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Disrupting Periodicity in Jazz Composition through Gagaku-Informed Listening Constraints

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Abstract: This article documents a practice-led compositional project in which two jazz compositions were developed through temporal and melodic constraints derived from immersive listening to Japanese gagaku. Rather than borrowing repertoire, instrumentation, or stylistic surface, the project targets a specific compositional habit: the default use of 16- and 32-bar periodicity. Comparative listening informed constraints around pitch-centre anchoring without functional cadence, rotating pitch cells, near-unison texture, and acceleration perceived retrospectively. Two contrasting pieces, one in swing and one in bossa nova, translate these constraints through altered phrase lengths, delayed harmonic rhythm, and melody-led formal organisation. Lead-sheet excerpts and short audio examples demonstrate how listening-derived constraints can reshape jazz compositional process while remaining performable and improvisation-friendly. The article contributes to music creation studies by demonstrating how intercultural listening can serve as a compositional method without necessitating stylistic imitation or fusion.

Keywords: jazz composition, gagaku, music creation, practice-led research, musical periodicity

1. INTRODUCTION

Jazz composition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has demonstrated remarkable stylistic and technical breadth. Functional harmony, modal writing, non-functional and multi-tonic systems, metric complexity, and through-composed forms all coexist within contemporary jazz practice. Within formal training contexts, composers are routinely encouraged to explore harmonic colour, rhythmic complexity, orchestration, and cross-genre influence. Yet beneath this diversity, certain structural assumptions often persist with surprising resilience. Among these is the reliance on periodic phrase structures, most notably 16- and 32-bar forms, which continue to shape compositional thinking even when other musical parameters are substantially reconfigured (Levine, 1995; Terefenko, 2014).

My own compositional background reflects this trajectory. I have written extensively in standard jazz forms, including blues-based and rhythm-changes structures, as well as modal compositions and through-composed works. I have also worked with non-functional harmonic languages, multi-tonic systems, and rhythmically complex designs, including asymmetrical meters and non-isochronous subdivisions. Despite these explorations, I became increasingly aware that the logic of periodic phrases often remained intact. Harmonic rhythm tended to align with predictable formal spans, and moments of arrival, however delayed or recontextualised, were still implicitly anticipated. This was not experienced as a limitation of technique, but rather as a habitual orientation toward musical time (Berliner, 1994; Huron, 2006).

The present project emerged from a desire to adopt a different compositional lens rather than to acquire new harmonic or stylistic materials. Specifically, I sought to disrupt the taken-for-granted reliance on 16- and 32-bar expectations that continues to



underpin much jazz compositional practice, even in works that otherwise resist convention. Rather than targeting harmony, rhythm, or orchestration directly, I turned to listening to recalibrate compositional attention within a practice-led music-creation framework (R. Nelson, 2013; Smith & Dean, 2009).

Japanese gagaku was selected not as a repertoire to be imitated nor as a cultural system to be exhaustively analysed, but as a source of temporal provocation. Initial encounters with gagaku recordings produced a consistent perceptual effect: changes in density and momentum were difficult to locate in real time and often became apparent only retrospectively. Phrase boundaries were indistinct, harmonic arrival points were absent, and acceleration appeared to unfold as a cumulative process rather than an articulated event. These experiences suggested a temporal logic in which musical identity was shaped less by goal-directed progression than by the distribution of change across extended spans of time.

Importantly, this project does not position gagaku as an external “other” to be fused with jazz, nor does it aim to translate its stylistic surface into a jazz idiom. Instead, gagaku functioned as a listening context through which entrenched compositional habits could be rendered perceptible and, consequently, negotiable. By attending closely to pacing, density, and pitch organisation without imposing analytical frameworks in advance, I sought to extract constraints that could meaningfully inform jazz composition while remaining situated within recognisable jazz performance contexts. Accordingly, I treat gagaku here as a listening discipline that perturbs compositional habit, rather than as an object of ethnomusicological explanation, and I restrict my claims to my own perceptual and practice-based responses.

This use of gagaku-informed listening also builds on earlier work in which Japanese gagaku was considered alongside other intercultural listening resources for expanding undergraduate aural-skills pedagogy beyond a single tonal-metric frame (Seow, 2024). In the present article, however, the emphasis shifts from classroom aural-skills application to compositional process. The question is not how gagaku might be presented as curricular content, but how listening to gagaku can generate constraints that unsettle habitual jazz periodicity.

The central research question is therefore: how can immersive and comparative listening to gagaku generate compositional constraints that disrupt habitual 16- and 32-bar periodicity in jazz composition without relying on stylistic imitation or fusion? The article addresses this question through two practice-led compositions that test how listening-derived constraints can reshape phrase length, harmonic rhythm, pitch-cell organisation, texture, and groove-based performability.

