

Kirsten MacKenzie's article on Brad Mehldau

The purpose of this research is to increase the body of knowledge on the subject of Brad Mehldau's music. While Mehldau is setting the standards among the new generation of jazz pianists, few have access to some of the fundamental stylings that make his music unique. Mehldau's approach to piano playing is of interest to students of jazz piano, particularly advanced students, and his compositions are of interest to students of composition, jazz performers and audiences alike. In this paper, four compositions and improvisations will be examined, in terms of compositional and improvisational devices, and in regard to their 'classical' connections and influences.

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Introduction

This topic was chosen for two reasons. First: the supposition was that there was a large ‘classical’ influence in the creation of a number of Mehldau compositions and improvisations. Second, having heard Mehldau live in concert twice, (in Chicago in 1996, and London in 2000), the author was inspired to discover more about Mehldau’s piano playing. It became immediately apparent that this subject would provide very fertile ground for investigation, particularly given that there is little published research on this music.

Mehldau’s music is intellectual and he makes sure his audience knows it, (Doerschuk, 2001). It is also emotional, virtuosic, innovative, intense, and draws its inspiration from many differing sources, as will be examined in this paper. Mehldau develops new approaches to old standards, and is constantly pushing the boundaries of his audiences’ expectations, with his ever-searching spirit, and compositional originality. He has an ability and affinity with the various touches on the instrument, a familiarity with a large portion of classical, jazz and pop repertoire, and also an affinity with Germanic culture. Mehldau is also provocative and insightful in his beliefs and written essays.

Methodology

In examining the main stylistic features and influences in Mehdau's music, numerous recordings were listened to, journal articles and internet web sites were consulted, and email interviews were conducted with Mehdau himself. Permission was obtained from Mehdau, regarding the usage of interview material in this paper.

A large portion of this study involved original research by the author, based on playing his music, and other related music at the piano. The study of published transcriptions from the Brad Mehdau Collection, (Hal Leonard, 2002), was an essential part of this process. In the course of this paper, material drawn from the Hal Leonard transcriptions, and the author's transcription of *Young Werther*, will be analysed, and compared with other musical examples where required.

The email interview questions answered by Mehdau over a six month period, sought to confirm assumptions by the author, such as in the case of how the composition "*Young Werther*" came about. Mehdau also led the author directly to the Brahms *Capriccio* which was 'unconsciously quoted' (Mehdau interview) in *Young Werther*. The information gleaned in the email questions, has been pivotal to the findings in this paper.

Biography of Brad Mehldau

Bradford Alexander Mehldau was born in Florida in 1970, the son of a doctor, and grew up in middle class Connecticut. He was a child prodigy, excelling in music from an early age. His early interests ranged from study of the classical repertoire, as well as listening to a lot of rock music. After hearing Keith Jarrett's album the '*Cologne Concert*' in his early teens, he switched his attention to jazz. Moving to New York in 1988, he studied jazz with Fred Hersch for two years, and Kenny Werner at the New School For Social Research, Jackie McClean and drummer Jimmy Cobb, who invited him to join Cobb's Mob. He made a number of recordings as sideman to Peter Bernstein, Mark Turner, Chris Potter, Joshua Redman, Jesse Davis and many others, before going on to lead his own group (Libman, 2003).

Working with such stellar jazz players early on in his career, must certainly have helped Mehldau to hone his already highly developed skills, particularly the rhythmic study he undertook with Cobb. In the author's opinion, Mehldau at some point must have made a decision to incorporate 'classical' stylistic methods into his jazz work. This became a critical decision in the development of his own unique sound on the Art of the Trio series.

Studying a large quantity of 'classical' repertoire as a child, has equipped Mehldau with a huge catalogue of ideas to draw on. Although some performers have blended 'classical' and jazz together, (for example, Bill Evans studied Debussy and Ravel,) few have utilised harmonic progressions in combination with romantic period emotional intensity in the way that Mehldau has done.

