JOHN COLTRANE’S MEDITATIONS SUITE: A STUDY IN SYMMETRY

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BACKGROUND

There are several milestone recordings in the vast Coltrane repertoire. These works stand out because they represent a summation of a specific period of development for the great saxophonist who, in his two-decades-plus career, traversed several well-defined stages. Each period was marked by the compositions themselves, their harmonic implications especially, as well as certain saxophone and ensemble techniques.

The early years, roughly 1955 through 1959, included his tenure with Miles Davis and for a short period with Thelonious Monk. These years featured many dates as sideman, as well as leader dates under his own name. The repertoire consisted mainly of standards, blues, and originals, all within the well-defined bebop idiom. Coltrane’s approach was unique even in this increasingly clichéd musical environment. It was complex, highly sophisticated concerning the chord changes, the speed as well as dexterity of his technique, and the saxophone sound itself. The “Giant Steps” recording on Atlantic (recently rereleased with alternate takes), along with nearly a dozen other tunes based on that complex harmonic progression, could be considered the culmination and apex of that first stage.

Beginning with “My Favorite Things” and the eventual formation of a steady and enduring group (Elvin Jones, McCoy Tyner, and Jimmy Garrison), Trane’s modal period (1960–65) found its seminal recording in A Love Supreme (1964), which included four compositions loosely held together by a simple three-note motif, consistent pentatonic fourth-based voicings, chromaticism, and a spiritual underpinning. This famous and widely acclaimed album also marked the end of the quartet’s basic premises, which were steady time and at least the semblance of a pedal point or ostinato harmony as the foundation for most of their repertoire. The frenetic pace of Coltrane’s recordings in 1965 reflect the changes he
felt were necessary, first in the music and then in the personnel itself. Therefore, the recordings of that year bear witness to a change of concept—a freer approach to all the aspects of his music.

It is in this year that *Meditations* was recorded. Although *First Meditations* precedes the suite under analysis in this study, the original version can be viewed as a prelude to the full-blown suite finally recorded a few months later. Of significance is that the full suite recorded November 23, 1965, marks the last known record date for both Elvin and McCoy with Coltrane. (This does not include any possible bootleg recordings which may exist.) It also marks the first appearance of drummer Rashied Ali and nearly the first session with saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, both of whom would stay with Coltrane until his death in 1967. Although some of the newer stylistic innovations developed during this last period of Coltrane (1965–67) were present in subsequent recordings, nowhere are they as clearly presented and as complete as in this suite. Primarily this is due to the structure of the music, which gives it a unity and balance equal to the intensity that stands out in the Coltrane legacy.

**OVERALL FORM**

One should begin the discussion of what makes *Meditations* so unique with the nonmusical, spiritual underpinning which permeates the suite. Anyone familiar with Coltrane’s sincere pronouncement of his self-awakening, so lucidly described in the liner notes to *A Love Supreme*, will notice how, during the last two years of his life, almost every composition bore some sort of spiritual significance in the titles themselves. The examples are many: “Dear Lord,” “Peace on Earth,” “Joy,” “Ascension,” “Dearly Beloved,” “Amen,” “Attaining,” “Resolution,” etc. Though it may seem presumptuous to speculate on such a private matter or attempt to deduce motives for this decidedly strong and obvious inclination, the five titles for the suite undeniably portray a strong religious quality: (1) “The Father and The Son and The Holy Ghost” (suggesting the Holy Trinity); (2) “Compassion”; (3) “Love” (the essential message of Christ); (4) “Consequences” (for those who don’t follow the path?); (5) “Serenity” (the eventual resting place?). There are many interpretations which could be made for these titles, but when one hears the music and considers the possibilities, there can be no doubt as to the direction that Coltrane was at least implying.

But it is not only the nonmusical, perhaps programmatic, aspect which unites the suite. The compositions themselves have very definite musi-
cal intentions in both their outstanding sense of lyricism and how specific intervals were used to create the various moods. The question overriding this analysis is: Were these melodies written down to be played more or less literally, or were they improvised? As of this writing, I am not aware of what exactly occurred, but the strong harmonic undertones suggest the former scenario. (In a discussion with McCoy Tyner in early 1996, Tyner said that the basic chords were written out and they knew the general melodic structure, but most of the recording was freely improvised.) However, what shades this view is that nowhere during the performance does the piano play any direct harmony to the melodies, although, to my ear, they are so clearly suggestive of chords. This is what forms, for me, the essential crux of the suite. By and large the melodies are extremely diatonic, while the harmonies played by the bass and piano are non-tonal, as are the improvisations. And herein lies the genius of Meditations—with the dense and dissonant overall color of the recording lies the most extreme and poetic lyricism. From the chaos of the firmament came perfect nature. In other words, the essential dichotomy of tension and release is not merely demonstrated as in any great art but is taken to an even higher level of contrast. Within the most complex lies the most simple.

