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# The AMC Trio Jazz Combo and their Inspirations Drawn from Slovak Folk Music

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## Abstract

In this study, we examine contemporary eclectic approaches to jazz and consider to what extent they allow for originality (notwithstanding the opposition between the terms “eclectic” and “original”). The music of the Slovak jazz combo AMC Trio is often seen as typically “Slovak”, and the presence of Slovak folk music in their compositions is discussed in detail. Because AMC Trio is one of the most exported Slovak jazz groups, this study analyses their music to see what makes it exceptional in the Slovak context and for the introduction of European impulses to jazz. We point out the fact that the trio’s compositions do not draw directly on Slovak folk music, but, nevertheless, they contain interesting parallels and indirect inspirations. These are what give a Slovak character and melodic originality to their music, which impresses even foreign artists who collaborate with them. It remains a question, therefore, whether eclecticism ultimately leads to new concepts in jazz or whether it in fact moves jazz further away from its Afro-American roots.

## Key words

Slovak jazz, jazz composition, contemporary jazz, Slovak folk music, musical inspirations

## Slovak Folk Music and the AMC Trio

In Slovakia, several listeners view AMC Trio as a jazz combo that sounds “Slovak”, and they recognize the roots of Slovak folk music in their music. One of the aims of this study is to confirm or disprove the hypothesis that AMC Trio is connected to Slovak folk traditions. We analyze three compositions from three different albums from their various creative phases: *One Way Road To My Heart* (2013), *Waiting For A Wolf* (2011), and *Thor-Iza* (2006). We are familiar with the complete discography and all the compositions of AMC Trio. Is there anything in their music that listeners may objectively recognize as “Slovak”?

## The Journey of AMC Trio to a Modern Version of Originality

AMC Trio, a jazz combo from Prešov, has been active on the Slovak jazz scene with the line-up of Peter Adamkovič – piano, Martin Marinčák – double bass, Stanislav Cvanciger – percussion, for twenty-six years, which makes them one of the most longstanding groups in contemporary Slovak jazz. In two decades, they achieved what few other Slovak jazzmen could. Their music made its way to international stages in collaboration with elite musicians like Randy Brecker, Ulf Wakenius, Philip Catherine, Mark Whitfield, Eric Marienthal, or Regina Carter.

In the beginning, the trio took a mainstream approach to rendering jazz standards. However, they quickly felt the lack of original pieces on the scene and found their new potential in composing. With time, they increased their recognition through their own music, and combined elements of jazz with popular music and later also with minimal music and Slovak folk music. An analogy in concept and style can be seen with the legendary Swedish combo, EST (“Esbjörn” Svensson – piano, Dan Berglund – dbass, Magnus Öström – drums, established in 1993). It is not by chance that, in the beginning, the music of AMC Trio was similar to that of EST. As they said, the Swedish band was one of their main sources of inspiration.<sup>1</sup> The EST drew on classical music, rock, pop music, techno, particular composers and musicians, and was inspired by the music of Béla Bartók and the British rock band Radiohead – sources that are truly remote from mainstream jazz.

AMC Trio’s first album, *Thor-iza*, was a manifestation of their own music and their new direction away from the mainstream jazz repertoire. As time proved, this was the right step, one that defined AMC Trio. It turned out that the public received AMC Trio’s own, original music very positively and their second album, *Soul of the Mountain* (2008), became the best-selling Slovak jazz album in Slovakia and abroad. It was rereleased three times.<sup>2</sup>

Prominent minimalistic, melodious tunes became the main building block of their music, and they attracted the attention even of renowned artists from abroad. Their compositions were performed by world-famous figures in jazz, such as Randy Brecker,

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1 Personal interview with Martin Marinčák (AMC Trio) in February 2021.

