

MUSIC REVIEWS

MUSIC FOR MARIONETTES IN 3 PARTS (1952), BY PAUL ASHFORD, Lost in Time Press LIT 002, <corlu@actionnet.net>, 2006. AAT Part I: sc 7 pp, pts 6 pp ea, \$16. Part II: sc 10 pp, pts 9 pp ea, \$18. Part III: sc 13 pp, pts 12 pp ea, \$20. Parts I, II, and III together: \$45.

Music for Marionettes, a delightful suite of trios, is published in three parts. Parts I and II contain three trios each, and Part III contains five trios. All three volumes are scored for two altos and one tenor.

Played straight through as a suite, the 11 pieces would last approximately 20-25 minutes. These trios are contemporary in their free and abundant usage of unprepared and unresolved dissonance; however, no extended techniques are required.

I made a recording of these 11 contemporary trios with my two friends, Donn and Aggie Sharer. I will say up front that I have really enjoyed playing these trios and listening to our recording, and I am very pleased and appreciative that Lost in Time Press is making Ashford's music available.

Part I of *Music for Marionettes* has a subtitle: "Music for Acrobats." This volume contains three pieces, further subtitled as "Muscle Dances" and individually named "Allez-Yup!," "Snake Charmer" and "Trapezists." "Allez-Yup" immediately introduces the listener to the very free use of skips into dissonance, which are also syncopated and accented. The melody glides along various five-note scales with a touch of chromatic work thrown in.

The two lower parts create a lively rhythmic foundation, but in the second half, "allez-ooop" style, the tenor and the first alto players switch jobs as the melody is smoothly passed to the tenor recorder. Interestingly, after much jarring dissonance, the piece ends on an A major chord.

Like all good programmatic music, these short pieces do sound like their titles. Try to imagine what an accompanied "Snake Charmer" tune might sound like. This melody, played by the two alto recorders in parallel major sixths, glides along smoothly with narrow skips. A hypnotizing repeated rhythmic line in

the tenor part, which plays numerous cross relations with the top melody line, accompanies the altos.

There are also many chromatic inflections between the two alto parts. Again, the listener will be surprised by the consonant ending on a major chord.

"Trapezists" is an *Allegro* with a lively melody in the first alto, which glides up and down five-note scales with half-steps between notes 1 and 2, creating an otherworldly-Phrygian effect. This is accompanied by various repetitive melodic intervals (mostly half and whole-steps) in the second alto and tenor lines.

This piece has less dissonance than the two preceding pieces, but don't be looking for traditional common practice harmony. Rather, I hear elements of minimalism, especially in repetition of intervals in the accompanying parts. This piece comes to satisfying rest at the end on an A major chord.

Part II of *Music for Marionettes* contains three pieces: "Full Moon Over Zanzibar," "Sinister Street" and "Wheels Within Wheels." The first piece presents quite a dramatic contrast with "Trapezists" in Part I. The dissonances found in "Full Moon ..." are gentler as they come about through stepwise melodic motion rather than by leaps.

The piece begins with a *Larghetto* featuring an ethereal wandering melody line in the tenor part. A *piu moto* follows that is less chordal and more contrapuntal. This section ends with an *accelerando* that leads back to the original *Larghetto*, and the tenor part takes back the melody. Following is an *Andante con moto* section that the composer suggests, with humor, should be played by a "spice laden woodwind." (Feel free to indulge in spicy foods before you play!)

The first alto takes over this playful melody with a rapidly rising *accelerando* followed by one more return to the *Larghetto*. This trio ends serenely on a B \flat major chord.

"Sinister Street" begins with a *Lento misterioso*. The opening melody, appropriate to the title, contains an augmented fourth (an active interval that wants to resolve to notes that are more consonant), and then climbs upward in thirds and fourths while the other parts play quick rhythmic figures that add to a sinister mood. There are some sudden switches from 4/4 to 6/8, but since the eighth note remains constant, this is not a problem.

Silence is used for drama in this piece, as there are two sudden full-measure rests

in all parts. After all of the activity, peace is restored with the ending A \flat major chord.

While I like all the pieces in this suite, "Wheels Within Wheels" strikes me as the most interesting. The solo tenor first plays a mournful melody that rises with ascending fourths and descends with seconds and thirds. This six-note melody is played over and over again, but always with different rhythmic placement and accents.

When the second alto part enters, it is in canon with the tenor part, a minor third higher. Then the top alto part enters with many of the same elements—ascending fourths, descending seconds and thirds—but it is more stretched out rhythmically, so that this piece does indeed sound like wheels within wheels!

The editor has thankfully added dotted lines to show phrasing and thus clearly indicates the overlapping movements of the wheels. In the middle section, if only one part has a wheel effect, triplets in the other two parts keep the music busy and active. The final section returns to the rotation of the wheels in all parts, finally parking on a B major chord.

Part III of this suite contains five pieces: "Nerves of Steel," "A Tense Moment," "The Cold Gray Dawn," "The Second Waltz" and "Exit March." "Nerves of Steel," a remarkable and original piece, begins with the tempo marking "Urgently allegro." Again, this trio is appropriately named: sharp, repeated dissonances build from three-note tone clusters and chords made of perfect fourths.