This article documents a compositional response to that disruption. Two contrasting jazz compositions were developed under constraints derived from immersive and comparative listening to gagaku recordings. One situates these constraints within a functional swing context, destabilising harmonic rhythm and phrase alignment; the other foregrounds melodic persistence and motivic logic within a bossa nova framework. Together, these pieces explore how alternative temporal sensibilities can reorient jazz compositional decision-making without abandoning performability, stylistic identity, or the embodied feel of groove-based time.

2. METHODS

2.1 Listening Procedure, Corpus, and Temporal Perception

The project began with an intentional restriction: to treat listening itself as the primary site of constraint formation. The broader listening process took place over approximately two weeks of repeated gagaku immersion, followed by several days of focused listening devoted specifically to *Etenraku* in *Hyojo* by Nippon Gagaku Kai (2013). During this focused phase, the primary reference recording was heard approximately ten times in attentive sessions. These sessions combined uninterrupted listening with brief reflective notes written during or immediately after listening. The notes recorded perceptual and bodily responses, especially changes in perceived pulse, density, arrival, pitch-centre anchoring, and phrase expectation. Rather than approaching gagaku through score study, analytical literature, or prior theoretical framing, I used repeated listening to observe how the recording affected my expectations as a jazz composer, particularly my ingrained sense of periodic form (Nancy, 2007; Voegelin, 2010).

Several perceptual features became immediately salient. First, the emergence of pulse was gradual and unannounced. Although a sense of shared entrainment developed over time, no clear boundary marked the transition from rubato-like suspension into a more stable temporal frame. Second, changes in density and momentum were complex to locate while immersed in the piece; the sensation of acceleration was often recognised only retrospectively, by recalling how the opening had felt several minutes earlier. In other words, temporal change was experienced less as an event than as a slow redistribution of attention across an extended span (Kramer, 1988; London, 2012).

Pitch organisation was perceived in similarly non-teleological terms. While a stable pitch centre appeared to be reinforced through recurrence and drone-like sonorities, no functional harmonic mechanism comparable to dominant-tonic cadence was perceived. Instead of long melodic arcs or thematic development, the music was presented as short pitch configurations, or cells, that recur with inflexion and rotation. It was perceived as centred yet non-teleological, with coherence arising through recurrence and registral emphasis rather than through functionally articulated arrival (Straus, 2016; Tymoczko, 2011).

These observations were recorded as phenomenological notes rather than analytical claims. Where intonation appeared flexible, particularly in seconds and sixths, the intent was not to diagnose a tuning system but to register perceptual "bandwidth": a sense that certain degrees behaved as expressive ranges rather than fixed targets. Likewise, moments that resembled unison frequently gave way to slight divergences, suggesting a texture of coordinated sameness-with-variation rather than chordal verticality. These early listening impressions were not treated as findings in themselves; they functioned as raw material from which the project's initial compositional constraints were distilled and subsequently tested in practice.

2.2 Comparative Listening and Variability

Following the initial immersive listening phase, the project expanded to comparative listening across approximately five additional gagaku recordings accessed via publicly accessible

platforms, including YouTube and Spotify. These recordings were selected because they were readily available, recognisable as conventional gagaku performances, and useful for comparing differences in duration, density, instrumentation, pacing, and perceived temporal emergence. The purpose of this phase was not to identify a definitive version or structural norm, but to observe how temporal behaviour persisted and varied across different realisations (Tokita & Hughes, 2008). The comparison therefore functioned as a practice-led check against overgeneralising from a single recording, while still keeping the project focused on compositional constraint formation rather than ethnomusicological classification.

Several contrasts emerged. In some recordings, percussive elements and implied pulse became perceptible relatively early, producing a sense of momentum and forward motion from the outset. In other cases, sparse textures and loosely articulated gestures were sustained for extended periods before any sense of temporal stability emerged. These differences affected the perceived urgency of the music: specific performances accumulated energy rapidly and plateaued sooner, whereas others delayed the onset of density and reached moments of intensity more gradually (S. G. Nelson, 2008).

Despite these variations, the overall temporal experience remained consistent. Acceleration was never announced through formal markers or sectional boundaries; instead, it unfolded through incremental changes in density, articulation, and registral emphasis. Importantly, these changes were often recognised only in retrospect, suggesting that temporal perception was shaped by cumulative memory rather than moment-to-moment signalling (Huron, 2006; Margulis, 2013). In this sense, pacing functioned as a flexible principle rather than a fixed structural template, allowing individual performances to stretch or compress time without undermining perceptual coherence.