MELODY AND HARMONY

Philosophy aside, a quick glance at the intervallic structures of the themes and their lyrical shapes is most instructive.

“'The Father and The son and The Holy Ghost’

After beginning with some multiphonic colors peculiar to the tenor saxophone centered about A4 (all references will be concert key), the first movement launches into a complete exposition of major triads beginning with the fifth as a pickup to the first, second, and third degree of the scales. For the most part, the key centers themselves descend by major thirds, except for a few cycles of fifths as the transposed motif evolves. The motif itself is unyielding and in its shape presents what must be the clearest example of tonality and melody in all musics—the 1, 2, 3, 5 of the major key! To reiterate, what makes this simplistic melody not appear trite is the nonmatching bass and piano harmonic accompaniment as well as the flowing, nonmetrical rhythm underneath (see Example 1).
The Father, the Son & the Holy Ghost

Example 1: Excerpt from “The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost”

“Compassion”

This is another example of an interval tying the composition together. Except for occasional half-steps, fourths, and whole steps, the minor third permeates the piece. The eternal blues motif, full of yearning, unifies the transpositions which, although McCoy Tyner is freely comping harmon-
Compassion

Example 2: Excerpt from Compassion

ically, do occur over a D, centered bass line, set in a rolling 3/4 meter. The use of octaves in the recapitulation after the solo gives a dramatic finale to this wonderful, haunting, and mysterious melody (see Example 2).

“Love”

This piece represents the epitome of a diatonic, step, half-step melody which is completely song-like as a result. Though it seems to be centered around an A, tonality, the basic rising motif is transposed throughout (Example 3). What is remarkable about this section is first of all the length of the so-called melody, which brings me back to pondering the thought posed earlier about composed versus improvised. It seems here that much of the latter part of the melody may be spontaneous, especially in light of the earlier recorded version of “Love” on *First Meditations,*
which is only a fragment of what appears full-blown here. Also, Trane lightens the tension dramatically in the middle by what seems a shift to the relative C minor before rebuilding to what for me is the midpoint of the entire suite, the altissimo melodies centered around his A (Example 4). Finally, the trills up and down A major-seventh bring this dramatic section, the climax of the suite, to a close.

Love

Example 3: Excerpt from Love
Coltrane’s Meditations Suite

Example 4: Excerpt from Love

“Consequences”

This movement is similar to other pieces from this late period in it not being so much a melody as a rhythmic motif which initiates a textural improvisation. One could say that “Consequences” represents the most elemental of structures functioning purely as a vehicle for the improvisation to follow. In other words, it is the truest free jazz piece of the suite, (top pg. 179)
Consequences

Themes

Example 5: Themes from Consequences

where the sole function of the "head" is to suggest a rhythm and texture. In actuality, though, even "The Father and The Son and The Holy Ghost" functions this way, although there is a motivic melody in that section at the outset. This is one of the parameters of Coltrane's last period, where melodies and ensuing improvisations are not necessarily directly related (Example 5).

"Serenity"

Finally, this tranquil and lyrical melody, based on what appears to be a phrygian motif, moves around several key centers in a V-I cycle when analyzed purely harmonically. As in "The Father," the accompaniment is not harmonically linked, so it appears on the surface that the melody was not intended to be tonally based. However, once again the point arises as to how clever was the juxtaposition of a diatonic-harmonic based melody opposite the nontonal, swirling background (Example 6).

RHYTHM AND COLOR

Quite possibly, it was the personal dynamics between the old and the new which gave the rhythm its essential character on Meditations. Legend suggests that there was an inherent tension between Elvin Jones and Rashied Ali. With the approval of the leader, the new kid on the block (Rashied) challenges the chief. After all, it was apparent from many of the 1965 recordings (which were not released contemporaneously) that Coltrane was heading towards an arhythmic, nonsteady pulse in his lines, as well as seemingly in the piano accompaniment. One hears on "Transition" and "Sun Ship" how Trane plays nonmetrically, yet Elvin still is
Example 6: Excerpt from Serenity

in time and in fact often marks off the 8- or 16-bar cycles, as was *de rigueur* in the quartet. As exciting as this kind of dialogue was, it had become clear that a change in the rhythm section was imminent. And in fact, as stated earlier, *Meditations* was McCoy’s and Jones’s last studio recording with Coltrane.