There are nerve-wrenching sections of ascending chromatic scales in parallel seconds. Now and then a surprisingly consonant chord appears, but the return of the pointed dissonance is always right around the corner. There are some wide and downright difficult leaps in the first alto part, where the composer humorously adds the instruction: "Lightly across the gruesome intervals."

Later he suggests a change in mood, "With smouldering passion," as there are more ascending chromatic scales—but not in parallel seconds. A sudden return of the chromatic parallel seconds signals a change back to the opening mood.

"A Tense Moment" begins rather calmly with a seven-note motive in the first alto part. A couple of measures later, the second alto joins in the same motive a third lower. Things are still calm and peaceful until tension is created by an apparent contest to see who can play the highest pitches. When the tenor enters, the tense moments increase, especially

when it leaps up a minor ninth, playing at a higher pitch than the two altos. Two measures later, the second alto leaps up to a high B and claims the highest pitch. Four measures later, the second alto claims the highest note as it soars to high E while the first alto also jumps up a perfect fifth—all of this effectively creating suspense and preparing for the “tense moment.”

A change of texture occurs when the three recorders begin to toss around a new and very chromatic seven-note motive. Following this, the tenor part suddenly and surprisingly starts a passage of 16th notes (all within the range of a minor third). Soon, the second alto joins in the 16th notes, and finally the first alto as well, creating a tightly-woven *stretto* passage.

For all the sixteenth-note activity, the general level of dissonance is actually down, as the 16th notes move in parallel thirds and end as suddenly as they appeared. General calm returns as the piece winds down, with many descending phrases, to end in E minor. For a 31-measure piece, it contains a lot of impressive musical development.

The title page of “The Cold Gray Dawn” contains some interesting (if not amusing) instructions: “Tight-lipped, but nonchalant, before a stone wall.” Make of that what you will; it is certainly more evidence of Ashford’s subtle humor.

Again, this piece sounds like its title, particularly if the mournful melody in the first alto is played with a cool, straight sound. The second alto and tenor parts have a rippling accompaniment of eighth notes across major and minor thirds. The entire piece is 24 measures long. Silence in all parts is used dramatically here, as it was in “Sinister Street.”

“The Second Waltz” is lighthearted, a minuet/trio marked *Amoroso* (but briskly)—another theatrical change in mood. Think of your favorite Strauss waltz, add some sharp skips into dissonance and you have the mood of this piece.

The eight-measure bridge between the *Amoroso* and the *Trio* contains biting cross relations. An asterisk by the *Trio* section is explained thus: “You’re too young to remember Vienna before the Great War.” This section is downright humorous.

The first eight measures are consonant and very much reminiscent of a Strauss waltz. The second eight measures begin with ornamented descending parallel seconds; then ornamented parallel seconds head back up the scale.

All of the previous pieces have employed varying degrees of dissonance,

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but they all end on major or minor chords. However, this piece, which has some surprisingly traditional common-practice harmony, ends on a tone cluster—all the more humorous and unpredictable!

The final piece in this suite is an *Allegretto* called “Exit March,” which is to be played “jauntily and with a fine flourish.” This is a light-hearted, almost calliope-sounding, march with traditional rhythms and quasi-traditional harmonies, but it is not without its own surprises. After bouncing along nicely in the key of F major, there is a crazy modulation in the last several measures, leading to the final chord of F# major!

While I am not sure if *Music for Marionettes* was written for a puppet theater, I certainly can visualize marionettes during the pieces. The composer indicates that these trios were intended for advanced recorder players, which may have been very true in 1952. However, it is my belief that today’s upper intermediate players, with practice, will also be able to play and enjoy them.

Players will need to know all of the chromatic fingerings and be strong in rhythm. To make these pieces come to life, adequate technique to slur notes involving complex fingerings is needed, as well as a wide variety of articulations.

While I think the first alto part is the most challenging, there is great musical interest in all three parts. The Sharers and I had a great time playing these pieces and liked them very much. But best of all, we were able to record them, fairly perfectly, after one or two brief read-throughs.

If a composer’s music reveals something about the composer, I can state with great enthusiasm that I would love to have known Ashford. I am very curious about his other works issued by Lost in Time Press.

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FITZWILLIAM OVERTURE FOR TWO CLARINETS AND HORN, HWV 424, BY G. F. HANDEL, ARR. R. D. TENNENT, The Avondale Press AvP 78 (Magnamusic), 2006. AAB. 3 sc 8 pp ea, \$14.

The arranger, R. D. Tennent, says in his introduction, “It’s thought that this work was composed in 1741-2 for a Mr. Charles, a Hungarian-born horn player who gave recitals with his wind ensemble in London from 1734 and in Dublin in 1742, overlapping with Handel’s season there. [This] is the only work by Handel in which he specified parts for clarinet, at that time considered to be an alternative to the *clarino*, the natural trumpet. The ‘Fitzwilliam’ designation refers to the fact that Handel’s autograph of the work, the only source, is in a collection at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.” Tennent also writes that he followed the original quite closely but transposed everything up a minor third.

The work is in five movements: *Andante*, *Allegro ma non troppo*, *Larghetto*, *Andante allegro* and *Allegro*. Tennent has done well at making sure that all three parts are interesting and challenging.

This music is for a more advanced ensemble and requires a solid bass player. The alto parts also run the full range of the instrument, especially in the *Allegro ma non troppo* movement. I highly recommend this wonderful arrangement.

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