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FUNDAMENTAL ANALYSIS OF CHICK COREA'S IMPROVISATION IN *SPAIN* (1972)

FLORIN BĂLAN[1]

SUMMARY. Modern jazz can be considered an equal part of modern music, owing to the numerous experiments, at times considered strange or not really agreed by the audience. When talking about modern musical life and the possibilities for making music in a proper manner, no doubt that the value and genius of composers like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or Ludwig van Beethoven must be recognized. However, one must also realize that modern life, with its modern, contemporary music is also needed. The great jazz saxophonist, Charlie Parker considered improvisation the middle of the earth, the place where, if only for a few brief moments, one can be the best and the greatest composer in the world. Furthermore, the idea of a song (theme) is the only reason for musicians to come and elaborate together, with variational spontaneity, a unique and maybe unrepeatable musical manifestation. The works of Chick Corea reflect this point of view, as the analysis of the work *Spain* (1972), discussed in the article bellow, will demonstrate. The work represents the fusion between Spanish music and the compositional methods of modern jazz music, reflecting Corea's unique style. Improvisation lies at the basis of this composition, offering the musician a multitude of possibilities for expressing his ideas regarding freedom and human nature.

Keywords: jazz, piano improvisation, spontaneity, creativity, harmonical knowledge, contemporary

Chick Corea – Personal musical skills

The purpose of the present article is to shed light on the work of Chick Corea, his vision about playing, improvisation, composition, and the fusion of various styles. Corea's unique style is mirrored in the work *Spain*

[1] *Assistant professor, PhD Student, Transilvania University of Brașov (Faculty of Music), E-mail: florin.balan@unitbv.ro*

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(1972), which was chosen to reveal the way the musician composed and understood music.

For at least 35 years Chick Corea[2] was the musician that had recorded, played, and composed jazz music in different styles, like Straight Ahead Jazz, Free Jazz, Jazz Fusion, Latin, with subtle influences of classical music and many ingenious variations. Corea can be regarded as one of the most complete and versatile players and creators of contemporary jazz, a source of inspiration for students and musicians alike.

On his real name Armando Anthony Corea was born on 12 June 1941 in Chelsea Massachusetts and died on 9 February 2021 in Tampa, Florida. His father was also a musician, he played the trumpet – he could be considered the first source of inspiration for Corea's musical career. After a few years, during which he played the drums and the piano (in a spontaneous fashion), he started to seriously study the piano with Salvatore Sulo, a well-known concert pianist in the USA.

After studying[3] at the Columbia and Juilliard Universities, he started to play in New York with Mango Santamaria, Willie Bob, Herbie Mann, Elvin Jones, Stan Getz, and many other established musicians of that time. Later, together with trumpet player Blue Mitchell, he recorded his first LP, with songs like *Chick's Tune* or *A thing to do*. In 1966, the next LP came out, recorded with musicians like Joe Farrell, Woddy Show, Steve Swallow, Joe Chambers. A mixture of styles (latin, bebop, free style) could be heard on the record under the name *Tones for Joan's Bones*. This was followed by the collaboration with the great Miles Davis in the *Miles Davis Group*, while together with Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette the improvisation in free style was experienced and founded for the first time.

The musical education and knowledge gained in the Juilliard and Columbia Universities were the first premise for the artistic development of Corea's vision and creativity. His various bands, (like *Return to Forever)* were considered among the time the best jazz bands ever. Together with musicians like Stanley Clarke, Joe Farrell, Flora Purim, Airto Moreira, and lather with Bill Connors and Lenny White, they made the best LP recordings (pieces like *Light as a Feather* or *The Hymn of Seven Galaxy* became standards), according to the specialized music critics from Downbeat Magazine. Until 1985 he had numerous projects with Herbie Hancock, Gary Burton, John McLaughlin, Paco di Lucia, Michael Brecker, Eddie Gomez, Steve Gadd. In 1985, together with John Patitucci, Dave Weckl, and Scott

[2] Corea, Chick. *A work in Progress…On being a Musician*. Milwaukee, MCA Publishing, 1999, p. 33.