What Ali brought to the music was a flowing, bubbling feeling without dramatic cadence points which ordinarily emphasize tension and
release. In other words, the rhythm became seamless—in a sense like prose without punctuation or paragraph markings. The familiar ups and downs of Coltrane's music receded. Instead, there was usually a quick ascent after the opening statement, rather than the peaks and valleys of the older format. Seemingly, the song form (and by extension modal forms) were pushed into the background from this period until the end of Coltrane's life.

But Jones was up to the challenge when necessary. With the two fairly well separated in the panning picture, it is apparent that much of the cymbal fluttering heard is Ali, while tom-toms are Jones. Ali also keeps a more or less steady cymbal/snare color throughout, which does in essence comprise the major component of his style. The bottom end of the drums were always important to Jones's approach, especially the characteristic, thunderous floor tom-tom rolls heard so much during these last recordings, often in rubato sections. Besides the 3/4 rhythm on "Compassion," which is typical of Jones's style, he does indeed play arhythmic and nonmetrical with no clear cadential mark-off points. Also, his particular way of playing of playing mallets is heard to great advantage in both "Father" and "Love" during cymbal and tom-tom rolls.

For Jimmy Garrison, the late period was really a perfect gift. After all, one of his earliest associations has been with free jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman. A large part of his style was well-suited for a nonpulse concept. Although his quarter-note-walking-feel fit like a glove with Jones's cymbal beat over the preceding years, one could sense that he liked to break up the time and play more freely whenever possible. In fact his normally long rhapsodic solos punctuated by flamenco-like strumming seemed to suggest a predilection for a more abstract rhythmic concept. Also evident in Garrison's playing were his simple, songlike melodies sometimes heard in the background but most clearly in Meditations during the solo introduction to "Love."

The same could be said of McCoy Tyner, whose playing shines so brightly on this last recording. Through the years of accompanying and soloing, both his harmonic and rhythmic concepts had evolved to a point where Coltrane's late music seemed natural to him for the following reasons: (1) The chromaticism of his fourth and cluster voicings; (2) the complex and dense rhythms in the right-hand solo lines; (3) the grandiose left-hand and bass pedal-points which increasingly moved around many key centers; (4) the fluid and fast arpeggios in and around the basic pulse; (5) the contrary motion of left hand descending while right hand ascends, encompassing almost the entire range of the keyboard; (6) the sometimes
droning right-hand tremolo opposed by left-hand bass notes or chordal movement; and (7) the independent, inner rhythmic conversations which would often be heard underneath the horns on top. All these contributed to a swirling, orchestral accompaniment perfectly matched to the late Coltrane dense style. Alice Coltrane’s arpeggio approach, harplike and rubato orientation would replace Tyner’s style through the final recordings. But there can be no doubt that Tyner found a way to enhance this new music as he has done so impeccably for the past years.

Finally the matter of color has to be addressed, for with the addition of another tenor sax and drums, as well as Ali’s adding tamborine and bells, the entire sound of the group changed. Having Pharoah Sanders playing almost exclusively in the altissimo register as well as often employing a buzzing kind of growl to his normal sound and range, the sheer mass of the music grew both in density and extremes of tessitura. There were long portions of the late music (especially in live performance) where both tenors played simultaneously and quite intensely—Trane both high and low in rapid flashes; Sanders relentlessly high up; Tyner using the entire range of the piano; Ali almost always on cymbals and snare; Jones frequently playing tom-toms; Garrison playing counter melodies in the bottom. The color spectrum was in itself an assault upon the senses, especially to those who were used to the more traditional quartet sound.

PERFORMANCE

I would like to point out some highlights of the various solos taken. After a preliminary multiphonic coloring on the tenors, Trane plays the triadic melody to “Father” using a wide and lush vibrato, as was common in the late period. He makes extensive use of a repetitive triplet figure on one note, all over the fluttering nonpulse drums/bass accompaniment and Tyner’s arpeggios. Trane’s solo begins with fast, repeated runs eventually landing in the altissimo, ending with a technique common to the late-period improvisations, which is the impression of duets with himself—rapid high and low question/answer phrases. Finally Sanders enters with his buzzing tone and ultrahigh altissimo shrieks. With Trane up high also and the drummers burning, the first great peak of intensity has been reached, finally subsiding with a recapitulation of the melody and the same saxophone multiphonic from the beginning of the movement.
Into a quick segue, Elvin begins the rolling tom-tom oriented 3/4 rhythm with Garrison’s bass line while Trane quickly plays the minor-third melody to “Compassion,” again with a dramatic use of vibrato and a very dark tone. Tyner’s solo is full of over-the-pulse lines, sequences and ostinatos in the right hand along with thunderous block chords towards the end played right in the pulse (see Example 7). Coltrane’s recapitulation, as mentioned earlier, uses some dramatic octave leaps and lyrical altissimo playing before ending with a pause before the next movement.

