

Portfolio of Compositions and Exegesis

(E)Merging Idioms: Integrating Jazz and Classical Ensembles

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for the degree of
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PART A:

Exegesis

Dedicated to Eric Bryce

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Abstract

The study centers on a folio of compositions in the jazz idiom that calls for the combination of one or two classical chamber groups with a small jazz ensemble. The scores incorporate a musical aesthetic that retains what will be shown to be jazz sensibilities, but which is accessible to performers schooled in the classical tradition. The exegesis briefly discusses the musical influences that have been a part of my compositional aesthetic and approach and provides a detailed commentary of the principal features of the three works included in this portfolio.

The portfolio contains three works: *The Clown*, for fourteen players; *Into the Wood*, for nine players; *Time Frames*, for ten players.

Declaration

This submission contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or any other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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John Aué

March 2010

Acknowledgements

Musicians who appear on the recording of *The Clown*

| | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Conductor | Bill Broughton |
| Piccolo | Anouvong Liensavanh |
| Oboe | Andrew Katsivas |
| Clarinet | Anna Coleman |
| French horn | Bryan Griffiths |
| Bassoon | Emily Heylen |
| Violin 1 | Jason Thomas |
| Violin 2 | Holly Bennett |
| Viola | Neil Thompson |
| Cello | Kim Worley |
| Percussion | Jim Bailey |
| Tenor saxophone | Derek Pascoe |
| Electric bass | John Aué |
| Congas and percussion | Joel Prime |
| Drums | Barnabas Smith |

Musicians for the recording of *Into the Wood*

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| Conductor | Robert Hower |
| Piccolo | Anouvong Liensavanh |
| Clarinet | Anna Coleman |
| French horn | Bryan Griffiths |
| Bassoon | Emily Stone |
| Tenor saxophone | Derek Pascoe |
| Double bass | John Aué |
| Drums | Jamie Jones |

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Introduction

The purpose of the current study has been to create a folio of compositions in the jazz idiom that calls for the combination of one or two classical chamber groups with a small jazz ensemble. The intention has been to arrive at a musical aesthetic that retains what will be shown to be jazz sensibilities, but which is accessible to performers schooled in the classical tradition. The following exegesis briefly discusses the musical influences that have been a part of my compositional aesthetic and approach and provides a detailed commentary of the principal features of the three works included in this portfolio.

Goals and aesthetics

My original impetus for the portfolio came from a keen desire to explore the sounds and textures of classical chamber groups in combination with a jazz ensemble. It follows from this that I set out to compose music that has improvised and written elements. The common ground between the jazz and classical idioms is well described by Gunther Schuller who in 1957 coined the term 'Third Stream' to describe the fusion of classical form with jazz elements such as 'swing,' harmony, rhythmic style, improvisations and instrumentation.¹ He suggested that a similar fusion was made by Béla Bartók, who incorporated elements of Hungarian folk music into his compositions that had earlier been heavily influenced by Claude Debussy and Richard Strauss.

Precedents

This fusion or combining of styles and instrumentation has been going on for many decades and it is very much a part of today's music. Rather than writing, say, a 32-bar tune and improvising over the chord changes, jazz musicians have realized the value of extended form. As early as 1924 George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* combined jazz elements such as swung eighth notes, blue notes, sonorities, and note bends, and, placing them in an extended form, added a string section to the Paul Whiteman band who performed and recorded it, giving a good example of combined classical and jazz instrumentation. In the 1950s Leonard Bernstein composed *West Side Story*. He used a mix of orchestral instruments such as strings, brass and woodwind sections, with a jazz rhythm section: electric guitar, double bass, piano, drums, vibes and Latin American percussion. Composers such as Eddie Sauter with *Focus* (1961) and Claus Ogermann with *Cityscapes* (1982) combined classical and jazz instrumentation to produce extended works. Other composers and performers in the jazz idiom have applied classical form to jazz instrumentation, notably John Lewis' (Modern Jazz Quartet) *Django* (1944) and *Lonely Woman* (1963), 'Duke Ellington's tone poem *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943) and Miles Davis' *Someday My Prince Will Come* (1961). In recent times, many jazz recordings

¹ Shoemaker, Bill. 'Gunther Schuller: Third Stream from the Source', *Jazz Times* (January/February 2001) <http://jazztimes.com/articles/20607-gunther-schuller-third-stream-from-the-source>. (Accessed 11 March 2009).

have incorporated classical instrumentation, which is a clear indication that the traditional barriers - or what instruments are assigned to which music - are disappearing [see under next heading: Influences]. The main difference between the 'classical' and 'jazz' disciplines is that, while the classical player learns to read music, master an instrument, and perform what is required by the composer in given style (baroque, classical, romantic, contemporary classical), the jazz musician has to learn to read, master the instrument and *improvise*. The jazz musician also has to *swing*, something that is not a part of the classical requirements. So while instrumentation is no longer a barrier, jazz style and improvisation is something that is really another area of study.