[3] Corea, Chick. *Music Poetry by Chick Corea*. Los Angeles, Litha Music, 1980, p. 35-45.

Henderson the *Chick Corea Electric Band* was founded. New instrumental textures and colours, obtained through keyboards-synthesisers marked the beginning of a new era in musical thinking and playing.

Chick Corea proposed a special jazz language, with its own melodic vocabulary, organized according to rules that reflect the features of the most important element of jazz music, the *improvisation*. Improvisation lies at the basis of his solos as well, remarkable in their coherence and continuity. The following analysis examines the way the musician devises his works, with consideration to the process and product of improvisational performance. The methods employed by Corea are examined using the techniques of music analysis, with emphasis on elements pertaining to jazz music.

1. *Spain*[4] – harmonic and melodic analysis of the 1st improvisation

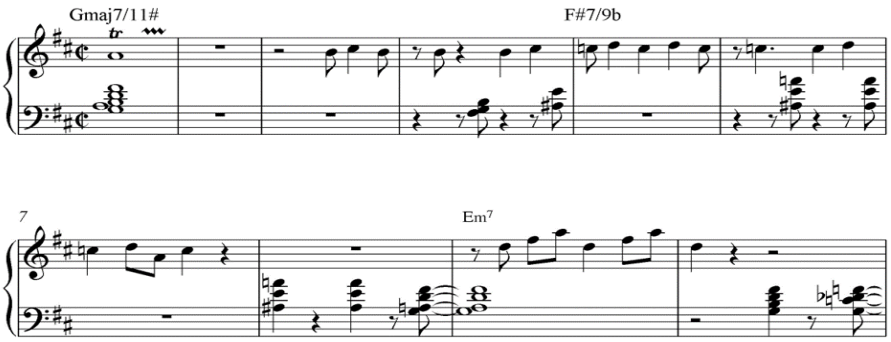
In his compositions Chick Corea offers valuable example regarding the assimilation of musical elements pertaining to other cultures, as suggested by the work *Spain* as well. To create this piece, the musician had to understand certain elements that are characteristic for Spanish cultural identity, assimilate these features, and harmoniously combine them with his musical perspective, thus creating a work in the genre of *fusion.*

Corea listened to the recordings of Spanish flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucia, which deepened his affinity towards Spanish folk music – an aspect that eventually took shape in the composition of *Spain* (1972). The work begins with a solo motif, performed by the piano, alongside the bass line accompaniment of the strings, inspired by the Adagio form Joaquin Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* (1939).

The improvisation starts (in the first 8 measures) with the rhythmic development of an ascending/descending musical motif, based on major seconds (measure 3-7) and major and minor thirds (measure 9), as shown in E.g.1:

[4] Corea, Chick. *The Essential of Chick Corea*, Los Angeles, Litha Music, 1982, p. 18-31.

E.g. 1



Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 1-10.

In measures 1-3 of first improvisation (E.g. 1) it is interesting to follow the upper and lower structure of the Gmaj7/11# chord, with added notes (note A in the left hand, or C# in the right hand, as an argument for the Lydian[5] mode in the right hand). At the end of the 4th measure, the harmonical anticipation for the next measure, the F#7/9 chord – structured only on two steps,[6] the 3rd and the 7th.

Between measures 5-8, (E.g. 1) by the right hand a line may be observed, based on the A minor pentatonic scale (represented A, C, D, E, G, the notes A, G are included in the left-hand chords structure). At the end of measure 8 there is another harmonical anticipation for the next chord, with added notes (the 4th and the 9th degrees) for the right hand, and the development with added notes (the 7th,9th,11th) for the left hand.

At the end of measure 10 (E.g. 1) another harmonical anticipation may be remarked, through the bipolar[7] chord of the Vth degree (A7), with a bright distribution (G, C, Db/C#, F) chord, with (both) major and minor thirds (C#/Db and also natural C).