Comparative listening also reinforced the primacy of temporal behaviour over thematic identity. At times, distinct works within the repertoire were initially difficult to distinguish on listening alone, despite their differing melodic material. This further suggested that musical identity was more shaped by shared approaches to pitch gravity, texture, and the management of change than by thematic development (Danielsen, 2010; Kramer, 1988). For this project, these observations legitimised treating gagaku not as a repertoire to be modelled, but as a field of temporal affordances from which compositional constraints could be abstracted.

2.3 Methodological and Ethical Position

This article treats gagaku as a listening provocation rather than as material for stylistic reproduction, cultural fusion, or ethnomusicological explanation. The project does not borrow gagaku repertoire, instrumentation, ceremonial function, or claims of cultural authority. Instead, it asks how a composer trained in jazz and contemporary music might use careful listening to an unfamiliar temporal discipline to make habitual assumptions about phrase, arrival, density, and periodicity more perceptible. The transfer is therefore procedural and perceptual rather than representational: selected listening experiences are translated into constraints for newly composed jazz materials.

This methodological position extends prior work on intercultural aural-skills pedagogy and plural rhythm curriculum design, in which listening across musical systems is treated not merely as repertoire acquisition but as a means of reconfiguring musical attention, coordination, and judgement (Seow, 2024; Seow, 2025). In the present article, that pedagogical concern is redirected toward music creation: listening becomes a means of testing how compositional habits can be exposed, constrained, and reshaped through practice.

2.4 Extracted Compositional Constraints

The listening phases described above were not treated as analytical ends in themselves, but as a means of generating constraints that could actively shape subsequent compositional practice. Rather than attempting to translate gagaku materials directly into jazz idioms, I abstracted a set of provisional constraints that addressed the specific habits I sought to disrupt, most notably periodic phrase organisation and predictable temporal arrival (Stokes, 2005).

The first constraint concerned pitch anchoring without functional drive. Across recordings, a stable pitch centre was perceptible through recurrence and sustained sonorities, yet this anchoring did not operate through functional harmonic progression. For compositional purposes, this suggested maintaining tonal coherence without relying on cadential mechanisms (Russell, 1953/2001; Tymoczko, 2011). In both compositions developed for this project, a single pitch centre was therefore retained, while functional dominant-tonic logic was either delayed, weakened, or rendered ambiguous.

A second constraint emerged from the perception of cellular pitch organisation. Rather than extended melodies or developmental arcs, the listening material was presented as short pitch configurations that recurred with variation and rotation. These cells appeared to function relationally, maintaining identity through intervallic shape rather than fixed pitch content. In compositional terms, this encouraged the use of brief pitch cells as primary melodic material, allowing larger forms to emerge through repetition, inflexion, and recontextualisation rather than through linear development (Almada, 2023; Schoenberg, 1967).

Temporal organisation constituted a third and central constraint. Acceleration was consistently perceived as retrospective rather than articulated, with changes in density and momentum becoming apparent only through memory rather than immediate signalling. This suggested a model of temporal unfolding in which clear boundaries did not mark formal divisions and phrase lengths could remain indeterminate. For the present project, this translated into a resistance to the perceptual authority of periodic phrase structures, particularly the expectation that musical ideas must prospectively signal resolution or accumulation within 16- or 32-bar spans.

Finally, a constraint concerning texture and coordination was derived from the frequent perception of near-unison, which occasionally gave way to slight divergence. This observation informed the optional use of coordinated lines and subtle textural redistribution as temporal cues, independent of harmonic rhythm.

Taken together, these constraints formed a listening-informed framework rather than a compositional system. They were not intended to reproduce gagaku practice, but to render specific

aspects of my own jazz compositional habit visible and therefore negotiable. The following sections document how these constraints were tested, adapted, and refined through the composition of two contrasting jazz pieces, each translating the same listening-derived principles into different stylistic and formal contexts.

Table 1. Listening-derived constraints and their application across the two compositions

Listening-derived constraint	Perceptual source in listening	Application in Composition I	Application in Composition II
Pitch-centre anchoring without functional cadence	A stable centre is perceived through recurrence and sustained sonority rather than dominant-tonic arrival.	A stable pitch centre is retained while harmonic rhythm is delayed, displaced, or weakened.	A stable pitch centre supports melodic persistence without requiring cadential closure.
Cellular pitch organisation	Short pitch configurations recur with inflexion and rotation rather than developing as goal-directed themes.	Short pitch cells support melodic continuity within asymmetric swing phrase spans.	Rotating pitch cells become the primary driver of melodic and formal organisation.
Retrospective pacing and delayed arrival	Density and momentum become recognisable through memory rather than through explicit formal markers.	Uneven phrase spans and delayed harmonic motion produce large-scale recognition after local phrase symmetry has been disrupted.	Melodic persistence and density shifts reduce the expectation that phrases must complete through predictable harmonic arrival.
Near-unison and lightly divergent texture	Coordinated lines suggest sameness-with-variation rather than chordal verticality.	Textural redistribution supports momentum without disrupting swing feel.	Near-unison and lightly divergent lines thicken the melodic field while preserving bossa nova grounding.

