

Composer's Corner IV:

“A work in progress: *Concerto for bayan and orchestra*”

Abstract

This article serves as the fourth installment in a six-part serial on the following topics: I: “The composer’s identity within the historical narrative,” II: “Crafting one’s voice,” III: “Horse or artist?,” IV: “A work in progress – *Concerto for bayan and orchestra*,” V: “The composer in exile,” and VI: “Aesthetics and accessibility in the 21st-Century.”

In this issue, I briefly discuss a little about my working method. By pointing to a few examples from a work-in-progress, I hope to shed light on some of the thought processes of a living composer. Although by no means comprehensive, I offer a glimpse of my own approach, not that this represents the only approach but that it might give a little insight into the complex task of composing an original work.

Introduction: What is a Concerto?

When composing a work for soloist and ensemble, the challenges can be daunting. I have often told my students that I believe the most difficult works to write are for solo, unaccompanied instrument. Alternatively, I have been known to point to the extreme challenges of writing for large ensemble. In each case, the constraints of the given genre are manifold. In writing a concerto the composer is, in effect, combining both types of work.

It is apparent that writing an unaccompanied work for a monophonic instrument creates great difficulty for constructing meaningful textures, readily discernible to the listener¹. In addition, when writing for a solo instrument capable of producing simultaneous sonorities such as the bayan (chromatic button accordion), the restriction to a relatively small group of timbres provides immense challenges to the composer's ability to maintain the listener's interest and attention. This is because difference of timbre provides an excellent vehicle for the development of formal musical ideas and – in the absence of this potential – unmitigated unity of timbre can prove extremely taxing for the listener. In addition, the possible combinations of texture are much diminished where a single instrument is present. Finally, the dynamic and expressive potential of works depends upon the number of different timbres and voices present. Solo works simply do not obtain the same range of extremes, lending works a tendency to feel flat relative to works employing combinations of instruments.

The challenges of writing for large ensemble are also profound. The orchestra's greatest strength, variety of timbre, creates great difficulties for the composer – a terrible imbalance of dynamics between instrumental families and individual instruments. The woodwinds can be overshadowed by almost everyone else, but each member unequally and differently within different areas of its range. The brass family has the advantage of a fairly homogenous sound but is always in danger of overpowering all other members of the orchestra. Also, each brass instrument obtains great difficulty in controlling dynamics, especially in the extreme areas of its range. The percussion represents an orchestra within an orchestra, given the wide array of instruments this family includes. Many percussion instruments will carry through or overpower other members of the orchestra but some must be treated very carefully, for their lack of ability to project. Keyboard instruments may often only serve a supportive role but they may also be called upon to fulfill the foreground. Finally, the strings represent the largest group of players and, like the brass are fairly homogenous

¹ Without the ability to create simultaneously sounding sonority, the composer must construct compound melody – registrally separated layers of texture clearly connected by stepwise motion over time – and/or arpeggiated harmonies in order to provide the listener's ear with a coherent vertical element. Of course, arpeggio is a very simple and appealing solution; however, textural variety is extremely important in the construction of large-scale works. Without multiplicity of texture, it can be quite difficult to maintain the listener's attention and interest. Canonic examples of compound melody are myriad and are best exemplified by masters of the Baroque, especially J.S. Bach. Creating a clear sense of stepwise connection often relies heavily on a preexistent idiom (such as functional harmonic relationships) for the listener to differentiate textural layers within a single-voice instrument. Certainly polyphonic and ensemble writing are also aided by a common vernacular between the composer and listener, as well. However, the capacity to differentiate textural layers by their timbre in multiple-instrument settings allows for alternative means of creating compound melody and for the possibility of relaying unfamiliar or entirely new norms of pitch organization.

in sound. Representing perhaps the most versatility of dynamic range, even this large group of individuals may be overshadowed by the brass or percussion and can easily overpower a solo or duet in the woodwinds, where they are meant to fulfill a supportive role.

Aside from the individual characteristics of each family, most instruments of the orchestra have tendencies of dynamic, intonation, and tone quality within different register domains and these tendencies are unique to each instrument. The individual voices of the ensemble must each be called upon to carry moments in either reliably idiomatic ways, or in fresh new presentations. In addition, doublings between members of the orchestra can produce issues of intonation or characteristic properties of sound that may not be appropriate to the temperament of a given passage. Effective doubling constructs a new instrument from two voices but it can be difficult to predict and control. In order to compose successfully for orchestra, or for that matter for unaccompanied solo instruments, the composer must master understanding of all of these idiosyncrasies. Important gestures and melodies may be obfuscated if not treated with caution.

Pre-compositional construction and form

After addressing the unique challenges of the genre for a planned work, I find it is useful to make some pre-compositional decisions about the overarching design. For me, this is the stage of composition engaged with extra-musical thought. Although I truly don't wish to communicate extra-musical ideas with my works (the domain of "program music"), I find these elements can provide a skeleton upon which to overlay the musical materials and create a formal trajectory. In this way the form can be coherent, consistent, and meaningful to me as I compose without being bound by normative conventions (like traditional formal schemas) that may hinder my sense of narrative flow. By constructing works according to a consistent narrative framework, the recurrence and development of material will also help the audience to navigate and make sense of the work.