2 <http://www.amctrio.sk/profil?lang=sk>

Ulf Wakenius, Philip Catrine, and Mark Whitfield. In 2020, they widened their portfolio by their collaboration with the American saxophonist Eric Marienthal and the violinist Regina Carter, the latter famous for fusing jazz and classical music. Some of these artists maintained the compositions of AMC Trio in their repertoire even after their collaboration ended.<sup>3</sup>

In an interview with Regina Carter on what drew her to the music of AMC Trio, she said:

*“The strong and captivating melodies and, on the whole, the very well-written compositions. You know, when a piece is composed for a particular instrument, it does not always work on another one. AMC Trio, however, had so many various guest performers in their band with so many various lead instruments and those compositions worked equally well - and that’s not simple!”<sup>4</sup>*

AMC Trio’s synthesis and way of thinking appear to be an original phenomenon in Slovak music. They themselves revealed that their goal was to make good music regardless of the origin of the inspirations, be it jazz, classical music, pop, rock, or folk music. Within style-forming trends, they can be ranked among eclectic fusion. An eclectic attitude is one of the main style-forming directions in contemporary European jazz. An increasing number of bands are appearing in Slovakia with a similar attitude to jazz, but, earlier on, when AMC Trio started, it was a unique path to originality. The etymology of the word eclectic indicates the adoption of already created ideas and this contradicts originality. Eclecticism had a pejorative connotation already in antique philosophy and denoted a collection of unoriginal ideas.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in the case of AMC Trio, it was the combination of various styles in an eclectic way that led to the crystallization of their original sound and compositions.

In the analyses below, we will zoom in on the way AMC Trio composes its music and works with original melodies that paved their way to the global jazz scene.

## Waiting For a Wolf

Waiting For a Wolf from the album of the same name (2011)<sup>6</sup> begins on the tonic in F minor. The entire harmony of (a) section is built on the alternation of degrees I and VI (F-7, Dbmaj7(#11)). Consequently, the entire section remains in a single harmonic plane since degree VI (Dbmaj7) may be viewed as a upper structure of F minor on an F<sup>13</sup> chord. Although the alternation of the bass note creates a sonic contrast, it is not a functional change. A contrasting section, (b), with the entry of the melody, starts in

3 Personal interview with Martin Marinčák (AMC Trio).

4 DOBŠINSKÝ, Peter. Bleskový rozhovor s huslistkou Reginou Carter, *skjazz.sk*, 8 April 2019, retrieved 21 April 2021. URL: <https://skjazz.sk/news/showNew/bleskovy-rozhovor-s-huslistkou-reginou-carter>.

5 MCCLELLAN, Chris. Eclecticism. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2003, retrieved 20 April 2021, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/eclecticism/v-1>.

6 Hevhetia HV 0048-2-331.

the *seconda volta*. In terms of harmonic rhythm (the number of chords per bar) and the motion of the chords, this section is less static. In terms of melody, however, the contrast is not that striking since section (b) works with the motivic material of section (a). These may be viewed as minimalistic elements that blur contrasts. Similar elements can be found in the music of the above-mentioned Swedish EST piano trio, too. The harmony stays in F minor, as confirmed by a minor cadence progressing as II - V - I (G-7(b5), C7, F-7). This is followed by the dominant, which is immediately resolved to the tonic. In terms of harmony, the repetition of the initial phrase of section (b) is underlined with an identical cadence in F minor. Afterwards, the dominant gradually reappears. This time, however, it is not resolved to degree I as we might expect. Instead, by a semitonal motion it gets to a tritonic substitution of the dominant of the dominant. Subsequently, the substitution is resolved to the tonic, i.e., to the dominant in F minor. This note represents a bridge between section (b) and section (a) by being developed into the original tonic of F minor which starts the repetition of the initial section (a). Harmony of the final section (a) is also based on the alternation of degrees I and VI and is the exact recapitulation of the first section in terms of both harmony and melody (Example 1).

The melody of the composition revolves around a single, prominent two-bar motif, repeatedly transposed throughout the sections.