The two compositions were evaluated through practitioner reflection, score-based compositional analysis, and reference audio examples rather than through a formal performer-interview or listener-response study. The claims made here, therefore, concern compositional process, constraint translation, and practice-led reflection. They do not claim to measure audience perception, performer reception, or generalisable listener response.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Composition I: Swing and Harmonic-Rhythm Destabilisation

The first composition tests how listening-derived temporal constraints might operate within a familiar swing setting while retaining performability and groove continuity.

3.1.1 Compositional Intention

The first composition was conceived as a practical test of how listening-derived temporal constraints might operate within a highly familiar jazz setting. A medium-up 4/4 swing feel, approximately 160 bpm, was selected, with bass and drums maintaining a continuous walking-and-riding groove throughout. This choice was deliberate: by keeping the underlying feel stable and recognisably “inside” the swing tradition, any disruption to temporal perception would arise from phrase organisation and pacing rather than from changes in groove or surface style (Benadon, 2009; Butterfield, 2011). This also

connects with groove-centred accounts of ensemble fluency, in which shared time is treated as a trainable, context-sensitive capacity rather than merely an intuitive feel (Seow, 2026a).

Rather than eliminating harmonic reference points, the composition retains a broadly modal-functional jazz language while loosening the expectation that harmonic motion should articulate form at regular intervals. Harmonic activity is present, but it does not consistently coincide with phrase boundaries or predictable spans. Instead, phrase lengths are deliberately uneven, and harmonic change is allowed to drift across these spans rather than defining them. In this way, harmony remains audible and usable as a temporal reference while its role in signalling formal arrival is weakened.

A central aim of the piece was to explore how the disruption of phrase expectancy could occur without destabilising swing feel. To this end, the form is constructed from asymmetrical phrase units whose cumulative duration nonetheless produces a moment of large-scale familiarity. The opening sections consist of phrase spans of differing lengths that, taken together, total thirty-two bars. This creates a subtle perceptual effect: while local phrase symmetry is repeatedly disrupted, a broader sense of formal "arrival" may be recognised retrospectively by listeners accustomed to standard jazz forms (Horlacher, 2001; London, 2012).

Pitch organisation supports this temporal strategy. A stable pitch centre is maintained, while melodic continuity is shaped through short pitch cells and durational proportion rather than through cadential articulation. Short pitch cells recur across the piece, providing continuity through intervallic shape rather than through harmonic resolution. This allows melodic activity to remain coherent while reducing the sense that phrases are oriented toward cadential goals.

Performance orientation is embedded in the form rather than added as a modular unit. Because phrase symmetry is intentionally redistributed while the swing feel remains continuous, temporal elasticity operates at a macro-hypermetric level rather than through disruption of groove or loss of formal intelligibility. The result is not an obscuring of form, but a redistribution of how temporal information is perceived: coherence is inferred retrospectively through accumulated change rather than signalled prospectively through periodic structure (Kramer, 1988; London, 2012).

3.1.2 Temporal Design and Form

The temporal design of the first composition redistributes the perceptual salience of periodic phrase organisation while remaining firmly situated in a swing context. Instead of regular 4-, 8-, or 16-bar units, the form is articulated through a sequence of uneven phrase spans. The opening trajectory comprises a fourteen-bar span, followed by a ten-bar continuation and a four-bar vamp marked for repetition, realised as an eight-bar expansion in the reference performance. Together, these spans total thirty-two bars before the form proceeds into later eight-bar spans. While local phrase symmetry is disrupted throughout, this cumulative duration produces a delayed sense of large-scale formal familiarity rather than immediate sectional clarity.

Throughout the piece, harmonic rhythm does not consistently align with phrase boundaries. Early sections sustain material beyond expected points of change, delaying harmonic motion without signalling stasis. When harmonic change does occur, it may arrive

mid-phrase or extend unevenly across phrase spans, redistributing hypermetric expectation without undermining formal intelligibility. This approach allows functional or modal harmonic reference to remain perceptible while decoupling it from phrase-level certainty.

Momentum is shaped through gradual shifts in density rather than through sectional contrast. As the piece unfolds, melodic activity increases incrementally through register, rhythmic subdivision, and motivic accumulation, while the underlying swing feel remains constant.

