

The Meters of Don Ellis' Variations for Trumpet

Andrew Wilson | Archival companion | Research period: circa 2020-2021

Context for this public archival edition

This presentation documents an earlier stage of Andrew Wilson's Don Ellis research. The surviving bibliography cites interviews from October and November 2020 and February 2021; the exact presentation date is not stated. The slides are preserved as an archival lecture companion, not relabeled as a newly revised research paper.

Its close reading of metric cycles, superimposition, and large-scale return contains antecedents of the hierarchical thinking developed in the later Doctrine and P.R.A.Y. P.R.A.Y. did not form part of the original presentation.

How to read the terminology

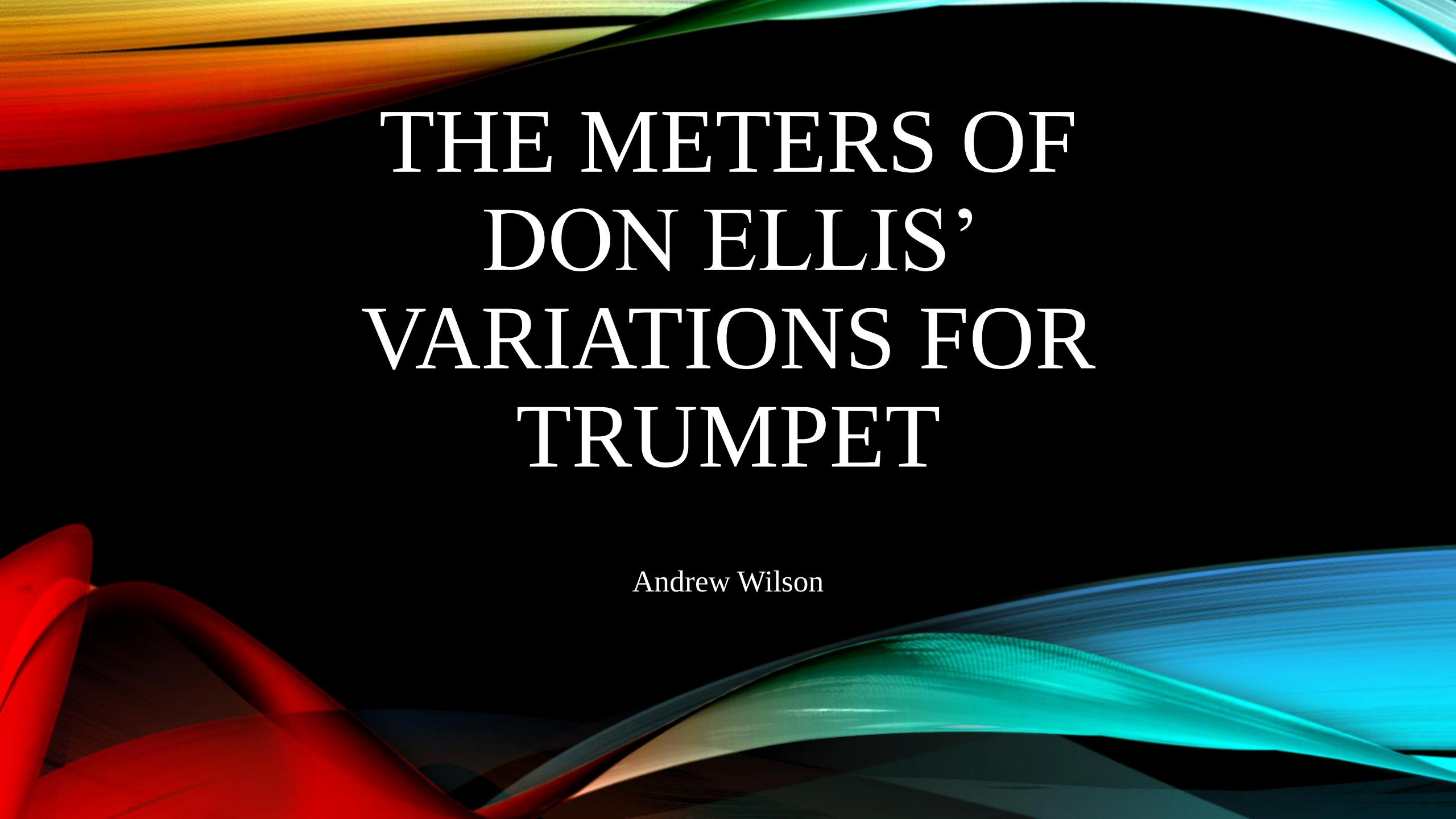
Definitions of metric consonance, dissonance, resolution, and modulation reflect this earlier analytical vocabulary. Compare them with the current Doctrine rather than treating the two texts as interchangeable. Evaluative and historical language in the slides remains the author's earlier assessment; this edition does not independently validate every claim or timestamp.

