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The Duo Legacy of Gary Burton and Chick Corea

“The piano and the vibraphone produce together a very ideal and unique blend of sounds. The other thing is the creative process taking place in a duo. I describe it this way: If you’re playing solo, you’re giving a speech; if you’re in a band, you’re part of a panel discussion; but in a duet, it’s like having a one-on-one conversation with a good friend. The interaction becomes fast and furious because in music you both talk continually as you exchange information. With a good rapport, amazing things happen.”¹

No duo jazz group has attained the prolificity and prestige that Chick and Gary Burton have garnered with their duet project, a partnership spanning more than 44 years and yielding seven album recordings between 1972 and 2012. Five of these recordings earned Grammy awards including best jazz instrumental performance for *Duet* (1979), *In Concert - Zurich October 28, 1979* (1981) and *The New Crystal Silence* (2008). The sound of the duet was unique, featuring post-bop, modal harmonic sensibilities with unique improvisatory vocabulary inspired by their individual backgrounds in jazz/rock fusion, country, and Latin music. Both players were significant pioneers on their respective instruments; Burton revolutionizing the way that the vibraphone is played from both a technical and stylistic standpoint and Chick, a visionary composer and arranger well known for his technical prowess on the piano and keyboards. The two had a great rapport and symbiotic chemistry when they improvised, reimagining the jazz duet format and effectively codifying and defining the art of duets between vibraphone and piano, leaving behind a legacy of recorded works that not only pushed the boundaries of

¹ Drouot, Alain. “Q&A with Gary Burton: A Fond Farewell,” *Downbeat*, 2017, <http://downbeat.com/news/detail/qa-with-gary-burton-a-fond-farewell>

improvisation but explored many forms of orchestration and arrangement in the duo format, creating a cohesive and compelling sound that was greater than the sum of its two parts. What makes the music of the Burton-Corea duo so compelling is not simply that they were both world-class musicians that played well together. Other world-class musicians have explored the duo format and have not made the same impact that Burton and Corea have with their discography. The combination of vibraphone and piano offer distinct advantages in the duo format to create a wide range of timbre and orchestration possibilities. Burton and Corea both approached the duo with a significant background in solo improvisation, facilitating unique dialogical interaction and creating a cohesive, composite instrument sound, which is perfectly exemplified in their inaugural recording of “Señor Mouse.”

Gary Burton was born January 23, 1943 in the rural Indiana town of Anderson. The vibraphone was not even 30 years old by the time he began teaching himself to play at age eight, having started with the marimba at age six. Under the guidance of a local percussion teacher, Evelyn Tucker, Burton would learn not only the basics of musicianship and exercises in arranging and improvising but would also be introduced to the concept of playing with four mallets. Building upon these early experiences, Burton developed the four-mallet grip that would eventually become known as the Burton grip, the use of which enabled him to facilitate fast melodic lines with harmonic accompaniment, similar to a piano player.

Burton found a passion for jazz in his early teens and began playing gigs on vibraphone and piano, furthering his music knowledge through performing, listening, and study with local teachers. In 1960 Burton moved to Nashville to begin his recording career with Hank Garland, recording *Jazz Winds from a New Direction*, the first of many experimentations in the fusion of jazz, country, and rock music throughout his career. After a summer in Nashville, Burton signed

a record deal with RCA and moved to Boston to attend Berklee College of Music where he remained for only two years before moving to New York to record several projects as leader for RCA, eventually joining George Shearing's quintet. In 1964 he began a rise to notoriety when he joined Stan Getz's quartet whom touring with prove to be an important experience. In Getz's quartet, Burton fulfilled with his four-mallet technique the harmonic accompaniment role that would normally be fill by another chordal instrument, like the piano or guitar. Getz would often feature the young Burton's prodigious playing in unaccompanied solo vibraphone performances in his sets. Burton would start leading his own bands in 1967, becoming an early pioneer of jazz/rock fusion. In 1971 he began teaching at Berklee on top of his recording and touring career, and would remain affiliated with the school for over 30 years, serving as teacher and later holding administrative positions like Dean of Curriculum. In 1972, Burton recorded an album that would earn him his first Grammy award, an LP of solo vibraphone performances entitled *Alone at Last*², one side of which was recorded live in Montreux in 1971. Burton would continue to have a successful career, leading many groups throughout the years until his retirement in 2017.

Born Armando Anthony Corea in Chelsea, MA on June 12, 1941, Chick would begin playing music at the early age of four, learning mostly from his father who was a professional jazz musician. Chick was encouraged early on by his father to play multiple instruments including drums, trumpet, and vibraphone and participated in local gigs from a young age. Corea mostly taught himself by transcription and listening to jazz recordings of Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Eckstine, and Horace Silver. After two brief academic stints, one at Columbia University and one at the Juilliard School, Corea decided to devote himself to performance. His first important engagements were with the Latin bands of Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo starting in 1962.