The form is therefore best understood as a continuous temporal trajectory rather than as a sequence of clearly demarcated sections. Moments of relative thinning or reduction in activity function as local recalibrations rather than as structural boundaries. They briefly suspend momentum without resetting it, preserving continuity while allowing perceptual space. In this way, formal continuity is achieved not through periodic repetition, but through the controlled shifting of phrase length, harmonic activity, and density over time.

The figures presented here are unannotated lead sheets intended as referential compositional artefacts rather than analytical representations; the temporal and perceptual claims discussed in the text are not visually encoded in the notation but emerge through performance and listening.

Composition I

Swing ♩ = 160

The musical notation for Composition I consists of three staves of music in 4/4 time, marked with a swing feel and a tempo of 160 beats per minute. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

- Staff 1:** Starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The chord is **Em**. The instruction "walk" is written below the staff. The staff contains a series of slanted lines representing a walking bass line. A measure number "(4)" is at the end of the staff.
- Staff 2:** Starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. A box labeled "A" is above the first measure. The chord is **C#m7(9)**. The instruction "5" is written below the first measure. The staff contains a series of slanted lines representing a walking bass line. The chord changes to **F#m7(9)** in the second measure and **B7** in the third measure. The staff ends with a double bar line.
- Staff 3:** Starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The chord is **Em**. The instruction "9" is written below the first measure. The staff contains a series of slanted lines representing a walking bass line. The chord changes to **Fmaj7** in the second measure. The staff ends with a double bar line.

Figure 1. Lead-sheet excerpt from Composition I (swing), showing the initial modal grounding and asymmetric phrase organisation. An eight-bar walking groove precedes overlapping fourteen-bar and ten-bar spans whose cumulative duration produces delayed large-scale familiarity while locally disrupting phrase symmetry.

Phrase symmetry is intentionally destabilised, with formal articulation emerging through cumulative shifts in density, harmonic activity, and registral emphasis rather than through regular 8- or 16-bar units. As a result, temporal change is experienced retrospectively: listeners and performers recognise momentum and intensification by recalling earlier states of the piece rather than by responding to explicit formal markers.

Figure 2. Lead-sheet excerpt from Composition I (swing), showing recalibration through a modal vamp and subsequent continuation. An eight-bar vamp resets temporal orientation, followed by contrasting spans in which pedal-point texture and increasing melodic density redistribute phrase-level expectation.

[Audio Example 1](#) is provided as a supplementary file.

Audio Example 1. Excerpt from Composition I (swing), demonstrating uneven harmonic rhythm and incremental density changes.

Through this design, the composition seeks to retain the embodied feel of swing while destabilising the assumption that form must be articulated through regular phrase symmetry. Temporal coherence is achieved not through periodic repetition, but through continuity of feel and the controlled redistribution of change across time.

3.1.3 Reflection

Composing within a swing context while actively resisting periodic phrase organisation required a sustained shift in compositional attention. Rather than designing form through predetermined section lengths or harmonic cycles, I found myself attending more closely to the durational weight of musical states: how long a particular harmonic area, texture, or level of activity could remain engaging before change became necessary. This recalibration foregrounded pacing as a compositional parameter in its own right, rather than as a by-product of harmonic progression or formal symmetry.

One immediate consequence of this approach was a loosening of the perceived authority of harmonic landmarks. Although functional progressions remained present, their ability to define arrival was attenuated by temporal displacement. In practice, this meant that harmonic changes were often experienced less as goals and more as reference points within an ongoing temporal field. As a composer, this altered how I evaluated material: instead of asking whether a passage “resolved”

appropriately, I attended to whether its duration felt proportionate within the larger temporal trajectory.

This shift also reframed my understanding of the relationship between composed material and potential performance orientation. Rather than treating form as articulated through explicit sectional markers or modular units, the composition foregrounds continuity of feel and accumulated change as the primary means of sustaining temporal orientation. From a compositional perspective, this reframes temporal organisation as a matter of macro-level phrase elasticity rather than sectional disruption, analogous to rubato applied at the level of hypermeter. In this sense, temporal understanding is inferred retrospectively through continuity, rather than signalled prospectively through periodic structure.

From a compositional standpoint, the most significant outcome of this process was the realisation that disrupting periodicity did not necessitate abandoning swing feel or functional harmonic reference. Instead, it required a redistribution of responsibility: harmonic motion no longer bore sole responsibility for shaping form, and temporal coherence emerged through continuity of feel and the controlled management of change. This insight provided a practical means of integrating listening-derived temporal sensibilities into jazz composition without resorting to stylistic imitation or structural opacity.

