"Cursed and Charmed" and "Africa"

Peter Vandemoortele

Abstract

An analysis of 2 jazz compositions published on a CD recording "Ysror", called "Africa" and "Cursed and Charmed", composed by Peter Vandemoortele, available on Itunes[1].) The instrumentation of both works is electric guitar, electric bass and jazz drums. In this article the composer talks about the inspiration for the music, the harmonic concept of progressions and regressions, and the change of meter as a compositional device.

Cursed and Charmed

The title "Cursed and Charmed", a jazz composition for a jazz trio, implies an apparent contradiction: a curse, a harmful event affecting someone, unable to do anything about it, and at same time being 'charmed' with the consequences of that event. I tried to musically express this oxymoron in the improvisation part of the performance and by recreating this sense of ambiguity through 1. the use of diatonic open triads, avoiding a tritone and 2. the use of a balance between ascending progressions and regressions (descending progressions).

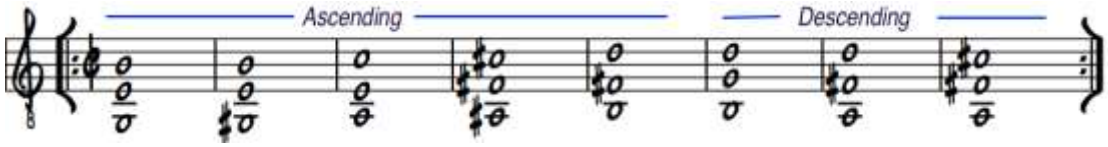
I intentionally made use of simple triads and/or inversions of them as opposed to the dense homophonic harmonic accompaniments that are achieved by making extensive use of chord "extensions", such as the ninth, eleventh or thirteenth, as commonly seen in Jazz compositions. The fact of leaving out the tensions not only creates this ambiguity but also provides the freedom for the improviser to add his or her own tensions and generates an open character to the trio setting. A simple triad like a G E B, although obvious as a chord, can be ambiguous, it can be both Em or G6.

Tonal chord progressions consist of a mixture of ascending progressions, descending progressions (also called regressions) and step-wise progressions. I used this as a guideline to compose the harmonies. I find it very useful to analyze a composition from this viewpoint because it is how I perceive the change between chords. It also helps us understand the basic layout of a piece and direction of the harmonies in a composition.

[1] https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/ysror/id1135382783

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Arnold Schoenberg[2] who is responsible for the classification of these chord progressions, defines them as follows: 1. strong progressions: the root descends by a fifth or by a third. In these progressions the root note of the first chord is preserved in the second 2. descending or regression: the root ascends by a third or a fifth (the root of the chord is not preserved in the second chord) and 3. superstrong progressions, the root and all other notes moves stepwise. The strong progression is an extremely common chord change in tonal music (as much as 80%) because it facilitates smooth voice leading and is the most effective progression in terms of fulfilling the listener's expectation. The descending is much less common, less effective and comes as a surprise, thus creating some ambiguity.



Example 2. Score reduction: In the first 5 measures, the chord movement is either a fourth up or a third down: G6 to E/G#, E/G# to Am, a fourth up[3], Am to F#/A#, a third down, F#/A# to Bm, a fourth up and Bm to G/B, a third down are strong progressions. The chord change from G/B to D/A, D/A to A6, a fifth up, are descending chord progressions or regressions.

The last chord, consisting of A F# C#, could be viewed as both F# minor in first inversion, as practiced in tonal classical music, or could be seen as an A major chord with the 6th, common in Jazz. (The same voicing is also used for the very first chord) In both cases (F#m or A6) the type of progressions is a descending chord progression (a regression), D to F#m, up a third or D to A6 which goes up a fifth.

The omission of the triton in these triads brings forth an intended ambiguity. The A section can be seen in D major or in E minor. In the last measure of section A (example 2) the G C# was avoided, which would result in a dominant A7 chord but chose A F# C#, the F#
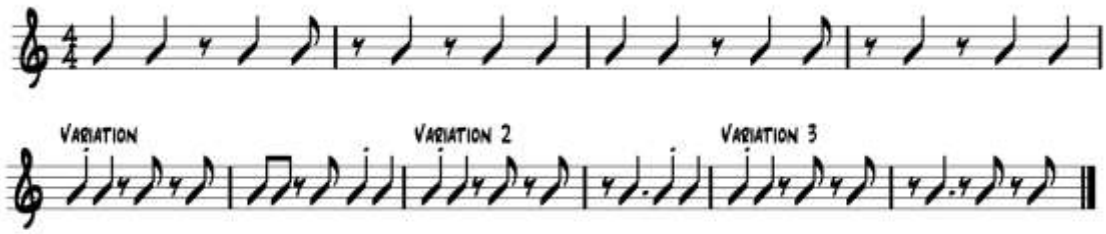
[2] In his Theory of Harmony (p. 118-121), Schoenberg used the English terms 'strong' or 'ascending', 'descending', and 'superstrong' to classify the three basic chord movements.