Editorial and citation note

The original slides follow unchanged except for removal of the direct link to the unfinished Metric Index. A citation correction is supplied here: Sean P. Fenlon, *The Exotic Rhythms of Don Ellis*, DMA dissertation, Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, 2002. The title page gives May 25, 2002; the original slide's "Mar. 2014" is not the dissertation date.

[Fenlon dissertation, title page and abstract](#). The cited source was checked for this edition.

No annotated score or separate musical transcription is included.



THE METERS OF DON ELLIS' VARIATIONS FOR TRUMPET

Andrew Wilson

TERMINOLOGY

- Metric Augmentation: Increasing a meter by a common factor.
- Metric Consonance: A feeling of cohesiveness that accompanies symmetrical rhythms or meters.
- Metric Cycle: The largest repeated pattern of indivisible groupings of meters/sub-meters that add up to a singular unit, phrase or form.
- Metric Diminution: Decreasing a meter by a common factor.
- Metric Dissonance: A feeling of tension or uneasiness that accompanies asymmetrical rhythms or meters.
- Metric Fractions: Meters that feature mixed numbers or improper fractions.
- Metric Inversion: Emphasizing the weak beats of an original meter or cycle.
- Metric Modulation: Retaining the same melodic/harmonic phrase but appearing in a new meter.
- Metric Resolution: Shifting from a sense of metric dissonance to consonance.
- Metric Retrograde: Reversing the original sequence of a meter or cycle.
- Metric Retrograde-Inversion: Simultaneously reversing the original sequence of a meter or cycle while emphasizing the weak beats of the original meter or cycle.
- Metric Superimposition: Two or more coexisting meters that occupy the same time but can be broken down differently.
- Metric Symmetry: Meters or cycles that, when given an axis of symmetry, will have an exact mirror of both the number of beats and identical organization of beats on both sides of the axis. (The axis of symmetry is usually drawn across the downbeat, or the exact middle of the meter or cycle).

THEME

- After an explosive blast of sound, the piece slows itself to the mysterious opening of the theme in 5/4.
- This 5 is subdivided as 3+2 and remains so for the A section of the theme.
- After the theme (0:18) is stated by Don and answered by Flute, we arrive at the B section of the theme (1:11) via a transitional bar of 7/4. The 'B' of the theme exists in 4/4 before being taken back to the A via another transitional 7/4.
- This time, as the orchestration begins to thicken, the A returns as an A prime (1:48) since the theme is elongated and placed above a now changing series of meters (5/4, 7/4, 7/4, 4/4, 5/4).
- The C section (2:06) moves back into 4/4 as the orchestra begins playing more whimsically and mischievously before Don goes into his first Electrophonic trumpet cadenza of the piece (2:48).
- The bass begins a new 5/4 ostinato underneath Don (3:11) and slowly more and more instruments are added throughout this D section until the ensemble crescendos into the recapitulation of A prime (4:10) which again is played over a 5/4, 7/4, 7/4, 4/4 pattern.
- This time, the A prime leads back to the 4/4 B Prime section (4:34), now stated up an octave by Don. The rousing finale to the theme concludes with A double prime (4:59) in 5/4, 5/4, 4/4, 4/4 as Don gracefully drifts down the horn to the final note of the theme (5:23).

VARIATION ONE

- The 1st variation takes off with a slow rubato conversation between the flutes, double bass, and Don
- The bass seemingly tries to get the groove off the ground (5:55), but using an alternating pattern of 4/4 and 6/4, the piece sounds as though it's stuck.
- Don comes in to “save the groove” by playing the new 9/4 ostinato (6:11) that is immediately reciprocated and continued by the bass. This new groove is a unique superimposition of 18/8 above 9/4. This compositional technique known as ‘tiered rhythmic diminution/augmentation’ is a skill that Don employed in various of his longer and more complicated pieces (A simpler example of this is when a piece simultaneously exists in 4/4 and 8/8. The meters’ lengths are the same, but the way that they are felt is unique).
- While the rest of the variation is written in 9/4, the bass and percussion cruises along in 7/8+4/8+7/8 or subdivided even further into a $(2+2+3)+(2+2)+(3+2+2)/8$.
- This groove begins to feel rather normal until the rest of the orchestra enters (8:24) clearly playing in 9/4 $(2+2+2+3)/4$ or $(2+2+3+2)/4$ depending on which section of the orchestra is playing. In many instances, there are essentially 3 different metric ideas all occurring simultaneously.