The motif is based on a descending minor third and an ascending major second. This model remains intact in most of its transpositions but for minor variations. The rhythmic model of the phrase is likewise maintained throughout the piece. This transpositional way of constructing melodic phrases with a repeating rhythmic model is typical for AMC Trio, as will be seen in the analysis of their other compositions. The use of isorhythmic models is also characteristic for Slovak folk music, especially for its new song culture. In the initial section (a), the phrase is transposed from the chordal notes of the tonic triad. It starts from the fifth, shifts by a major third and, subsequently, by a minor third to the tonic. In section (b), the phrase starts on the diminished fifth of degree II in F minor. The motif is transposed also a major third lower compared to the initial section, but then the phrase is repeated instead of being transposed again. A variation appears in the second repetition of the phrase in section (b), after which the motif appears in rhythmic diminution. The motif ends on C<sub>5</sub>, and the repetition of this note leads to the reappearance of the original section (a) without any changes. The analysis of the relationship of the harmony and the melody shows that the melody moves mostly on the basic chordal notes of the accompanying harmony. If a higher tension appears, such as a chord with an added thirteenth or ninth, it has mostly a short rhythmic value on an unaccented beat.

A glimpse at the formal structure reveals that it is a small song form, a-a-b-a, with a length of 32 bars. This form is common in jazz standards and compositions. Section (a) is based on two transpositions of the prominent motif and section (b) on its single transposition, with a repetition and variation. This structure naturally applies only to the

head of the composition. The macro structure of the entire piece as it can be heard on the album makes it obvious that AMC Trio conceives it in a standard way, as regular jazz compositions do, i.e., section B is the development, while the harmonic progression and the form of section B maintain the same structures as section A. The recapitulation of section A is shortened and contains only theme (a) and its harmonic progression with variations (Table 1).

### Waiting For Wolf

\* sub. - substitúcia

**Ex. 1** The chords progression of the composition Waiting For Wolf.

The form of Waiting For a Wolf			
Overall form of the recording	A (head)	B (solos)	A (recapitulation)
Form of the movements	a b a	a b a	a a a' a'

**Tab. 1** The form of the Waiting For a Wolf.

## Thor-Iza

The composition entitled Thor-Iza comes from a previous album of AMC Trio, from 2006<sup>7</sup>. It starts with the tonic in D minor. With respect to the earlier styles of modern jazz, the 6/4 metre is a bit unusual here. The harmonic rhythm, however, remains similar to most of the jazz standards in 4/4 time, two chords per bar. In this case, one chord takes up three beats. The three initial chords remain on the tonic, whereas the bass descends by a tone. These are followed by a cadential sequence of degrees IV and V. The latter, however, is not resolved to the tonic as might be expected, but to a tritone substitution of the dominant of the dominant by a semitonal progression (G-7, A7, Bb7). This is then resolved to its own tonic (degree V), i.e., to the dominant (A7). The dominant consolidates the tonal centre by a resolution back to D minor, where the repetition of the melodic phrase starts, underlined with the same progression as in the beginning. After three tonic chords, we reach the dominant again. The repetition here contains a minor variation. The dominant is no longer resolved to a tritonic substitution, but to the tonal centre of D minor, which closes the first section (a). The second section, (b), begins on the D-7 chord again, but then moves to its relative key, F major, confirmed by a complete cadence on IV – V – I (Bbmaj7, C7, Fmaj7). Then it immediately returns to D minor through a jazz cadence on II – V – I (E-7(b5), A7, D-7). At the same time, this forms a bridge to the return of the phrase from the second half of section (a). Consequently, the first and the second section end in the same way. The second section might be considered as only a variation of section (a). However, its first half uses different melodic material, and the harmonic progression also differs, so we decided to label it as a contrasting section (b) (Example 2).

Similarly to the composition *Waiting For a Wolf*, the melody is built up of the **transpositions of two characteristic motifs**. The first motif is based on a descending fifth, an ascending fourth, and a subsequent descending fifth.



This striking motif begins with a characteristic syncopation contrasted with the regular rhythm of the three crotchets in its second half. After the motif is stated, it is transposed a major third lower with a minor variation in its ending where the fifth is replaced by a major sixth. A second motif appears in bar three. Contrary to the first one, it has an ascending character. The first half of the motif is again based on two syncopations and its end, in regular rhythm, is contrasting again. After the second motif is played, it is transposed by a minor third. Transpositions of phrases by a third are very frequent in the music of AMC Trio. The melodic flow continues with a repetition of the beginning of the composition, i.e., of the first motif, its transposition, and the second motif. The end