[3] Chord movement is analyzed from the root of the chords, not from the bass of an inversion, in this case E to A, a fourth up, and not G# to A.

minor triad (or the A6 triad) instead. The F#m indeed implies the key of D major because of the C#, and the very first chord of the piece, G E B, would then be heard as the IIm7 (Em/G) or the IV6 (G6) in D major. On the other hand if the very first chord G E B is seen as an E minor first inversion (Em/G) it strongly implies the key of E minor. This is confirmed by the progression into the subdominant Am through the use of a secondary dominant (E, the V of IV). Furthermore, the A minor chord is not a diatonic chord in D major and is of no functional use in the key of D major unless it was used as a preparatory dominant of D7 (Am7- D7) moving to the subdominant G major (which is not the case here), which suggest the Em key. The F#m or A6 in measuse 8 which resolves back into the first chord as a super strong progression (step-wise motion). The occurrence of the D in measure 7 of section A, a strong rhythmic position, does favor the key of D.
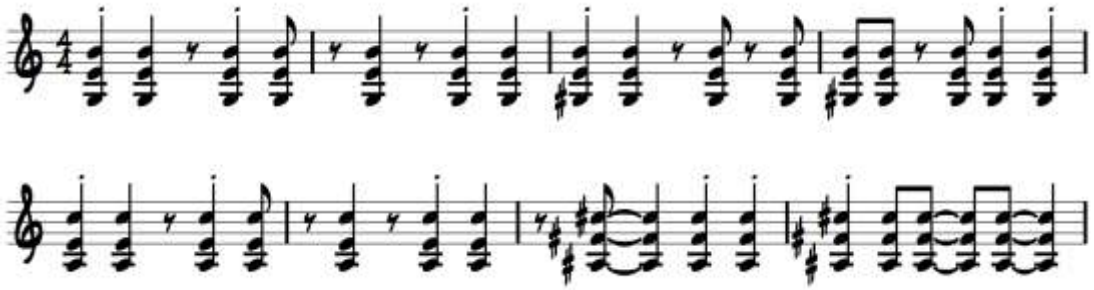
The bridge, in the key of Dm, is preceded by A6 chord which, as mentioned above, is void of the tritone G C# but still does move smoothly into the new tonic Dm as there are only 3 notes, F# descending chromatically to F, C# ascending chromatically to the D, the A is a common note, 1 common note and 2 notes moving, a principle that always works. Harmonically, the bridge keeps a balance between strong, descending and superstrong progressions.

Rhythmically I was inspired by the driving pulse of the Samba and Samba Cruzado drum patterns. During the composing process I used as a sequencer to loop the drum patterns in the background, inspiring the creation of the harmonic and melodic material.



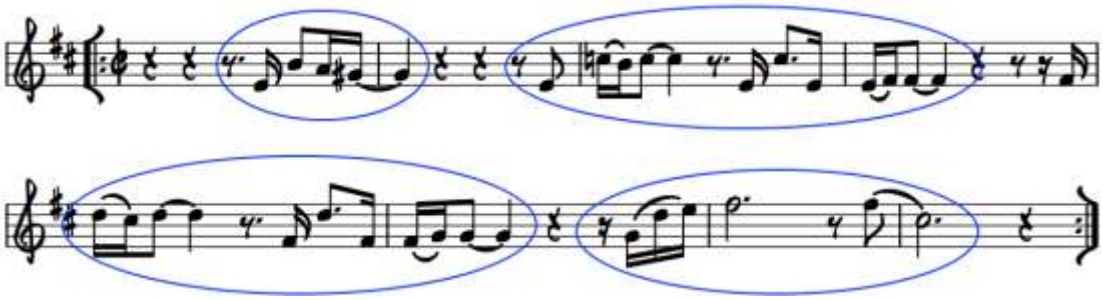
Example 3. Variations on the Samba cruzado pattern.

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Example 4. The samba pattern and variations in the guitar accompaniment.