Mehldau is very highly regarded among the global jazz community, and has won numerous awards in his short career, including - “Chock” award 1999 - Le Monde de la Musique, New Star of 1998- Swing Journal Disc Award (Japan) Best Jazz album of the Year 1998 - Songs Jazzman Magazine - France. #1 Talent deserving wider recognition - 1997 and 1998, Downbeat Critics Poll. In 1999 Downbeat Magazine awarded him Acoustic Pianist of the Year, an outstanding achievement for a 29 year old. In the 51st Downbeat magazine critic’s poll 2003, Mehldau was rated as second in the Acoustic pianist of the year, second to Keith Jarrett.

Meldau has a very eclectic approach to piano playing. On ‘*Songs*’ for example, he plays a standard song by Rogers and Hart, next to *Exit Music*, by Radiohead, alongside ‘classically’ influenced originals like *Sehnsucht*. In 2002, he recorded the experimental/avant-garde album, ‘*Largo*,’ suggesting a possible move away from some of the more ‘classically’ influenced music on the Art of the Trio series. However he is “currently writing a song cycle for classical soprano Renee Fleming which he is to perform with her in 2004 at Carnegie Hall, New York.” (Billboard magazine Vol.1 15 No. 22.) This freedom of movement between musical genres is becoming a hallmark of his style.

‘Classical’ Influences in the music of Brad Mehldau

Within this project, the term ‘classical,’ is employed to refer to all pre-twentieth century music, unless otherwise stated. This is because jazz and pop musicians tend to utilise the term in this way.¹

¹ The author is however aware that the ‘classical’ period is defined as taking place during the years “1770 - 1800 approximately.” (Grout, 1960, p.452)

Some of these ‘classical’ influences in Mehlau’s music include: fugal and fugato material, economic use of material, Romantic period influences - (in particular, Brahms’ piano *Capricci*, and the song cycle forms of Schumann and Schubert), counterpoint, the music of JS Bach, and harmonic progressions reminiscent of pre-Twentieth Century music.

Economic use of material refers here to the utilisation of small melodic fragments to generate a composition or improvisation.

Economic use of improvisational and compositional material will be considered with regard to a possible link between ‘*Rons’ Place*,’ and the ‘*D Minor Fugue No.6*’ from the Book 1 of Well Tempered Clavier. A section of ‘*Sehnsucht*’ will be compared with 2 bars from the ‘*Fugue No. 16 in G minor*’ from Book 2 of the Well Tempered Clavier .

Counterpoint, and Romantic period influences will be examined with regard to ‘*Unrequited* and *Young Werther*.’

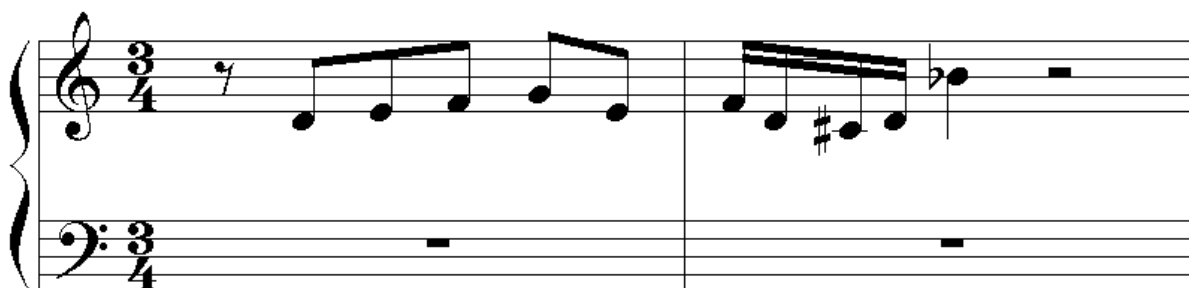
Economic Use of Motifs

As seen in fugal writing, and in comparison with ‘*Ron’s Place*’ and ‘*Sehnsucht*’ and with ‘*Young Werther*’:

The ‘*Fugue in D Minor No.6*’ for three voices, from book one of the *Well Tempered Clavier*, by J.S. Bach, is a good example of extremely economical use of material. (This fugue was chosen as a place to begin examining contrasts and similarities with Mehlau’s work, as it was familiar to the author.) The subject occurs in varying forms, 17 times during two A4 pages. Note also that the motif begins on the upbeat, providing forward melodic and rhythmic motion, as in the melody of ‘*Young Werther*.’