² Burton, Gary. *Alone at Last*, (Atlantic SD 1598), 1971.

His first releases as leader were *Tones for Joan's Bones* (1966)³ and *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* (1968)⁴. After exploring extensively free improvisation in Miles Davis' group, Corea would turn to solo piano to establish a more lyrical context for his music. *Piano Improvisations* volume I and II, released by ECM were important benchmarks in the viability of the piano solo format⁵ and in Corea's exploration of solo improvisations. He would continue a prolific career well into the second decade of the 21st century, recording and performing with his own bands that spanned every context from electric fusion to acoustic solo and duo playing.

The work of Burton and Corea started together in 1968. Burton was nearing the end of a summer tour with his group, The New Gary Burton Quartet, a small jazz group comprising Steve Swallow on bass, Roy Haynes on drums, and Larry Coryell on guitar, with Burton leading the band on vibraphone. By the end of the tour Burton decided it was necessary to replace Coryell. Both Haynes and Swallow recommended Chick Corea to fill the chair, both having recorded previously with him on separate occasions. Corea, having replaced Burton in Stan Getz's band in 1967, was currently touring with Sarah Vaughn, and was eager to find a group with more experimental freedom than he was afforded with her so he accepted the position as soon as his touring commitment was up.

Burton recalls in his autobiography, *Learning to Listen*, that what he imagined to be a "dream band" with the addition of Corea didn't work out. After a few weeks of touring dates, both Burton and Corea concluded that their chemistry wasn't right in the quartet environment.⁶ Burton returned to his guitar-vibraphone oriented quartet and Chick was hired soon after by Miles Davis for the sessions that would evolve into *Bitches Brew*. The next few years were an

³ Corea, Chick. *Tones for Joan's Bones*, (Vortex Records 2004), 1968.

⁴ Corea, Chick. *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*, (Solid State Records SS 18039), 1968.

⁵ Elsdon, "Keith Jarrett's The Köln Concert," *Oxford University Press*, 2013. 115.

⁶ Burton, Gary. "Learning to Listen," *Berklee Press* 2013, 215.

individual foray into the advent of fusion music for the two. Burton continued exploring the fusion of rock and country with jazz in his quartets, releasing albums like *Country Roads and Other Places* (RCA, 1969), *Throb* (Atlantic, 1969), *Good Vibes* (Atlantic, 1970), as well as a collaboration album with Keith Jarrett. Chick would similarly explore jazz and rock fusion with his group Return to Forever, a group that utilized “expansive melodies, romantic vocal lines, and infectious Latin rhythms,”⁷ as well as different timbral possibilities in the electric piano and synthesizers.

Having both explored solo improvisations, Burton with his Grammy award winning *Alone at Last*, and Corea with his groundbreaking *Piano Improvisations*, both were invited to perform at a festival in Munich that coincided with the 1972 Olympics. At the end of an evening dedicated to solo jazz performances, Burton and Corea were the only willing participants in a request by the promoter to participate in a jam session that would conclude the evening. Taking the stage after an evening of solo performances, Burton and Corea played a rendition of Corea’s newly written tune, “La Fiesta.” The audience response to the duet was encouraging, so much so that ECM label founder, Manfred Eicher, convinced them to record an album of duets.⁸ The duo entered the studio in Oslo, Norway that Fall to record their debut album, *Crystal Silence* (1972).

As Burton mentions in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, “the piano and the vibraphone produce together a very ideal and unique blend of sounds.”⁹ While both the piano and vibraphone have unique characteristics, they have a lot in common as instruments. They are not only laid out similarly, with the vibraphone’s “metal bars arranged like a piano keyboard,”¹⁰

⁷ Dobbins and Kernfeld. “Corea, Chick,” *Grove Music Online*.

⁸ Burton. “Learning to Listen,” 239.

⁹ Drouot, Alain. “Q&A with Gary Burton: A Fond Farewell,” *Downbeat*, 2017, <http://downbeat.com/news/detail/qa-with-gary-burton-a-fond-farewell>

¹⁰ Bevan, “Vibraphone (jazz),” *New Grove Online*, 2003.

but both utilize a pedal that controls the sustain of the notes. Timbrally, however, they are very distinct from one another. The vibraphone is part of the idiophone class of instruments, an instrument consisting of a set of plaques.¹¹ The metal bars, being struck by a mallet of varying material, size, and mass, are suspended over tube resonators. Each opening in the resonator houses a revolving valve which is connected to a motor. This gives the sustained tone a vibrato-like tremolo effect, though Burton admittedly did not use this effect for the majority of his career,¹² and never in the context of his duo work with Corea. A technique that Burton was well-known for, however, is the use of dampening techniques including a type of mallet dampening that creates a lowered-pitch bend effect. Burton's extensive use of mallet dampening techniques, as well as the innovative use of finger dampening techniques,¹³ gave him masterful dynamic control over the instrument. The piano, on the other hand, relies solely on the use of the pedal to control the sustain of the hammered action of the strings, and while it is capable of alternative timbral options using extended performance techniques like strumming the strings, Corea rarely explored these in the duet.

