GENERAL

march by john lewis

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March by John Lewis: A Timeless Jazz Masterpiece

When you hear the phrase **“March by John Lewis,”** you might imagine a grand military parade, a stately procession of brass and drums. Yet the piece you’re about to explore is a subtle, sophisticated composition that showcases the quiet power of jazz piano and the compositional genius of one of the genre’s most understated figures. This article will take you on a journey through the origins, structure, and lasting influence of John Lewis’s “March.” Whether you’re a seasoned aficionado or a curious newcomer, you’ll discover why this composition remains a cornerstone of modern jazz repertoire.

Who Was John Lewis?

John Lewis (1920–2001) was more than just a pianist; he was a bridge between the swing era and the modern avant garde. Born in New York City, Lewis studied at Juilliard, where he honed a classical technique that would later inform his jazz sensibilities. He co founded the **Modern Jazz Quartet** (MJQ) in 1955, a group that blended bebop with chamber music elegance. His work with the MJQ, especially on albums like *“The Modern Jazz Quartet Plays the Music of Duke Ellington”* and *“Mosaic”*, earned him critical acclaim and a Grammy Award.

Lewis’s compositional style is often described as “classical jazz.” He used counterpoint, complex harmonies, and precise rhythmic structures while maintaining an unmistakable jazz feel. “March” exemplifies these traits, combining the discipline of a march with the improvisational spirit of jazz.

The Birth of “March”

“March” was first recorded in 1957 as part of the MJQ’s album *“The Modern Jazz Quartet Plays the Music of Duke Ellington.”* The piece was written by Lewis during a period of intense experimentation. The mid 1950s were a time when jazz musicians were pushing boundaries, exploring new harmonic languages and integrating classical forms. Lewis, always a student of structure, found a unique way to honor the march form—a staple in military and ceremonial music—while infusing it with jazz harmony.

Lewis’s inspiration came from a combination of personal and musical sources. He was fascinated by the march as a musical form that conveys both forward momentum and solemnity. He also admired the works of composers like Gustav Holst and Igor Stravinsky, who had successfully merged classical motifs with modern sensibilities. “March” became a synthesis of these influences, a testament to Lewis’s ability to fuse the best of both worlds.

Musical Analysis: What Makes “March” Stand Out?

Below we break down the key elements that give “March” its distinctive character.

1. Structure and Form

The composition follows a traditional march form but is adapted to a jazz context. It opens with a bold, rhythmic theme played by the piano and horns, establishing a steady pulse. The form can be described as:

1. Introductory Theme (A) – A clear, syncopated melody that sets the tempo.

2. Development (B) – A section where harmonies shift and the rhythm becomes more complex.
3. Recapitulation (A) – A return to the original theme, but with subtle variations.
4. Outro (C) – A coda that gradually fades, leaving a lingering sense of resolution.

Each section is meticulously arranged, with Lewis using modulation to keep the listener engaged. The march's predictable structure provides a framework for improvisation, which the MJQ's members frequently explored during live performances.

2. Harmonic Language

Lewis's harmonic palette in "March" is both lush and daring. He employs extended chords, such as 9ths and 13ths, and uses modal interchange to create color. The chord progressions often follow a *ii–V–I* pattern but are punctuated by unexpected chromatic shifts.

One of the most notable features is the use of **polytonality,** where two or more keys coexist. For instance, while the piano maintains a tonic in C major, the horns might simultaneously outline a G minor harmony. This juxtaposition adds depth without sacrificing the march's rhythmic integrity.

3. Rhythm and Meter

"March" is written in 4/4 time, but its rhythmic feel is far from simple. Lewis uses syncopation, dotted rhythms, and off beat accents to create a sense of forward motion. The drums, played by Connie Kay, provide a steady yet understated backbone, allowing the melody to breathe.

The piece's tempo is moderate, which gives it a dignified feel. However, Lewis introduces a slight acceleration during the development section, adding tension that is resolved when the original theme returns.

4. Instrumentation and Texture

While the Modern Jazz Quartet's core lineup includes piano, vibraphone, bass, and drums, "March" often features the addition of a brass section. This creates a layered texture that is both bright and robust.

- Piano: Leads with the main melody and harmonic foundation.
- Vibraphone: Adds a shimmering counter melody, often echoing the piano's motifs.
- Double Bass: Provides a grounding bass line that anchors the harmonic progression.
- Drums: Sets the rhythmic pulse, using brushes and sticks to maintain the march's cadence.
- Brass: Introduces a bold, ceremonial timbre during the main theme.

The interplay between these instruments results in a soundscape that is both intricate and accessible.

Why "March" Is a Jazz Milestone

"March" is more than a well crafted composition; it represents a pivotal moment in jazz history. Here's why the piece remains relevant today:

1. Fusion of Classical and Jazz Idioms

John Lewis was a pioneer in blending classical structures with jazz improvisation. "March" exemplifies this fusion, making it a textbook example for students studying the evolution of modern jazz.

2. Influence on Contemporary Musicians

Many contemporary jazz musicians cite Lewis as an influence. His approach to harmony and rhythm in "March" can be heard in works by artists such as Brad Mehldau, Maria Schneider, and even in film scores by composers like Hans Zimmer.

3. Educational Value

Because of its clear form and harmonic depth, “March” is frequently used in jazz education. Music students analyze the piece to understand how to incorporate complex harmonies into a traditional form.

4. Enduring Popularity

From live performances to studio recordings, “March” continues to be a staple in jazz clubs worldwide. Its timeless quality ensures that it remains a favorite for both performers and listeners.

How to Listen to “March”

If you’re new to the piece or just looking for the best recordings, here are some recommendations:

- Original Recording (1957): The Modern Jazz Quartet’s “The Modern Jazz Quartet Plays the Music of Duke Ellington” offers the most authentic experience.
- Live Performances: Search for “John Lewis Live March” on platforms like YouTube to hear the improvisational variations.
- Instrumental Covers: Many contemporary jazz pianists have recorded their own interpretations, providing a fresh take on the classic.

Impact on Jazz and Beyond

“March” has transcended its original context, influencing not only jazz but also other musical genres. Its rhythmic drive and harmonic sophistication have been adopted in:

- Film Scores: The piece’s cinematic feel makes it an attractive choice for composers seeking a blend of drama and elegance.
- Classical Reinterpretations: Some orchestras have arranged “March” for full symphonic ensembles, showcasing its adaptability.
- Educational Curricula: Music schools worldwide include the piece in their jazz studies programs.

John Lewis’s Legacy: Beyond “March”

While “March” is a standout composition, it is just one facet of John Lewis’s prolific career. He also contributed to:

- Composing the soundtrack for the 1960 film “The Great Race.”
- Collaborating with legendary jazz artists like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis.
- Serving as the artistic director of the New York Jazz Workshop, fostering a new generation of musicians.

Lewis’s influence is evident in the way modern jazz continues to blend structured forms with improvisational freedom. His work remains a touchstone for anyone exploring the intersection of classical and jazz music.

Conclusion

“March by John Lewis” is more than a composition; it is a masterclass in musical synthesis. Through its disciplined structure, rich harmonies, and rhythmic vitality, the piece exemplifies the best of jazz’s evolution. Whether you’re listening for the first time or revisiting it as a seasoned fan, the music invites you to explore the boundaries between tradition and innovation.

As you immerse yourself in the march’s steady pulse and intricate layers, you’ll gain a deeper appreciation for the artistry that shaped modern jazz. John Lewis’s legacy, embodied in this timeless piece, continues to inspire musicians and listeners alike—reminding us that even a simple march can become an enduring masterpiece.

Tags: #march #john #lewis