The subject ends with the ascending minor 6th interval, which has a lamenting quality about it, (and which Mehl dau employs extensively in ‘*Young Werther*,’ as a chord.)

Fig. 1.1 The subject from Bach’s ‘*Fugue in D Minor*,’ *Book One of the Well Tempered Clavier*:



numerous alterations, including changes of pitch, rhythm and sequence.

(McCoy, 2001)

The first 4 notes in bar 3, form part of a descending whole tone scale, which is then repeated at bar 5, down a tone.

Fig.1.3 Ron's Place solo - melodic displacement of the opening motif - Bars 11, 12 and 13:

The whole tone idea is repeated here, but the shape is altered to form a descending then ascending curve.



In fugue form, typically, the voices enter one at a time, and *stretto* occurs as the music becomes more and more dense. Mehlau employs a *stretto* type device bars 38 to 48, which is an uncommon technique among jazz pianists. In this example, from bars 41 to 45, the right hand begins with a repeated note ascending line in the first bar, which the left hand imitates in the third bar:

Fig.1.4 Bars 41 -45 *Ron's Place* solo:

The musical score for Fig. 1.4 is written in 3/4 time. It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows a right hand with eighth-note chords and a left hand with a long, sustained chord. The second system shows a right hand with a melodic line and a left hand with a rhythmic accompaniment.

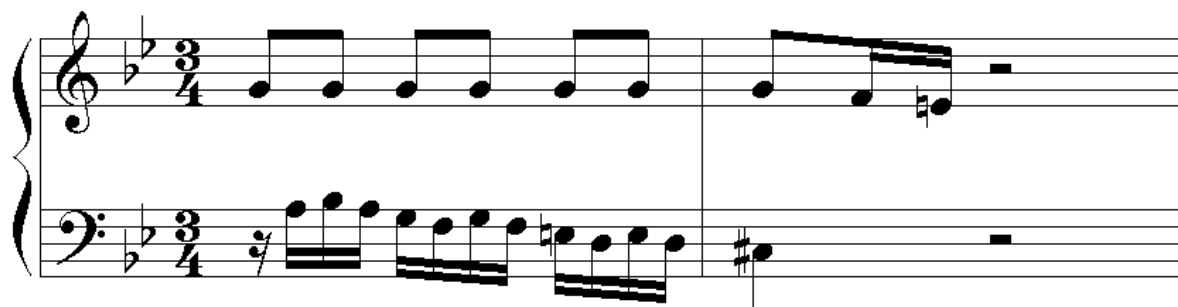
Mehldau has a virtuosic technique, where, unusually for a jazz pianist, his left hand is as independent as his right. His background as a classical pianist, has probably taught him independence between the hands “by osmosis,” and he uses this facility to add to the melodic texture of his work, as in **Fig.1.4**. (Interview, 2003). (Mehldau also employs a very similar use of stretto technique to the above example, in his improvisation on ‘*Young Werther*’ from ‘*Introducing,*’ 1995.) This provides much of his compositional and improvisational work with a contrapuntal flavour, and is one of the major characteristics of his style from the mid to late 1990s and up until the album, ‘*Largo*’ recorded in 2001.

Further examples of his use of contapuntal playing can be observed during the ‘head’ and solo of ‘*Unrequited*’, from *Art of the Trio*, vol. 3, and also ‘*Sehnsucht*,’ from the same album.

Mehldau mentions Fugue No. 16 in G minor from Book 2 of the *Well Tempered*

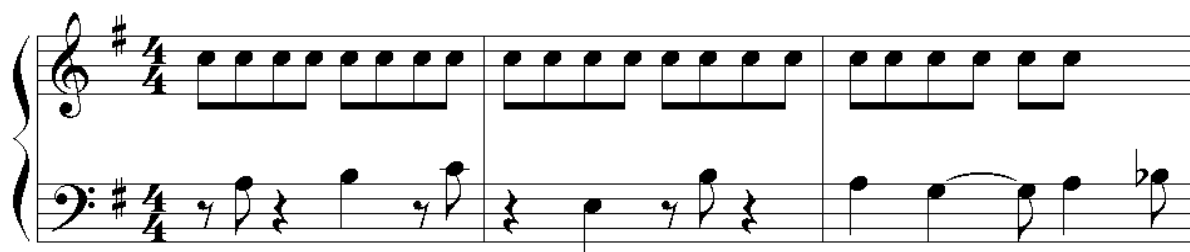
Clavier as being a fugue he particularly likes. (Interview, 2003.) Interestingly, the subject contains a repeated note figure:

Fig 1.5 ‘Fugue No.16 in G minor,’ *Well Tempered Clavier*, Book 2, Bars 8 and 9:



Mehldau also employs note repetition often, as seen above in ‘*Ron’s Place*’ and also in his ‘*Sehnsucht*’ solo on *Art of the Trio* Volume 3:

Fig 1.6 The opening of the third chorus of improvisation, ‘*Sehnsucht*,’ Bars 69 to 71:



In this example of economy of material, Mehldau plays a repeated note in one hand, while improvising with the other. This combination of ideas, results in an increase of melodic intensity and drama. Also, while one hand is focused on ‘one idea,’ the other is free to improvise.

Romantic Period Influences

As the *Chicago Tribune* observed in regard to Mehdau's compositions on 'Introducing,' (1995), the originality of these compositions is startling. (Hal Leonard, 2003).

Mehldau has been greatly influenced by Germanic literature and culture in general, and has spent time living in Germany. The Romantic period appears to have had a particular impact on him. Mehdau says he has been influenced by "Schumann, late Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms," among others. (Interview, 2003.)

Stein (1996, p.6) suggests that German Romanticism can be expressed in four main themes, each theme being captured by a typical Romantic metaphor.

"The theme of heightened individuality is dramatised by the figure of the wanderer: The evocative world of nature is typified by the lonely forest. The seductiveness of mystery is represented by the night, and spiritual salvation is projected by yearning for peaceful death. All of these themes and metaphors emphasise the characteristic German Romantic need to explore the unknown and the dichotomous."

Mehldau has spent a lot of time travelling in the United States and Europe over the last decade, and can clearly identify with the lonely Romantic wanderer archetype.

"It's composers like Schumann, Schubert and Brahms who have this kind of interior, inner thing that pulls you in. For whatever reason it seems to suit my temperament. Ever since I can remember I was like that. Those were the kinds of things that appealed to me from a very early age with music. The very fine line between loneliness, solitude, reflection. Being alone always appealed to me as a kid." (Jazz from

Lincoln Centre, 1998).

Art in this 19th Century period, was characterised by intense emotionalism, introspection and self-absorption. Poets celebrated the individual and savoured every human emotion from ecstatic joy to devastating despair. German literature is noted for its poems whose titles highlight feelings and psychological states, such as Matthaues von Collin's '*Wehmut*' ('Melancholy') and Eichendorff's '*Heimweh*' ('Homesickness') (Stein, 1996).

A number of Mehldau's titles can be seen to reflect these influences - most notably, '*Sehnsucht*' - which translates as 'longing,' also, '*Unrequited*,' and '*Young Werther*.' According to Stein, (1996 p.5), irony is expressed through different combinations of contradictory elements, for example: Romantic yearning (romantische Sehnsucht) for unattainable love, weeping for joy because love is full of pain; or the moon's light creating shadows on the landscape.

Mehldau's compositions '*Sehnsucht*' and '*Unrequited*,' have a harmonic continuum which never really resolves, creating the perception of perpetual motion. The emotional turbulence suggested in the titles, is therefore represented by Mehldau in unresolved, ever changing harmony

Examination of links between Brahms *Capriccios*, Opus 76 No. 1 and Opus 116 No. 7, '*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*' and '*Young Werther*':

In analysing Mehldau's composition of this name, it became necessary to ask Mehldau how the tune came about, as the title suggested a 'literary connection.'

In 1774, '*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*' ('*The Sufferings of Young Werther*'), by Goethe was released. In German, the word *wert* (old spelling *werth*) means "worthy, estimable." '*Werther*,' is the first German novelette, and was the first German work of any kind to make its author, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and his country's literature,

internationally known. It is a tragic story, beautifully written, about a young man who becomes besotted with another man's woman and is unable to reconcile his feelings. In the end, he commits suicide.