Crystal Silence would be the first of seven albums to capture the duo's exploration into the vibraphone/piano format. From the first track of that album, a composition by Corea entitled "Señor Mouse," a few advantages of the recorded vibraphone/piano duet format become readily apparent. Common ground between the two instruments is a significant unifying factor that makes them work so well together, one aspect of which is the capability of both the vibraphone and the piano for extended polyphony. As both instruments rely on the striking action of an individual string or bar, the number of active polyphony is technically limited only by the

¹¹ Blades and Holland, "Vibraphone," *Grove Music Online* 2001.

¹² Burton, "Learning to Listen," *Berklee Press* 2013, 31.

¹³ Brooks, "An Analytical Approach," *LSU Digital Commons* 2007, 15.

number of strings or bars on the instrument (the perceivable polyphony will vary based on the decay length for each instrument's notes, a characteristic of which varies from instrument to instrument). This opens up the textural and arrangement possibilities of the instruments individually and in duet, and extended polyphony is a technique that Burton and Corea explored extensively.¹⁴ When the duo reaches a sustained chord at 1'17" in their recording of "Señor Mouse,"¹⁵ this high capacity of polyphony is utilized to create a dramatic pause in the composition, exploring for a few moments the textural possibilities of the range of each instrument. Burton utilizes mallet dampening techniques here to sustain some notes while muting others, creating a line underneath the sustained chord, giving that particular moment forward momentum that leads into the next phrase, with Corea complementing the textural line with some high register chords.

From this first recording a psychoacoustic advantage of the vibraphone and piano becomes clear. Both are stereophonic instruments, each having an expansive enough physical profile to warrant the use of multiple microphones in the recording process.¹⁶ When mixed for playback on a stereo speaker system, the microphone placement techniques will recreate the "wide" stereophonic image that would be experienced when hearing the instrument live. Gary Burton, in a brief interview during a performance hosted by NPR, expounds on how the physical profile of the instrument is visually beneficial for listeners, pointing out that "you not only see the hit of the note, you can tell whether it's higher or lower on the instrument."¹⁷ This visual experience of the physical profile of the instrument is also translated aurally in stereophonic

¹⁴ Extended polyphony sustained notes here is differentiated from the "momentary" polyphony limited generally by Corea's ten fingers and Burton's four mallets.

¹⁵ Burton, Gary and Chick Corea. *Crystal Silence* (ECM 1024), 1973.

¹⁶ It is common practice to use two microphones when recording a piano or vibraphone.

¹⁷ "Gary Burton: NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert." Youtube.

recordings, where high notes will appear, psychoacoustically, to come from different points in the left to right stereo image of two speakers than do low notes.

The stereophonic phenomenon of both the vibraphone and piano is used creatively to enhance the perception of a composite instrument throughout the duo's recorded works. Evident throughout the recordings on *Crystal Silence* (and their six other recorded albums) the piano and vibraphone are panned (placed relatively in the stereo field) so that they each have their own space while also fulfilling a wide range in the left-to right stereo image. The engineer of *Crystal Silence*, Jan Erik Kongshaug, places Corea's piano to left side of the stereo image, and Burton's vibraphone more to the right. This puts Corea's lowest notes of the piano range firmly on the left side with the higher notes situated progressively to the right. Burton's vibraphone, similarly occupies a relatively wide stereo profile, the lowest notes being situated in the center of the stereo image, moving to the right as the notes get progressively higher. This creates a fascinating interplay in the stereo field as each player explores the range of their instruments, a phenomenon that is unique to the vibraphone and piano duet. Other duet arrangements, such as guitar and bass¹⁸, being naturally monophonic instruments, aren't able to create this type of interplay in the stereo field except by artificially automated panning techniques, the use of which would distract from the intimate setting of acoustic jazz improvisation.

Even as the vibraphone and piano provide a fantastic sonic combination, it's the deployment of world-class improvisations through unique compositional forms that provide a deeply satisfying listening experience. In the duo's engagement with these forms, they elicit a strong dialogue, one that is propagated by unique symbiotic interactions during their improvisations together. Returning to the duo's inaugural recording of "Señor Mouse," a timeline

¹⁸ Charlie Haden & Pat Metheny's *Beyond the Missouri Sky* (Universal Music Jazz France 1997), is a good example.

analysis in Figure 1 will demonstrate an example of the unique compositional forms that facilitate their improvisatory dialogue.

