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Two Miniatures, A Comprehensive Analysis

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TWO MINIATURES, A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

By

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Introduction

The journey I took as a composer through the process of writing my Two Miniatures for Woodwind Quintet was a test of my endurance as a musician. I had not taken on a single musical project as intense and prolonged, and the musician I became on the other side of the experience made the process truly rewarding. The piece consists of two movements: Abyss, and Electric, which are direct contrasts of each other, both musically and compositionally. The contrast between the two is multi-faceted; regarding style, emotional context, and construction. The product of all the hard work was the physical piece of music, but perhaps more important were the many lessons I gained along the way, which is the culmination of my work on this composition.

The undertaking of writing a piece of music significantly impacted my views as a conductor, performer, and educator, and has vastly reshaped the way I view printed music. What a composer puts on a page is a deeply personal conundrum, because once the ink has dried and we deem a piece complete it will (mostly) remain unchanged. When a piece of music is completed, we relieve ourselves of the responsibility, and must entrust the making of our music to performers. Never once has a musical prospect filled me with so much angst; the thought of my own personal creative endeavor being open to the world is terrifying, but just as with any musical process, I found that the more I did it the less scary it became. As musicians, we greet this feeling like an old friend, we embrace it and learn to move beyond it so that true music making may come to the fore.
Analysis: I. Abyss

_Abyss_, as seen in its final form (fig. 1) is in a simple Ternary form (ABA). The movement begins slowly and quietly with the solo bassoon, and then moves to a duet between the bassoon and oboe. The energy of the piece builds slowly and consistently, with peaks and valleys in climactic energies, before reaching its highest point at measure 47 (fig. 1). The movement then returns to its opening mood, before slowing down into its last chord, A-major, the only major tonality in the entire movement.

The composition of the first movement began shortly after I started my compositional studies with Dr. Whitney Prince. The first assignment I was tasked with was to write a short three-voice chorale exercise, the first phrase of which is shown in example 1.

**EXAMPLE 1.** Three-voice exercise, first phrase

The instructions were as follows: compose a short model melody of three phrases, and harmonize that melody with a variety of chords of different sonorities and qualities. These exercises were meant to expand upon our existing harmonic language and to familiarize ourselves with more modern sounds and sonorities. The original chorale is quite basic and does not resemble the finished composition in any way. After the completion of this initial chorale exercise, however, I began the process of "fleshing out" the chorale. This entailed a few different processes including embellishments of the melody, variation of the harmonic rhythm, and experimenting with different sonorities of chords that would
allow for smoother voice leading. This work also consisted of thinking of pitches and how they are perceived to a listener over time. Additionally, these exercises challenged me as a composer to provide the listener with a sense of freshness with each change of chord. The revision process involved various degrees of experimentation, progressing through multiple degrees of complexity. Example 2 and 3 demonstrates this evolution of complexity.

**Example 2. Three-voice exercise, first phrase, version 2**

![Example 2](image)

**Example 3. Three-voice exercise, first phrase, version 3**

*Stately* \( \text{\textit{j}=80} \)

![Example 3](image)

During the final stages of this three-voice exercise, a handful of student composers from the School of Music & Dance at Eastern Michigan University had the rare opportunity to share our compositions with Michael Daugherty, a well-respected and Grammy-award winning composer. After presenting my piece to Mr. Daugherty his immediate response was “it’s good, but it sounds like an exercise.” Obviously, he was right, the completed
'piece' was just an exercise and was lacking in emotional content. One aspect of music is its ability to be a medium for conveying emotion, and at that point in my compositional studies, my music conveyed an understanding of writing within specific guidelines. Mr. Daugherty briefly coached me in strategies for further expanding what I had written, and that feedback directly resulted in the synthesis of the bassoon solo that opens the quintet (example 4). The opening interval of a minor third is an expansion upon the first measure of example 3, and the solo is a product of the experimentation and creative assistance from Mr. Daugherty.

Example 4. Two Miniatures, Abyss. Opening Bassoon Solo mm. 1-10

From here, the stream of ideas came more naturally after having worked with Mr. Daugherty, and the process of composing the rest of the first movement became easier. I also drew influence from music I was performing at the time, a notable example was Igor Stravinsky’s Octet for Wind Instruments. This can be observed in a few sections of the quintet. One such example is the bassoon-oboe duet at measures 16–23 (fig. 1), where the bassoon is playing eighth notes in a light, staccato style, while the oboe is playing the melody overtop, as seen in example 6. In example 5, a similar style is implemented in the beginning of the Finale from Stravinsky’s piece. In the Finale, the two bassoons are used in a similar way, with one playing constant eighth notes, and the other playing the melody over top of that.
EXAMPLE 5. Stravinsky, Octet for Wind Instruments, Finale, mm. 1 – 4

EXAMPLE 6. Mufarreh, Two Miniatures, Abyss, mm. 16 – 18
Analysis: II. Electric

Electric, the second movement of the Two Miniatures, is build off a single, reoccurring motive (example 8). This motive was inspired by my study of Oliver Messiaen’s Quatour pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the end of time), and that piece had a profound impact on my writing of the quintet. In the fourth movement of Messiaen’s piece, Intermède, he opens with the clarinet, violin, and cello in a unison melody that spans two octaves between the instruments. (example 7).

