

Seven Pieces

for Bass Clarinet and Piano

About the Volume

The overall intention in writing this volume was to develop material that was unapologetically apt for the bass clarinet and to help expand the repertoire with a set of pieces offering differing characters with varying levels of technical challenge that explored the full capabilities of the instrument.

The true range of the bass clarinet was to be a major feature of the set, as was the considerable variation in tone; from mellow and warm, to thin and piercing, from deep and sonorous, to dry and breathy. There was to be no holding back on tackling the issues of agility and swiftness in navigating the respective registers with rapid flourishes and erratic angular leaps.

The original vision which inspired the set was that each piece would be about a different time of the year, each one marked by events and natural phenomena like the summer solstice and the winter moon. As the pieces took shape, it became clear that there was a thematic thread running through them concerning the phases or states of the moon; such as the full moon, lunar eclipse and lunar perigee. As well as the extra-musical connections, there will no doubt be many other patterns identified that enhance the connectivity between the pieces.

Full Moon Eclipse

The piano briefly introduces the rich, sonorous language of the piece. As the bass clarinet joins in, the state of grandeur of the moon is captured in the full tone and power of the lower notes which are almost intended to cause the wood to vibrate.

A significant central section follows with beautiful expansive lines for the bass clarinet, set over a more flowing piano part. There's a much greater sense of harmonic direction and an unbounded feel of moving through various keys and tonalities.

At the conclusion of the central section the harmony comes to a point of rest with an almost French-sounding sixth-chord. This ushers in the deeper, more resonant class of material from the start, which, on its return, is now a tone lower. This in turn further emphasises the dense rich harmony of the piece.

Chalumeau Reverie

As the title suggests, this movement concentrates solely on the chalumeau register of the bass clarinet as the warm reed-sounding line is presented over slow-moving chords on the piano. The bass clarinet part does not go beyond the lowest minor tenth.

The variation in this piece is quite subtle. The initial sketches took a sudden diversion away from the well-sustained, spacious material, toward a much freer, more rhythmic episode. However, this music was apportioned off to become its own piece. What remained became a sonorous musing of the rich fundamentals of the lowest register.

There is only a minimal sense of drive due to the emphasis on reverie and being lost in the moment rather than having a clear sense of destination. However, towards the end, the music yields to the need for a greater sense of movement as the piano part takes on an almost antiphonal role.

Earthshine Under Cloud's Veil

The material that formed this piece emanated from the initial sketches of one of the other pieces (*Chalumeau Reverie*). Whilst in an embryonic state, the direction of the ponderous, spacious music of *Chalumeau Reverie* had veered off into a protracted episode in a much freer, syncopated style which had a clear jazz influence. The material was also developing a somewhat atonal harmonic language. This posed the question as to how much the single-movement work could permit contrasting sections before needing to afford the major variation its own platform? To this end, a decision was made to extricate the brittle, spiky rhythmic section and cast it as its own separate piece. This abstraction resulted in an entirely different piece with a contemplative, moody character where the instruments' parts were inherently more rhythmically independent. This work could be said to be a result of the reflection from another body, much like the phenomenon of earthshine, where we witness the glow caused by sunlight reflected by the earth on the darker portion of a crescent moon.

And The Sun Shall Stand Still

A solo from the bass clarinet, as opposed to the piano, opens this more straightforward piece, thereby firmly establishing the instrument's territory. The somewhat ceremonial feel to the opening call marks the last glimmer of sunlight before the full eclipse takes hold. The piano part introduces a gentle chorale which is later taken up by the bass clarinet and sounded in differing tessitura. The short piece closes with a powerful return statement of the ceremonial call, set against an expansive and expressive piano rendering of the chorale.

Strawberry Moon Solstice

This fun, optimistic piece, almost didn't see the light of day! It was almost shelved during the earliest stages of composition, when only the first page had been written, due to the fact that fast, rhythmic music requires sheer hard graft and the desired result did not come naturally at first. When the composer's sister heard of the planned fate of the sketches, she intervened, making earnest pleas to carry on with the piece – since it was her favourite of the set, and so it was saved! Other hurdles were presented by the saturated notation, lack of places for the bass clarinetist to breathe, and the piano part not fitting well under the hands. However, these were all overcome and the result is an upbeat, summery piece, which presents moderate challenges to both players.

For some, the title may take time to grow on them, but perhaps not for those who were at Stonehenge during the summer solstice of June 2016, when they experienced the unexpected bonus of a huge strawberry moon heralding the sunrise.

Winter Moon on Westward Course

This piece tracks the moon through the winter as it travels on its Westward course. Beginning in a minor key it then proceeds to travel quite feely through a variety of other keys.

The piano is marked '*una corda*' throughout in order to help create a soft and understated under-layer, over which the bass clarinet presents a soft, hauntingly beautiful theme. This theme is then repeated in a higher octave, before moving on to a central more nostalgic-sounding section which is led by the piano.

The bass clarinet plays a descending motif over a piano accompaniment of a sequence of downwards-moving chords with little or no common notes which together create a sense of falling into the depths, only to rise again.

The placement of the notes which form the bass line is quite deliberate and the pitches are used like pylons to mark the sharper changes in direction, as the music turns corners to find new territory. This lack of a firm harmonic foundation gives the piece its unsettled feel.

At the end of the piece, the music does however find its way back to the home key. Just after the piece appears to have died away, the bass clarinet makes a surprise return.

Moonrise at Perigee

This piece addresses an issue that emerged during the writing and editing of the other six pieces. It became clear that they did not fully explore the higher register of the bass clarinet. The result is that this work is largely cast in the clarion register, but with occasional dips down to the lower notes of the throat tones and upper end of the chalumeau register. Despite the objective of utilising the uppermost range, it was also an important consideration that the bass clarinetist did not feel constrained.

An improvisation at the piano, subsequently notated, forms the chassis of the piece. All of the tempi markings are approximate in order to give the performers added freedom, but due to the inherent syncopation in the somewhat lyrical jazz feel, the rhythms have turned out to be a little on the tricky side.

Towards the end of the piece, after several false starts, an emotive climax erupts, representing the close proximity of the moon to the earth. The piano part becomes more agitated and volatile, and the intoxicating effects of the lunar perigee are borne out in the added intensity of the upper register of the bass clarinet.

Andrew March, 2017