

American Jazz Influence in Contemporary Hungarian Composition

Sonata per fagotto e pianoforte - Gyorgy Orban

Richard Meek
Lubbock, Texas

This is a presentation of a new work for bassoon and piano, commissioned of Mr. Gyorgy Orban and premiered in August, 1989 at the International Conference of the International Double Reed Society in Manchester, England. The commission was the result of an earlier performance by the Mariah Winds of a woodwind quintet by Mr. Orban, a work of considerable craftsmanship. Mr. Orban was approached through Balint Andras Varga of Editio Musica Budapest for a small chamber work including bassoon. This sonata is the happy result.

The Sonata is in three movements:

I Allegro moderato

II Larghetto

III Allegro

The first movement is a loose sonata-allegro design, with a first theme consisting of an fm7 chord and a syncopated semitone motive (Ex. 1); and a second thematic motive embracing a tetrachord of wholetone, semitone, wholetone (Ex. 2). These two motives permeate each movement of the sonata.

Example 1

Musical notation for Example 1, showing a bassoon line in 3/4 time with a syncopated semitone motive.

Example 2

Musical notation for Example 2, showing a piano line with a tetrachord of wholetone, semitone, wholetone.

The first theme and the chromaticism in the second measure give rise to harmonies characteristic of the Blues scale with its flexible third, fifth, and seventh scale degrees (c.i., 3/b3, 5/b5, & 7/b7) (Ex. 3).

Example 3

Musical notation for Example 3, showing piano accompaniment with chords labeled (5/b5) and 3/b3 scale degrees.

Example 3 (mm10)

Musical notation for Example 3 (mm10), showing piano accompaniment with chords labeled (7/b7).

The second motive generates another popular jazz scale form, the octatonic, or eight-tone symmetrical scale which is especially prevalent in the first movement (Ex. 4). This eight-tone scale is consistent with **Example 4**

Musical notation for Example 4. It shows a single melodic line on a treble clef staff. The scale consists of eight notes: F#4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, Eb5, F5. Above the notes, fingerings are indicated: 2, 1, 2, 2, 1, 2, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2. A bracket under the first four notes (F#4 to Bb4) is labeled "tritone". A bracket under the remaining four notes (C5 to F5) is labeled "octatonic".

a number of harmonies commonly part of our jazz "vocabulary." Example 5 is an analysis of the harmonic progression from measure 106 through measure 113. Each chord may be derived from the octatonic scale. **Example 5**

Musical notation for Example 5. It shows a harmonic progression on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). Above the staff, chord symbols are written: F#7, b9, b7, 7, Bbb5, F, b5, 13, Bb, b5, A9, A. Below the staff, Roman numerals are written: v7/ii, ii°7, bII, b7, (vb5), bII, A9, I. The notes are mostly whole notes.

Note also the use of the popular "jazz" function of the BII7 as a dominant substitution. The concept of tritone and semitone evident in the statement of the second motive (See Ex. 4) is also revealed in the final cadence of this movement with a statement of both the dominant chord and its tritone substitute: Gb9 + 13 to C7 to F.

Each section of the movement is marked by a statement from the bassoon of the first theme; the first and third statements outlining an fm7 chord, and the statement of the middle section outlining an Ebm7.

The second movement is a ternary form beginning with a quasi improvisando statement of the second theme plus expansion (Ex. 6). The semitone motive is continued as alternating minor 9ths & Major 7ths while the second thematic motive is metamorphosed into a new theme in f# minor (Ex. 7).

Example 6

Musical notation for Example 6. It shows a melodic line on a treble clef staff. The line is divided into two sections, 'a' and 'b', indicated by brackets above the staff. Section 'a' contains a sequence of notes with a semitone interval, and section 'b' contains a sequence of notes with a major 7th interval.

Example 7

Musical notation for Example 7. It shows a melodic line on a bass clef staff. The line is divided into two sections, 'a' and 'b', indicated by brackets above the staff. Section 'a' contains a sequence of notes with a semitone interval, and section 'b' contains a sequence of notes with a major 7th interval.

The middle section of the ternary form is a three part structure in itself, beginning and returning to quasi waltz passages and unified by a hemiola rhythmic figure:

Musical notation showing a hemiola rhythmic figure. It consists of a sequence of notes with a 3/2 time signature, indicating a three-part structure.