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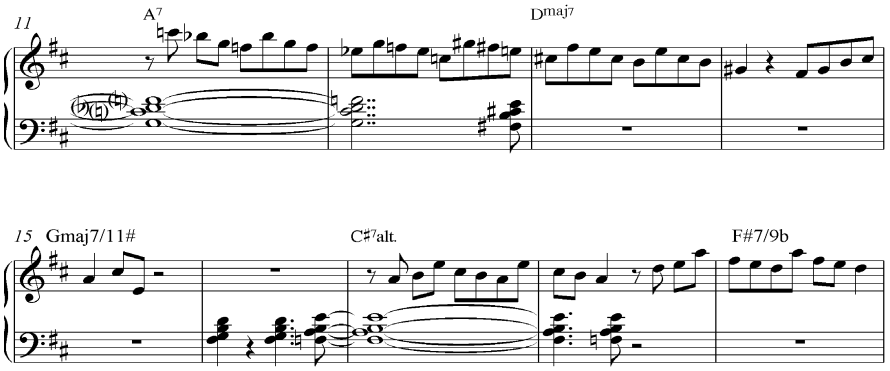
[5] Russell, George. *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organisation*, Concept Pub. Co., Brookline, Massachusetts, 2001, p. 46.

[6] Moody, Gregory. *Handbook of Harmony Substitution and Passing Chords*, Music Publish, Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2010, p. 87.

[7] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, Oxford Paperback References, Oxford University, 1996.

E.g. 2

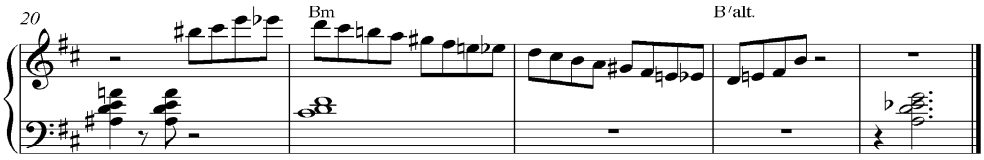


Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 11 - 19.

Measure 11 (E.g. 2) shows a descending pentatonic[8] line of the Eb minor scale, followed by chromatic passage, passing at an ascending half step, in measures 12-13, to tonic (root) Dmaj7, marking the end of a II-V-I relation (measures 9-14).

Measure 15 (E.g. 2) shows the Lydian mode (note C# in the right hand), at the end of measure 16, again the harmonical anticipation of the altered C# chord, bipolar, with added notes (minor 6th and 7th) for the left hand, in the right hand an A minor pentatonic sequence followed by an ascending transposition at the 4th in the next measure (D major pentatonic). The same 4th transposition for the left hand after C#7 alt. (altereted) the move to F#7/9b in measure 20. (E.g. 3)

E.g. 3



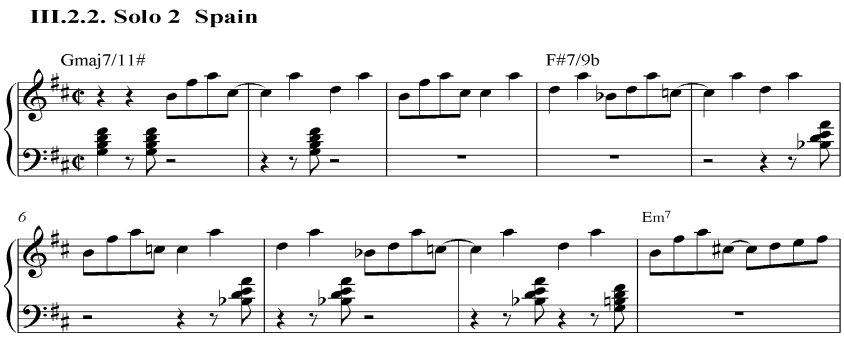
Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 20 – 24.

[8] Fedele, Daniel. *The Pentatonic Scales Workbook a Step by Step Guide for Musicians*, Art Music, Hamburg, 2016, p. 67-69.

Measure 21 (E.g. 3) shows a B minor chord (based on major 7th, minor 3rd, and perfect 5th for the left hand) and an improvisational descending line for the right hand, based on the Lydian mode, starting from 3rd degree (D) of the same B minor chord. The end of the first solo will be marked through a bipolar chord, structured[9] from minor 7th and 3rd, major 3rd, and 6th (or 13th over the bottom, same B minor).