7 Thor-Iza, 2006, Hevhetia EH 0006-2-331.

of the repetition brings a minor change. The second motif is no longer transposed but, instead, it is followed by a leading note resolved to the tonic which closes the melodic motion of section (a). The next section, (b), begins with the second motif which becomes its main building block. The motif starts on the unison of the accompanying D-7 chord and is subsequently transposed a major second higher. The first half of section (b) is based entirely on ascending, diatonic transpositions of the second motif, which is shifted by a minor second and then by a major second. The final note of the last transposition becomes the initial note of the original first motif, by which the composition melodically returns to the second half of section (a) whose melody is completely identical to the second half of section (b). AMC Trio have found their compositional formula which works for them and which they are not afraid to repeat. The same melodic transition between sections by repeating a note can be found in the composition *Waiting for a Wolf*, too. The analysis of the relationship of the melody and the harmony reveals that a number of high tensions occur in the melody. These relationships arise mainly from the nature of the motifs, which represent compact phrases; in the case of the second motif, it has diatonic motion, too. Their shifts give rise to exciting relationships against a seemingly simple harmony. What is even more interesting, however, is the descending character of the melody, which is in line with old, tetratonic Slovak folk music.

In terms of form, AMC Trio works with the small song form. In this composition, it shortens it: instead of the typical 32 bars, it consists only of 24. This, however, is another frequently used model of the song form in jazz, as several jazz standards work with a 24-bar song form. The form may be perceived in two ways here – either as the recapitulation of the melodic phrase from the second half of section (a) in section (b), viewed as part of the overall section (b), resulting in an a-a-b form with repetitions and the hint of a recapitulation; or we may view the form as consisting of separate, shortened sections, where section (b) lasts only for 4 bars and the final (a) is a variation (bar 13), with an equal length of 4 bars. The resulting form of the head may then be expressed as a-a-b-a'. In our analysis, we prefer to view it as a ternary small song form with a hint of a recapitulation. The overall form of the recording on the album has a structure that is standard for jazz compositions: head (theme) – improvised solos – head (theme). In this case, the theme in the recapitulation appears in its complete form, without any shortening. A short coda is added to the end of the composition, repeating the last two bars of section (b) twice as a turnaround (Table 2 with A7 and D-7 chords).



## Thor-Iza

Ex. 2 The chords progression of the composition Thor-Iza

The form of Thor-Iza				
Overall form of the recording	A (head)	B (solos)	A (recapitulation)	Coda
Form of the movements	a a b	a a b	a a b	b'

Tab. 2 The formal structure of the composition Thor-Iza.

## Pain Is Real

The composition *Pain Is Real* from the album *One Way Road to My Heart* (2013) is in standard 4/4 time, with a typical two-beat harmonic pulsation.<sup>8</sup>

It is in D minor, beginning on the tonic and progressing by alternating the subdominant and the tonic, where the major chord is reinterpreted as a minor one, and the resulting

<sup>8</sup> Moosicus Records M 1209-2.

D7 chord becomes the dominant of the subdominant (D-, G-, D-/F, D7/F#) into which the subsequent chord is resolved (G-). The composition moves through degrees III and VI to the dominant, which is then resolved to the tonic of D minor (Bb, A7/C#, D-), as can be expected. This is followed by a thrilling moment where the harmonic flow is again directed towards the dominant, but this time it is derived from the natural minor, so it has a minor character (A-/C). The harmony continues through degrees VI, III, IV, and I (Bb, F/A. G-, D-/F) to the dominant core of II-V (E-7(b5), A7), typical for jazz. It forms a bridge between the end of section (a) and the beginning of the composition and is resolved in its repetition to the tonic. The second section, (b), is exciting in terms of harmony because a chain of chords appears there which are not anchored by tonality or function. It is a progression of primary and secondary dominants, and the inversions of the chords are chosen in a way that the bass descends by a semitone. A closer look at the chords and the chosen voicings reveals that it is a chain of so-called irregular resolutions, i.e., harmonic connections where the voices are led in a way that at least one or more voices are shifted by a semitone, or by a tone at maximum, and the other voices are shared. Such connections are common in jazz and are used for an enrichment of the sound in short modulations. The harmonic progression culminates in the dominant core of A minor in bar 15. This again leads to an interesting moment in harmony. We would expect a resolution to the tonic, A minor, but the core is resolved to an ambiguous Asus4 suspended chord, which is then resolved to the A7 major chord, not to A minor. The A7 chord is the dominant of the original key of section (a), D minor, which subsequently appears and forms a bridge for the harmonic progression to return to section (a). The chordal progression then continues in the same way as in section (a), without any changes (Example 3).