The piece, a simple ternary song in ABC form, commences by stating the theme using electric guitar and is then repeated adding drums and bass to allow for improvisations. The bass is taking over the harmonic accompaniment of the guitar in the same register with a few modifications. The interaction of the rhythm section with the guitar solo creates a new dynamic to the piece, creating a peak in the B part, which is repeated until cue before restating the melody of the C part. The melody of the A section comprises four statements of a two-bar unit.
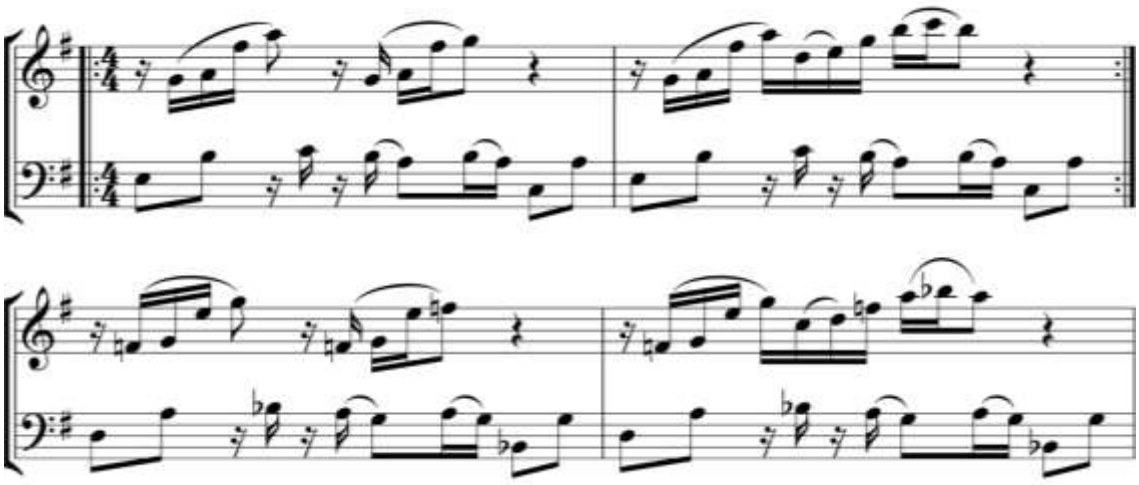


Example 5. The main theme: 4 statements of 2 bars

Africa

In the second piece “Africa” the goal was to write a composition on a rhythmic pattern that repeats itself. The piece is characterized by a change of meter from 4/4 to 7/8, inspired by the rhythmic concept and concept of improvisation found in North African music. The rhythmic patterns change throughout the 3 main parts, as do the harmonies to a lesser extent.

The overall structure of Africa is A B C B. The piece changes in character throughout the different parts. The A section, a guitar and bass duo, is rather minimalistic in nature. It is based on a short 2-note motive in the key of G, repeated over a descending bass. It provides a consonant harmonic structure on a repetitive pulse and establishes the emotional context of the piece.
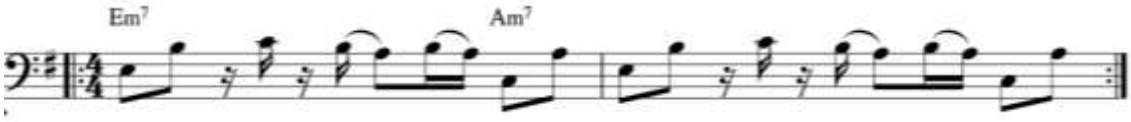
The B section changes into a rhythmic denser character achieved by adding the drums over a dynamic ostinato bass line and introduces a pentatonic theme characterized by big leaps alternated with major and minor seconds. The harmonic approach here is simple as intended, modal in character, a repetitive rhythmic-harmonic pattern on the Em Aeolian mode that is transposed to Dm Aeolian, switching back and forth between those 2 centers.



Example 6. Africa: ostinato bass with pentatonic melody
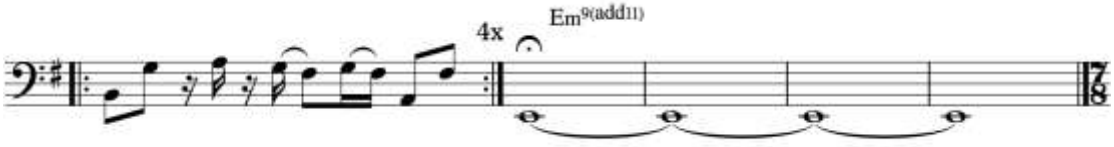
Although the ostinato bass on Em sounds modal (and is transposed to Dm), it does suggest to move to a subdominant chord, a plagal color so to say. The B in the bass (second 8th note) raising to the C imbalances the Em chord (tonic function) and moves to an A on the third beat creating tension on the Em and implies a subdominant chord which is confirmed on the 4th beat through the leap from the low C to the A spelling an Am chord. The jump between the low C and the A suggests the subdominant Am chord in first inversion. This little feature is repeated in the next section, although in a different meter, creating continuity throughout the piece.