Mehldau was so influenced by this book, that he even named his publishing company after it. This tune is highly original in terms of jazz structure. It has an enigmatic quality which upon closer examination can probably be attributed to the influence of both '*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*,' and Brahms *Opus 76. No.1*. Mehldau unconsciously borrowed a motif from this Brahms '*Capriccio*' in his composition :

Fig. 1.7: Brahms 'Capriccio' Opus 76 No.1 Bars 15 and 16:

"The one that '*Young Werther*' borrowed from unconsciously was the first '*Capriccio in F-Sharp Minor from Opus 76*' - the four note motif that is the main theme in the right hand: C-sharp, D, F-sharp, F-natural. It's almost the same interval-wise as the four note-motif of '*Young Werther*' - A, B-flat, D-flat, C."

(Interview, 2003.)

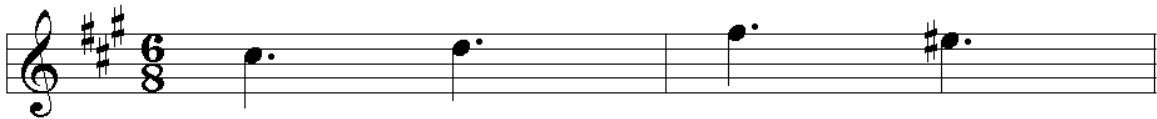
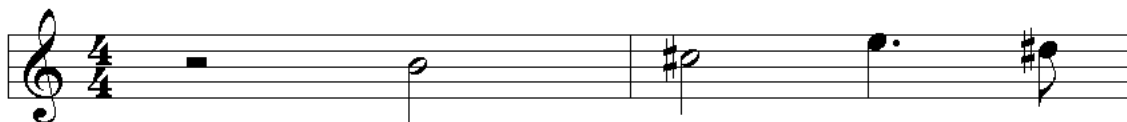


Fig 2.2: *Young Werther* Bars 19 and 20:



The ‘head’ in this composition is unusual, in that it can’t be notated as a typical jazz lead sheet, (a melody plus chord symbols.) Rather, the ‘melody’ is distributed between the two hands, like a series of questions and answers. The melodic fragments have a unified feel about them, brought about by way of common interval choices, such as the prevalence of the minor and major 6th intervals, in how the fragments are harmonised, for example, bar 12:

Fig 1.9: ‘*Young Werther*’ Bar 12:



Of this composition, Mehldau says:

“ That came about as a result of studying a lot of the contrapuntal aspects of classical music. I tried to get away from just a one note melody and a chord under it, and tried to explore the relationships between several notes moving independently. The whole tune is based

on four notes in different configurations. The idea of generating a whole composition from a small amount of thematic material is very alluring to me, and came about as a result from studying the compositions of great classical composers like Beethoven and Brahms.” (Hopper, 2003)

There may also be a possible stylistic link between the opening of the ‘*Capriccio in D Minor*,’ Opus 116, No. 7 as shown in **Fig. 2.1** and the ‘question and answer’ style Mehlau employs in ‘*Young Werther*.’ The right hand/left hand interplay is certainly similar.

Fig. 2.1:



Examination of ‘*Unrequited*’

This composition is a miniature masterpiece, both in terms of compositional technique, and the way in which the improvisation develops, (as heard on Art of the Trio Vol. 3.) Harmonically, the bass moves either cyclically, or in intervals of a 3rd or less, creating

closely related harmonies reminiscent of J.S. Bach. There is a new chord type every bar, creating a texture of unrelenting movement and delayed resolution. Mehldau employs interrupted cadences at bars 4 and 5 and 12 and 13, an unusual technique in jazz composition, but common in classical harmony. At bar 9, he substitutes a Bb Major chord for its relative G minor chord, which is unremarkable in itself, however Mehldau talks about the mixing of major and minor as, “a kind of aural symbol - that literally paraphrases Romanticism in its gesture.” (Jazz Times, 2001.) Dualities and dichotomies are part of romantic irony, or as described by Cole Porter, and quoted by Mehldau in *‘Every Time We Say Goodbye’*, “how strange the change from major to minor...(Jazz Times, 2001.) Mehldau employs chord substitution, as many jazz musicians do, to add the element of ‘surprise’ in a chord progression.