This section begins with an "echo" of the first theme from movement I over a waltz-like accompaniment (Ex 8), then develops the second theme before returning to the "waltz." A brief *quasi cadenza* by the piano

Example 8

Musical notation for Example 8. It shows a melodic line on a treble clef staff. The line is divided into two sections, 'a' and 'b', indicated by brackets above the staff. Section 'a' contains a sequence of notes with a triplet, and section 'b' contains a sequence of notes with a major 7th interval.

returns to a statement in **D** of the metamorphosed motive by itself to close the movement. One may note again the use of the jazz dominant substitution concept as the semitone motive is carried through a slowly descending chromatic line in the bass to a final cadence on a C#M/M/A eleventh chord.

The third movement is essentially in F major, and might whimsically be described as a dialogue between two players in search of a theme in three parts. plus coda.

The bassoonist begins, introducing a new idea, a short *perpetual motion* still emphasizing the semitone motive (Ex. 9). This is rejected by the pianist with a “bluesy” statement of the first theme (Ex. 10) who then offers a four-bar fugal subject a semitone higher in f# minor as an alternative (Ex. 11). It may be

Example 9

F: I IV vi ii V I

Example 10

Example 11

F#7 D7 G Db Gb

f#7/bII bII V+ I

noted that this “square” fugal subject might be considered an harmonic paraphrase of the four bars of *perpetual motion*. After a somewhat halting start, the bassoon takes up the fugal subject and it is subsequently turned upside down, fragmented and developed.

Upon arriving at a sort of half-cadence on a G7, the pianist capitulates and takes up the first *perpetual motion* theme in C major to mark the beginning of the second section. The bassoon offers a clever compromise constructed of motives from *both* the first and second themes of the first movement (Ex. 12). It has all the charm of a cabaret tune and is immediately taken up by the piano. The bassoon returns to the fugal subject with variations involving 8/8 meter, statement in waltz style, and continued development through fragmentation and imitative statements.

Example 12

The third section begins with the bassoon returning to the *perpetual motion* theme in F major again. This time all three themes are combined simultaneously; the *perpetual motion*, fugal subject, and cabaret tune. After a brief diversion through a “polonaise” in the subdominant tonal area, comes a planing of M/m 7th chords, down by minor thirds to a deceptive close. A final statement of the four-bar fugal subject brings the work to a close in F major.

The work is quite varied and humorous in its conception. That this is quite intentional is born out by the comment from Mr. Varga that the composer reported “he could not help chuckling while writing it.” Several performances have elicited such descriptions as “mockingly serious,” “wonderfully varied,” “funny piece,” and even “its a hoot.” It is in addition very demanding technically, requiring of the bassoonist a range from low Bb up three and one half octaves to high f2 (although an *ossia* is provided making the highest pitch only d2); and requiring of the pianist a light and facile technique more akin to the improvisatory jazz pianist, perhaps, than the more “classically” trained.

That there were so many compositional aspects (i.e., scalar, harmonic, and rhythmic) that seemed jazz oriented was quite unexpected. Mr. Orban (1947-) had been born in Transylvania, and studied composition with Sigismund Toduta and Janos Jagamas at the Kilozsvar Academy of Music, Romania, where he subsequently taught until moving to Hungary in 1979. I asked Mr. Orban if he would kindly share any of his thoughts regarding the composition of the sonata, and received the following reply.

As far as the jazz elements of my sonata are concerned I am of course aware of them, too. They are attributable, subconsciously, to the fact that in writing it, I was thinking of the United States and secondly, I abhor the abstract, sophisticated, artificial music of the last decades and employ instinctively musical elements that I like listening to / Classical music + jazz + anything disliked by the aesthetes. And I still adore the Beatles!

Mr. Balint Varga adds that "Mr. Orban . . . together with Miklos Csemiczky and Janos Vajda . . . represents a school of thought in contemporary Hungarian music."

Richard Meck teaches bassoon at Texas Tech University, Lubbock and is a performing bassoonist in many orchestras and chamber ensembles in Texas and the Southwest.

In Memory Of
Erika K. Kubey

[1919 · 1991]

Erika Kutzing Kubey, a pioneer woman musician-bassoonist and wife of bassoonist Arthur Kubey, died in Pittsburgh on April 1st, 1991 at the age of 72.

Mrs. Kubey was the first woman bassoon student to graduate from the Juilliard School of Music in New York.

During her career she performed with many ensembles, including the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under Fritz Reiner from 1944 to 1954.

She is survived by her husband, Arthur, a son, Lawrence, a daughter, Phyllis, and a brother, Walter Kutzing. The I.D.R.S. joins the family and her many friends in mourning her loss.