EXAMPLE 7. Messiaen, Quatour pour la fin du Temps, IV, Intermède mm. 1 – 4

Messiaen’s use of chromaticism and rhythmic unison, result in a sense of urgency and power. These same techniques are implemented in the opening of the second movement of my quintet. The first motive is stated in unison in the clarinet, oboe, and bassoon (example 8). This motive guided the synthesis for much of the second movement.

EXAMPLE 8 Two Miniatures, Electric mm. 1 – 2

Various compositional techniques were employed in writing the rest of the second movement. One technique was rhythmic augmentation, through which the note values of the main motive (example 8) were doubled. This is demonstrated in example 9 where the horn serves to relax the momentum of the movement.
Another compositional technique implemented was the use of retrograde – which is the process of reversing the note-order of the original motive. (example 10). This technique gives the listener the essence of the original motive. Taking this retrograded motive and layering it with the original creates a sense of cacophony and organized chaos.
Performance Preparation

The compositional process never truly ends, countless hours are spent in the revisionary stages, and it is at the discretion of the composer to decide when it has been completed; writing a piece of music is an arbitrary goal, and even when it nears completion, a great deal of work must go into preparing it for a performance congruent with the composer's intentions.

As initial rehearsals began, one hard truth became apparent: music is open to interpretation. Corrections needed to be made, including articulations, musical directions, and enharmonic notes. As a composer in the 21st century, it is easy to get caught up in the digital playback of notation software. The software will always play the music back perfectly, and consistently, which is dangerous and deceiving. What a computer can perform may not be what performers can physically achieve.

During the compositional process, I consulted with the performers regarding their individual parts. Through these consultations, it was noted that the aesthetic value of the parts greatly impacts the performers perception. If music appears sloppy, poorly written, or full of useless accidentals, it may affect the performance negatively. We as composers must balance this subtle performance psychology and use it to our advantage. Examples 11 and 12 demonstrate a change I made in my piece, and in this instance, the dynamics and articulation markings were addressed. In example 11, the fortепіано followed by a crescendo appears cluttered on the page, making it unclear and difficult to interpret. While it may be clear to me as the composer, to a performer, it could be crowded and confusing. Example 12 cleans up the notation to be more performer friendly, while achieving the desired effect.
EXAMPLE 11. Two Miniatures, Abyss, Un-revised version

EXAMPLE 12. Two Miniatures, Abyss, Revised version
Reflection

As I reflected on my experiences writing this piece of music, I observed a shift in my perception of music written by other composers. I found that I take more care and consideration to the ink on the page, and that everything a composer writes is imperative to constructing a worthwhile interpretation of the music. Prior to this realization, I approached much from the perspective of a performer, and would fixate on notes and rhythms alone, only to gloss over the deeper structure of the composer’s intent. As I assumed the role of composer, however, I realized we don’t simply put notes on a page, we have a musical message that we wish to convey.

When I look at a dynamic marking in a piece of music, I don’t simply observe a *mezzo forte*, or *forte*, but that there has been more care and considering to what that dynamic marking meant to the composer in that moment for that specific part of their music. While this may be a scrutinizing and painstaking way to look at music, and can make even the most basic compositions seem like a grand undertaking, we as performers and teachers owe it to those that have created this medium of our art form to perform and teach it in a way that conveys the art behind it. Just like a stroke of a paintbrush, the art of putting notes on a blank page can be just as profound, and the nature of composing music makes it so unique and impactful to the pursuit of creating beauty in the world through music.
Figure 1. *Two Miniatures*, Full score

**Two Miniatures for Woodwind Quintet**

![Musical notation for Two Miniatures for Woodwind Quintet]

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Fl.
Ob.
Bb Cl.
F Hn.
Bsn.

accel.

Più mosso $\approx 104$
accel.

Fl.
Ob.
Bb Cl.
F Hn.
Bsn.

42

Fl.
Ob.
Bb Cl.
F Hn.
Bsn.

$fp$
II. Electric

Allegro Moderato \( \frac{1}{2} \times 100 \)

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet in B♭

Horn in F

Bassoon
Program Note

*Two Miniatures* explores a juxtaposition between two innate human emotions, sorrow and excitement. Comprised of two movements, the first movement, *Abyss*, is a somber movement, conveying darkness and a feeling of sorrow and melancholy. This movement begins with a bassoon solo playing a yearning melody, then moving to a duet with both bassoon and oboe. The movement continues with this music developing with a feeling of longing, before developing into the chaotic climax but then returning to the opening mood. Before this movement developed into its deep and dark undertones, it began as a simple composition exercise that through many attempts of editing, expanding, and experimenting developed into the first movement that we hear now.

*Electric*, is a high energy, bombastic close to the piece. The second movement builds off a recurring motive influenced heavily by jazz rhythms. The construction of the movement and much of the inspiration came from the fourth movement of Oliver Messiaen's *Quatour pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the end of time), with a harmonic language that is a nod to that of Igor Stravinsky. After the initial statement of the theme, it is then slightly varied with small changes in texture. This theme is then augmented in a sense of 'organized. chaos', with the theme remaining persistent throughout. The movement then takes components of this established motive before racing to an exuberate close.
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Messiaen, Oliver. Qua tour pour la fin du temps. 1941. Paris: Durand & Cie, 1942. Print