‘Unrequited’ is an example of 3 part writing in the piano part - soprano, alto and tenor, with the bass line provided by Larry Grenadier. Voiceleading, (4 of a chord becomes 3 of the next chord in the next bar,) often occurs in the alto line, usually descending chromatically, for example Bars 6-7. This technique creates a very smooth transition from one chord to the next.

At Bars 17 - 20, Mehldau employs ‘contrapuntal elaboration of static harmony,’ a common jazz technique, not widely utilised in classical music. All 3 renderings of the 32 bar ‘head’ on this recording, employ counterpoint in place of standard chord voicings.

After the first statement of the ‘head,’ or ‘theme,’ the second ‘head’ begins as a variation on the first, employing more dense question and answering phrases between the 3 piano parts than in the first statement. ‘Theme and variations’ is a common classical technique, also not widely used in jazz.

The piano solo is 3 choruses long, and is in 3 distinct sections. The first chorus is mostly sequential employing question and answer phrases. The second chorus is based

around contrapuntal ideas, while the third is a virtuosic tour de force. Mehldau employs right hand arpeggios in 8th note triplets and 16th notes, while playing a haunting improvised melody with the left. The solo section comes to an end with abstract jazz language lines, including the difficult phrasing of 7 in the time of 4 eighth notes, Bar 77.

This track demonstrates Mehldau's ferocious technique, and his ability to effortlessly combine jazz and classical elements, in a single composition and improvisation.

Mehldau in Comparison with Other Jazz Musicians

On the allmusic.com site, the following was written about Mehldau:

“Brad Mehldau was another of the plethora of young jazz pianists in the ‘90s to adopt Bill Evans as their role model. Yet while the influence of Evans still thoroughly dominates Mehldau’s introspective manner, harmonic constructions, and preferred format (the piano trio), he is one of the more absorbing and thoughtful practitioners within that idiom.”

(Ginnell, 2003)

Mehldau vehemently rejects any comparison with Bill Evans. He says, “I’ve cringed when some critics say I was obviously first and foremost influenced by him. It’s not true. I’ve started to feel like it’s a conspiracy against me. A lot of times, what they (the critics) really want to do is to make you smaller.” (*Downbeat*, September 2002, 28.)

Mehldau’s frustration and annoyance with the comparison is understandable, as he shares only a few characteristics with Evans. The trio format, intellectualism, emotionalism, a classical background, an occasionally crooked neck, and the occasional standard left hand voicing, which all jazz players use from time to time. In terms of the end result, both pianists have their own unique voice at the piano, and their own definitive approach to the music.

On the subject of Keith Jarrett, Mehldau says, “When I was 13, a friend knew about

Keith Jarrett and he bought me the *Koln Concert*. That's an ideal to aspire to, not to play like him, but to have the amount of creativity that he has and to tap into it." (*Downbeat* September 2002, 28.)

Mehldau has transcribed solos by Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner and Bud Powell, although he no longer transcribes. (Interview, 2003.) It is difficult however, to observe any great influence from the work of the musicians whose work he has transcribed, on Meldau's improvisations or compositions.

Conclusion

Mehldau has a unique style based on his pluralistic approach to the study of music. 'Classical' influences are a very central part of Mehldau's approach to jazz. The Romantic period in particular, appears to have had a profound impact on his work.

He has superb technical facility, and is able to play very difficult phrasings, such as double handed single line improvisation, left handed soloing against right hand arpeggios, and he exhibits flow and ease with odd time signatures. He employs many question and answer phrases, sequences, and contrapuntal lines from the 'classical' language. His continuing study of 'classical' music is undoubtedly beneficial in this regard, as well as providing inspiration for his compositions and improvisations. He is able to draw on a huge repertoire from the last three or four hundred years, as well as contemporary music, combining and contrasting materials in an original way.