The melodic structure of the composition is not based on a prominent melodic motif but on a characteristic rhythmic model, constantly repeated throughout all the sections.



It consists of two quavers and a dotted minim. Here, again, we can notice that the combo works with an isorhythmic model. A look at the relationship of the melody and the harmony reveals that the interval progressions of the melody, combined with the repeating rhythmic model, are mostly chosen in a way that they form basic chordal notes with the harmony, most often thirds or fifths. In this way, the melodic line emphasizes the harmonic flow. This is important especially in section (b), which is not processed tonally. The descending harmonic motion in the bass in section (b) is supported by a descending melody which highlights it even more. In the notation (transcription of the original piece by AMC Trio), the final section (a) ends with a phrase from the upbeat on the notes F<sub>4</sub> and E<sub>4</sub>, which would leave a trimmed and unfinished impression, so, on the recording, the end of the entire theme (head) ends with a melodically completed phrase just like on the upbeat, progressing from E<sub>4</sub> to D<sub>4</sub>.

In terms of form, the composition is conceived in the typical 32-bar small song form, a-a-b-a, mentioned several times above. The form is framed mainly by the harmonic

process, since the melody is not built by the development of any motifs but is based on a rhythmic model, and no contrast arises in the melody. The melodic flow appears as a uniform, compact unit. However, the prominent change in harmony and the tonal diversion of section (b) create adequate contrast for the concept of a form. On the recording, the overall form is treated as in the compositions analysed above: section (b) is like an improvised resolution but maintains the exact harmonic structure of section (a). An interesting change occurs when the main theme reappears. The theme starts as in the beginning, a-a-b, but section (a) is not repeated afterwards, and the composition continues with a variation of section (b), after which it ends with a short coda. The latter is also based on a variation of section (b) (Table 3).

### Pain Is Real

- posun basu o poltón

Ex. 3 The chords progression of the composition Pain Is Real.

The form of Pain Is Real				
Overall form of the recording	A (head)	B (solos)	A (recapitulation)	Coda
Form of the movements	a a b a	a a b a	a a b b'	b'

**Tab. 3** The formal structure of the composition Pain Is Real.

## Conclusion

The analysis reveals that the harmonic language of AMC Trio draws on jazz tradition and popular music. They do not use folk tunes in their compositions and are not directly inspired by them, either. However, the members of the combo do listen to Slovak folk music.<sup>9</sup> In our opinion, several parallels can be found between folk music and their compositions. The author of this study does not pursue primordialism in terms of an inborn anthropological “Slovak” character, although he does not rule it out, either. When we look at several melodic phrases of AMC Trio, they are arranged into eight-bar themes and small song forms, which can be found in several folk songs, too. Nevertheless, they cannot be regarded as the prominent, characteristic element of Slovak folk music. However, connections with folk music can be traced in the way AMC Trio works with the melodic structure. The melodies are based on short phrases with a length of two to four bars, which are then transposed to form complete, compact themes. This way of building a structure can be found in many folk songs, too. In addition, these sections are often formed in a symmetric way, which is another frequent phenomenon in Slovak folk songs. In the first composition analysed above, long, sustained notes can be heard at the end of the phrases, which may be remotely inspired by Slovak harvest songs.