3.2 Composition II: Bossa Nova and Melody-First Pitch-Cell Logic

The second composition applies the same listening-derived constraints to a contrasting bossa nova setting, shifting the primary organising force from harmonic rhythm to melody-led pitch-cell behaviour.

3.2.1 Compositional Intention

The second composition was conceived as a contrastive experiment, designed to test the same listening-derived constraints under markedly different stylistic and compositional emphases. Whereas the first piece retained functional harmonic landmarks within a swing context, this composition foregrounds melodic persistence and motivic logic as the primary organising forces. A bossa nova feel was selected as the underlying groove, providing a stable and familiar temporal ground against which disruptions to phrase structure and melodic expectation could be clearly perceived.

The central compositional intention was to shift the hierarchical priority from harmony to melody. Rather than allowing harmonic progression to determine phrase shape and duration, short pitch cells were treated as generative material from which both melodic contour and harmonic implication emerged. These cells recur, rotate, and recontextualise across the piece, creating continuity through intervallic identity rather than through cadential arrival or thematic development. In this context, harmony functions as a secondary, responsive layer, supporting melodic behaviour without asserting teleological control (Berliner, 1994; Levine, 1995).

Melodic material was composed in close alignment with idiomatic bossa nova timing, such that pitch cells consistently coincide with stylistically conventional tension tones rather than diatonic resting points. These choices were not conceived as harmonic substitutions or transformational procedures, but as surface-level colouration aligned with jazz-bossa performance

practice, allowing melodic persistence to be maintained without assigning formal or teleological weight to harmonic resolution.

Texture plays a crucial role in articulating this approach. Textural coordination, including near-unison and lightly divergent voicings where used, is employed to thicken the melodic field without resorting to vertical harmonic stacking. This creates motion through coordinated variation rather than chordal change, allowing shifts in density and register to function as temporal cues. As a result, phrase boundaries remain fluid, and the perception of form arises through accumulation and contrast rather than through symmetry.

A reference performance, represented by Audio [Example 2](#), accompanies the lead sheet to convey groove feel, pacing, and phrase-level timing that are only partially notational. The lead sheet functions as a referential compositional artefact rather than an analytical diagram; interpretive commentary on pitch cell behaviour, density, and temporal perception is therefore provided in the surrounding text.

Together, these intentions position the second composition as a complementary exploration of how gagaku-informed listening can inform jazz composition when melodic logic, rather than harmonic progression, is placed at the centre of formal organisation.

3.2.2 *Pitch Organisation and Texture*

Pitch organisation in the second composition is governed primarily by cell-based melodic design rather than by harmonic progression or formal cadence. These cells typically consist of three pitch degrees related by simple intervallic shapes, which recur across the piece with variation in register, rhythm, and articulation. Continuity is established through the recognisability of these intervallic relationships rather than through fixed pitch sequences or thematic development.

Melodic persistence is further reinforced through the systematic coincidence of pitch cells with stylistically inflected tension tones typical of jazz-influenced bossa nova practice, including extensions and altered colour tones that exceed strict diatonic expectation. These tensions function as expressive surface features rather than as drivers of harmonic motion, supporting continuity of melodic flow without introducing goal-directed harmonic behaviour.

Rather than functioning as motives that “go somewhere,” these pitch cells operate as fields of possibility. Their repetition does not imply accumulation toward a goal, but sustains a sense of centredness through recurrence and rotation. This approach allows melodic material to persist over extended spans without requiring resolution at predictable phrase boundaries, thereby directly supporting the project's aim of loosening the perceptual authority of periodic form (Kramer, 1988; London, 2012).

A stable pitch centre underpins this organisation, reinforced through recurrence and registral emphasis. This contributes to a tonal environment that feels anchored yet non-directive, enabling melodic activity to unfold without compelling arrival.

Texture further reinforces this melodic-first hierarchy (Adler, 2016; Schoenberg, 1967). The lead sheet foregrounds coordinated melodic behaviour, which can be realised as near-unison or lightly divergent lines in performance, allowing motion to arise from sameness-with-variation rather than from chordal verticality. These

divergences are not treated as harmonic events but as textural inflexions, creating motion and depth without introducing vertical harmonic hierarchy. At times, lines briefly separate before reconverging, sustaining a sense of coordinated motion rather than contrapuntal independence.