The performance of “Señor Mouse” is built on the opening riff of the intro. The orchestration of the melody and accompaniment alike is distributed between the two instruments democratically. One distinct limitation of the vibraphone in comparison to the piano is its limited range: three octaves spanning F3-F5 compared to 7+ octaves of the modern grand piano, stretching from A0-C8, the low register of which extends several octaves below the vibraphone’s lowest note. While both engage in leading as well as accompanying roles, Burton tends to lead melodically with Corea providing the accompaniment, especially in the bass register that Burton can’t reach with the three octave vibraphone.

The duo structures their performance dynamically in “Señor Mouse,” taking full advantage of the orchestration possibilities of the vibraphone and piano. After a brief piano intro, Burton takes the A section melody before improvising over a brief interlude and a dynamically expanded restatement of the A melody where he utilizes a homophonous harmonic accompaniment over Corea’s driving pedal tone riff. After syncopated hits conclude the last phrase of the A section, the two enter the B section, the deployment of which in “Señor Mouse” characterizes most effectively the stereotypical rhythmical, line-driven situation that the duo finds themselves in throughout many of the compositions that they perform.

With Corea’s left hand outlining a psuedo-montuno feel, the two engage with varying degrees of unison and contrapuntal initiative to explore an angular and disparate melodic line that outlines unpredictable rhythmic tendencies, peppered with momentary instances of interactive call-and-response. While traditional jazz performances will center improvisations around the squared form of the head-in, solos, head-out format (with tunes usually consisting of

a 32-bar AABA form), Burton and Corea generally improvise around more asymmetrical formal structures.

Señor Mouse

Time	Part	Description
0'00"	Intro vamp	Modal, pedal tone Piano riff
0'12"	A melody	Vibraphone enters to play A melody over tonic pedal.
0'30"	interlude	Burton improvises over pedal tone piano riff
0'47"	A'	Restatement of A section melody with heightened dynamic accompaniment the melody by Burton
1'07"	B	Piano and vibraphone double the melody over a pseudo-montuno groove in Corea's left hand
1'12"		Melodic statements by Burton are answered by Corea in high register rhythmic stabs
1'17"		Both play melody, landing on an extended polyphony chord.
1'22"		Doubled restatement of B melody
1'30"		Harmonized statement of melody
1'38"	Intro vamp	Burton solos over intro vamp for 11 measures
1'59"	A	Burton solos over A section for 9 bars
2'18"	B	Written B section
2'50"	Intro vamp	Burton solos over intro vamp, variations by Corea
3'26"		Burton takes over accompaniment riff, Corea solos over implied pedal
4'09"		Both join intro riff
4'16"	C	Burton plays C melody
4'26"		Doubled C melody with counterpoint by left hand in piano
4'46"	Intro vamp	Burton plays intro riff, Corea solos
5'37"		Both play intro riff
5'54"	C'	Unison C melody
6'14"		Final chord using extended polyphonic textures

Figure 1. Timeline analysis of "Señor Mouse," the first track of *Crystal Silence* (ECM 1024), 1972.

After Burton solos over the intro vamp and A section, the duo rejoin for the written B section melody. Burton then solos over the intro vamp again to wind down dynamically, allowing for Corea to interject a few improvisatory statements. The two then articulate the written C section melody, again featuring an interesting doubled melodic line with contrapuntal support by Corea's left hand. Corea solos over Burton's accompaniment using the intro riff before one last

restatement of the C melody is issued, this time with dynamic and textural variations between the musicians. The performance ends with a texturally pleasant extended-polyphony chord that fades to silence.

A close examination of “Señor Mouse” shows only a glimpse into the compelling performance concepts that Burton and Corea would expand on with their six subsequent albums. It’s clear from analysis of this single recording how the duo used the sonic advantages of the vibraphone and piano, deeply interactive improvisational forms, and dialogical interaction in order to establish a composite instrument sound. Many aspects of the duo’s playing style, interaction, composition catalog, and performance techniques are worthy of deeper analysis and study. Throughout the remainder of their six studio albums and years of touring, they would establish a deepening symbiotic rapport, explore new orchestration possibilities, particularly through the addition of string quartets and symphonic orchestras, and explore an expanding catalog that deepened their roots in the jazz diaspora while breaking new ground in the improvisation over new styles and forms. A comprehensive study will reveal more deeply how the duo achieved their composite sound and will yield significant insights in the areas of improvisation and in-the-moment interaction between musicians. “With a good rapport,” Burton asserts, “amazing things happen.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Drouot, Alain. “Q&A with Gary Burton: A Fond Farewell,” *Downbeat*, 2017, <http://downbeat.com/news/detail/qa-with-gary-burton-a-fond-farewell>

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