One of my current works-in-progress, *Concerto for bayan and orchestra*, is dedicated to two fantastic musicians from Iceland: my dear friend, Gudni A. Emilsson and the works commissioner, our mutual friend the bayan player Hrolfur Vagnsson. I decided to write a work based in the music of Iceland, portraying some of the images I associate with that land (despite the fact that I have never actually set foot there). Maestro Emilsson helped in this vision by introducing me to a published set of Icelandic traditional music collected by Jon Leifs (1899-1968), which formed the launching point for much of the work. I also knew before writing that the work would premiere on a program with Bela Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*. So, I felt it would be appropriate to honor Bartok's style when setting this music in order to complement that masterpiece of the program.

Quotation, Variation, and Creation

The *Concerto for bayan and orchestra* is in four movements: *i. A land of fire, ice, & Frónbúi*, *ii. Waltz-ish (leaning over the rail)*, *iii. To the death of banks*, and *iv. Grateful for the Music*. The first movement is alternately volatile and serene, like the formation of an island. The title of the second movement refers to the past days of the Dionysian Vikings, traveling the seas to conquer and lay waste. The third movement

refers to the tragic collapse of the Icelandic economy, which had been largely dependent upon the (now failed) banking industry prior to the “housing bubble” collapse of the last decade. The fourth movement refers to my personal affinity for the music of Iceland with bands such as Múm, Sigur Rós, Sugarcubes (and Björk), and the wonderful classical musicians I have met from that great island in the last decade.

In the following section, I will discuss some aspects of variation, development, and motivic/ melodic contrast in the first movement to briefly introduce the reader to some aspects of my personal approach.

The central function of the first movement is to introduce the instrumental combinations, spirit, aesthetic, and a quotation which appears frequently throughout the work. The excerpt below (measures 64-71) shows the first few phrases of the originating material for this quotation, which appears in various forms in all but the second movement:

Tempo di marcia e grandioso (♩=96)
"Ris þú unga Íslands merki."
molto vibrato

64

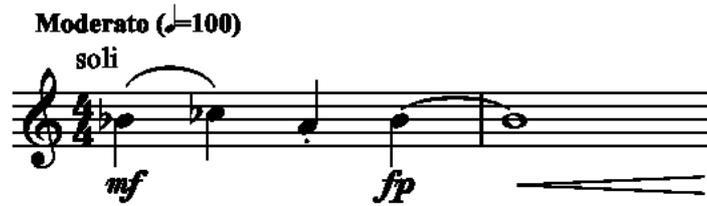
68

Although the exposed presentation of this material above does not occur until midway through the first movement, the opening few phrases are also based on the ideas found here. However, the register of melody and harmony are reversed so that the material that appears above in the bass is first introduced as a melody above the harmonic layer. In addition, the temporal domain is compressed, the melody is slightly varied, and some repetition is excised to give the material a little more momentum for the opening, as shown in this example (measures 5-8):

So, the basic material is first introduced as a variation of the originating material and the quotation is gradually revealed during the course of the movement. However, along the way the material moves even further from the originating quotation. In the next appearance, for example, the phrase is truncated and a layer of nonfunctional counterpoint appears (inversion of the melody), as shown below (measures 13-16):

As the movement moves forward toward the direct quotation, a few more mutations appear, moving ever further from the original material. However, for the careful listener the relationship between these variations and the original quotation should be apparent when the basic material is finally reached. I intended for this moment to appear as some kind of relief from the progressive unraveling of the idea's coherence.

In addition to this material, another central idea provides contrast and relief during the course of the first movement. This idea is based upon a four-note motive that could have come from anywhere (but in fact is based upon a nice moment in the originating material forming the basis for the third movement). This motive appears in the first two measures, in the principal trumpet:



From this basic idea, the bulk of the movement is freely composed through processes of elaboration, inversion, transposition, etc.

Although I don't usually apply quotation in my works (in fact, hardly have I done so ever), the process of manipulating generative materials described above in many ways defines my thinking in several of my scores. I believe that literal repetition is uninteresting but development and variation of core ideas provide a valuable means of lending coherence to works of music. Coupled with the necessity for contrasting materials, although not restricted to melodic/ motivically derived ideas², the balance between newness within a single work and the comfort of familiarity provides an excellent vehicle for the dialogue between composer and audience.

In closing, in this article I attempted to elucidate the story behind an unfinished work (as well as a tiny view of my technique) but I do not mean to imply that this is the absolute meaning of the work or even that my subconscious choices for variation, elaboration, and development are less important. It is my hope that each member of the audience at the premiere and subsequent performances will find their own meaning. In my own theoretical study, I care little for the intentions of the composer. I am more interested in understanding why a specific work strikes me. I believe that what makes a work of art valuable to us may not be the same as what gives it value to its creator. This, for me, is the beauty of art. After it is completed, a work of art does not belong to anyone but, rather, to all.

² For example, contrast can be achieved by gestural shape, texture, registral separation, etc.