2. *Spain*[10] – harmonic and melodic analysis of the 2nd improvisation

E.g. 4



Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 1 – 9.

Measures 1-3 (E.g. 4) of the second improvisation, start on the G7/11# chord, in the right hand an improvisational line may be observed, structured on degrees 3rd, 7th, 9th, 4th # of the G scale.

Measures 4-8 (E.g. 4) are represented through repetitive formulas in mirror (recurrence)[11] on the same bipolar F#7/9b chord.

Measures 9-10 (E.g. 4/5) show a line in the right hand, based on the Ionian mode on D (D, E, F#, A, B, C#), and in the left hand the harmonic anticipation of chord A7 with bipolar structure (minor 6th and 7th).

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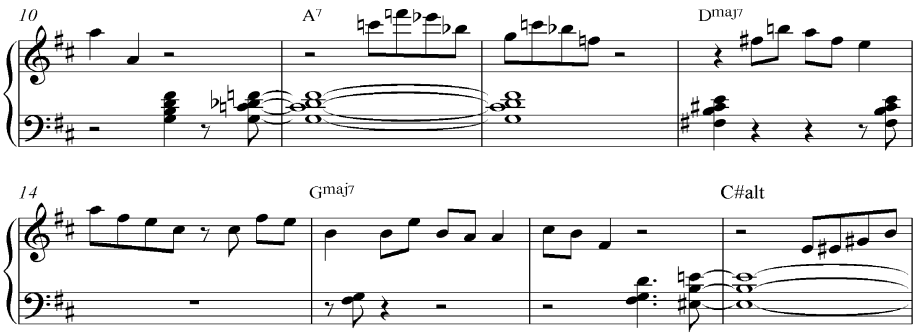
[9] LaVerne, Andy. *Handbook of Chord Substitutions*, Ekay Music Inc., New York, 1991, p. 89-103.

[10] Corea, Chick. *The Essential of Chick Corea*, Los Angeles, Litha Music, 1982, p. 18-31.

[11] *Rudiments and Theory of Music* based on *The Syllabus of Theory Examination of Royal Schools of Music*, published by The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, London, 1958, p. 231.

E.g. 5



Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 10 – 17.

Measures 11-13 (E.g. 5) show a tritone substitution[12] of the A7 chord (in the left hand) with an improvisation development of the pentatonic scale Eb major, starting from the 6th degree of the pentatonic scale (for the right hand).

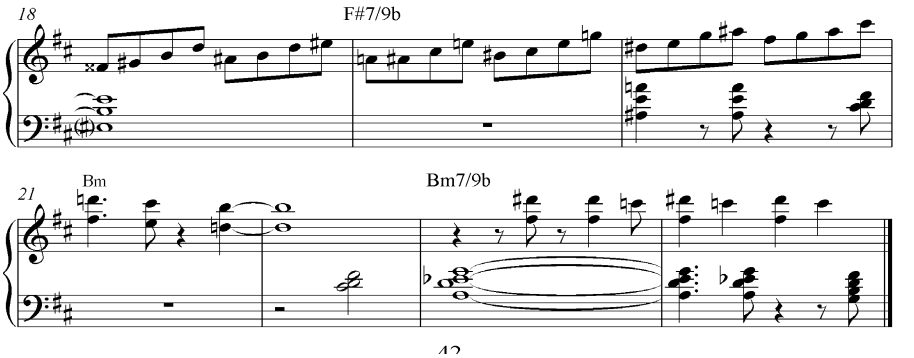
Measures 13-14, (E.g. 5) based on the 3rd degree of the scale, with added notes (the 6th and the 9th) for the left hand and a descending pentatonic sequence of the pentatonic scale (D) with added note (major 7th - C#), considered to be the passing note to the 3rd (B) for the next following chord (Gmaj7).

Measure 15 (E.g. 5) is important to follow due to the lower structure[13]/voicing on the left hand, structured on 2 short notes (harmonic reduction) on the second half of the first beat. At the same time, the right hand plays a descending pentatonic line of the F# minor scale, starting at the end of measure 14 through 15, on the 3rd degree.

