sweden. Russell used the expanded opportunities to teach and compose such major works as "Othello Ballet Suite" (1967) and "Electronic Sonata for Souls Loved by Nature" (1968), both commissioned by Norwegian institutions. More importantly, the support he received during his Scandinavian sojourn allowed him to develop the next key component of his compositional approach: Vertical Form. Russell's idea of Vertical Form relates to the ritual pursuit of African drum choirs to halt linear time through the layering of different rhythmic patterns. Russell used African rhythms to this effect as early as the Jazz Workshop-era piece, "Fellow Delegates." Subsequently, Russell's use of Vertical Form worked hand in glove with the tonal gravity provided by the Lydian Concept; the building of rhythmically contrasting phrases resulted in music peeling with exclamatory power. On pieces like the "Electronic Sonata," Russell seemingly unleashed the atomic power of music, as the energy of the piece mushrooms with each additional strata of material.

Utilizing a jazz orchestra, a chorus, and nine additional singers, the 1970 mass, "Listen to the Silence" (commissioned by the Norwegian Cultural Fund) is the most daring of Russell's Vertical Form compositions of this period. It is noteworthy that this was the first major piece Russell completed upon his return to the US in 1969 to assume his current position with the New England Conservatory of Music. Russell stacked sung and chanted texts by Dee Brown, Rainer Maria Rilke, and others, with sectional writing that created jarring cross rhythms. As the mood of piece veers between hushed calm and intense clangor, the texts create stark juxtapositions between the themes of the Viet Nam War and the ethnic cleansing of the American West, making "Listen to the Silence" a harrowing work of conscience. In recent years, the opening orchestra theme has been extracted for use as the signature piece of Russell's Living Time Orchestra. The theme served as a coalescing call-to-arms in the original work; that quality has been retained in its new role.

The Vertical Form works of the '60s and early '70s also signaled the introduction of rhythmic elements gleaned from popular music into Russell's work. Russell avoided the after-beats on '2' and '4' that make rock music rhythms so predictable by using shifting meters and rhythmic patterns. Instead, the infectious grooves he created on works such as the aptly titled "Living Time" (a 1972 album-length work commissioned by Bill Evans) invariably undermine the foot-patting listener, who soon finds himself off beat. The African roots of Vertical Form and Russell's rhythmic conceptions are clearly joined in the 1983 extended work "The African Game;" just as the rhythms of "Electronic Sonata" reflected the contemporary innovations of African-American funk, the buoyant African rhythms propelling "The African Game" mirrored the rhythmic impetus of Afro-Pop.

Jointly commissioned by the Swedish Rikskonserter and the Arts Council of England, "It's About Time" is a 1995 work that further delineates the interrelationships of rhythm and Vertical Form within the Lydian Concept. The two parts of "It's About Time" begin somewhat deceptively; the first movement with an almost radio-friendly groove, the second with a ballad laced with world-worn lyricism. Yet, in both parts, Russell deploys familiar strategies -- blues vamps, displaced rhythmic accents, glancing staccato brass riffs, rumbling low-end motives, knotty saxophone and synthesizer figures -- to build kaleidoscopic masses of sound, culminating in ecstatic, densely packed finales. "It's About Time" is not an overtly profound work, but given its mature expression of the expanded tonality and structural capacities provided by the Lydian Concept and Vertical Form, respectively, it should be placed in the first tier of Russell's compositions.

Russell's Lydian odyssey takes a sharp turn into uncharted waters with the premiere of "Dialogue." This piece for violin, piano, and two synthesizers is Russell's first composition to feature the violin. It is his first work intended for live performance that fits into late-century parameters of chamber music (while it could conceivably fit into a contemporary chamber music program, Russell's 1968 "Electronic Organ Sonata No. 1" is a tape construction). Originally commissioned by the Library of Congress through the McKim Fund as a duo for violin and piano, Russell soon found that additional keyboards were required to execute the material. The work is in two movements, but, unlike many of his major works, which are divided into the obviously defined "Events," Russell intends the transition between movements in "Dialogue" to be discreet, if not imperceptible. The folkish thematic core renews a rich strain of Americana in his work, one which stretches back to works like "The Day John Brown Was Hanged" and "All About Rosie." "Dialogue" brings aspects of Russell's work full circle, while creating a new context in which the Lydian Concept can be realized.