Melodic sequences, frequently used by AMC Trio as can be seen in all their compositions analysed above, are frequent in Slovak folk music, too. However, they appear only in its new song culture period with harmonic thinking, which is the youngest developmental stage of Slovak folk songs.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the melodies of AMC Trio contain elements from the earlier developmental stages of Slovak folk songs, too. In several compositions, the character of the melodies is strongly descending, which is an important element in the early, tetratonic and tetrachordal phase of Slovak folk music. According to Jozef Kresánek, this type of melody was tied to vocal performance, when the singer took breath and wanted to stabilize the key by starting on the highest note. The same applies to overblowing pipes. This is prominent especially in the composition Thor-iza. If we ignore the note B  $\flat_4$ , which appears only for a very short time in section (b), the composition begins on the highest note and descends subsequently, which is exactly the principle of the old descending

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview with Martin Marinčák (double bass, AMC Trio) in April 2018.

<sup>10</sup> ELSHEK, p. 110.

folk songs as Jozef Kresánek analysed them.<sup>11</sup> In addition, this descending principle appears also in section (b) of the composition Pain Is Real. This piece exhibits an isorhythmic model, too, which is frequent in the new song culture of Slovak folk music.

In the phrasings of AMC Trio, the syncopated rhythm in the melodies is undoubtedly rooted in the jazz tradition, but even in this case we can find parallels with Slovak folk music, in which syncopated rhythm appeared in its harmonic phase of development under the influence of Romaperformers.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of form, AMC Trio draws on the new song culture, which uses the song form AABA. Old folk culture used open binary or ternary forms like AB, AAB, ABB, etc. In the new song culture, the ternary song form emerged from the exact recapitulation of the first section, and it was a transitional model to the quaternary form. In the case of AMC Trio, however, it is based on the jazz tradition of Broadway standards with a 32-bar song form.

Also, in several melodies of theirs, even ones excluded from the above analysis, the range often moves within a tetrachord or exceeds it only by small leaps or neighbouring notes. In addition, the melodiousness is very prominent, lyrical, and contains mostly longer rhythmic values, which may again be seen as another parallel with Slovak folk music. In their music, AMC Trio does not work with folk tunes and inspirations directly, but some of their melodies may nevertheless evoke the character of Slovak folk music to the listeners. That is why we may conclude that their music is rooted in Slovak folk music and is indirectly inspired by the Slovak folk environment.

In our study, we pointed out that the music of AMC Trio does not differ from regular modern Central European jazz in terms of form and harmony. However, in the context of their time, they paved the way for modern eclectic jazz on the Slovak jazz scene, which is now gaining momentum in Europe. Their diversion from mainstream jazz to eclecticism and original composition was unique among the mostly mainstream and fusion formations of Slovak jazz. Their minimalistic and straightforward approach became a supporting framework for their exciting, strongly melodic compositions, which exhibit several parallels with Slovak folk melodies. Above all, they follow the principle of descending melodies, which has its roots in the old tetratonic developmental phase of Slovak folk music and is tied to a characteristic vocal and instrumental rendering on the folk wind instruments of that period. In addition, the melodies exhibit isorhythmic models, motion in seconds, and a narrow melodic range, mostly within an extended tetrachord, which are also typical for Slovak folk melodies. AMC Trio does not use direct folk inspirations and Slovak folk tunes, but several parallels can be traced and the roots of Slovak folk music appear as passive inspirations in their music. They themselves said they liked listening to Slovak folk music and they confirmed their ties to jazz and Slovak folk music through their project “AMC Trio and the Folk Music of Stano Baláž – AD Fontes”, in which they collaborated with a folk music ensemble and applied jazz elements to Slovak folk music directly. All the

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11 KRESÁNEK, Jozef. *Slovenská ľudová pieseň zo stanoviska hudobného*. Bratislava: Národné hudobné centrum, 1997, pp. 195–198.

12 ELSCHEROVÁ, Alica – ELSCHER, Oskár. *Úvod do štúdia slovenskej ľudovej hudby*. Bratislava: Hudobné centrum, 2005, p. 115.

above principles, combined with the minimalistic approach, jazz harmony, and modern style-forming trends of contemporary jazz, led to the crystallization of AMC Trio's original sound and concept, which reveal that European jazz is shifting from the Afro-American concept of mainstream jazz. This European concept gives rise to new, original structures, sometimes even to a hybrid fusion of genres, and is clearly moving away from the jazz tradition.

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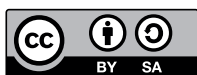
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