Composition II

Bossa Nova ♩ = 160

The musical score for Composition II (Bossa Nova) is presented in 4/4 time with a tempo of 160. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score consists of several staves:

- Opening:** A four-measure sequence of chords: Gmaj7, Abmaj7, Gmaj7, and Abmaj7. The notation shows a melodic line with slurs and a final measure marked with a double bar line and a circled 4.
- [A]:** A melodic line starting at measure 5. Chords indicated are Am7 and D7. The melody features a slur over the first two notes and a final measure with a double bar line.
- [B]:** A melodic line starting at measure 9. Chords indicated are Bm9 and Bdim7. The melody features a slur over the first two notes and a final measure with a double bar line.
- [B]:** A melodic line starting at measure 13. Chords indicated are Am7, D7sus4, Em(maj7), and G7. The melody features a slur over the first two notes and a final measure with a double bar line.
- [B]:** A melodic line starting at measure 17. Chords indicated are Cmaj7⁽⁶¹⁾ and B7. The melody features a slur over the first two notes and a final measure with a double bar line.

Figure 3. Lead-sheet excerpt from Composition II (bossa nova), showing the opening pitch-cell logic and stable groove framework. The excerpt foregrounds melodic persistence, pitch-centre anchoring, and the use of harmonic colour without strong cadential direction.

In this context, harmony functions as a responsive layer rather than as a governing structure. Chordal implications arise from the interaction of melodic material rather than preceding it, and harmonic change is often withheld or minimised to preserve melodic continuity. This allows shifts in density, register, and articulation to play a greater role in shaping temporal perception, further decoupling form from periodic harmonic rhythm.

Figure 4. Lead-sheet excerpt from Composition II (bossa nova), showing intensified textural and harmonic activity. The excerpt preserves recognisable melodic contour while using pitch-cell rotation, delayed arrival, and increased density to support retrospective formal recognition.

[Audio Example 2](#) is provided as a supplementary file.

Audio Example 2. Excerpt from Composition II (bossa nova), demonstrating pitch-cell persistence and melody-led temporal organisation.

Through this approach, pitch organisation and texture operate together to sustain coherence while resisting the pull of phrase-based closure. The result is a compositional environment in which melody does not lead toward resolution. Instead, it maintains an open temporal field within which the composed material can unfold continuously.

3.2.3 Reflection

Working with a melody-first hierarchy produced a markedly different compositional experience from that of the first piece. Without harmonic progression acting as the primary organiser of time, decisions were guided instead by the durability of melodic material: how long a particular pitch cell could remain active before variation or recontextualisation became necessary. This shifted my compositional attention away from questions of resolution and toward questions of persistence, contour, and density.

One of the most immediate consequences of this approach was a reduction in formal pressure. Because melodic cells were not required to “complete” a phrase or lead toward cadential arrival, musical continuity could be sustained over extended, internally varied spans without generating a sense of incompleteness. In practice, this allowed phrases to extend or contract organically, with change motivated by saturation or perceptual fatigue rather than by formal obligation. Temporal coherence emerged from the recognisability of material rather than from symmetry.

This orientation also altered the role of harmony in the compositional process. Because harmonic implication followed melodic behaviour rather than directing it, decisions were guided less by chordal destination and more by the durability and recontextualisation of pitch cell material. This reframed formal

continuity as an outcome of persistence and controlled variation rather than of cadential arrival.

Texture proved central in supporting this shift. Near-unison writing, with its balance of sameness and divergence, allowed multiple voices to reinforce melodic identity while introducing subtle internal motion. These textural variations functioned as temporal cues, shaping the perception of movement and change without invoking harmonic progression. From a compositional perspective, this reinforced the insight that density and coordination can serve as primary drivers of form, independent of periodic phrase structure.

Reflecting across both compositions, the contrast between them clarified that disrupting periodicity does not require a single solution. In the first piece, destabilisation operated through misalignment of functional harmony and phrase expectation; in the second, it emerged through sustained melodic logic and the redistribution of harmonic function to the level of surface colour rather than formal direction. Together, these approaches demonstrated that listening-derived temporal constraints can be flexibly translated into jazz composition, yielding different outcomes depending on which musical parameters are foregrounded.

3.3 Transferability, Limits, and Implications

This project does not propose gagaku as a compositional model for jazz, nor does it advocate stylistic fusion or intercultural synthesis at the level of surface materials. Instead, it demonstrates how immersive listening to an unfamiliar temporal discipline can serve as a practical means of destabilising entrenched compositional habits. The constraints developed here, centred pitch without functional drive, cellular melodic logic, retrospective acceleration, and resistance to periodic phrase structure, are transferable, not as techniques to be replicated, but as attentional orientations that can be adapted to other compositional contexts.

One implication of this approach is that compositional renewal need not depend on the acquisition of new harmonic systems, rhythmic vocabularies, or stylistic idioms. In both pieces presented here, the most significant changes arose from rethinking when and how change occurs, rather than from the materials used. This suggests that listening-based constraint formation may offer a productive pathway for composers seeking to refresh their practice without abandoning stylistic identity or performability.