In the end of measure 16 (E.g. 5) there is another harmonic anticipation of the chord C# alt. on the left hand.

[12] Pease, Ted. *Jazz Composition Theory and Practice*, Berklee Press, Berklee University Boston, 2003, p. 211.
[13] Levine, Mark. *The Jazz Piano Book*, Sher Music, Petaluma California, 1989, p. 46.

E.g. 6



Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 18 – 24.

Measures 17-18 (E.g. 6) in the right hand show the typically jazz sequences[14] based on minor 2nd, major 3rd, and minor 3rd, in ascending movement, starting from the 3rd, 5th and 6th degrees of the scale C#. For the left hand, the bipolar chord without (elliptical) the root (tonic) and with the minor 7th added.

Measures 19-20 (E.g. 6) continue the same procedure of jazz sequences, again in ascending movement from the 3rd, 5th,7th,9th degrees of the scale, supported by F#7/9b in the left hand.

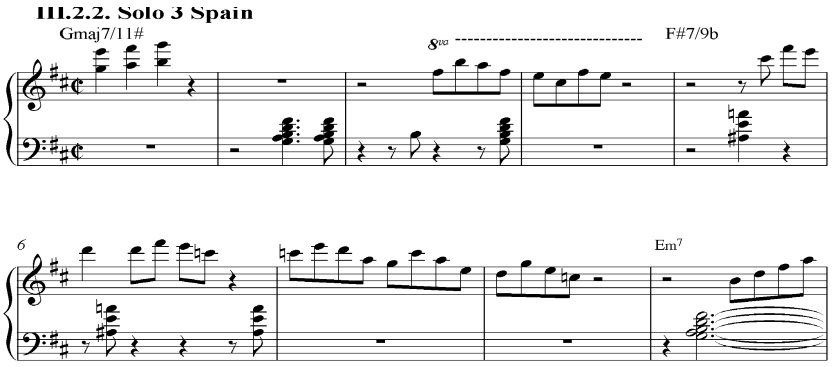
Measure 21 (E.g. 6) is based on a descending melodic line, strengthened by the inferior 6th for the right hand, and to contrast it (small cluster) voicings[15] structured on the 9th, 3rd, and the 5th degree of the scale on the left hand.

In measures 23-24 (E.g. 6) one may observe a left-hand harmonic structure of a bipolar B minor 7/9b chord, based on the 7th, major 3rd, minor 3th, and major 6th (or 13), this time the 9b (from the chord structure) will be found in the right hand, upper structure (natural C).

[14] Richards, Tim. *Exploring Jazz Piano*, Schott Verlag, Mainz, 2005, p. 78 - 91.
[15] Waite, Brian. *Modern jazz Piano, A study in harmony and Improvisatio*n, New York, Hippocrene Books, Spellmount Publications, 1987, p. 241.

3. *Spain*[16] – harmonic and melodic analysis of the 3rd improvisation

E.g. 7



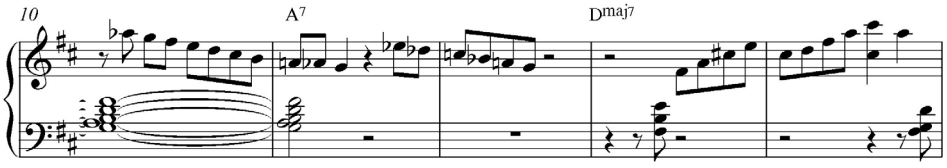
Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 1 – 9.

Measures 1-4 of third solo (E.g. 7) sounds like a calm beginning of flamenco,[17] supported by 6th intervals (extensions) with added notes in the left hand (2nd note A) in the 2nd bar. In the right hand, in measure 3, a pentatonic sequence of the C# minor scale, based on the tritone substitution with the left hand (Gmaj7/ - C# minor) starting on the 3rd degree.

Measures 5-6 (E.g. 7) are formed by pentatonic sequences on the scale for the right hand, and bipolar chord F#7/9b in the left hand.

In measures 7-8, (E.g. 7) in the right hand, Corea uses pentatonic sequences based on the C, again in tritone substitution relation with the left hand (F#7/9b).