These characteristics combine to give him a uniquely appealing and compelling voice at the piano.

Selected Annotated Discography of Brad Mehldau

Alone Together - with Lee Konitz and Charlie Haden - stretching the boundaries of the drumless trio - (1997). USA: Blue Note

American Dreams - with Charlie Haden and Michael Brecker - string arrangements by Alan Broadbent, Jeremy Lubbock and Vince Mendoza. (2002). LA: The Verve Music Group

Elegiac Cycles - a solo album - introspective and melancholic, pseudo classical compositions. (1999) LA: Warner Bros.

Hyperion with Higgins (1999) LA: UNI/ECM

In This World - Mark Turner - Brad as sideman

Introducing Brad Mehldau - 1st CD as leader - blazing new talent, 7/4 proficiency, fast tempos. (1995) USA: Warner Bros.

Largo - departing from the acoustic trio, electro-acoustic album featuring horn arrangements, Brad on vibes on 'Wave and 'Mother Nature's Son', and soundscapes. (2001) LA: Warner Bros.

Places - a more mellow trio album than 'The Art Of' series. (2000) LA: Warner Bros.

Signs of Life - Peter Bernstein Quartet - (1995) NY: Criss Cross Jazz 1095

Somethin's Burnin' - Peter Bernstein Quartet - (1993) NY: Criss Cross Jazz 1079

The Art of the Trio - volume 1 - features 'Blackbird' and 'Blame it on my Youth' - the latter track was featured in the film 'Eyes Wide Shut.' (1996). USA: Warner Bros.

The Art of the Trio - volume 2 - Live at the Village Vanguard - featuring 'Countdown' and 'It's All Right With Me.' Also contains a 12 page essay by Brad. (1997) USA: Warner Bros. Records Inc.

The Art of the Trio - volume 3 - Songs - features the wonderful 'Unrequited.' USA: Warner Bros. 1998.

The Art of the Trio - volume 4 - Back at the Vanguard - Live energy on ‘All the Things You Are’ (1999) NY: Warner Bros.

The Art of the Trio - volume 5 - Progression - Bachian introduction to ‘Alone Together.’ (2000) NY: Warner Bros.

Timeless Tales - Joshua Redman (1998) USA: Warner Bros.

Vine - Chris Cheek - (1999) NY: FSNT 086

When I Fall in Love - Mehdau & Rossy trio - (1993) FSNT007

Works For Me - John Schofield (2000) NY Verve

Young At Art - Jesse Davis alto - leader (1993) USA: Concord Jazz CCD-456

Discography - Non - Mehdau Albums

Related listening from the classical repertoire:

Jando, Jenö. (1995). *J.S.Bach The Well Tempered Clavier, Book 1.*[CD]. Germany: Naxos

Kovacevich, S.B. (1983). *Brahms.*[CD] Germany: Phillips

Rogé, P. (1991). *Brahms* [CD] UK: Decca Ltd

Schiff, A. (1987) *J.S. Bach The Well Tempered Clavier, Book 2.*[CD] London: Decca

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Bach, J.S.(1912) *The Well Tempered Clavier Books 1 and 2:* London: Edwin Ashdown

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Brahms, J. (1928) *Eight Piano Pieces* Augener’s Edition No. 5122

Brahms, J. (1928) *Fantasias*: Augener's Edition No. 5124

De Barros, P. (1999) *Acoustic Pianist of the Year*: Downbeat Vol. 66 No.12 page 142

Doerschuk, R. (2001) *88: The Giants of Jazz Piano*. San Francisco, California: Backbeat; London: Hi Marketing, pages 319, 320 and 321

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Hopper, B.H. (2003) *Brad Mehldau Biography*. Retrieved 8/3/03. <http://www.hopper-management.com>

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McCoy, Kerry. (2001) *Woodshed: Ron's Place*: Downbeat, September, pages 76-78

Mehldau, Brad. (2001) *Brahms, Interpretation & Improvisation* USA: Jazz Times

Shatz, Adam. (1999) *A Jazz Pianist with a Brahmsian Bent* USA: New York Times, page 31

Stein, Deborah. (1996) *Poetry into Song*. New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, page 6