At the same time, the project reveals clear limits. Sustained resistance to periodicity can shift the distribution of formal certainty for listeners accustomed to predictable landmarks. In the present project, this shift is addressed by retaining stable groove frameworks, swing and bossa nova, so that altered phrase expectancy is heard as temporal elasticity rather than as breakdown of feel. These tensions are not shortcomings of the approach but rather inherent frictions that must be negotiated carefully, particularly in jazz settings, where groove, flow, and shared temporal orientation are highly valued.

This study also underscores the importance of contextual grounding. By situating both compositions within familiar jazz feels, the effects of altered temporal logic remained legible. This suggests that the transferability of such constraints is enhanced when listeners and performers are given stable reference points against which change can be perceived. Future work might explore how similar listening-derived constraints operate in less stylistically

grounded contexts, or how performers adapt to these temporal conditions over extended periods of practice.

Finally, the implications of this work extend beyond composition to pedagogy and aural training. If periodic form is understood not as a neutral container but as a learned expectation, then exposing students to alternative temporal behaviours through listening, reflection, and constrained composition may help cultivate more flexible modes of musical attention (Huron, 2006; Terefenko, 2014). This pedagogical implication connects with prior work on intercultural aural-skills pedagogy (Seow, 2024), plural and embodied rhythm curriculum design (Seow, 2025), and groove-centred ensemble fluency, where shared time is treated as a trainable, context-sensitive musical capacity rather than merely an intuitive feel (Seow, 2026a). While this article does not attempt to formalise a curriculum, it suggests that practice-led music creation grounded in listening can help address broader questions about how temporal understanding, structural listening, and ensemble judgement develop in jazz education. The approach also has implications for genre-inclusive curriculum design, since it treats composition, listening, and the interpretation of musical structure as connected forms of musicianship rather than as separate theoretical and practical domains (Seow, 2026b).

Taken together, the two compositions show how immersive listening can be used as a compositional method, not to import stylistic surface but to re-pattern temporal expectations within jazz practice. By translating gagaku-informed constraints into two familiar jazz feels, the project demonstrates that disrupting 16- and 32-bar periodicity can remain performable, groove-grounded, and aesthetically legible. Future iterations will test the approach with additional repertoires and longer-form compositional designs, and will examine how performers internalise these temporal conditions over repeated rehearsal cycles.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has documented a practice-led compositional project in which immersive and comparative listening to Japanese gagaku was used to interrogate a specific habit in jazz composition: the automatic perceptual authority of 16- and 32-bar periodicity. The project did not reject these spans as structural containers. Instead, it examined how periodic form can remain intact while its perceptual salience is redistributed, becoming less prospectively signalled and more retrospectively inferred through listening-derived constraints, including centred pitch without cadential drive, rotating pitch cells, and cumulative shifts in density and momentum.

The two compositions translate this approach in contrasting ways. In the swing composition, periodic totals are preserved but rendered less immediately legible. Vamps, extensions, and local bar removals destabilise phrase-level expectation while still producing longer spans that add up to familiar durations, including delayed recognition of 32-bar form. In the bossa nova composition, the formal container remains stable. Still, melodic persistence and pitch cell rotation flex within it, reducing the sense that phrases must complete themselves through harmonic arrival at predictable points. In both cases, periodicity is neither abandoned nor negated, but reframed as a background structure whose authority is softened rather than removed.

The project's contribution is methodological rather than ethnomusicological. It shows how intercultural listening can function as a source of compositional constraint without requiring direct stylistic borrowing, instrumental imitation, or claims of cultural authority over gagaku. By translating listening-derived constraints into performable jazz material, the article demonstrates a modest but transferable model for music creation: listening can expose compositional habits, constraints can redirect those habits, and composition can test the resulting temporal possibilities in practice.

Taken together, these outcomes demonstrate how listening-derived constraints can redistribute temporal expectation from within jazz practice, without displacing groove, style, or performative legibility. The article, therefore, contributes to music creation studies by showing that intercultural listening can serve not only as inspiration or reference but also as a practical method for reshaping the compositional process.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author was responsible for the conception, compositional design, listening process, analysis, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

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DECLARATIONS

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Manuscript Preparation

The author affirms that ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used for editorial support, including language refinement, formatting adaptation, structural checking, citation-format assistance, and preparation of submission materials. This tool did not determine the study conception, compositional design, listening process, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions. The author has reviewed and revised the manuscript and takes full responsibility for all aspects of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX

[Audio Example 1](#) Composition I (swing)

[Audio Example 2](#) Composition II (bossa nova)