E.g. 8

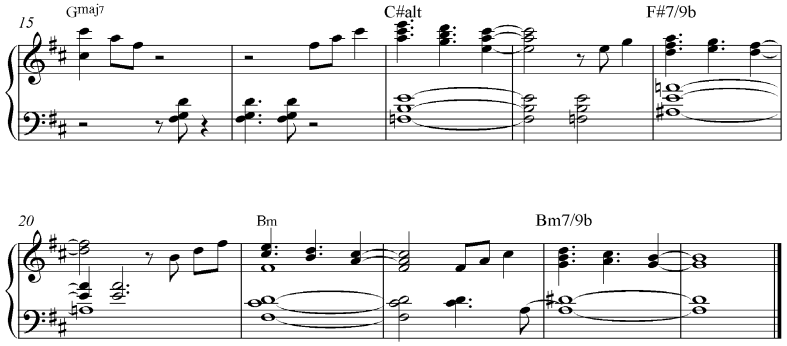


Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 10 – 14.

[16] Corea, Chick. *The Essential of Chick Corea*, Los Angeles, Litha Music, 1982, p. 18 - 31.
[17] Granadas, Manuel. *Manual didactico de la guitarra flamenco*, Ventilador Edicions, Barcelona, 1995, p. 46 - 71.

Measures 10-12 (E.g. 8) show a sequence of the A major scale with chromatic change[18] between root and the 7th, followed by a diminished descending line, half tone/whole tone, again with tritone relation (A7/Eb). Everything will be calmed down, when the root chord sounds in measure 14, (E.g. 7) the entire discourse is fulfilled by the right hand with the Dmaj7 arpeggio.

E.g. 9



Chick Corea: *Spain (1972),* m. 15 – 24.

In Measures 15-16 (E.g. 9) an F# minor arpeggio on the G maj7 chord is employed, in the left hand. It sounds dissonant,[19] but the hands are not playing at the same time! It means that the notes played by the right hand are considered extensions for the G maj7 chord (the raised 4th, typical for the Lydian mode, the 9th and the 7th as written for the left hand major 7).

Measures 17-24 (E.g. 9) are structured by the right hand through 3 note chords using the rhythmic formula that reminds us about the introduction, the beginning of the theme. No doubt, it is the end of the improvisation, everything will be calmed down again, and the next turn will be prepared. For the left hand the same open chords are used, structured on perfect tower 4th, bipolar or small cluster distribution.

The work reveals Corea's ability to assimilate elements of Spanish music in an original manner, harmoniously combining these with features of jazz music.

[18] Chinen, Nate. *Playing Changes Jazz for the New Century*, Pantheon Books, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, New York, 2018, p. 28 - 31.

[19] Cook, Nicolas. *Music a very short Introduction*, Oxford University Press (OUP) Limited Company, Oxfordshire, 2000, p. 17.

Final conclusions

A DownBeat Hall of Famer and NEA Jazz Master, 23-time Grammy Award winner, and keyboard virtuoso, Chick Corea has attained living legend status after five decades of unremitting creativity and an artistic output that is simply amazing. Chick Corea is the fourth-most-nominated artist in the history of the Grammys, with 63 nominations. He's also earned 3 Latin Grammy Awards, the most any artist in the *Best Instrumental Album* category has ever won. From straight-ahead jazz to avant-garde, bebop to fusion, children's songs to chamber music, along with some far-reaching forays into symphonic works, Chick has touched an astonishing number of musical bases in his illustrious career, while maintaining a standard of excellence that is awe-inspiring. Even after his death (in 2021), the musician is still an inspiration, a model of creativity for musicians all around the world. A tirelessly creative spirit, Corea continued to forge ahead, continually reinventing himself in the process of creating music.

The present analysis, a homage to Chick Corea, offers the opportunity for discovering and understanding concepts related to modern jazz. The analysis of the work *Spain* aimed to reveal the way the musician's ideas regarding freedom and creativity have manifested in his music, based on his knowledge of the principles that govern jazz music. At the same time, Corea managed to assimilate elements pertaining to Spanish music, thus creating a fusion of styles, at the core of which lied the concept of improvisation.

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