An outstanding example of a group that has successfully combined the classical instruments with the jazz idiom is the Turtle Island String Quartet. They play everything from Bach to The Beatles, Ellington to Corea, Ragtime to Pop and Hip Hop. Jazz critic and historian Bob Blumenthal says in his liner notes to *A Love Supreme* that the TISQ "has shown an ability to function with equal conviction in the classical and jazz realms unmatched by any other contemporary ensemble. This is only fitting for players who have learned to swing and to improvise as they were learning their instruments."²

Influences

Outstanding recordings that have helped to shape my musical thought and aesthetics include:

(1) *Focus* – Stan Getz (1961)

This was a suite commissioned by Stan Getz from composer Eddie Sauter. The line-up includes tenor saxophone (Stan Getz), three violins, viola and cello, bass and drums and was recorded in 1961. The compositions contain a great deal of jazz phrasing and harmony for the strings. The beautifully crafted arrangements reveal the many colours and effects of a small string section in combination with drum kit. One example occurs in *I'm Late, I'm late* where the descending string quavers are reinforced by brushes-on-snare quavers with a crescendo applied throughout. This was very effective arranging indeed. The tenor saxophone improvises and weaves in and around the

² Bob Blumenthal, program note to *A Love Supreme*, Turtle Island String Quartet, Telarc CD 879354 (2007)

string themes throughout, which is in itself an interesting way of organizing the music.

(2) *A Windham Hill Retrospective* by the Turtle Island String Quartet (1997)

In 1995 I discovered the music of the Turtle Island String Quartet. Up until that time, I had always associated string quartet music with the classical, romantic and contemporary classical repertoire. Historically, the jazz violin (and the occasional jazz cellist) was usually accompanied by a rhythm section and to find a string quartet operating, as a complete jazz band was a delight! I am absolutely staggered by the scope of their music and their sheer musicality. The arrangements, written by members of the group, are superb and reflect an intimate knowledge of the instruments' capabilities and the achievable effects. (They can closely imitate the sound of a rhythm guitar and use the body of the instrument for percussive effects) Moreover, every player improvises in the jazz style.

The Turtle Island String Quartet not only sparked my enthusiasm to write for string quartet but it also opened my mind to the idea of writing for a different, independently operating, ensemble, the wind quintet. Though both of these chamber groups are in combination with a jazz rhythm section in the folio, I have featured them on their own within some of the compositions (the wind quintet for 97 bars in *Into the Wood* and the string quartet in 'Thing-a-me Jig' for 32 bars).

(3) *Cityscape* by composer Claus Ogermann (1982)

This featured the tenor saxophonist Michael Brecker with a large string section and a jazz rhythm section. I enjoyed the way the tenor saxophone gave a dramatic sound-picture. It was a piece of music drama. This recording very much decided me on using tenor saxophone as the solo voice in *The Clown*.

(4) *Officium* by saxophonist Jan Garbarek and the Hilliard Ensemble (1993)

The soprano saxophone is featured as an improvisatory voice with the four male voices of the Hilliard Ensemble. They perform compositions from the 14th- and 15th-century (Morales and Dufay), the 12th century (Perotin) and early vocal music. The result is stunning.

(5) *Sketches of Spain*, the Miles Davis/Gil Evans collaboration. Though many years had passed since hearing this recording, I found that I would write, quite unconsciously, phrases and harmonies

that I later recognized as having their roots in the music of Gil Evans. *Sketches of Spain* has left an indelible impression.

I was drawn very much by the *sound* of the traditional classical instruments. This is what caused me to want to arrange and compose for them. When it came to compose these works for the folio, I took the idea one step further and combined them with jazz instruments. The resulting music is not a series of jazz-styled pieces where the classical players have been assigned to a secondary, accompanying part; rather, both groups take the primary and accompaniment roles. A good example of this occurs in *Into the Wood*, where the woodwind quintet plays an unaccompanied solo for eighty-nine bars (bars 222-311). Also, in ‘Thing-a-me Jig’, the string quartet plays without accompaniment for 32 bars. Elsewhere, the classical chamber ensemble (or single instruments from it) and the jazz group share the melodic focus. It should be noted that improvised solos are potentially available to *any* of the musicians who are skilled jazz players on *whatever* instrument.

Challenges

Working with classical players has proved to be a rewarding experience; it certainly showed up the importance of precisely conveying one’s musical intentions by providing accurate articulation and dynamics on the player’s parts. To communicate jazz sensibilities to a classical musician is not always easy. It was important to instruct players to not over-emphasize accents and to ‘flatten out’, *imply*, triplets in a swing phrase so it did not become too ‘bounced’ or 1930s in style. The subtleties of phrasing and accents in jazz are impossible to notate accurately, but a jazz player will know what the composer wants: the player ‘feels’ it. ‘Feeling it’ can be difficult for classical players to understand (especially for string players who need as much detail for bowing as possible) but, as is common practice at rehearsals, the conductor would communicate my musical intentions by singing the phrase. The player could then mark the part accordingly and most of the time this worked well. The general spirit on these occasions was positive: people *wanted* to play this style well.

Another challenge was the question of achieving the right balance. It especially requires the drummer to play with a *quiet* intensity; this is not easy but it is achievable. We had a very

successful outcome: *The Clown* was performed in Elder Hall without sound re-enforcement, thanks to the sensitivity and awareness of the conductor and the musicians.

It has been my aim (and challenge) to write logical and interesting melodies for each player: to make musicians feel that they are contributing to the piece in a meaningful way. After completing a large section of a work, I diligently read through each instrument's part in 'real time' as I played back the score through the music software. This provided valuable insight of each musician's role in the overall arrangement and helped with the editing process.