VARIATION TWO

- The transition from the first variation to the second variation occurs rather suddenly (9:02) and takes only a few bars until the bass establishes the new groove in 7/4 (9:15).
- The orchestra remains steadfastly in the 7 groove and begins to pick up the pace (12:17) leading up to one of the most interesting sections of the piece. We are then introduced to the B theme of this variation (12:36) which consists of a heavily syncopated homophonic passage for the whole orchestra.
- After a long unison fall off the last note of the phrase, we then enter the triple antiphonal section (12:57). Since this was a studio album, it allowed Don to truly flex his creative muscles and he wastes no time introducing us to the concept of having the band essentially duet with itself at seemingly random moments. Band A plays the new passage in 4/4, followed quickly by a rhythmically identical passage played by Band B. As this tradeoff continues, the two groups begin playing atop one another, resulting in an often-confusing amalgamation of 4/4 that sounds nothing like anything ever attempted.
- After confusingly passing around these phrases, the two opposing bands are occasionally interrupted by Don (13:19). When listening to this portion of the piece with headphones, the mix is such that the two bands sound as though they are coming from opposite sides (L/R) while Don improvises from 'above.' After the bands play the final conversational double-time phrase a mere eighth note apart from one another (13:32), the rhythm section begins to meander aimlessly while Don noodles around randomly

VARIATION THREE

- After a few moments of chaos, Don begins to play the new rhythmic motif of the 3rd variation (13:43) and eventually settles into our new metric home of 32/8.
- You may be wondering, if 32 is a multiple of 4, why would the section not be in 4/4? The answer is that the new subdivision follows an incredibly unique pattern of 5/8+7/8+9/8+11/8. This metric cycle is built upon a premise I mentioned when discussing the theme; Don's obsession with 5.
- The first portion of the metric breakdown is (2+3)/8. Each of the three successive meters inside the 32/8 introduces one additional 2 in front of the already existing meter. The cohesive 32/8 metric cycle is subdivided as follows:
(2+3)+(2+2+3)+(2+2+2+3)+(2+2+2+2+3)/8.
- We are left with the rhythm section and Don eloquently spindling phrases of 5, 7, 9, and 11 together. The orchestra is reintroduced (14:20) by playing large swells of chords over the 32 using what Don liked to refer to as the "Doppler Effect" (the scientific principle behind car horns and train horns changing pitch as they pass by).
- As if 32/8 wasn't already difficult enough to comprehend, the orchestra begins a new homophonic passage above the rhythmic ostinato featuring heavy syncopation and metric superimposition (15:14). The orchestra plays a phrase of 64/8 every 2 bars of 32/8 in the rhythm section. The superimposition is divided as 12/8+15/8+17/8+20/8. The further breakdown of this complex pattern is
(6+6)+(6+9)+(5+5+7)+(9+6+5)/8
- Also expressed as; (2+2+2)+(3+3), (2+2+2)+(3+2+2+2), (2+3)+(2+3)+(2+2+3), (2+2+2+3)+(2+2+2)+(2+3). After the orchestra states this 64/8 theme, the orchestra splits into parts making the meter even more indeterminable. Soon, the entire group splits off from each other (15:35) playing the phrase in a sort of canon
- At the height of the chaos, the percussion section begins banging every instrument imaginable to create a wash of white noise that over-encompasses the entire orchestra (16:10).

RECAPITULATION

- Finally, after many metric twists and turns, the return to the theme triumphantly occurs (16:20).
- We begin again with the A section of the theme, strictly in 5/4. After the familiar transitional bar of 7/4, the powerful sax section enters with the B section of the theme (16:57) again in 4/4. After every phrase played by the saxes, Don plays a small cadenza.
- The ensemble crescendos into the A Prime section of the theme stated as it was in the beginning in a pattern of 5/4, 7/4, 7/4, 4/4 (17:41). Don then trades off soloing with the whole orchestra in a series of powerful homophonic chords before arriving at the most mysterious and final Electrophonic cadenza in free meter (18:47).
- With that, the orchestra plays its last chord as Don wails his final note above the entirety of the ensemble.

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QUESTIONS?