Garrison takes one of his typical bass solos as an intro to “Love” using simple diatonic arpeggios and closely knit melodies in character with the coming theme. Tyner’s background to the melody is rhapsodic and very scalar, albeit in various and changing key centers. With a lot of tom-toms from Jones, and Ali’s cymbal, the balance behind Trane stays fairly

Analysis: Extended melodic shape; not exact transposition, but retaining the basic shape of downward motion, skip up, down again.

Example 7: Excerpt of McCoy Tyner’s solo in “Compassion”. This excerpt is taken from *A Chromatic Approach To Jazz Harmony and Melody* by David Liebman, published by Advance Music, 1991.
consistent throughout. Toward the middle of the theme a sensitive moment occurs as Trane quiets the whole band down and begins to build to the climax of the melody before resolving diatonically in A♭, concluding with rapid pianissimo trills. It should be noted that there are no solos in this movement or in the final “Serenity.”

“Consequences” is the “burn” of the suite, featuring at first Sanders playing intensely, screaming and appearing to rip the horn apart. When Trane joins in, the two saxophonists raise the intensity to an unbelievable level along with Jones and Ali. The sheer physical energy here is awesome in itself, and its placement in the suite is crucial to the entire shape of the performance.

After a solo excursion by Tyner, which sounds like a mini-twentieth-century piano concerto in scope, intensity, and technique, the scene is set for the benediction—the beautiful, yearning, and finally peaceful goodbye melody, “Serenity.” On the whole, as far as intensity is concerned, the form of the suite can be viewed as an A-A-B-A-B shape. The A sections are the intense “Father,” “Compassion,” and “Consequences,” while B represents the more peaceful “Love” and “Serenity.” There is also an interesting key relationship of fifths between “Love” (A♭), “Compassion” (D♭) and “Serenity” (G♭) when these movements are viewed harmonically.

PERSONAL VIEW

For me, every Coltrane release in the 1960s was an event. As I have written and said many times, seeing this group live was what inspired me directly to pursue jazz. I awaited each new release anxiously to see what to expect when I would go to the clubs in New York, as I did so often. It should be noted that the order of recording dates does not necessarily reflect the order of the actual releases at the time. In fact several of the 1965 recordings were released posthumously, possibly because of the enormous output or Trane’s reluctance to make the music available. Meditations came out after an album called The John Coltrane Quartet Plays, which itself followed the acclaimed A Love Supreme. On Quartet Plays, the tune “Brazilia” gave an inkling as to the next stage of Trane’s evolution. Besides the quartet being augmented by bassist Art Davis, the performance was very free in scope, and for me it was a big challenge to understand that tune. But it was Meditations with the addition of Ali and Sanders which gave conclusive evidence to the next period. Of course...
record releases may have been stylistically dated, compared to what the group was doing in live performances. I had seen Sanders a few times with Coltrane, and his addition to the group mystified me. To hear Coltrane abandon eight-bar phrases and steady-time on *Meditations* was cataclysmic for me. All I can say is that hearing the group live was the strongest music I have heard since, or up to that time—bar none.

As the decades passed and my comprehension of the music itself increased beyond the heavy spiritual influence and direct inspirational effect it had upon me as a youth, I felt that Trane’s late music has been by and large ignored by the audience and musicians alike. From the audience standpoint this was understandable, because their expectation of what Coltrane would play had been built up by so much repertoire from the quartet during the preceding five years. But I felt that musically, this period should be more studied and analyzed by musicians. In the mid-1980s with the help of my wife, Caris Visentin, who painstakingly transcribed all of the melodies of *Meditations*, I decided to perform the suite on each fifth anniversary of Coltrane’s passing. As I write this article in 1995, I have just performed it several times in Europe and New York, befitting the thirtieth anniversary of the actual recording session.

The most interesting musical aspect of rediscovering this inspiring music was that the melodies often suggest, to my ears, very strong harmonic implications. So in these performances around the world over the years (and into the future I hope), I have added some chord changes to “Love” and “Serenity” in particular, as well as on occasion using keyboards and percussion to color the various sections. Also depending upon the performance, I have added guitar, synthesizer, percussion, and trumpet, as well as more horns. I treat the performance of *Meditations* as a spiritual event, a celebration of Coltrane’s music and his massive effect upon me and so many musicians. This deep piece of music stands as a monument to John Coltrane’s vision of revelation which imbues his late period and, in particular, the *Meditations* Suite.
Meditations Suite - Voicings Sheet

I. 4ths/Clusters (2nds & 3rds)

II. Minor 3rds/2nds

IV. G7+5  A7+5  Double Whole Tone

V. Chord Voicings