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Example 7.

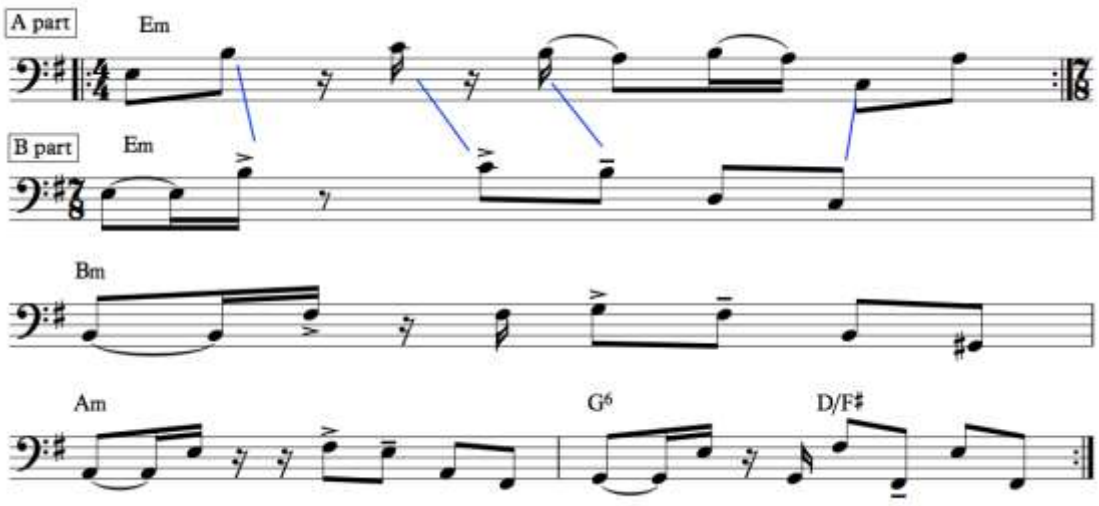
The end of the B section is announced using the similar ostinato motive but this time transposed to the dominant, followed by a fermata on Em9 11 of 4 measures.



Example 8. End of part B

Leaving out a harmonic accompaniment on this part allows for the bass ostinato to be interpreted in different ways. The bass line starting on the B suggests a dominant chord, as there is no third of the B chord, it can be interpreted as both a major or minor chord, for example as a Bm7 or a B7 giving the improviser the freedom to impose his own harmonies. The G, on the 2nd eighth note of the first beat, destabilizes the original B chord (B7 or Bm7), until resolved to the f# on the third beat.

Another character change is created from part B to part C achieved through the change of meter from 4/4 in A and B parts to ⅞ meter in the C part and through harmonic variations. As was the case in 4/4 meter, the bass starts on the root (E) and the fifth (B) of Em connecting the 2 sections harmonically but this time the rhythmic accents are displaced in the new meter. The 7/8 meter is divided in 3+2+2, the third eighth note being syncopated which creates a forward pulsing motion



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Example 9. Change from 4/4 to 7/8 meter.

The harmonic approach is tonal using chord sequences of 4 measures consisting of 5 chords from Em Aeolian: Im7, Vm7, IVm7, III6 and V/3 that serve as the basis for improvisation by guitar and drums consecutively. The ostinato bass from part B is developed into a new melodic bass line that accommodates the new chords but this time in 7/8 meter.

Summary

The musical material for both compositions came from various sources. In the case of "Cursed and Charmed" I wanted to create a lyrical melody on top of open triads that had no tritone using a mix of ascending and descending progressions. The result is an open sounding homophonic tune. "Africa" is a piece that builds from repetitive ostinato patterns that change in mood and character, enhanced by the change in meter, from 4/4 to 7/8 and to back to 4/4. Both pieces were published on the CD "Ysror" (©2016 Peter Vandemoortele) and were performed at the Chiangmai Jazz Festival (2014) and other locations.

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Audio recording of CD “Ysror”

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