## Chopin, Jobim, and Contrafactum

Peter Bouffard (December 2001)

## **Abstract**

The appropriation of preexisting music as a basis for new music is evinced in all periods and traditions. However, the procedures and significance of borrowing has varied over time and between repertories. J. Peter Burkholder has formulated a typology of musical borrowing that can be used to view this subject with a wider lens, that is to say, without the boundaries of traditions, periods, or genres; and has developed criteria for establishing and evaluating when borrowing has occurred.

Since the 1940s there has been an almost canonic practice in jazz of writing new melodies over preexisting chord changes borrowed from the blues and American popular songs, yielding new sources of repertory. There was a much older practice in Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries of adding new texts to older melodies in the plainchant and secular monophonic repertories. The Latin term contrafactum is most commonly applied to this compositional practice. In an article written in 1975, the musicologist James Patrick coined the term "contrafact" which he used, by analogy to the text substitution in medieval music, to describe a jazz melody built upon the chord progression of another piece.

Why do jazz musicians relish certain songs, so much that they have continually recycled them by adding new melodies? Jazz musicians value tunes that are good vehicles for improvisation. It appears that linear intervallic patterns (especially patterns that alternate tenths and sevenths), local and interlocking ii-Vs, and delayed tonics contribute to the success of an original harmonic scheme.

Initially, I focus my investigation on contrafacts that are based on harmonic schemes from the American popular song and blues repertories. Indeed, these are the defining sources. However, there are examples of newly composed pieces associated with the jazz idiom that borrow elements from works of other genres. This can be illustrated in the comparison of Frederick Chopin's *Prelude in E minor Op. 28, No. 4* and Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Insensatez" ("How Insensitive").

If we are to regard Chopin's *Prelude* as a blueprint for a jazz contrafact, then we must consider its harmony. Ironically, this piece has been described as "the search for the lost chord." Though the succession of sonorities is captivating, one searches in vain for an explanation through functional harmony. The *Prelude* is notoriously resistant to a chord-by-chord harmonic analysis. How then can it be utilized as a harmonic infrastructure? The confluence of voices generated in the *Prelude* does result in an inventory of certain vertical sonorities akin to minor triads, major sixth chords, major seventh chords, minor seventh chords, dominant seventh chords, half diminished chords, and fully diminished chords. And given its texture, it is possible to derive a type of chordal progression.

Written in 1963, "Insensatez" has become a standard itself. If we apply Burkholder's criteria for establishing and evaluating when borrowing has occurred, perhaps we can make a case applicable to the contrafact paradigm. My comparative analysis has revealed that the paradigm is intact. Jobim has transformed the *Prelude* into a 32-bar song.

What makes Jobim's tune so popular among jazz musicians? Clearly, "Insensatez" is not constructed entirely from a chain of fifths present in many preferred harmonic infrastructures. But it does bear the inexorable downward pull evinced by certain linear intervallic patterns allowing for similar descending voice leading—reminiscent of the preferred American popular song blueprints.

"Insensatez" is a finely crafted amalgamation of syncopated Brazilian rhythms, American popular music song form, and the kind of harmony that appeals to jazz musicians. The slower harmonic rhythm and chromatic bass line allows the improviser to treat each chord as its own tonally ambiguous sonic world. At the same time, the interpolation of some circle of fifth root movements and ii-V groupings helps the jazz musician to feel at home when improvising.

Chopin's Prelude in E minor mm. 22-25 (Bass cleff only)

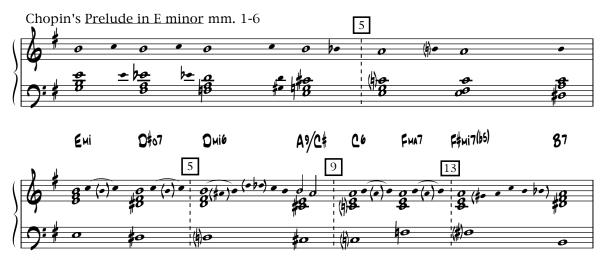


Inner line from Chopin's Prelude in E minor mm. 22-25



Jobim's "Insensatez" mm. 30-32 (melody derived from Chopin's inner line)





Jobim's "Insensatez" mm. 1-14

## Chopin's <u>Prelude in E minor</u> mm. 1-2





Jobim's "Insensatez" mm. 21-22

Chopin's Prelude in E minor mm. 21-25



Jobim's "Insensatez" mm. 29-32

"Insensatez" linear intervallic sketch

